

Women's Empowerment and Islam

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## **Introduction**

Men have always assumed some superiority over women and have sought to dominate the world and relegate women to the background. Cultures and civilisation have sought to confer legitimacy to this male superiority and have accordingly developed myths and conventions that tend to perpetuate them. Through time women have consistently, if grudgingly, borne the brunt of this male domination. Such inequities have been a feature of all human societies, from antiquity to our contemporary times. Religions, especially revealed ones, often intervene to redress such intrinsic imbalance in human relations. Christianity, at least in the form we know it today, rather unfortunately, did not help matters, for by blaming a woman (Eve) as the source of the down-fall of man, it in fact compounded this inequity, and unwittingly gave men a new impetus to relegate women to the background. It accordingly denied women even their independent identity, having to dissolve in to that of their husbands on marriage. Islam, however, dealt with the issue decisively, but ignorance and enduring male arrogance have always connived to deny women what Islam has given them. This was further compounded by the incorporation of the Muslim world in to the contemporary world, shaped as it had been by Western liberalism which is rooted in a rebellion against a Christian God. With both Christianity and Islam marginalised in our contemporary world, the job of intervention and the restoration of equity in this gender relationship has now been taken over by the United Nation and chains of NGO's. The idea of women empowerment is a concept created by the UN, championed by UNIFEM and supported by the various NGO's. Is Empowerment of women the answer to the problem? Can the UN, supported by the host of, admittedly good intentioned agencies, redress the imbalance and restore equity in gender relations? Does Islam offer a better hope and if it does, will our contemporary Muslims allow it? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to address.

But first some caution. Foremost, the relation between men and women, which this paper is obliged to touch, is too often clouded by emotion. This may have to do with the nature of the relationship between men and women which is essentially emotive. For it is difficult to explain rationally why we love the people we love or why we marry the spouses we marry. Emotions, we hardly need say, cloud vision, obstruct rationality and make it difficult to fathom issues. Second, Muslims scholars have remained decades (some would say centuries) behind the very societies they are supposed to guide. Many of them appear to be oblivious of the age in which they live and seem unwilling to exert themselves as their predecessors had done in developing rulings (fatawi) which takes into account the dynamics of society and address their immediate context. This not only stultifies the Sharia, especially in the

eyes of the uninformed, but, it also holds the Muslim community hostage to the imbecility and ineptitude of those who are supposed to lead it. Many followers are consequently left to wallow in increasing confusion as to the position of the Shari'a on many issues, especially the issue of women. Third, the prevailing intellectual decadence of the Muslim community has over several decades forged a timid mind which had been keen on conformity and weary of creativity. Thus the average Muslim mind has lost its analytical capacity and has become mechanical in its thinking, content with whatever is passed to it as knowledge. The mind has been particularly intimidated into conformity by a clergy who have masked their incompetence by curtailing the kind of questions that can be raised and by raising the qualification of the jurist who could answer these questions to such humanly unattainable heights, that we are left to helplessly and endlessly wait for some imaginary mujtahid to emerge from only God knows where. Thus the average Muslim mind fears raising questions and finds it easier to evade rather than face issues, leaving many topical questions unanswered. Far from deterring us, these problems ought to in fact motivate us the more, they are raised here mainly to help explain some of the questions to be raised and put in context some of the liberties the author may wish to take. But it seems necessary to first appreciate the features and contours of our contemporary world, the terrain within which we shall be applying what ever ideas we may come up with.

### **Our Contemporary World**

Our contemporary world is nothing but the extension and perfection of a culture which took its roots from the European renaissance which itself started in 15th century Europe. This is a culture which rebelled against God as symbolised by the Christian Churches and sought to create a civilisation which is man-centred and where the pursuit of pleasure becomes the overriding objective in life. The Renaissance Movement thought that man's craving for pleasure and material progress has been blocked or at least delayed by the idea of a god and sought, therefore, to wean off man from god and release him from all inhibitions so that man can, for once, be free to explore his full potentials uninhibited. This new man, also called the 'renaissance man' or the 'universal man', limitless in his capabilities to acquire knowledge and in his capabilities for development, was deemed to be the centre, nay the master of the universe. The vision of the new man was to be found in the motto of the renaissance, captured in the famous remark of one of its chief prophets, Leon Battista Alberti (d. 1472) that "a man can do all things if he will". This was to form the foundations of renaissance humanism and the modern world it gave birth to.

By the 19th century, renaissance had acquired sufficient momentum and its new man, enough audacity to declare God dead. Soon books were being written about the history of God and Karl Marx was reported to have said that God never created man, but it was man who created God, in other words, God was nothing but a figment of man's imagination. By the middle of this century, however, some of the promises of the renaissance were still to be realised. The illusive search for happiness has only produced sadness and misery as evidenced by the dramatic rise of suicide cases, mental illnesses and violent crimes. The El Dorado promised by communism remained a mirage until the whole edifice collapsed like the proverbial

house of cards. The glitter of science and technology had by the second half of this century began to fade in the face of the destruction it had wrought not only on the physical environment but also on man's social environment. Social and economic inequality, weakening of the family unit and the crisis of values, were to unleash series of unprecedented consequences that continue to suffocate the life of the modern man. In the words of a prominent Western scholar, "the modern era had put its enthusiastic hopes in the mastery of nature and society. For more than two centuries man believed that the continued perfecting of rationality would have as a result the unceasing growth of his power and, consequently, an increase in well-being and happiness, freedom and equality among people. Now, not only has he experienced the limits of his power, but he has discovered that the rational and technological civilisation creates new problems and that it endangers the balance between man and nature, individual and society. The deception", he added, "is all the more painful because the progressivist had exalted people's desires and confidence."

Such was the tragic end of modernism. In the eloquent words of Erich Fromm, "in the nineteenth century the problem was that God is dead, in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead." Our contemporary world is a post modern world in which the variety of the problems created by modernism are being addressed. Admittedly many of these problems have not been sufficiently diagnosed or sufficiently comprehended. Even in the physical environment, which lends itself to easy enquiry, when we thought we have learnt enough of the global warming and ozone layer, the problems of EL-NINO is surfacing out of the blue. The emergence of a new brand of tuberculosis that defies all known remedies, may well be the tip of an iceberg. The Social environment which is certainly more complex, is even more difficult to fathom. The crisis of values triggered by renaissance and championed by modernism, the confusion of roles and the consequent identity crisis and the rising domestic violence and the breakdown of the family, are only aspects of a complex situation in a constant state of flux. Though Europe and the rest of the Western world provided the main theatre for this drama, the Muslims world in particular and the non-western world in general, have increasingly been drawn and incorporated in to this contemporary world, initially through imperialism, subsequently through education and recently, but, perhaps more effectively, through satellite communication. The relationship between men and women, which is the concern of this paper, has been dramatically changed and shaped by the social crisis which has become the trade-mark of our contemporary world. This is what makes it necessary to first appreciate the features and contours of this contemporary world before delving in to this issue.

## **The Problem**

The plight of women in the middle ages, when Europe was in the full grips of Christianity, is fairly explicable, for the Bible seem to have placed the entire blame for the descent of man at the door of the woman. In the popular literature of the middle ages, the woman was likened to the Satan who worked day and night for the destruction of the man. The Church in Europe remained stuck with its misogyny up through the 18th century when it presided over the famous debate in France on whether a woman had a soul or not. What appeared inexplicable was the

continuation of these prejudices well after the renaissance and the weakening of the grip of the Church and the liberalisation of thoughts and ideas. It was even more surprising that a whole century after the French revolution of 1789, with its promise for people's rights and democracy, women in the West remain suppressed. Writing in 1866, George Eliot observed, "A woman can hardly ever choose ... she is dependent on what happens to her. She must take meaner things, because only meaner things are within her reach." One can feel the sense of frustration in this remark. What is news, however, is not the remark, but the fact that George Eliot is a pseudonym of an English woman novelist Mary Ann Evans (1819-80), who apparently dared not use her proper feminine name in a society so dominated by men that works like hers could only be taken seriously if they were to come from men. She had six years earlier written that, "the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history", in her book, 'The Mill on the Floss', where she "portrayed rural Victorian society, particularly its intellectual hypocrisy".

This situation seemed to have continued unabated well in to the second half of this century and seem to have given impetus to what is commonly referred to as feminism. The lives and works of three prominent Western feminists summarises the situation. Virginia Woolf, (1882-1941) a British novelist, philosopher and critic took the themes of the tensions for combining marriage and career in her book *The Voyage Out* and pursued the issue of economic independence for women in her book *The Waves* 1928. That she tragically ended her life through suicide by drowning herself may not be unconnected with the tensions of her times. Gloria Steinem, (1943- ) an American journalist and liberal feminist emerged as a leading figure in American new women's movement in the late 1960's, co-founded the women's action alliance in 1970 and also co-founded the *Ms Magazine*. She was one of those who gave feminism a concrete shape, betraying the cumulative oppression and frustration of women behind the thin veneer, or as we may prefer in Nigeria, behind the smoke screen of freedom and equality. Her perception of feminism is captured in her oft quoted statement "We are becoming the men we wanted to marry" and another attributed to her, "a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle". Yet another woman in this class is Juliet Mitchell, a British psychoanalyst and writer. She took feminism further first by her article titled *The Longest Revolution*, in 1966 and later her books titled, *Women's Estate* (1971) and *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974). She seemed to have been the first to combine socialism and feminism and to use Marxist theory to explain some of the reasons behind women oppression in the West. Juliet Mitchell has had tremendous influence on feminist thinking and one could see her hands in to a lot of the women struggles against oppression in the West.

The influences of these and other feminists writers can easily be detected in the current debate on gender equity. We must not make the mistake that many pious Muslims make of dismissing feminism. One does not have to like feminism to appreciate the situational problems that brought it about. Dismissing it, as many Muslims are apt to doing, is ignoring the circumstances, which is neither fair nor panacea. If nothing else, in feminism we have a lesson to learn and that is: if we are not prepared to allow equity, then we should be prepared to live with anarchy. And one should quickly add, single parent family, which had been a phenomenon

restricted to non-Muslim communities is slowly creeping in to the Muslim community. This is only one form of anarchy. Lesbianism is another. And one could go on.

In the Muslim world the literature on this subject, especially authored by women, may not be as rich, but that is not to say the oppression was any less. Here in pre-Jihad Hausaland, presently Northern States of Nigeria, reading the works of Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, particularly his *Nurul-al-Bab* one can see a lot parallel with the misogyny of the Victorian days in Europe, in spite of the equitable and humane provisions made by the Sharia. The presence of the Sharia, undoubtedly, made the difference. Even as the provisions of the Sharia did not stop the oppression, they made Shehu Usman's case easier, for all he needed do was to enlighten the society and draw attentions to these provisions. Of course, even then it was far from easy, not only because of the opposition he faced from nor other than scholars themselves, but also because no sooner had the tempo of the jihad began to wane and ignorance started to creep, the situation reverted, gradually, back to the pre-Jihad periods. Today the situation of Muslim women, in terms of rights and equity is very much close to the pre-Sokoto Jihad period. It may at first sound like an exaggeration until we visit the Area Courts in the North and perhaps the customary courts in the South. Or better still until we allow the women to tell their tales.

Many Muslim women will today find the offer of the UN and the host of NGO's quite attractive, not so much because Islam has not given her something better, but rather because they are either not sufficiently aware or the men, better still, Muslim scholars, are not quite ready to concede to them what Islam has given them. But coming from the West, such offers of emancipation are, rather naturally, rooted in the rebellion of the renaissance, imbued with a consuming hedonism and embellished in a rhetoric that is designed, like a bait, to capture a prey. The social context of the offer itself presents some problems for Muslims, for our contemporary modern world, having made the search for pleasure a major, some would say, the major, objective in life, has predicated gender relationship on sheer lust. Modelling, fashion and advertising agencies are up and about exciting our base desires and making lust a major consideration in our decisions in life including the important institution of marriage. The institution of marriage itself has lost its sacredness in the West, it is, in fact, fast losing its meaning, so such offers tend not only to ignore Muslim sensibility, invert Muslim scale of priority, but may actually find no place to accommodate religion, having completely dispensed with it a long time ago.

It is worth recalling that the globalisation of gender equity started quite recently, with the United Nation declaring 1975 as the International Women's Year. Sequel to this the decade 1976-1985, was declared the Decade for Women, during which international agencies as well as some governments focused attention on what came to be popularly referred to as 'women issues'. This decade was crowned by the Nairobi conference on women in 1985 in which forward-looking strategies for women to be implemented by the year 2000, were adopted. Then came the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 which seemed to focus on the independence and autonomy of women even with a family context. Indeed several conferences, conventions and activities of a host of international

agencies took place during the 1985-1994 period to prepare the grounds and minds for the famous Beijing Conference in 1995. It was in Beijing more than anywhere the issue of empowerment was focused and made such an indispensable condition for world progress and development. These two decades, during which the UN championed the globalisation of the women issues, happened to be the two decades during which the UN became increasingly a tool in the hands of a few Western nations who were using it to achieve their selfish political goals. The role of the UN in the Palestinian Crisis, its role in the Gulf War and its performance, or lack of it, in Bosnia, left many in no doubt that someone was using the UN to subvert Islam and Muslim body politic. This left many Muslims unsure about the role of the UN in respect of the women issues.

### **Is Empowerment the Solution?**

The word 'empowerment', seems to be of very recent etymology, it became widely used and popularised by the 'Draft Platform of Action' of the Beijing conference of 1995. Though the etymology appear recent, the morphology of the word betrays a deep root in the psyche of a civilisation which had been born out of conflict and remains ridden with conflict. For empowerment suggests the giving of power to someone who has been deprived of it, someone who will remain vulnerable without that power, someone whose hope for justice and fairness seem to hinge on the possession of that power. This power, which is held to be the solution to all the problems, has to be wrested from some despot, presumably, in this case, man. This power also holds a promise for a panacea. All these features underscore the origin of this word in Western conflict embedded psyche. This conflict which began with renaissance and continue to date, appears to be one thread which runs through Western social and intellectual development. First it was a conflict between man and God, then between the state and Church, then science and nature, then Proletariat and the bourgeoisie, then women and man and young and old.

There is therefore the fear that empowerment conceived in this context may only aggravate this perceived conflict rather than solve it. In the same way that the empowerment of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie led to the crumbling of the communist edifice leaving hardly any pieces to pick. The difference being that while we can happily do without communism, one is not sure if the same can be said of the institution of the family. Empowerment, at least in the way it has been conceived in Beijing, may only aggravate the war of the sexes which had been triggered earlier. Empowerment, if and when it succeeds, may be the cost of complementarity of the sexes which again is essential for the health and function of the human family. One is not sure from where empowerment will drive its power of implementation. So far it looks like it will be the UN and its Member states, which undoubtedly have immense coercive powers, but can coercive power alone impose a code of behaviour between such intimate partners as husband and wives, brothers and daughters, ect.? Granted the UN and its members states will be wise enough to appreciate the folly, will they then appeal to the minds and hearts of their citizens? But does the UN and its member states and even the NGO's have a real place in people's heart? To put it bluntly does UN and others in the business of empowerment believe that people will abandon what their religions stipulate in favour of some resolution from Beijing? The UN has immense power, they can send troops anywhere in the world and these

troops can wreck all manners of havoc, but unfortunately for the UN or any of its members state, it has no heavens or hell to reward or punish people after death.

What has Islam to offer?

It must first be appreciated that Islam is a religion of balance; balance between the mundane and the spiritual; balance between work and worship; balance between self-preservation and selflessness. This balance or 'ADL, as the Qur'an calls it, is the very essence of the human creation, in which the body and spirit are united and balanced and on whose shoulders consequently lies the responsibility of the maintenance of the balance in nature, both societal balance as well as the eco-system. Islam as a religion seeks first to maintain that balance in man and then guides man to maintain that balance in society and the eco-system which plays host to the human society. The disruption of this balance is what Islam calls injustice, DHULM. A man who violates the balance between his spirit and his body is called unjust in the Qur'an. Similarly the violation of the balance in human society or the eco-system is seen as injustice. This explains the Qur'an's choice of 'ADL to describe that balance for 'ADL also means justice, harmony and complementarity. Similarly, in the relations between the two opposite sexes, Islam seeks to ensure 'ADL, balance, justice, harmony and above all love and mercy. How exactly did Islam go about ensuring this?

1. At the time of Islam's intervention in the seventh century, the human society then (as indeed today) was replete with a variety of societal injustices, claims of superiority of one group over the other and discriminations on the basis of sex, lineage, tribe, race, etc. One of the first things Islam did was to demolish all these artificial barriers in the famous verse: "O Mankind we created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you in to nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)." It is significant that the verse started with gender discrimination. The message is unmistakably clear that men and women are in the sight of their creator equal, the only way one can be better than the other is by being more righteous. But even here, none can flaunt about his iman and brag, because luckily only God Himself knows who really is more righteous. As if to pre-empt men's intransigence, Allah continued to reinforce this position in several verses of the Qur'an stressing this equality and balance.

2. Another intervention which was as quick as it was sharp was in the arrival of the female child. The female sex in the seventh century Arabia was a sort of abomination, the mere announcement that a wife had begotten a female child used to evoke anger and disappointment in the husband and the female child may end up, as many did, being buried alive in the Arabian sand without as much as a remorse in a society that has completely lost its balance and sense of justice. The Qur'an strongly warned not only those doing these killings but even those who express anger at the arrival of the female child, describing graphically the attitude, it says, "When the news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief!" (Q. 16:58) The Qur'an unequivocally

abolished the practice not only by promising a severe penalty in the day of judgement but by instituting the 'life for life' injunction in the Sharia. The prophet of Islam followed these sticks, as it were, with a big carrot when he announced to his companions that anybody who has been blessed with two female children and he brought them up very well, with love and kindness, Allah will on that account grant him paradise. Of the people listening some had only one female child and they kept asking the Prophet: what about one? The Prophet, in his characteristic condescension, granted that even one would do. In another hadith, the Prophet said, "Whoever has a female child and does not bury her alive, nor holds her in contempt, nor prefers his male child above her, God will make him enter into paradise." (Abu Dawud)

3. The Prophet of Islam not only said that the search for knowledge was compulsory on every Muslim male and female, but he also said who ever educates a male educates an individual and who ever educates a female educates a nation. Here not only does the Prophet give priority to the education of the female but also by likening the female with the nation he conferred a special position and by virtue of that position a special role for the female. That an individual female is nation is a concept that requires a whole book to expound, but for our immediate purpose here it will suffice to point to the fact that the female which alone harbours the womb and carries the heaviest responsibility in child bearing also represent the pedestal on which the future of mankind as a whole revolves. The female to this extent symbolises the human races and the custodian of human values and the conscience of society. If she is left ignorant and backward, so will the nation and if she is educated and advanced, so will the nation. This point has been amply demonstrated by the jihad of Usman Dan Fodio and is today being re-enacted in the Republic of the Sudan which saw tremendous transformation only after educating and incorporating its women in its struggle for a just society.

4. We may wish to recall the eagerness with which the companions of the Prophet tried to excel each other in the doing of good and were always asking the Prophet how they could increase their good and become better. In one of these inquiries, the Prophet, as if to summarise the situation, informed them that the best among them is actually the one who is best to his wife (family). This is a very profound position not only in the seventh century Arabia where wives were no more than chattels but even today when they appear to be the least of the worries of men. By making the state of wives the very measure of the quality of men, Islam, more than any other religion or ideology, has placed women in a pedestal which guarantees their happiness and welfare. If wives of Muslim men are not the happiest of wives, it is not because of Islam, it is in spite of it.

5. We are all too aware of the companion who came to the Prophet telling him that he was rich and in a position to help and be kind to people and he wanted the Prophet to tell him, of the people on earth, who deserves his benevolence most. The Prophet in this well known Hadith replied the man: "Your mother", the man asked, "then who?", the Prophet repeated: "Your mother", he continued to ask, "then who?", the Prophet repeated for the third time: "Your mother", before saying "your father", in

the fourth instance. This special position of the mother had been preceded by verses of the Qur'an and supplemented by other statements of the Prophet. In the words of the Qur'an, "And we have enjoined on man (to be good) to his parents: in travail upon travail did his mother bear him, in years twain was his weaning: (hear the command), 'Show gratitude to Me and thy parents: to Me is thy final Goal.'" (Q.31:14) It is not difficult, therefore to understand why the prophet said that, "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers." (Muslim)

So, as a child, as a wife and as a mother, Islam has given a woman such special and distinguished position that no other culture or civilisation has given her and that ought to be the envy of men. But let us still go a little further and see in what other ways has Islam empowered women, so that we can be intelligible to our contemporaries who live in this age of empowerment.

### **What has Islam to offer?**

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ideology, has placed women in a pedestal which guarantees their happiness and welfare. If wives of Muslim men are not the happiest of wives, it is not because of Islam, it is in spite of it.

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### **Islam's Own 'Empowerment'**

1. Perhaps the first and most important empowerment is give woman her own separate personality that does not dissolve into that of a man on account of marriage or any other account for that matter. There is certainly no better empowerment than to be one's own self. The idea of being an appendage of man, in some cultures man's personal property, robs her of all powers and denies her an independent life of her own. Islam wishes to produce a woman who is not only of independent personality, with a life of her own, but also one who does not nurse any feeling of deficiency because she is a woman. This is particularly relevant today when women have been made to feel a deep sense of deficiency and consequently see their equality in terms of equating to men in almost every thing, dressing like men, behaving as tough as men and insisting in doing those jobs and holding those offices that are thought to be exclusive to men. The kind of personality that Islam seeks to build is also one which will save women from the torments of having to dance to whims and caprices of men, as the modelling industry amply demonstrate. Too often women go through all manners of dieting and work-outs not for their own good but for meeting men's expectation of beauty, some times they undertake measures that are clearly injurious to their very health like the bleaching of their skins and the implants of silicon to boost their bust-line. The personality Islam seeks to bestow is one which gives women confidence, security and esteem which allows them to deal with men as equals without having to play to their gallery or aspire to behave like men.

2. The Prophet of Islam not only made the education of male and female compulsory but he appointed a separate day in which he attended to the educational needs of the women. One woman who made the best of this opportunity, rather understandably, was his youngest wife Aisha. She learnt so much and had a wonderful memory that the prophet told his companions that they could take half of their knowledge of Islam from this red girl, referring to Aisha. By this statement, the Prophet was actually appointing Aisha, to what today we call a professorial chair, in the university of the Prophet. By this appointment of a woman in this exalted position the prophet was elevating women to the highest and perhaps the most prestigious of position of power, for knowledge is indeed the greatest source of power. We must thank Allah that Aisha lived long after the Prophet during which time she transmitted large numbers of hadith, the fourth largest, corrected numerous others and taught many men and women.

3. The average Muslim woman today may not quite understand the noise made about economic empowerment, largely because she has always been empowered; her dowry has always been hers, not even her parents can take any part thereof without her consent and permission; her wealth has always been hers, if she works she never had to operate a joint account with her husband, who will then decide what to do with the money. A lot of what is called economic empowerment, Islam had given women 14 centuries ago. If over time and due to societal ignorance this is denied her she can best recover this through a process of re-education and enlightenment. Her economic independence is a right given her by the Most High and no one can deny her. This right to own her property uninhibited must not, however, be confused with the right to work to earn money. The issue of work has to be weighed against the non-material needs of the family and the conveniences of the couple, for work touches on issues that Islam deems more important than material possession.

4. Allah's call to stand up to injustice in society and endeavour to correct them was not restricted to men only it was a general call addressed to all Muslims, and women are just as equally liable as the men. For the avoidance of doubt when Allah brought up the issue in Surah al-Tauba, he made it amply clear that he meant both men and women working together, in His sublime words: " The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity and obey God and his apostle. On them will God pour His mercy: for God is exalted in power, wise. God hath promised to believers, men and women gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of ever lasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of God: that is the supreme felicity." What the Most High is saying is that Muslim women are empowered to supervise, improve on and correct the social order. They are thus empowered to participate in the running of every aspect of state and society, without prejudice to their responsibilities as mothers or wives.

5. To the extent that this correction of injustice of society requires political action as it too often does, then women have a responsibility to partake in politics not just as

passive voters but also and if need be as active participants. What is important for the Muslim women here is that politics is not a past time or a hobby but a serious business. Politics is not an end in itself but a means to a higher end and that is the cleansing of and the improvement on society. Some Turkish women who joined politics as elected members of the municipality (under the REFAH Islamic party) have scored great success in the elimination of prostitution and drugs, unlike the men before them, in the Turkish cities on the eastern borders with the Soviet Republics. That women can take responsibilities and head units and institutions has never been in doubt in the Islamic tradition. This idea is clear and unambiguously conveyed in the very hadith of the Prophet that says "every one of you is a shepherd, and every shepherd will be held responsible for his flock, .... a woman is a shepherd in the house of her husband ... "

Here then are examples of what we may call Islam's empowerment of women. What must be noted is that this is empowerment without the confrontation and bitterness and without the excessive competitiveness and the confusion of between equality and uniformity that so characterises the empowerment in vogue. As FOMWAN would say, "setting women against men in rivalry specifically for power and wealth, (which is what is meant by empowerment) is a piece of social engineering on par with the communist experiment in equality based on the mistaken idea that all human beings are the same." What FOMWAN seems to be saying is that just as the communist edifice crumbled so would any notion or institution which chose to ignore reality and build castles in the air, as it were.

### **Clarification of certain Issues**

It may still be necessary to go a little further to clarify certain issue that appear to many, especially to non-Muslims, to contradict the exalted position Islam had accorded women as has been discussed above. Some of these issues include the share of inheritance, the issue of evidence, polygamy, restriction in a marriage to non-Muslim men and invalidity of Women political leadership.

**Inheritance** - That a Muslim woman receives half of what a man receives in the share of inheritance has lead many an ignorant observer to rush to the conclusion that Islam values woman as half the value of man. Those who mean mischief have found a ready example of Islam's oppression of women and a ready ear in those ignorant non-Muslim observers, or so they thought. The fact is however different. First the Islamic laws of inheritance are easily the most equitable that mankind has known, but it is beyond the scope of this short paragraph to go further, the interested reader can inquire further in so may published works. Here we can only point the fact that women in Islam, unlike their Hindu or post-modern counterpart, receive dowry in marriage from a man. Besides, as a wife all her basic needs of food, cloth and shelter are provided for by her husband. When not married she remains the responsibility of her father or brother whose duty it is to take care of her. By simple arithmetic the woman who gets half of what her male brother gets could end up twice richer than the same brother. So Islam is simply being practical, and the logic is clearly unassailable. If any has a better system let him share his wisdom with all and sundry, we should all be ready to learn.

**Evidence** - In the course of the evolution of the Sharia, some of the sources were interpreted to mean that in certain circumstances the Sharia either doesn't admit the evidence of women or it takes the evidence of two women in place of that of one man. But the Sharia is not static it evolves over time to meet the dynamics of society. Surprisingly, even the Muslims, who ought to know better, are resisting this dynamism of the Sharia. But luckily scholars in the Sudan, who more than any other Muslim community today on the globe, are having to live the Sharia in the present time, not in the past, have re-examined these interpretations in our contemporary context and have now given women equality in evidence. In respect of the verse in al-Baqra, (Q.2:282) for example, they have argued that at that point in time, seventh century Arabia, women were not involved in commercial transactions and hence were not deemed to be familiar enough with the intricacies of trade to make their evidence in such matters reliable. Today, however, many women are involved and quite familiar with trade and commerce thus obviating the need to undervalue their evidence. The details, it would be appreciated, cannot be provided here.

**Polygamy** - This is one touchy issue which can hardly be resolved in a paragraph but on which luckily a lot has been written. While we refer readers to more detailed works on the subject, we need mention one very important point: that Marriage in Islam is not absolutely compulsory and if one wishes to marry he is free to enshrine such conditions as the contracting parties may wish to consent to and this ought to take care of the fears of those who do not, for whatever reason, wish to be part of a polygamous family. One may also be tempted to ask why wouldn't women be granted the same opportunity, so that they can also have multiple husbands. We only need to point to one fact, that in a polygamy, for every child both the mother as well as the father can be known with certainty, while in a polyandry there could be no doubt about the mother but it will be difficult to establish the father with absolute certainty. Islam deems certainty in the parentage of children too seriously to risk any confusion.

**Restriction in the marriage** - While Islam allows Muslim men to marry women from among the people of the book. Jews and Christians, It does not allow Muslim women same, is this not a form of discrimination? How many times has one heard Muslims, especially the men, trying to explain by pointing to the fact that because women are weak their is the fear that a non-Muslim husband may either convert her to his religion or carry the children from this marriage over to his religion. This, however, is not Islam's reason, it only shows how uninformed Muslims themselves are about the Sharia. First Islam does not view a woman as weak on matters of faith and conviction, for Islam knew the generation of Makkan women who made the first and the second hijra against all manners of threats and hardship. It should also be recalled that the first person to die of the torture in Makka was a Muslim women. We actually need not go very far, in Nigeria we also know of army generals who will come out to command troops but go home to stoop and be commanded by a woman. Islam's reason has nothing to do with this idea (or is it figments of imagination?) of the weakness of women. The main reason is simple and easy to comprehend. In the Sharia the married woman has a right to be fed, clothed and sheltered by her husband, and these rights are justiciable. In other words if the husband should fail in his duty she could go to a Sharia court which will force him to

pay up. If, however, the husband is not a Muslim the Sharia cannot enforce itself on a non-Muslim. On the other hand if the wife is non-Muslim and she goes to court the Muslim husband will be forced to pay up. The restriction is not therefore a discrimination, on the contrary it is meant to secure and uphold the rights Islam had given married women.

**Political Leadership** - We have already seen the need, some would say necessity, for women to participate in politics, but can a woman hold the highest political post of the head of state? Most Muslims would say no a woman cannot hold the post of the head of state. The evidence hinges on the hadith which says that: "a nation would never succeed that make woman in charge of her affairs." This evidence has however been faulted by some scholars. First, one of the scholars argued, the hadith does not seem to be in agreement of the spirit of the story of Bilqis the queen of Sheba in the Qur'an, for Bilqis, who was the head of her state, and was praised by Qur'an for her wits and sagacity and actually succeeded since she came into Islam along with her people. Secondly the hadith itself could not pass the credibility test on three counts. Third there is no explicit text of the Qur'an which says no to women leadership. Some scholars therefore believe that there is no barrier to women leadership any more than the standards that Islam has placed for such leadership, which applies to any Muslim, male or female.