

Introduction

The Status of Women in Society: A Reflection of the Nation's Moral Standards

I call on every lover of truth to examine with me the status of women in Egyptian society. I am confident that such individuals will arrive independently at the same conclusion I have, namely the necessity of improving the status of Egyptian women. The truth I am presenting today has preoccupied me for a long time; I have considered it, examined it, and analyzed it. When it was eventually stripped of all confounding errors, it occupied an important place in my thinking, rivaled other ideas, overcame them, and finally reached the point where it became my dominant thought, alerting me to its advantages and reminding me of its necessity. I became aware of the absence of a platform from which this truth could be elevated from reflection to the unlimited space of appeal and attention.

A profound factor that influences human development and ensures its positive future is the strange power that compels a human being to communicate every scientific or literary idea once it crystallizes in the mind, and once it is accompanied by the belief that it will benefit the progress of future generations. Communicating these findings supersedes concern over any negative consequences that may be incurred by the individual in presenting his knowledge. The impact of this power is recognized by anyone who has experienced a trace of it. Such an individual feels that if he fails to use this power toward the goal it is

aiming to achieve, and if he does not use whatever strength he has to assist it in reaching that goal, it will eventually overcome him in the struggle, resisting him if he opposes it, coercing him if he tries to force it, and appearing in an unfamiliar form, like a gas that could not be contained through pressure. In fact, the pressure may cause an explosion that would destroy its container.

History offers numerous proofs of this phenomenon. The history of nations is saturated with disputes, arguments, sufferings, and wars that originated with the purpose of establishing the superiority of one idea or ideology over another. During these encounters victory was sometimes for truth and at other times for falsehood. This characterized Islamic countries during the early days and the middle ages, and continues to characterize Western countries. It is reasonable to state that the life of Western countries is a continuous struggle between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong: it is an internal struggle in all branches of education, the arts, and industry; and an external struggle among the various countries. This is especially obvious in this century when distance and isolation have been eliminated by modern inventions, and when the separating borders and forbidding walls have been torn down. These changes are reflected in the increasing number of individuals who have toured the whole world and who presently can be counted by the thousands. Likewise, the ideas of any Western scholar, when formulated in a book, are translated and published simultaneously in five or six languages.

Countries like ours have preferred a less ruffled existence. This is because we have neglected the nurturing of our minds to such an extent that they have become like barren soil, unfit for any growth. Our laziness has caused us to be hostile to every unfamiliar idea, whether a product of the sound principal traditions or of current events.

An intellectually lazy person whose arguments are weak is often satisfied, in refuting an apparent truth, to hurl a false remark and declare it a heresy in Islam. He only makes this false remark to avoid the effort of understanding the truth, or to disengage from the labor of research, or to avoid its application. It is as if God created the Muslims from clay especially set aside for them and freed them from obeying natural law, whose power dominates human beings and the rest of living creation.

Some people will say that today I am publishing heresy. To these people I will respond: yes, I have come up with a heresy, but the heresy is not against Islam. It is against our traditions and social dealings, where the demand for perfection is extolled.

Why should a Muslim believe that his traditions cannot be changed or replaced by new ones, and that it is his duty to preserve them forever? Why does he drag this belief along to his work, even though he and his traditions are a part of the universe, falling at all times under the laws of change? Can the Muslim contradict God's laws of creation—God who has made change a prerequisite for life and progress, rather than immobility and inflexibility, which are characteristic of death and backwardness? Is not tradition merely the set of conventions of a country defining the special customs appropriate to its life and behavior at a specific time and place? How can people believe that traditions never change, and at the same time maintain the understanding that traditions are one of the intellectual products of humans, and that human intellect differs according to historical era or geographical location? Does the presence of Muslims in various parts of the world imply a uniformity of traditions or ways of life? Who can pretend that Sudanese preferences are similar to those of the Turks, the Chinese, or the Indians; or believe that the Bedouin tradition is appropriate for an urbanite; or claim that the traditions of any country whatever have remained the same since the creation of that country?

In truth, during a specific historical era every country has peculiar traditions and mores that match its intellectual state. These traditions and mores change continuously in an unobtrusive way so that people living during that era are unaware of the changes. However, the changes are influenced by regional factors, heredity, intercultural exchanges, scientific inventions, ethical ideologies, religious beliefs, political structures, and other factors. Every intellectual movement toward progress is inevitably followed by an appropriate change in the traditions and mores of a society. Therefore, there should be examples of differences between the Sudanese and the Turks comparable to the differences in their intellectual status. This is a well-known, established fact. The differences between Egyptians and Europeans also need to be considered in this context.

We cannot consider traditions (which are merely a way of life for an individual, his family, his countrymen, and the children of his race) to be the same in a civilized nation as in an ignorant, barbaric one, because the behavior of every individual in a society is appropriate to the intellectual abilities of that society and to the method by which its children are brought up.

This total interdependence between the traditions of a nation and its

level of civilization and knowledge suggests that the power of tradition controls a country more than any other power, and that tradition is one of the most influential permanent components of a nation, and is least likely to change. Therefore, citizens of a nation cannot but comply with the existing traditions, unless they change or unless their intellectual level increases or decreases. Thus I believe that traditions always overcome other factors in a society and that they even influence the laws of that society. This belief is confirmed through daily observation of the laws and programs of our nation, which are usually intended to improve the state of affairs but are immediately turned around to become new instruments for corruption. It is not difficult to understand this phenomenon, because at times tradition may even supersede the existing religion, destroying or transforming it so that those who are most knowledgeable about religion eventually disown its existing form.

This is the basis of our observations. This evidence of history confirms and demonstrates that the status of women is inseparably tied to the status of a nation. When the status of a nation is low, reflecting an uncivilized condition for that nation, the status of women is also low, and when the status of a nation is elevated, reflecting the progress and civilization of that nation, the status of women in that country is also elevated. We have learned that women in the first human societies were treated as slaves. The ancient Greeks and Romans, for example, considered a woman to be under the power of her father, then her husband, and after him his eldest son. The head of the family had the absolute right of ownership over her life. He could dispose of her through trade, donation, or death, whenever and in whatever way he wished. His heirs eventually inherited her and with her all the rights that were given to the owner. Prior to Islam, it was acceptable for Arab fathers to kill their daughters and for men to gratify themselves with women with no legal bonds or numerical limits. This authority still prevails among uncivilized African and American tribes. Some Asians even believe that a woman has no immortal soul and that she should not live after her husband dies. Other Asians present her to their guests as a sign of hospitality, just as one would present a guest with the best of his possessions.

These traits are present among emerging societies, which are based on familial and tribal bonds rather than on formal structures. Force is the only law with which such societies are familiar. The use of force is also the medium of control for governments run by autocratic structures.

On the other hand, we find that women in nations with a more advanced civilization have gradually advanced from the low status to

which they have been relegated and have started to overcome the gap that has separated them from men. One woman is crawling while the other is taking steps; one is walking while the other is running. These discrepancies reflect the different societies to which these women belong and the level of civilization of these societies. The American woman is in the forefront, followed by the British, the German, the French, the Austrian, the Italian, and the Russian woman, and so on. Women in all these societies have felt that they deserve their independence, and are searching for the means to achieve it. These women believe that they are human beings and that they deserve freedom, and they are therefore striving for freedom and demanding every human right.

Westerners, who like to associate all good things with their religion, believe that the Western woman has advanced because her Christian religion helped her achieve freedom. This belief, however, is inaccurate. Christianity did not set up a system which guarantees the freedom of women; it does not guarantee her rights through either specific or general rules; and it does not prescribe any guiding principles on this topic. In every country where Christianity has been introduced and spread it has left no tangible impact on the normative structure affecting women's status. On the contrary, Christianity has been molded by the traditions and manners of the specific nations in which it was introduced. If there were a religion which could have had power and influence over local traditions, then the Muslim women today should have been at the forefront of free women on earth.

The Islamic legal system, the Shari'a, stipulated the equality of women and men before any other legal system. Islam declared women's freedom and emancipation, and granted women all human rights during a time when women occupied the lowest status in all societies. According to Islamic law, women are considered to possess the same legal capabilities in all civil cases pertaining to buying, donating, trusteeship, and disposal of goods, unhindered by requirements of permission from either their father or their husband. These advantages have not yet been attained by some contemporary Western women, yet they demonstrate that respect for women and for their equality with men were basic to the principles of the liberal Shari'a. In fact, our legal system went so far in its kindness to women that it rid them of the burden of earning a living and freed them from the obligation of participating in household and child-rearing expenses. This is unlike some Western laws, which equate men and women only with regard to their duties, giving preference to men with regard to societal rights.

Within the Shari'a, the tendency to equate men's and women's rights is obvious, even in the context of divorce. Islam has created for women mechanisms worthy of consideration and contrary to what Westerners and some Muslims imagine or believe. These will be discussed later.

Islamic law favors men in one area only—polygamy. The reason is obvious and is related to the issue of lineage, without which marriage is meaningless. This topic too will be addressed later. In summary, nothing in the laws of Islam or in its intentions can account for the low status of Muslim women. The existing situation is contrary to the law, because originally women in Islam were granted an equal place in human society.

What a pity! Unacceptable customs, traditions, and superstitions inherited from the countries in which Islam spread have been allowed to permeate this beautiful religion. Knowledge in these countries had not developed to the point of giving women the status already given them by the Shari'a.

The most significant factor that accounts for the perpetuation of these traditions, however, is the succession over us of despotic governments. At various times and places Islamic societies have been stripped of the political structures that delineated the rights of the ruler and the ruled, and that granted to the ruled the right to demand that the rulers stop at the limits established for them by the Shari'a. In fact, their governments continually took on a despotic nature, with their sultan and his assistants having total authority. Thus they ruled however they wished, without restraint, counsel, or supervision, and they administered the affairs of their citizens without these having any say.

Yes, rulers, whether important or unimportant, are obliged to follow justice and avoid injustice. Experience demonstrates, however, that unlimited power is a temptation for abuse, especially when it is unaccountable, unchallenged by any other opinion, and unsupervised by any formal structure. This explains why for so many centuries absolute and autocratic rule was the norm for Islamic countries. Rulers administered these nations poorly and were excessive in their capricious tampering with the affairs of their subjects; quite often they even tampered with religion. There are a few exceptions to this pattern, but they are insignificant in contrast to the majority of cases.

When despotism prevails in a country, its impact is not limited to individual cases only, since it is central to the ideology of the supreme ruler. Despotism continues to flow from him to those around him, and they in turn influence their subordinates. A despot spits his spirit into every powerful person, who, whenever possible, dominates a weaker

one. This attitude pervades the life of all individuals, regardless of the approval or disapproval of the supreme ruler. These despotic systems have also influenced the relationships between men and women—man in his superiority began to despise woman in her weakness. As a result, corrupt morals became the first sign of a country ruled by a despot.

Initially one would assume that a person who experiences injustice would love justice and that he would be inclined toward compassion, having experienced the suffering resulting from the catastrophes which have befallen him. Observation indicates, however, that an oppressed nation does not contain an appropriate and fit environment for the development of desirable virtues. The only plant that grows in an oppressed nation is that of depravity. Every Egyptian who has lived under despotic rule in the not very distant past knows that the village mayor, robbed of ten Egyptian pounds, reclaims a hundred pounds from his villagers, and that the village chief, struck with one hundred lashes, upon his return to the village takes his revenge upon a hundred peasants!

The natural implication of this situation is that human beings respect only force and are deterred only by fear. When women were weak, men crushed their rights, despised them, treated them with contempt, and stomped on their personality. A woman had a very low status, regardless of her position in the family as wife, mother, or daughter. She was of no importance, was ignored, and had no legitimate opinions. She was submissive to a man because he was a man and she a woman. She obliterated herself in the person of the man. She was allowed nothing in the universe except that which she concealed in the corners of her home. She specialized in ignorance and secluded herself with the curtains of darkness. A man used her as an object of delight and pleasure, amused himself with her whenever he wished, and threw her into the road whenever he wished. He had freedom and she had bondage; he had knowledge and she had ignorance; he had a mind and she had simplemindedness; he had light and space and she had darkness and prison; he had absolute authority and she had only obedience and patience. Everything in existence belonged to him, and she was part of that totality of which he took possession.

Despising the woman, a man filled his home with slaves, white or black, or with numerous wives, satisfying himself with any of them whenever his passion and lust drove him. He ignored the prescribed religious obligations, which required good intentions for his actions and justice in his dealings.

Despising the woman, a man divorced her without reason.

Despising the woman, a man sat alone at the dining table, while his mother, sisters, and wife gathered after he was done to eat what was left over.

Despising the woman, a man appointed a guardian to protect her chastity. Thus a eunuch, a legal guardian, or a servant supervised, observed, and accompanied her wherever she went.

Despising the woman, a man imprisoned her in the house and boasted about her permanent restriction, which was lifted only when she was to be carried in her coffin to the grave.

Despising the woman, a man announced that she was unworthy of trust and honesty.

Despising the woman, a man secluded her from public life and kept her from involvement in anything except female or personal issues. A woman had no opinions on business, political movements, the arts, public affairs, or doctrinal issues, and she had no patriotic pride or religious feelings.

I do not exaggerate when I say that this has been the status of women in ~~Egypt until the past few years, when we have witnessed a decrease in the power of men.~~ This change is a consequence of the increased intellectual development of men, and the moderation of their rulers. We have observed that women at present have more freedom to look after their own affairs, that they quite often go to public parks in order to take the fresh air and to see the works of the Sublime Creator, displayed for the eyes of all humans, whether male or female. In fact, many women now accompany their husbands during their business trips to other countries. Likewise, many men have given women a special status within the family structure. This has occurred among men who are confident in their women and have no worries regarding their trustworthiness. This is a new kind of respect for women.

Yet we cannot claim that this change removes the need for criticism. In reality the causes of criticism are not change, but the conditions surrounding it. Among the most important of these are the firmly established tradition of veiling among the majority of the population, and the inadequate socialization of women. Were women's socialization effected in accordance with religious and moral principles, and were the use of the veil terminated at limits familiar in most Islamic schools of belief, then these criticisms would be dropped and our country would benefit from the active participation of all its citizens, men and women alike.