

## AN ELUCIDATION OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN BEFORE THE ADVENT OF ISLAM AS DESCRIBED IN THE GLORIOUS QUR'AN

<https://uia.e-journal.id/spektra/2803>

DOI 10.34005/spektra.v5i1.2803

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### **Abstract:**

*Before the advent of Islam, the position of women varied widely across different regions and cultures. It is important to note that the following information provides a general overview and may not apply uniformly to all societies of that time. Pre-Islamic Arabia: In pre-Islamic Arabia, women's status varied greatly depending on tribal customs and traditions. Some tribes practiced female infanticide, considering daughters a burden, while others valued women as members of the community. Women were often married off at a young age and had limited rights in matters of inheritance, divorce, and property ownership. Polygamy was prevalent, and women were sometimes treated as objects of trade. The position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia was varied, depending on their social status and tribal affiliation. However, in general, women had few rights and were often treated as second-class citizens. They were not allowed to own property, inherit, or testify in court. They could be married off without their consent, and they could be divorced by their husbands at will. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to expose these issues in details. Also, the paper explains the status of women in Roman period, in Jews period and in the Christian era. The method used in conducting this research is analytical method.*

**Keywords:** Glorious Qur'an, Women, Jews, Christian, Romans, Islam



## A. Introduction

Describing the status of Indian women, the Encyclopedia Britannica states: "In India, subjection was a cardinal principle. Day and night women must be held by their protectors in a state of dependence says Mann. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is, descent traced through males to the exclusion of females." And according to the Hindu scripture, a good wife is described as "... a woman whose mind, body and speech are kept in subjection; acquires high renown in this world and, in the next, retains the same abode as her husband." And in Athens, women were not better off than Indian or Roman women:

### Women in Ancient Civilization

"Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male to their father, to their brother or to some of their male kin."<sup>1</sup> Also, a Greek woman had no right to consent to marriage because: "...she was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, and receive from them her husband and her lord, even though he were a stranger to her."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a historian commented that a Roman wife was: "... a babe, a minor, a ward, 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."<sup>3</sup> The Encyclopedia Britannica, sums up the legal status of women under Roman civilisation:<sup>4</sup>"In Roman Law a woman was, even in historic times, completely dependent If married, she and her property passed into the power of her husband ... the wife was the purchased property of her husband, and like a slave, acquired for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office.... could not be a witness, surety,

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<sup>1</sup> E. A. Allen History of Civilisation, Vol 3, p.444

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, P, 444

<sup>3</sup> The Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th ed, 1911, *Op. Cit*, Vol 28 p.782

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p, 783

tutor, or curator, she could not adopt or be adopted, or make a will or contract.” Turning to the status of Scandinavian women, we discover that they were: “...under perpetual tutelage, whether married or unmarried. As late as the Code of Christian V, at the end of the 17th Century, it was enacted that if a woman married without the consent of her tutor he might have, if he wished, administration and usurp of her goods during her life.”<sup>5</sup> According to English Common Law, a woman’s rights were equally suppressed: “...all real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passed, the English courts devised means to forbid a husband’s transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to the wife’s personal property, the husband’s power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit.”<sup>6</sup>

Only by the late 19th Century the situation started to improve: “By a series of acts starting with the Married women’s property Act in 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, married women achieved the right to own property and to enter contracts on a par with spinsters, widows, and divorcees.”<sup>7</sup> Also by the late 19th Century, an authority in ancient law, Sir Henry Maine, wrote: “No society which preserves any tincture of Christian institutions is likely to restore married women the personal liberty conferred on them by the Middle Roman Law.”<sup>8</sup> Before turning to the Qur’anic teachings about the position of women, a few Bible teachings may further shed light on the subject and thus provide a better basis for an impartial evaluation. According to the

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<sup>5</sup> Encyclopedia Americana International (edition) Vol 29, p.108

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p, 109

<sup>7</sup> The Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968, Vol 23, p.624

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Mace, Marriage East & West, *Op. Cit* p.81

Mosaic Law, the wife was 'betrothed.' Explaining this concept, the Encyclopedia Biblica records: "To betroth a wife to oneself meant simply to acquire possession of her by payment of the purchase money; the betrothed is a girl for whom the purchase money has been paid." From the legal point of view, the consent of the girl was not necessary for the validation of the marriage: "The girl's consent is unnecessary and the need for it is nowhere suggested in the Law."<sup>9</sup>

Concerning the right of divorce, the Encyclopedia Biblica states: "The woman being man's property, his right to divorce her follows as a matter of course."<sup>10</sup> The right to divorce was therefore held exclusively by the man: "In the Mosaic Law, divorce was a privilege of the husband only..."<sup>11</sup> The position of the Church, until recent centuries, seems to have been influenced by both the Mosaic Law and by the stream of thought that was dominant at the contemporary time. David and Vera Mace, in their book, *Marriage East and West*, detail:<sup>12</sup>

"Let no one suppose, either, that our Christian heritage is free of such slighting judgements. It would be hard to find anywhere a collection of more degrading references to the female sex than the early Church Fathers provide. Lecky said that: 'Woman was represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance on account of the curses she has brought upon the world... She should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent instrument of the devil.' One of the most scathing of these attacks on woman is that of Tertullian: "Do you know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours

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<sup>9</sup> Encyclopedia Biblica, 1902, Vol 3, p.2942

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 2947

<sup>11</sup> The Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th ed, op. cit, p.782

<sup>12</sup>Mace, *Marriage East & West*, op.cit, p.80 - 81

lives in this age; the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealed of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserters of the divine law; you are she who persuades him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image - man...' Not only did the church affirm the inferior status of woman, it deprived her of legal rights she had previously enjoyed."

## **B. Discussion**

### **Status of women in the era of Romans**

In the times of Romans, a father was not forced to accept his son or daughter into his family. The newly born baby would be put at the feet of his/her father, and if the father picks him/her up then this means he accepts the infant into the family, and if not then it means the baby would be taken to public squares or halls of worship places and laid down there. Anyone could take the baby if it was a boy. Otherwise, the baby would die out of hunger or thirst, or because of exposure to sun light or cold during winter<sup>13</sup>.

A Roman man could sell his daughter if he wanted. He could kill her if he wanted, too. Girls did not have the right of ownership. If a girl gets money, then this money goes to the head of the family. Then the situation developed for girls and the money they inherit from their mothers is different from the money they get from their fathers. However, fathers have the right to use them.<sup>14</sup>

If the head of the family dies, guardianship of the girls moves to the curator as long as a girl is alive. A trick later was found in order to get rid of guardianship of the curator, i.e. a woman sells herself to a curator that she chooses on the condition of freeing her and not

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<sup>13</sup> M. Lapidus, *Ira A History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge University Press, 2002., p15

<sup>14</sup> L. Kabir, *Roman Law (4th Ed.)*. Dhaka: Ain Prokashan 2009, p, 9.

putting restriction on her. The curator should not oppose any of her behaviours. The control over the girl then moves to her husband once married. Old Romans used to justify putting women under guardianship saying: “they are reckless<sup>15</sup>.”

### **Status of women in the times of Jews**

For some Jewish sects, women were considered servants. Fathers had the right to sell girls while minors. If a girl had no brothers, then she would not inherit her father or even get what her father had given to her during his life. When a girl is deprived of inheritance as she has a brother, the latter is obliged to pay for the former once married<sup>16</sup>.

If a girl gets inheritance as she does not have a brother, she cannot get married to someone from another [sabt] tribe and she does not have the right to move her inheritance to another tribe. Jews considered a woman as a curse because she seduced Adam. An Israelite man would marry any number of women without any restrictions<sup>17</sup>.

### **Status of women in the times of Christians**

Early Christians were horrified of what they had seen in the Roman society, i.e. adultery and atrocities, as well as the ethical degradation. They considered women as being responsible for all of that. Women could enjoy and mingle with men the way they wanted. They decided that marriage is a sin that should be avoided, and a single man is more honourable for God than a married one. They declared that women are the gate for devil, and their beauty is the weapon for evil to seduce<sup>18</sup>. They thought of women as an inevitable evil, a desired blight, and danger for the family. A saint said: “A woman is the gate for devil into human soul. She is a breach for

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p, 10

<sup>16</sup> N.N. Karen Rhea. *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Greenwood Press, 1998, p, 12

<sup>17</sup> M, Halilu, *Women Rights in Christianity and Islam: A Comparative Study*; Unpublished BA Project, Islamic Studies Dept, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 2007, p. 35

<sup>18</sup> IBID, P, 36

Allah's laws. She distorts the image of Allah, meaning man.<sup>19</sup> Westerners continued to oppress women and waste their rights during the Middle Ages, and even in the era that was called the knighthood era, when knights used to court women and praise them. It was then thought that women enjoyed a social level when they were considered minors who do not have the right to control their money without the permit of their husbands. Women in the era of Christians were insulted to extent that a man could sell his wife. This was legalized by the English law in 1805, stating that a man could sell his wife. The law determined the price of a wife as equal to six girls<sup>20</sup>. The civil French law stipulated that a woman is eligible to contract without the consent of her curator if she was unmarried. This law came after the French Revolution late 18th century that liberated human beings from slavery and insult. One of the articles of the civil French law stipulated that minors are: youth, insane, and women. The previous article remained in effect until 1938. This article was modified for the benefit of women, yet there were some restrictions on behaviours of married women. One of these legal restrictions is that a French married woman cannot dispose her own money, and she has to maintain usufruct for her husband.<sup>21</sup> For the ancient nations, women witnessed oppression and insult to the extent that a Chinese proverb states: "Listen to a woman and never believe her", and a Russian proverb states: "In every 10 women you find 1 soul only", while a Spanish proverb states: Beware the corrupt woman, and do not depend on a virtuous woman." An Italian proverb states: "A stick is for both good and bad women."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p, 36

<sup>20</sup> P. Sarah and B. Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity. Schocken, 1995, p, 7

<sup>21</sup> Thapar, Romila. Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300 University of California Press, 2004, p, 6

<sup>22</sup> Encyclopedia of Family Under the Auspices of Islam, part 2, p7

## Right and Status of Women prior to the advent of Islam

In the pagan society of pre-Islamic Arabia, the status of women was like slaves who had no rights and dignity. Women would not get share either from parents or spouse as inheritance. But Islam ensures share of women in the property of parents and husband.<sup>23</sup> Regular shape of marriage as we understand at present time was totally absent. There were such types of marriage as may be treated as fornication, prostitution, adultery or polyandry.<sup>24</sup> Men could marry any number as he like and there were no specific rules in regard to marriage, they could marry even two real sisters at one and at the same time (Rashid, 2004). But in case of marriage, Islam imposes prohibition on account of affinity (prohibition due to marriage relationship). In this respect the Holy Qur'an declares:

“Forbidden for you (to marry) are the mothers of your wives and your step-daughters that are in your laps (in charge of you) through your wives to whom you have gone in; but if you have not gone in to them, then there is no sin upon you (to marry them); and the wives of your sons whom you have begot-ten.”<sup>25</sup>

Husband possessed the power of divorce which was so unlimited and unrestricted that he could divorce his wife whenever he wishes without any lawful ground and could revoke his divorce and divorce again as many times as he favoured. He could illogically accuse his wife of falseness, dismiss her and leave her with such infamy as would prevent other suitors; while he himself would go free from any kinds of liability of maintenance or legal punishment. Neither of the wives could get a dower but Islam approves dower as a respect to the wife.<sup>26</sup> False charges of unchastely were frequently used for depriving the wife from her right of dower. Her protector

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<sup>23</sup> M. M, Rahman, Introduction to Muslim and Family Law. Dhaka: Kamrul Book House. 2008. P, 33

<sup>24</sup> M., Faiz-ud-din,. A Text Book on Islamic Law. Dhaka: Shams Publications, 2008, P, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'an, 4: 23

<sup>26</sup> M., Faiz-ud-din, A Text Book on Islamic Law. Dhaka: Shams Publications, 2008, P, 43



could deliver her to any person as he wished. But showing respect to women Islam reformed marriage laws in a sweeping and far-reaching way.

Women were considered as material things and where husband were unable to pay his debt during his life time, after his death his creditor would own his wife as reparation<sup>27</sup>. Female child was considered an evil omen and fathers were terrified if the new born baby were female. Fathers not only become unhappy when a female child was born but also felt embarrassed. In pre-Islamic Arabia, there was a ridiculous discrimination against their female children whom they used to bury alive. The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) not only protest to this culture but also ordered to stop it. He showing them that supporting their female children would act as a screen for them against the fire of Hell.<sup>28</sup> Under original Hindu law, women were treated like slave who had no rights of inheritance.<sup>29</sup> If the husband of woman died during her lifetime then she had to burn herself alive when the dead body was cremated.<sup>30</sup> Widow had no right to remarry who had to bear intolerable pain in her daily life. In Chinese culture, there were many atrocious customs had to bear a girl. A male child was treated as an immense gift of God but female was an acceptable degradation.<sup>31</sup> In Greek society, women were treated to be the incarnation of evil and they had no right of inheritance, education, divorce etc<sup>32</sup>. They were considered as material goods who had no feelings and free will. In ancient Rome, cruelties

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<sup>27</sup> A. Saifee, Baloach, A. G., Sultan, S., & Khalid, I Status, Identity and Privileges of Women in Islam. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, (2012), pp, 30, 146-154

<sup>28</sup> A. R. Doi, *Women in Shari'ah (Islamic Law)* (4th Ed.). Kula Lumpur: A. S. Noor-deen, (1992)., P, 36

<sup>29</sup> M., Uddin, & M. F, Hossain, (2017). *A Text Book on Hindu Law: Theory and Practice* (2nd Ed.). Dhaka: Hira Publications, P, 30

<sup>30</sup> A. R. Doi, *Women in Shari'ah (Islamic Law)* (4th Ed.). Kula Lumpur: A. S. Noor-deen, (1992)., P, 37

<sup>31</sup> A. Saifee, , Baloach, A. G., Sultan, S., & Khalid, I Status, Identity and Privileges of Women in Islam. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, (2012), pp, 30, 146-154

<sup>32</sup> A. Saifee, , Baloach, A. G., Sultan, S., & Khalid, I Status, Identity and Privileges of Women in Islam. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, (2012), pp, 30, 146-155

towards women were unbearable. Women had no rights, dignity or honour and the position of the women was like slave.<sup>33</sup> Men had authority to sell her or send her into exile even a husband had power of summarily putting his wife to death for acts like drinking, poisoning and substitution of a spurious child<sup>34</sup>. In Jewish society, women were lived without right, dignity and honour. They had no right of inheritance and were considered as an object owned by the male protector.

### **Marriage in Pre-Islamic Period**

Marriage in *Jahiliyyah* was the institution for creating a family, which was the primary unit of society. Without marriage, there would be no family and no ties to unite the different members of a community. Marriage in pre-Islamic society was one way to increase the strength of the tribe by begetting more children who would be the next generation of the tribe. The question for consideration here is, what kind of institution was marriage in *Jahiliyyah*? Did society through marriage, give the Arabian women any rights as a wife?

Most of the time, women in *Jahiliyyah* were degraded, without any rights and regarded as non-entities as Lebon remarked "Men, before the dawn of Islam, used to consider the position of women as midway between animals and human beings, and her role either as a servant or captive. Islam was a just religion shifting the status of women<sup>35</sup>.

In general, marriage in *Jahiliyyah* was not a private matter, but the tribe itself had the full right to accept or refuse any marriage which depended on how far the tribe would benefit from this marriage. Marriage was the practical way of making alliances with other tribes. Arabian

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<sup>33</sup> L. Kabir, *RomanLaw* (4th Ed.). Dhaka: Ain Prokashan, 2009. P, 45

<sup>34</sup> A. R. Doi, *Women in Shari'ah* (Islamic Law) (4th Ed.). Kula Lumpur: A. S. Noor-deen, (1992)., P, 37

<sup>35</sup> G. Lebon, , *Va4i7rat al Arabq* translated into Arabic by "hil, Za'aýt; tr, Is 9'al-Halabi, Beirut, 1969, 10

society before Islam had known two types of marriage: Endogamy (marriage between cousins) and Exogamy (marriage outside the tribe)<sup>36</sup>.

### **Dowry in Pre-Islamic Period**

Arabs considered dowry a sine qua non for the validity of a marriage contract. If such a requirement was not met, they considered the marriage to be adultery or fornication.<sup>37</sup> Most Arabs had considered a dowry to be a token of a woman's nobility.<sup>38</sup> The dowry was paid by the husband. Smith rightly explained that the dowry is paid by the husband to the bride's kin and indeed, the lexicographers, in explaining the odd formula '*hani'an laka al naf1jah*' used to congratulate a father on the birth of a daughter, in the times before Islam, say that the daughter was welcomed as an addition to her father's wealth, because when he gave her in marriage, he would be able to add to his flocks the camels paid to him as her *mahr*.<sup>39</sup>

The man in *Jahiliyyah* had the right to recall the dowry he paid for his wife after her death from her inheritance and if she did not leave any wealth or possessions behind, he could ask her family to return his dowry. Thai suggests that laws or customs in pre-Islamic Arabia were in many aspects biased against women.<sup>40</sup> There is no evidence that there was a fixed amount of dowry at that time; it depended to a great extent on the husband's financial status. For example, the historical sources mentioned that Abd al-Mutalib bin Histiam-gave Fatimah bint a Amr one hundred camels and one hundred pounds of gold as dowry.

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<sup>36</sup> Y. Zuha ", Tatawwur Beira! al! Usrah al-! Arabiyyah wa al-JudhCr 0-- 10 -- al-Tarikhiiyyah wa al-Ijtim-allyyah Li-Qa4aryih6'al-Mu1Csir-ah. e Development of the Arabian's Family Build Up and the Historical and the Social roots for its contemporary matters), P. 45

<sup>37</sup> J, Alij- Tg"rTkH al-. 'Arab Qab1 al-Is'l'Em, al-, ', Iajma'c al-CIIZI Beirutl 1970, 525

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 525

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 525

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 257

### **Divorces in Pre-Islamic Period**

The social and the economic condition in Pre-Islamic society had the greatest effect as regards the occurrence of divorce. Divorce was a very simple action which a man undertook against his wife sometimes in order to take revenge either on her or on her own people. Sometimes this was because of reasons which had nothing to do with the marriage itself. Also, poverty, and prejudice were! Important reasons for the occurrence of divorce; what sin had a woman committed to be divorced just because she gave birth to girls only<sup>41</sup>.

Some Arabs used to divorce their wives without, allowing them to get married to other men because of jealousy. Some Arabs had taken that so seriously, that whenever the divorced wife of one of them tried to get married to someone else, he threatened her and her people.<sup>42</sup>

When divorce took place, he secured her agreement written and endorsed by witnesses. When she had an offer of marriage from another man, she had to pay her ex-husband and get this agreement for her to marry another man, otherwise he could prevent her. This reflected the position of woman generally in the Peninsula in pre-Islamic, times.

### **The Women's inheritance in Pre-Islamic Period**

The issue of women's inheritance in Pre-Islamic times is controversial. Some argue that she had a share in the inheritance others that she never had such a share. Some sources state that the general practice during that time was to distribute the inheritance among the 'adult males (not females); men who could ride a horse and who could use a sword; i. e. among male fighters<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 250

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 250

<sup>43</sup> R. Levy, The Social Structure of Islam, Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 1957. P, 96

To conclude, generally speaking a woman in Arab society did not have the right to inherit apart from a few exceptions. These exceptions were so few, that it did not affect the majority of women in pre-Islamic Arab society. So we can assume that during pre-Islamic time the woman's right to inherit was negligible; the one who inherited was the man, the strong knight who could defend his tribe. The girl was considered to be weak and dependant on her family and because of that, she was deprived of her right to inherit, and she remained so until Islam came along with its guidance to protect her rights.<sup>44</sup>

### **Burying Daughters Alive**

In Pre-Islamic Arabia males were a source of strength while females were a burden on their families it is no wonder that the female was treated in some tribes as an unwanted person from the moment of birth. Some Arabs used to kill their daughters by burying them alive. This was condemned by the Qur'an in more than one passage. On the Day of Judgement, we are told:

"When the female (infant) buried alive, is questioned for what crime she was killed.<sup>45</sup>"

So, the full horror of the deed committed against her could be known and condemned before all, while she could be compensated and consoled. The Qur'an captures most vividly the feelings of a pagan Arab who has been informed of the birth of a female child. - The description is most dramatic as it illustrates the contradictory emotions and fears which swept the mind of such a man after such an occasion.

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

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<sup>44</sup> R, Smith, Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabiprj United Publi- shers, Beirut, 1973, 117

<sup>45</sup> Qur'an, 81: 8

has had shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt or bury it in the dust? Ah, what an evil (choice) they decide on.<sup>46</sup>

It was an evil choice, he had to make; - either to keep the innocent girl to suffer and be treated as contemptible; or to kill her by burying her alive. The previous verse is a clear proof that this practice, existed if in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Burying daughters alive was regarded by some Arabs as a sort of kindness and mercy to the female, because their parents knew about their weakness and their inability to struggle against all the harshness of life. They preferred to choose death for their daughters instead of letting them undergo the hardship and dangers of life. They chose the bitterness of losing a daughter with all its grief instead of burdening themselves with the responsibility of a female. To Pre-Islamic Arabs however, "the despatch of a daughter is a kindness. The burial of daughters is a noble deed.

### **C. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia was generally very low. They were considered to be inferior to men in all aspects of society, and had very few rights. However, the advent of Islam brought about a number of changes in the status of women, and the Quran granted them a number of rights. These changes did not happen overnight, but they helped to lay the foundation for a more just and equitable society.

Here are some specific examples of how the status of women changed after the advent of Islam: Women were given the right to own property. They were allowed to inherit property from their parents and husbands. They were allowed to testify in court. They were prohibited

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<sup>46</sup> Qur'an,16:58

from being buried alive. They were enjoined to be treated with kindness and respect by their husbands. These changes were not always easy to implement, and there was still much discrimination against women in early Islamic society. However, the Quran's teachings about the rights of women helped to lay the foundation for a more just and equitable society.

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