

## **CAPACITY BUILDING OF MUSLIM WOMEN TO WITHSTAND THE ONSLAUGHT OF WESTERN THOUGHT**

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**Abstract:** In the globalized world of today, the Western media and intelligentsia is questioning compatibility of Islam with the modern times and terming it retrogressive thus injecting ideas, negatively impacting our minds and the thought process, thus threatening the social moorings of our society. Pakistani women in particular are vulnerable to the theme of living in oppressive and abusive society. The onslaught of the alien or external thoughts on the Muslim Women warranted the need for building their capacity to withstand the negativity of the external thoughts and adopt the positive ideas in keeping with their faith, values and social responsibilities to play the pivotal role in family and society in a more effective manner. Hence, this paper endeavors to look for the challenges to the thought of Muslim women and suggests measures for capacity building in the light of Iqbal’s philosophy and Seerah to enable them effectively play their role in the contemporary socioeconomic environment.

**Keyword:** Social role of women, capacity building, Iqbal for women, western thoughts, Seerah, women empowerment.

### **Aim**

The purpose of this paper is to comprehend the onslaught of the Western thoughts on the Muslim women, highlighting the need for building their capacity to withstand the negativity of the external thoughts and adopt the positive ideas in keeping with the faith, values and social responsibilities. It finally suggests a framework to develop Muslim mindset of next female generation to withstand the undesired exposure in life.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative research based on combination of revealed sources of knowledge i.e. The Quran & Sunnah and literature reviews to document the impact of onslaught of Western thoughts that stand to subvert the minds of our women folk through the allure of modernization and empowerment. Evaluation of various surveys and studies has been used to ascertain the gaps in capacity building of Muslim women to withstand the negative impact of Western thoughts.

### **Research Limitation**

Seerah and Iqbal's perspective is integrated as a model composed of old and new thoughts.

### **Introduction**

In the globalized world of today, we see growing interaction between people from different faiths, leading to exchange of ideas impacting social life. Islam, as a faith, unfortunately, is under attack from other monotheistic religions. The western media has been focusing on the Islamic thoughts questioning its compatibility with the modern times and terming it as retrogressive thus injecting ideas impacting our minds and the thought process that strike at the very social moorings of our society. Pakistani women in particular are vulnerable to the theme of living in oppressive and abusive society, in spite of the legal and religious provisions about women rights and status. Unfortunately, the Islamic principles and code of conduct are not followed in many pockets of our society in letter and spirit, hence, the Western thoughts in the forms of so-called Muslim or Islamic feminism, propagating women emancipation exploit the gaps in the understanding of Islam and margins in its application. Therefore, the onslaught of these alien or external thoughts on the Muslim Women, has initiated a "dialogue within" the minds of our women folk, warranting the need for building her capacity to withstand the negativity of the external thoughts and adopt the positive ideas in keeping with her faith, values and social responsibilities. Moreover, the hybrid warfare against Pakistan carries invasion of western thoughts aimed at striking at the foundation of our cultural and moral moorings, therefore, we have to develop capacity to withstand the pressures from external sources of ideas and ideologies. The exposure and involvement of women in all the walks of life with fellow beings from variety of academic and social backgrounds makes them vulnerable to the allure of western thoughts. The paper is focused on identifying the challenges of western (non-Muslim) thoughts and suggesting guidelines for capacity building in the light of Seerah (the model of ancient time) and Iqbal's ideas (addressing the modern woman).

**Scope:** The paper has been developed in the following sequence:

- Challenges of Western thoughts on Muslim Women.
  - o Western thoughts and Muslim women.
  - o Ways and Means of the onslaught of Thoughts.
  - o Emerging female mindset.
- Response: Capacity Building Strategy to withstand the challenges.
  - o Guidelines from Seerah and Iqbal's philosophy.
  - o Capacity Building Framework.

## **Challenges of Western Thoughts to the Muslim Women**

### **Western Thoughts:**

The contemporary themes of Western origin impacting Muslim Women's thoughts will be discussed here briefly. Historically, the woman in Western never enjoyed position of respect and authority, therefore did not attain much significance till nineteenth century. Therefore, Feminism emerged as the driving concept of all the liberal feminist ideas, which through decades drastically expanded its scope and influence. Oxford Dictionary defined Feminism as "the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of sexes"<sup>1</sup> It has been the prime mover of various women movements; the feminist movement now asking for the women liberation, female emancipation, empowerment and other women rights.

The feminist movements can be traced back to 1848, when the women in the West were deprived of even the basic rights and Church was not sympathetic towards rights of women.<sup>2</sup> The organized efforts led to gaining some dignity and honor denied to her. Friedrich Engels, a German socialist, in his work on the subjection of women, proposed elimination of bond of marriage and state taking over responsibly of the children born in the process<sup>3</sup>. The mandate of such movements in 1948 expanded to equality with husbands, equal employment opportunities, rights for divorce and equal pays. Today, marriage in the West has become irrelevant, therefore, sexual freedom and same sex marriages and what and what not are finding acceptance in the western societies. The feminist cause of equality, liberty, independence and security brought in focus the miseries of "old woman" and sketching the image of the "new woman", who is supposed to be independent, confident and secure.<sup>4</sup> Western woman is unfortunately not realizing that she in being seen as an object not subject, though this understanding is seen as major cause of reversion to Islam.

### **Ways and Means for the Onslaught:**

The western media, think tanks and various institutions have been injecting variety of themes that have negative impact on the modern Islamic societies. The Islamic eastern culture is considered to lose its traditional importance; hence it is important to repeatedly call to the basics i.e. Quran and Sunnah. Half-baked religious ideas floating around on social media are even more damaging as these are not viewed with much contempt by young generation. A short clip may lead to confusion in the minds with regard to Islamic concept of life, thereafter, proving supremacy of Western culture. The Muslim woman of our materialistic generation and beyond is much different from the earlier generations, who were known for their values, principles and sincerity. Our homegrown electronic media, in their quest for ratings is bent upon promoting Western life style and alien cultures. The Western ideology of

feminism has captivated the minds of educated female lot, promoting environment of disobedience, independence and individualism.

The floodgates of western thoughts opened up with the development of media from print to electronics in the garb of knowledge, art and science. The technology has made irreversible access to our minds. The art has been the latest weapon which slowly and gradually impacted the minds at all ages. The so-called creative art developed an illusionary mindset. Starting with cartoons, the mindset so developed is far away from reality of mind. The film, the drama, the novel, through any medium like cinemas, TV and now social media induce the imaginary spectator like mindset, with soothing effects like a tranquilizer temporarily satisfying the unrealistic desires, thus impacting the human emotions and feelings in the long run. The love rather lust for the illusionary satisfaction pushes the women into an imaginary world. Thus, the resultant mindset revolves around urge of illusionary life. The life style, so induced, is the one created by others with no definite purpose of life or direction to attain that purpose. Such a mindset has pleasure, in all probability, as the only purpose with least respect for social, moral or spiritual values.

The feminism comes to Pakistan through literature, media and NGOs in the garb of women development, duly supported by modernists and secularist. While the former may be seen as passive means, the NGOs are viewed as active catalysts for the change of minds and culture. It is visibly proclaimed by one of lead programs in Pakistan, “USAID in Pakistan is working to narrow the gaps between men and women to promote a more prosperous, stable and inclusive society in Pakistan”<sup>5</sup>.

#### **The Emerging Mindset / Thought Pattern:**

The West has always portrayed Muslim women as oppressed thus symbolizing the lifestyle as a choice between Burqa and Bikini. The feminist thoughts have targeted Muslim societies in following areas: -

- Family values.
- Polygamy.
- Marriage and divorce.
- Parda / hijab.
- Secularism; selective application of injunctions of Islam.
- Supremacy of western values in relation to material development.

The women right activists are against the traditional social setup criticizing for gender discrimination, emphasizing on absolute gender equality, irrespective of the physical incompatibilities. Strange enough, when it comes to dress, they prefer least covered women, with fully covered men. The dress designers have helped them advance this theme. If we look around; our ‘shalwar’ has transformed into trousers, then into ‘tights’ and shrinking length exposing legs through ‘Capris’ and ‘tulips’. Similarly, shirts with revealing

designs like cold shoulder are aimed at presenting female beauty to every Tom, Dick and Harry. It is interesting to note that dress transformation from traditional to skirt was resisted by Iranian women seen demonstrating in Esfahan City Square in 1955, while Iranians again witnessed the women demonstration at same venue in 1979 against Imam Khomeini's decree to cover their legs.<sup>6</sup> So, this is such a slow poison that leads in incurable cancer.

The portrait of '*independent woman*' by Western feminists has subjected the 'new woman' to many dangers and risks resulting into further socio-cultural complications. I have tried to imagine the life pattern emerging for the modern or new woman influenced by Western thoughts: -

- Taking up jobs of all kinds in a quest for equality and economic independence.
- Leading to urge for escape from the traditional housekeeping role.
- Seeking participation of men in the household; leading to domestic conflicts.
- Independence and confidence induce thoughts to avoid husband's domination, hence choose not to marry and seeking divorce.
- Emergence of tendency to the horrible experience of extra marital relationships.
- Economic independence, social liberty, equality in work and jobs has led to extremist form of relationship, where men and women are seen as rivals, even as enemies. The result is promoting lesbian tendencies.
- The cost of equality in jobs and at work emerges as male expectations that she should look slim, pretty and well-groomed in her appearance, attire, toilette, make up, hairstyle etc. It is virtually "the beauty trap" at job, she must look like Brook Shield.
- In quest of independence, the bondage from home weakens, with new promises of assured freedom and terrifying consequences of loneliness, thus falling easy prey to the male wildest fantasies.
- This line of thinking will certainly lead to social destruction.

### **Capacity Building of Muslim Women**

#### **Imperatives of the Modern Time:**

The study of recent reversion of Western Women to Islam suggests the growing realization of the negative impact of the modern thoughts, which have turned the female into an object of pleasure and resultant increase in crimes against women<sup>7</sup>. Islam had introduced such a fantastic social concept at a time, when immorality of today's West was rampant in the erstwhile Arab society and the women were seen as an object with no rights to live even. Islam gave birth to a family system, which is reflection of Islamic society. Father is family head (Imam), who performed his responsibilities in the light of Islamic teachings, ensuring rights of wives, children, his own parents and even the extended family.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the Islamic principles and code of conduct

are not applied in many pockets of society in the Muslim countries in letter and spirit, hence, the voices against subjugation and seeking freedom are bound to be heard, allowing space to the Western thoughts in the forms of so-called Muslim or Islamic feminism, propagating women emancipation. At individual, society and institutional level, the code of conduct in line with guidelines of Islam provides much needed protection and respect to the women. In keeping with the threat perception, we need to focus on capacity building of Muslim women to withstand the onslaught of Western thoughts, as suggested in the succeeding paragraphs.

### **Guidelines from Seerah on the Role of Muslim Women:**

Islam ensured dignity, self-worth and autonomy of women, by laying limits on male ascendancy. Quran has led to understand fundamental equality and complementarity of men and women, which is demonstrated in Ahadees as well. In Quran, Sura Nisa (The Women) and Sura Noor (The Light) have dedicated contents on the women issues and some of the tangible and intangible roles and rights of women have been determined.<sup>9</sup> The early revelations of Quran, besides core issues of Tauheed and Akhira, undertook the social issue of status of women, decreeing against burial of the baby girls, indicating importance of women in the human equation.

The personality of Prophet ﷺ studied as a role model in various social relationships provides the beacon as a male member of the society. For female, the lives of the honorable ladies around him are considered as role model. The books written about the most revered ladies of Prophet's ﷺ times are focusing on their personage. However, some of the writers on Seerah have ventured into social and to be more specific familial role of the Prophet ﷺ, highlighting the guidance as a male to behave in a certain manner in a particular relationship; a husband, a father, a son, a cousin / brother and also a neighbor.

Study of Women's contemporary issues and searching the guidelines in the light of Fiqh ul Seerah is a challenging project and warrants a deep study and comprehension of the Holy Prophet's ﷺ life and the lives of Ummahat Ul Momnin. The research of Seerah and the comprehension of its literal and social aspect, the analysis and expression of different events or incidents related to women and the deduction of inferring of directions from Seerah, provide adequate guidelines for application in today's world. It includes aspects of women's life with reference to the Seerah of Prophet ﷺ in social, political and economic context through which we can propose or derive precise guidelines for different issues and emerging challenges faced by Muslim women in contemporary societies till the day of Resurrection.<sup>10</sup>

Following major examples of women's social status, empowerment, roles and professional engagements are extracted from Seerah of Holy Prophet ﷺ<sup>11</sup>:-

- Hazrat Khadeeja (RA) was the first believer in faith of Islam, who recognized it as the message of Creator towards men and women and withstood the challenges of the society in defence of faith and the Prophet ﷺ.
- In the Second Treaty of Aqaba, those women, who formed part of the delegation, became the first one in defense of Prophet ﷺ and Islam on return to Medina, besides extending Daawa'h (preaching faith).
- The women of Ansaar in Medina enjoyed much better social status and could impose on clan or tribe in decision making, therefore, Islamic society developed without gender biases.
- Hazrat Ayesha (RA) and other noble ladies were always committed to seeking of education being obligatory for all men and women without discrimination.
- Medicine and Surgery ,Poetry, Weaving of cloth, farming, trade, handicraft were some of the professions with active participation of women.
- Hazrat Ayesha is also seen as trainer for Muslim women in socio-religion context.
- Muslim women in the time of Holy Prophet (PBUH) had been taking part in battles, and were engaged in logistics, medical aid, supporting and motivating fighters and even fighting etc..
- There have been examples of participation of women in political affairs, as well.

### **Iqbal's Thoughts on Muslim Women:**

Iqbal being a political and social reformer of the Subcontinent has been great critique of Western modern thoughts including democracy, nationalism, secularism, socialism/capitalism and liberalism. Iqbal has observed that Western cultural thought in post industrial revolution era has destroyed the basic family unit by employing women as work force. This has led to numerous psychological and social problems for the women. He is visibly disturbed by the Western women's inspiration and aspiration of equality, as he understood that equality is not helpful in acquiring the respectable place for women in the society. Iqbal's own thoughts are deeply embedded in the Divine source of Quran and traditions of the Holy Prophet ﷺ. He has accepted certain principles through rational analysis but rejected the others, which are found in conflict with teachings of Quran and Sunnah. In case of liberal Western thoughts regarding women, he advocates that Women should rather demand the opportunities and respect besides acceptance as a person, instead of feminist demands of liberalism and equality leading to her virtual degradation. He says: -

**kya cheez hai aaraish-o-qimat me ziyadah  
Azadi -e niswaan ke zumurrud ka gulu-band?**

“which is better in beautification and value? The freedom for women, or an emerald necklace “

Iqbal has openly acknowledged the concept of Quran regarding men’s responsibility to protect women, hence, the question of equality between men and women in roles and responsibility gets addressed. However, Iqbal is considered to be convinced that men and women are equal as human beings. In Ramooz-e Bekhudi, Iqbal expresses : -

“**Poshish’ a uryani’ a mardan zan ast  
Husan’ a dilju ishq ra perahan ast”**

This is exact translation of Quranic verse “wives are costume of their husband and they are regalia of their wives”<sup>12</sup>

Iqbal is for the education of women, however, is not in favor of Western education as it induces the urge to trespass their domain. In Zarb-e-Kaleem, he says :-

**jis ilm k taseer se zan hoti hai na-zan  
kahte hai isi ilm ko arbab-e nazar maut!**

“The knowledge, which affects a woman to the extent of transforming into a non-woman, this knowledge, is called demise by the people of wisdom and insight”

Iqbal does not support the idea of free mixing up of both genders for the obvious reasons. He says: -

**Barh jata hae jab zoq e nazar apni hadon  
Ho jaate haen afqar praganda o abter**

“ When the desire to look into the eyes of opposite sex heightens, the thoughts in the mind are bound to go astray and get fouled”

Iqbal keeps the women’s role as mothers at a very high esteem. His ideal woman is Hazrat Fatima (RA) as mother. The Western thought suggests stripping the women of this godly attribute, therefore, he says: -

**tahzeeb-e firangi hai agar marg-e ummumat  
hai hazrat-e insaan ke liye is ka samar maut!**

“if Western culture suggests the demise of motherhood, it will virtually lead to death of humanity”

Iqbal supports the idea of PARDA for women and does not consider it as any obstruction towards playing of her active role in the socio-economic activities. He rather, considers a women with hijab being better placed to work with concentration. While addressing the women, he says: -

**Aaghosh e Sadaf jis ke naseebon men nahin hae  
Woh qatra e nasyan kbhi banta nahin gohar**

“The drop of rain, unless housed by the oyster, is never destined to become a pearl”

Iqbal has great sympathy for the women being oppressed and exploited thus supports the concept of women emancipation to the extent. On women



emancipation he inspires women's intellect and vision to find the rightful place. On the issue of protection of woman, Iqbal says: -

ik zindah haqiqat mery seene me hai mastoor  
kya samjhe ga woh jiss ki ragon me hai lahu sard

“a living realism is concealed in my heart, which would never be understood by anyone in whose veins the blood was so cold”

Iqbal feels pity on the pathetic conditions of women as expressed in his poem ‘Aurot’ (Woman). He says: -

‘Mein bhi mazloomi-e-niswan se hun ghamnak bohat  
Nahi mumkin magar iss aqda-e-mushkil ki kashood

“I too am extremely unhappy on women's oppression, however, this intricate matter can not be easily resolved”

Islam does not lay any restriction on progress of women and rather offers roadmap for elevation to higher status. Iqbal also sees her as more important component of the social system, thus her education and capacity building will lead to better grooming of the next generations.

### **The Capacity Building Framework**

Having identified the threat, challenges and impact of the Western thoughts on the Muslim women, it is established that defence has to be built around the family, the society and the institutions to mitigate the impact and prevent further losses. Basing on the study of Seerah (older times) and Iqbal (modern times) the suggested framework includes imparting knowledge about Islam, other religions and development of culture in accordance with universal values of Islam to enable the Muslim women to withstand the challenges of Western thoughts. Islam has enabled the female to undertake socioeconomic activities to sustain herself and children, when needed and also desires her to play role in service of humanity.<sup>13</sup> The family, the institutions and society have very important role in women development.

### **The Family:**

- Mother is a full time job and must be prioritized as such to enable the Muslim woman to play her role to the best possible level in managing the domestic affairs and upbringing of the children (next generation) .
- Understanding Quran and Hadees with a view to implement it in the daily life is very important for women. Basic education of the children in line with Islamic teachings can be ensured by educated mothers only.
- As a nutritionist, mothers should be able to plan the healthy diet for family in keeping with available resources and ensuring Rizq e halal. It will avert many diseases in children; obesity at the top.
- The women should be mindful of the dress code, especially for the daughters, in line with the social values based on the universal values of Islam.

- Mothers must pay attention to the personal hygiene and the environment and inculcate the habit of Salaat (prayers) in their children; this will ensure protection from many ills and evils.
- Mothers should inculcate habit of reading in children and exercise parental control on TV and internet.
- Mothers must respect the elders of the family and take extra care of the elderly parents, if there; this will inculcate these virtues in the children.
- The parents must be very careful in selection of schools for the children. The schools with over bearing influence of Western thoughts must be avoided.
- The parents must keep an eye on the books of children to look for any material, not in line with the teachings of Islam. Do not hesitate to point out such lapses to the teachers, school management and fellow parents as well.
- Grandparents have a lot of time for interacting with the young ones, hence, must inculcate the values and virtues in them.

**The Institutions.** The governments, the education institutions and the social organizations need to work in following areas: -

- Pull the girls to schools, through motivation and realization to address the gender inequality in enrollment and drop out.
- Careful syllabus formulation and selection of books to avoid non-Islamic contents and have right component of Islamic education.
- Teaching of Quran with meanings must form part of curriculum. So far lip service only has been given to this important issue.
- Be mindful of the decency of dress and extent of male and female interaction.
- Hold workshops on the challenges of Western thoughts and the remedies to avert their influences.
- There have been excessive legislation on women issues in Pakistan, most of which are more of academic exercise, thus need for application of laws in letter and spirit to plug the gaps that let the alien ideas find space in our societies.
- Media Policy should be revised to enable the media to play its role in social reformation in keeping with our indigenous values and encourage simple way of life.
- Awareness program highlighting the need of education for female must be organized by involving religious scholars to alter the perceptions of conservative segment of our society about the female education.

- Dedicated female education institutions should remain the ultimate national objective to ensure ideal grooming environment for the Muslim women.

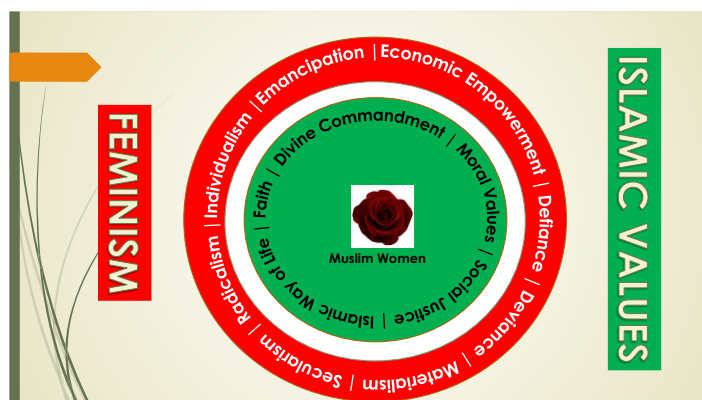
**The Society.** The society at large has to play its role in shielding its female segment from the onslaught of Western thoughts creeping into the young minds, through following measures: -

- Attitude towards women as custodian of the familial system and values must be transformed to accept and respect the roles to be played by men and women.
- Rights of women as enunciated in Quran and Sunnah with regard to education, inheritance, family and society must be ensured.
- The slogan of women empowerment, instead of blind pursuit of enhanced role in economic development must be governed by their needs, instincts, sentimental feelings and capabilities.
- The society needs to redefine the role of woman in various fields in keeping with the contemporary socio-economic cultural requirements.
- The media needs to formulate code of conduct to safe guard our values and faith against the feminist thoughts, which are secular in essence.
- Attitudes, mindset and behavior pattern of people have to be transformed through education and training by building faith on rational basis.
- The Muslim scholars and activists must secure space on woman issues, henceforth occupied by secular champions of women cause in parliament and elsewhere.
- Instead of rigidity on various social issues that is causing fissures, Islamic ethical perspective of Halal (appropriate) and Haram (inappropriate), Mubah (permissible), Makruh (disliked), socially good and acceptable should be followed in defining code of conducts at workplace or educational institutions.

### **Conclusion**

In the globalized environment, interaction between people from different cultures has led to exchange of ideas, impacting the social life. The Western media and intelligentsia are questioning compatibility of Islam with the modern times and terming it retrogressive. The ideas are being injected, which are negatively impacting the minds and the thought process of younger generations, thus threatening the very social moorings of our society. Muslim women in particular are vulnerable to the theme of living in oppressive and abusive society. The onslaught of alien or external thoughts on the Muslim Women warranted the need for building their capacity to withstand the negativity of the external thoughts and adopt the positive ideas in keeping with their faith, values and social responsibilities to play the pivotal role in family

and society in more effective manner. The feminist values of the West do not hold ground, when pitched against the Islamic values based on concept of humanism as projected below: -



*I believe, the Western Thoughts creep into the Muslim societies through GAPS in understanding of Islam and MARGINS in application of principles and teachings of Islam. We must plug the GAPS and reduce the MARGINS to forestall the negative impact of this onslaught.*

The threat of Western thoughts to the Muslim Women has been identified and outline response has been proffered in this short paper to initiate a dialogue “within the female mind” to develop the capacity of Muslim women to withstand the negative impact of the onslaught of alien thoughts. It is hoped that in this manner, we will be developing a Muslim mindset of the next generations, which may be able to endure the undesired exposure in life by developing better understanding of Islam.

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