Status of Women in Pre-Islamic Civilizations: Analytical Study of the Dark Ages - From the Ancient Greek to the Jahiliyah

Muhammad Mumtaz Ali Khan¹*, Mazher Hussain², and Zil e Huma Rafique³

¹Director Research and Development, Punjab Higher Education Commission, Lahore, Pakistan
²Department of History, the Islamia University Bahawalpur, Bahawalpur, Pakistan
³Department of Pakistan Study, Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: mumtaz.ali@punjabhec.gov.pk

Abstract
Woman had no status and no rights in Pre-Islamic civilizations and religions. Before the advent of Islam, the women were no better than animals or chattels. They had no rights of earning livelihood, no rights of inheritance, and no rights of owning of property, no rights in marriage, dower or divorce, and even not to speak of any political rights. They were treated like commercial goods, destined to be purchased and sold in open markets. In many regions of the world, they were generally regarded as slaves or at the best as domestic servants whose chief duty was to serve the men and please them by satisfying their sexual appetite. The research paper in hand presents a brief study on the plight of woman in various leading civilizations and communities of the world, especially the Greek, the Roman, the Judaism, the Christianity, and the Jahiliyah.

Keywords: Greek Civilization; Roman Civilization; Judaism; Christianity; the Jahiliyah, Islam

Status of women in Greek Civilization (the 12th-9th centuries BC to the end of antiquity c. 600 AD)
Greece civilization has been regarded as the most glorious of all the ancient civilizations. In its early stages, woman was looked down upon morally as well as socially, and she had no legal
According to the Greek mythology, an imaginary woman called Pandora was the source of all human ills and misfortunes, like the Eve of Jewish mythology. Just as the connected story about Eve had deeply influenced the Jewish and Christian conception of the woman and adversely affected their law, social customs, morals as well as their general attitude towards life, so was the impact of Pandora fiction upon the Greek mind. The Greeks regarded woman as a sub-human Creature whose rank in society was in every way inferior to that of man, for whom alone was reserved honor and a place of pride.

The Greek woman was forced to marry without her consent, as her consent was not regarded as a necessity. The parents made her submit to their wishes. She was supposed to accept a husband and Lord, chosen by her parents, even though he was a complete stranger to her. She had to obey. The Greek women were always looked down upon as minors, and were to obey blindly their male kinsmen- that is to say father, brother or to some extent their uncles.

During the prime of Greek civilization a chaste woman was a precious thing. Greek women observed some sort of purdah (veil). They had Harimlek (women’s apartment). Later on the house of a prostitute became the focus of attention of all classes of the Greek society, and all national decisions were taken under her influence. Her house became the place of worship as she represented Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty who betrayed her husband god and made.

It was the faith of the Greeks that a man who was burnt by fire or bit by snake could be treated but a man who was bit by woman could not be treated; thus, they considered a women biggest evil of the world.

The Greeks considered the women inferior to men. They followed Aristotle’s view that woman should be passive, obedient and salient. Generally the women could only leave their homes to attend funerals and some religious celebrations. They had to control over the property they could own or inherit. Wives were usually less educated and significantly younger to their husbands. Prostitution was common and slave women had a miserable plight. The wife was a mere chattel marketable and transferable to others and subject of testamentary disposition. She was regarded as an indispensable evil for ordering of a household and procreation of children. The husband could dismiss his wife for any cause. However the wife had no right to leave the house of her husband. She could only present her case to the court on grounds of cruelty and degenerate behavior. No doubt Plato pleaded for the equal right for man and woman but this was no more than an theoretical preaching and was nowhere in practice.
The purpose of marriage was just political that is, to produce strong and healthy children for the defense of the country. It was laid down in the law of Sparta that the husbands who were not fully young or weak, should offer their younger wives to healthier and stronger young men to enable them produce sturdy soldiers for the army.

**Status of Women in Roman Civilization**

In Rome the status of women was very low for a long time. The head of the family or husband had full authority over his wife and children. A Roman wife was something like a purchased property of her husband. Thus she was like a slave acquired solely for her lord’s benefit. She was not allowed to take part in any civil or public affairs: that is to say; she could not be a trustee, a witness or stand surety for another or even be a tutor. She was just like a piece of furniture to decorate a man’s abode. He could turn out his wife at any time he wanted. There was no system of dowry. The father had the right to give his daughter in marriage to anybody at his sweet will. He could also break the marriage. Later on, this right was transferred to the husband who could even kill his wife if he so desired.

In roman society, man used to marry woman only for his own benefit. She was never considered fit for any post or even able to give evidence in any matter. She had not legal rights whatsoever; only some facilities were granted to her because of her physical weakness. Of course, the woman was given some rights by the Romans in later period, Roman women gained the right to conduct their business and personal affairs themselves and also to attend public functions. Yet she was not treated equal to man.

**Status of Women in Judaism**

In Judaism the condition of women was degraded in the extreme. The Hebrew maiden, even in her father’s house, stood in the position of a servant; her father could sell her if a minor. In case of his death, the sons could dispose of her at their will and pleasure. The daughter inherited nothing except when there were no male heirs. When a woman got married all her possession were transferred to her husband. He used to exercise full right over her possessions during their joint life.

In Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures have condemned women to an eternal divine curse. It says of the woman came the beginning of sin and through her we all die.
Among the ancient Jews there existed, besides the system of plurality of wives, the custom of entering into conditional as well as temporary contracts of marriage. These loose notions of morality exercised a disastrous influence on the constitution of society within the peninsula.\textsuperscript{18}

The heaviest burden for maintaining the daily requirement of the Mosaic dietary laws falls on the women: their ritual and secular statuses are always inferior to those of the men. It is the task of the housewife to be sure that meat and dairy foods are not mixed, that ritually slaughtered meat is not blemished, and that cooking equipment and dishes and utensils for meat and dairy are rigidly separated. The only personal states of ritual pollution relating to food also refer only to women. For instance a women who has not been ritually cleansed after her menses must not make or touch pickles wine or beet soup. If she violates this customary rule, it is believed that these foods will spoil.\textsuperscript{19}

It has been mentioned in Torah, If two brothers live together and one of them dies childless, the wife of the deceased should not be married to a stranger but her husband’s brother should have sexual intercourse with her in privacy, treating her to be his wife and fulfill the right of being her husband’s brother as the child which will be born to her would be called the child of his deceased brother. Thus his name will not be effaced from Israel. If he refuses to act as her husband, his brother’s wife should draw out shoe from her feet and spit on his face before the Judges saying: “who does not care for his brother’s home, deserves such treatment”. His name would become notorious among Israel as being the house of one where a shoe has been drawn out.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Status of Women in Hinduism}

Hinduism has assigned a very low position to women. Manu, ancient India’s greatest law giver says, “In childhood must a female be dependent on her father, in youth on her husband, her lord being dead on her sons, a woman must never seek independence”. According to Hindu law luck storm, death, hell, poison, poisonous snakes, none is more harmful than woman.\textsuperscript{21}


\begin{enumerate}
\item When the bride and bridegroom are pious and chaste and of excellent moral character and have been tied in wedlock on their mutual consent, the marriage is called \textit{Braham}
\item To give over the girl in gold ornaments to the bridegroom in a ceremonious way, is called \textit{Dev}
\end{enumerate}
3. Where the parents receive some money before giving the hand of their daughter, is called 

Arish

4. Where the couple marries to promote the cause of faith is called Parajapat.

5. Arrangements of marriage after giving something to the bride and bridegroom is called 

Asur

6. Irregular and haphazard meeting and contact of a man and woman by their mutual consent is called 

Gandharb

7. Seiure of a girl by force or allotment is called 

Rakshas

8. Forced sexual intercourse with a sleeping, drunk intoxicated or mad girl is called 

Paishaj

Nayung is a custom among the Brahmans according to which, if the woman is childless, she can, with the permission of her grandfather, have sexual connection with her relatives or her husband’s brother to get offspring according to her desire.22

It has been mentioned in Satyarath Parkash; “If the woman is barren (she does not become pregnant) for eight years or she gives birth to dead babies or she delivers female babies only, her husband should wait for eleven years. But so far as the woman who uses bad language is concerned, her husband must forsake her immediately and have Nayung (sexual intercourse) with another woman to get offspring”.

Likewise if the husband is very cruel; the woman should leave him and get children by having sexual connection with the husband of another married woman, who will be his inheritors. When the husband is rendered impotent, he should give permission to his wife in the following words:

“O fortunate woman who desires children! Now seek another husband besides me as I am lacking in sufficient strength to produce children.”24 Then that woman would have sexual union (Nayung) with another man’ but serve her large-hearted husband. In the same way when the woman is rendered unfit to bear children due to illness, she should permit her husband to have sexual union with some widow to produce children.25

As Indian wife used to call her husband: “My Lord” or even ‘My God”, as he was regarded as her earthly god. She never ate with him. She had to follow a few yards behind him when both walked to-gather. She was to worship her husband. She had to serve her father, be a chattel of the husband and submit to her children.26
An Indian woman became a plaything for animal passion. Indians looked upon sex relations between man and woman as loathsome and evil: whether they contract legally or illegally.

In India they used to regard a good wife as a woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, and so acquired high renown both in this world: and in the next, the same abode with her husband.  

Before the advent of Islam, ancient Indian history is full of incidents of non-reliance on women. For instance, in order to level the charge of adultery against any woman, it was sufficient to say only that she remained with another man for the time during which an egg can be fried.

**Status of Women in Christianity**

Christian doctrine both praised women and blamed them for Adam’s fall Jesus welcomed women as well as men as followers. St. Paul, one of the leading Saints of Christianity says, “let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach or usurp authority over the man”.  

The very basic principle of Christianity reduces women to the utmost degradation when it makes the cause of human perdition. But overtly, Christianity, universally brought it to be believed (through western civilization), that it is the deliverer and savior of woman. Christianity blasts a woman, but the Christian flocks are made to believe that it blesses her.  

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (c. 155 – c. 240 AD) was the spiritual leader of the early Christians. He explains the Christian view by declaring woman the gateway for the entry of Satan, and in turn, she allured man to the forbidden tree. She was considered the breaker of divine law, destined to spoil man—the image of God.

Thus; the basic doctrine was that woman was the mother of sin and root causes of all evil. She was the primary cause of stimulating man towards sin and corruption and thus led him to Hell: all human ills and troubles emanated from her. The mere fact of her being a woman was enough to render her detestable. She should feel ashamed of her beauty and charms, for these served as means to Satanic temptations. She should, therefore, keep on atoning constantly for her inherent sins, because she was responsible for causing all human ills and misfortunes in the world.
St. John Chrysostom (c.349–407), the Archbishop of Constantinople and one of the important Greek Church Fathers, says: “She is an inevitable evil, an eternal mischief, an attractive calamity, a domestic risk, a charming and decorated misfortune”. 31

Their second doctrine was that the sexual relations between man and woman were in itself an objectionable, dirty affair, even if it was established within legal marriage. This monastic conception of morality was already taking root in Europe under the influence of Neo-Platonism. The Christian Church led it to its logical extreme. Consequently, celibacy and spinsterhood became the criterion of the nobility of character, and married life came to be regarded as a necessary evil.32 Avoidance of marriage becomes a symbol of piety and holiness and a sign of sound moral character. To live a clean and pure religious life, therefore, one was either not to marry at all, or was to live apart from one’s wife in complete abstinence of conjugal relations. Rules were passed in religious conference barring the Church officials from meeting their wives in seclusion. They could, however, see each other in public in the presence of at least two other persons. The concept of the conjugal relationship as a dirty affair was inculcated on the Christian mind by various devices. For instance, it was enjoined that the man and wife who had shared bed during the night before a Church festival could not participate in it. They were too polluted to be allowed to associate themselves with a religious function. This monastic conception affected adversely the relations of love and blood, even those between mother and son, because all relations resulting from the bond of marriage were held as vicious and sinful.33

These two doctrines not only caused the downfall of the woman from moral as well as social points of view, but they also undermined the traditions underlying the community life to the extent that, on the one hand, married life became a headache both for men and women, and on the other, the social status of the woman was in every way degraded. Following are the main features of the legal injunctions that were enforced under the influence of the Christian Church:

1. The woman was crushed economically and made to depend wholly on man permanently: she was given limited rights of inheritance, and even more limited of acquiring and holding property; she had no control over her own earnings, as these were all seized by the husband with full proprietary rights.

2. Divorce and Khul’a (divorce on woman’s demand) were totally prohibited. The man and wife were compelled to remain together, both by religion and law, though they might be fed up with each other. The maximum that could be done, in extreme circumstances, was
to cause separation between the spouses, and that was all. In such a case, neither the man nor the woman was entitled to remarry. Obviously, this measure was even worse, for after separation they were left with no other choice than to become monks and nuns or resort to a life of sin.

3. It was considered vicious, rather sinful, for the spouses to remarry after the death of their life partners. According to the Christian Scholars, remarrying was nothing but a means of satisfying animal passions and lusts of the flash. They called it “civilized adultery”. Remarrying by the priests was particularly looked upon as a crime under the Church law. Law of the land had also prohibited. It in certain places and where it was allowed by law, public opinion which was deeply colored by the religious prejudices, did not recognize it as a lawful.\(^\text{34}\)

**Status of Women in the Jahiliyah Civilization (Before the Advent of Islam)**

The position of women, in general, before Islam was dismal. Women at this time generally led oppressed lives, particularly in Arab society. The birth of a girl for example was an unwelcome event to the point where they used to bury their daughters alive others left them to live oppressed and miserable lives. The history of human civilization testifies that the women who gives birth to man as mother, was humiliated, treated harshly and reduced to the position of being ‘a maid’ rather than a dignified women. They were treated not only as social inferiors but like slaves and chattel. When a man, having many wives died, the latter were inherited by his sons live movable property. It was a mark of dishonor for any man to have a daughter, and many preferred to buy alive their female children rather than face social opprobrium, women were held in bondage to their husbands, who could keep them or divorce them at their and pleasure.\(^\text{35}\) Women were viewed as the embodiment of sin, misfortune, disgrace and shame and they had no rights or position in society what so ever. Indeed society was confused about the very nature of women and even questioned whether God had granted them a soul. Hence, they were deprived of all opportunities to develop their personalities and their individualities, and make full use of their abilities to the benefit of their society. Women in those societies were also denied all rights of inheritance and ownership. Rather they were considered as objects of inheritance. A woman was classed not as a person but as a thing, divisible like property; she was an object of scorn and contempt.\(^\text{36}\)
There inhuman practices were prevalent at the time in most ancient societies. Before the advent of Islam and the arrival of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and his proclamation of prophethood, the history of women was no doubt was the history of subjugation and oppression. She was underestimated and condemned as a low and mean creature and was regarded as the root cause of all evils and disasters. She was bought and sold like animals. Women had no independence or power over issues relating to their well-being and they were excluded from any active role in the social and political affairs of their society. It has been stated that at annual gatherings and fairs women were made to dance naked and poets sat around composing poems on various parts of their body and movements. In other words, they were treated as sex objects with no respect at all for their dignity.\textsuperscript{37}

In pre-Islamic Arab women were also considered to be a heavy burden on the family. The birth of the daughter was embarrassing for the father who considered it a disgrace and a matter of shame. Therefore, the Arabs of that time practiced widely ‘female infanticide’ burying their female child alive. This custom was common among the Arabs and it was even viewed as a generous act.

The Quran described the mentality of ignorance underlying such as practice as such:

\begin{quote}
“When the birth of a girl is announced to one of them, his face grows dark and he is filled with inward glom. Because of the bad news, he hides himself from men; should he keep her with disgrace or bury her under the dust?”\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

The Arabs did not welcome the birth of a baby girl, and this was so because of the nature of their society. Wars and invasions never ceased and taking revenge never stopped. All these things depended on the male, but women were unable to do any of their tasks, in addition to it, she was desired loot for service in the eyes of the enemy, or she was for his entertainment.\textsuperscript{39}

One of the social reasons for such an attitude was that, in pre-Islamic times there were often inter-tribal blood feuds, which demanded make members to defend their tribes. Hence men were in much greater demand than women. In addition, in the tribal conflict, the enemy always aimed at capturing women and taking them as prisoners so that they could collect heavy ransoms. Failing to do so, they would keep them as slaves. In both cases women were considered a liability to their own tribes. For if they paid ransom, they would lose money, if not, then the chastity of their women as well as their honor were at stake.\textsuperscript{40} For these reasons, the Arabs,
believed that their own daughters constituted a heavy burden on them and the easiest way to get rid of them was to kill them immediately after they were born.\textsuperscript{41}

Moreover, men in the Jahiliyah society enjoyed an absolute right over women in matters related to marriage and divorce.\textsuperscript{42} Man had unlimited rights of marriage and divorce. He could take as many wives as he wished and could discard a wife at will. The idea of a fixed institution of marriage was absent from the pre-Islamic era.\textsuperscript{43} There were only different kinds of sexual union. The result was that man was at liberty to contract as many marriages as he wished men in Arabia before Islam used to marry four, five, six, or even ten women simultaneously and nobody could ever stop them from marring more than that ‘before Muhammad’ (peace be upon him) the capacity of the Arab’s purse would appear to have provided.\textsuperscript{44} The only limitation to the number of his wives, and though there were established conventions about the status of the women he married, there were neither conventions nor laws to dictate to him how many they should be.

When Islam emerged the issue of marriage was regulated. It encouraged men to have one wife, but reluctantly allowed them to have up to four wives under special circumstances. Men before Islam also used to force their women, especially their slaves girls, into prostitution (\textit{zina}).\textsuperscript{45}

With regard to divorce, there was no formula for severing the marriage relationship. The husband in general, enjoyed absolute power over the divorce issue and this led to constant abuses.\textsuperscript{46} The pagan Arabs used to revoke the divorce and resume the marital relationship. A man, for example, would pronounce the formula, “I divorce you many times” and then took his wife back; he could then divorce her again and yet could still take her back.\textsuperscript{47} When women were divorced or widowed there were no fixed period for \textit{iddah} (seclusion after divorce in Islam).\textsuperscript{48} Some women had to wait for a year before they would be able to re-marry; others contracted marriages immediately after the separation.\textsuperscript{49}

Divorced women had no right to claim for maintenance, men were exempted from any financial responsibility and endured no legal punishment for their actions. This in human treatment had contributed to the degradation of womanhood is so far as the woman herself believed that she should not be more than a servile and submissive creature, and had no right to expect any respect and honor in the world.\textsuperscript{50} Such a deplorable situation illustrated that the rights and the liberties of women in those ancient societies were not only trampled upon but were
entirely denied them. Finally there is some indication that women in pre-Islamic Arabia were not allowed the holding, or in any case the uncontrolled disposal, of their possessions.  

1. Conclusion

Islam is the first religion in the history of the world and the first social system which recognizes the human status of women and conferred on them the highest dignity and honor, and granted them equal rights with men in every respect and abolished all discriminations on the basis of sex. God clearly defined and guaranteed the rights of women in Quran, so that they could no more be subjected to those wrongs, injustices and oppressions which had been inflicted on them since the beginning of the human category. Women occupied a special importance in the prophetic call of Muhammad. He realized that half of mankind was women and that they have been deprived humiliated and degraded throughout history. Therefore he made a special effort to uplift and honor them and employ them as equal sharer with men in blessing of Islam. Islam professes that from a material as well as spiritual point of view the position of women is the same as that of men.

Quran makes a stronger appeal to the solidarity of mankind, the rights of women and orphans and the multiplications of family relationship. It recognizes the rights of women pertaining to marriage property and inheritance. Women as human beings are entitled to similar right to life honor and property sex distinction which is a distinction in nature does not count in spiritual matters. The reward for both sexes for their good deeds is similar male and female, men and women are considered as members of a family. The equal status of sex thus recognized in spiritual matters and they are also equal in their rights to live an honorable life.

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