

Women on the Pilgrimage to Fostering Social Cohesion & Peacebuilding: Understanding Islamic Principles

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Abstract

Women are fundamental drivers of change within their communities and society. They carry the responsibility to nurture their families and teach the next generation of children. By increasing their role in social cohesion and peace-building, their family, community, and country will benefit. The literature identifies that gender equality and equal opportunities for women and men without discrimination of colour, creed, religion, and ethnicity and protection of religious and ethnic minorities are considered the most critical elements for social cohesion in a society. The objective of this research is to explore, how women can play their positive roles in the abovementioned domains by following their religion and living in the Islamic paradigm and structure. For this purpose, the teachings of the Last Prophet ﷺ are very much hoped to guide the female fabric of society that how they can remove the social injustice and inequalities, violence and extremism and particularly can provide the rights to people from different racial backgrounds or people of a different faith along with the respect for every faith, their followers, their sacred text and worship places. It is then incumbent upon the scholars to identify and highlight the Prophetic teachings for better understanding to cope with the perplexing situation. The study will also discuss that without following the real teachings of Islam, we would be unable to establish a peaceful and cohesive community. The study will be qualitative and the methodology to be used in the discussion will be the inductive approach.

Keywords: *Social Cohesion; Cohesive Communities; Islam, Peacebuilding; Prophetic Traditions*

Introduction

Islam believes in equality, therefore, provides freedom and equal self-respect to both men and women. Sometimes they are different in their tasks and functions, but both have been given equal opportunities to come closer to Allah Almighty by giving their best in their deeds. Equality of rights is discussed in detail in *shari'ah* (Islamic Law) and Holy Prophet ﷺ implemented them during his sacred era. It is obvious that similar to the Qur'an, the Prophetic traditions also have emphasized the honor and respect of women within such a frame of love, endearment, and affection. Doubtlessly, society would face injustice, deprivation, and economic and social inequality and would encounter many other evils and issues if there is an absence of gender equality and even in such a society woman cannot contribute effectively. "Doubtlessly, men and women are the backbones of human civilization and both play their due roles in society. In the present era, women are found engaged in every walk of life. Their potential was appreciated in

the fields of education, research and medicine for a long but now they have also got prominence in fields like the army, politics, games, culture, economy, engineering and even avionics. The woman of the modern era is now a good mixture of a conscious wife, an affectionate and educated mother and an active worker by increasing her importance and status through achievements in all walks of life.” As in the previous couple of decades, the establishment of peaceful and inclusive societies has been globally a primary goal and also 36 targets across the UN 2030 Agenda are directly related to inclusivity, peace, tolerance and justice. Therefore, the present study would highlight how a woman can play their role in peacebuilding and Social Cohesion efforts due to the positions they occupy (as a mother, mentor, teacher or religious representative/ scholar) within their families and communities in the light of Prophetic Sunnah, Sayings and historical evidence during the early period of Islam.

Understanding Peace & Social Cohesion Through a Different Lens

When we look toward a broader conception of peace, we find that in many ways it is synonymous with social justice. According to Marshall “women who provide social services or assistance to the needy engage in trauma healing or reconciliation, and help in rebuilding communities by caring for marginalized groups such as orphans, informal workers, and widows, or providing microfinance, women’s organizations that help victims of sexual violence bring relief to survivors of violence, and advocate for structural changes to create more inclusive democratic systems are considered builders of this definition of peace.”ⁱ A more comprehensive approach to peace also means that “violence indirectly related to war and civil strife, especially domestic violence and trafficking, is taken into account. Such a peace even envelops work on climate change, given the potential for environmental factors to foment conflict, such has been seen in places like Sudan where the amount of land suitable for agriculture and grazing is shrinking.”ⁱⁱ However, Ela Bhatt has provided a more precise and practical definition of peace in the following wording:

“Peace is about the ordinariness of life, how we understand each other, share meals, and share courtyards. And that is what women do. That very ordinariness and the kinds of livelihoods that so many women pursue are absolutely central to life. That is what keeps communities together.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Dena Merriam argues that “by peace, we really mean that we are looking at consciousness change and at underlying values. Thus we are looking at peace in its broadest definition: the development of sustainable, inclusive, balanced societies that are truly prototypes of more peaceful, harmonious ways of living.”^{iv} It would be pertinent to share Dekha Ibrahim Abdi’s interpretations while discussing the definition of peace that “peace should be seen as an egg, fragile and fertile at the same time, with conflict resolution just the beginning of a process that needs care and nurturing at every stage.”^v Dekha Ibrahim Abdi’s interpretation of peace is quite closer or similar to the two significant qualities of females, fragility and fertility, therefore, peace and woman are having a deep link between them and we find women in society contributing positively in every field by providing ease to humanity and removing pain from the society not only during this modern age but since the ancient period in this world and making a safe and strong community. Indeed, the purpose of this is to relate social cohesion with Peacebuilding it also carries the same purpose as discussed above in the light of multiple

definitions of social cohesion, as Chan and his fellow authors have said: “Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations”.^{vi}

They also have identified that “the measurement of social cohesion is multi-dimensional and covers different societal domains and should include subjective like opinions and attitudes as well as objectives like actual behavior and indicators. The cohesion is the reflection of the state of mind of individuals which manifests itself in a certain behavior”.^{vii} Valentova, Marie defines the nature of social relations that “at the cross-section of these two axes, one can find four dimensions of the concept of social cohesion: institutional trust, willingness to cooperate, political and social participation and aiming to bring communities closer together.”^{viii}

Community cohesion “lies at the heart of what makes a safe and strong community. It must be delivered locally through creating strong community networks, based on principles of trust and respect for local diversity, and nurturing a sense of belonging and confidence in local people. Building cohesive communities brings huge benefits by creating a society in which people from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds can live and work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. Cohesive communities are communities which are better able to tackle common problems, provide mutual support and work together for a positive future.” Promoting community cohesion involves “addressing fractures, removing barriers and encouraging positive interaction between groups. Community cohesion is closely linked to integration as it aims to build communities where people feel confident that they belong and are comfortable mixing and interacting with others,” particularly people from different racial backgrounds or people of a different faith.^{ix} The previous literature suggests that gender equality and equal opportunities for women and men without discrimination of colour, creed, religion, and ethnicity and protection of religious and ethnic minorities are considered the most critical elements for social cohesion in a society.^x In their evaluation of steps taken to end gender-based inequalities for better social inclusion, Kelles-Viitanen and Shrestha found that “deep-seated cultural norms and practices continue to deter efforts toward gender equality as women are primarily viewed in their role as wives and mothers. According to a few studies, the youth of any society have the potential to the promotion of peaceful coexistence but unfortunately, we see our youth indulging in violence-related activities by travelling in public and private transport, in markets, educational institutes and shopping malls, they often manifest the violent behaviour even upon the minor issues and matters.”^{xi} It would be instructive to highlight that the home environment is the most important factor that has a profound effect on a child's life. From the earliest moments of a child's life, a child depends on his parents to meet his every need. Parents are the first teachers of the children and play the role of role models for them.^{xii} So, the satisfied and controlled youth can be shaped only by the proper nurturing of the child during his/her childhood and further during their adolescent period by their parents. Here, also the role of a woman as a mother predicts her significant contribution to the formation of a cohesive and peaceful society.

Principles within Islamic Frameworks

According to the Islamic Perspective Peace is a collective responsibility that is directly tied to justice where everyone could live with dignity and harmony. Once Prophet

Mohammad ﷺ said to his followers, “Shall I inform you of a better act than fasting, alms, and prayers? Make peace between one another: enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by roots”.^{xiii}

Islam strongly emphasizes “positive peace, that is rooted in the principles of justice (adl), beneficence (ihsan), wisdom (hikmah) and dignity (karamah) and emphasis on relational networks and social cohesion such as mediation, reconciliation, dialogue, consultation, popular will and truce or ceasefire. The end goal is the restoration of social unity and justice where everyone has the potential to flourish.” According to the Quranic verse:

“Fulfill the Covenant of Allah when ye have entered into it, and break not your oaths after ye have confirmed them; indeed, ye have made Allah your surety; for Allah knoweth all that ye do”.^{xiv}

There are abundant examples from Quranic verses that focus on the role and responsibilities of peacemaking for the resolution of the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. Further Quran states from this perspective that:

“But if the enemy inclines towards peace, do you [also] incline towards peace, and trust in Allah? For He is the one that hears and knows [all things]^{xv} Nor can goodness and evil be equal. Repel with what is better. Then will He between whom and you were hatred become as it were your friend and intimate”.^{xvi}

According to Smock and Huda, “The fundamental Islamic principles of nonviolence and peacebuilding include the pursuit of justice; doing good; the universality and dignity of humanity; the sacredness of human life; equality; the quest for peace (individual, interpersonal, communal, regional, and international); peacemaking via reason, knowledge, and understanding; creativity; forgiveness; proper deeds and actions; responsibility; patience; collaborative actions and solidarity; inclusivity; diversity; pluralism; and tolerance”.^{xvii} Therefore we find Islam as the perfect starting point for dialogues on peacebuilding, non-violence, and conflict resolution because it focuses on discipline, self-sacrifice, obedience, the sharing of personal and social responsibility, and the belief in the oneness of humankind.^{xviii} Holy Prophet ﷺ emphasized the need to promote positive moral values in order to achieve peace. According to his teachings, every believer is a preacher of peace. As the Holy Prophet ﷺ said:

“A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with his tongue and hands. And a Muhajir (emigrant) is the one who gives up (abandons) all that Allah has forbidden.”³ When the Holy Prophet ﷺ arrived in Madina, he established relations between the Muhajireen and Ansar and history is unable to provide such kind of precedent regarding practical implementation for social cohesion and peacebuilding in a multi-faith society. The Constitution of Madīna, which represents the first major official decree of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ categorically accords freedom of religion to non-Muslims:

“The Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs. [This applies to] their allies and their persons. But whoever acts unjustly and sins will only destroy himself and his agnates”.^{xix}

The Islamic teachings guide a cohesive society and prioritize the establishment of peace in its internal and external affairs. Now the implementation of the Islamic teachings of peace is needed.

Historical Evidence of Women's Contribution to Social Cohesion & Peacebuilding During Prophetic Era

Islamic history has an unfaltering line of Muslim women contributing to human society. Women were involved in shaping religious interpretations and responses to the conflict in their communities in other ways. They have played significant roles in their local places and in their family's religious life, and have shaped the religious traditions in influential ways. Mother of the believers and the spouse of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, a successful business woman Hazrat Khadija (R.A.), was the first who trusted in and supported our Prophet ﷺ in the best manner and throughout his whole life has been a source of great support and courage.^{xx} The author of a most authentic collection of Hadith, Imam Bukhari narrated that Rabiyya (R.A.) the girl of Mu'awadh (R.A.) stated: "We had participated in the Gazwat (battles) with the Prophet ﷺ. We offered water to the warriors, served them, and brought the dead and injured to Medina."^{xxi} Umm Ateyya (R.A.), who belonged to Ansar, said: 'I accompanied the Messenger of Allah ﷺ seven times, guarding the camp, making the food, treating the wounded and caring for the sick'.^{xxii} Umm Sulaim (R.A.), the spouse of Abi Talha (R.A.), has narrated that "she was carrying a dagger along her during the battle of Hunain. At the point when the Prophet ﷺ saw a dagger with me and then asked about its purpose, then I replied to Prophet ﷺ that, I am carrying it for my safety purpose that I can guard myself against our enemies. The Prophet ﷺ did not preclude this."^{xxiii} Throughout Islamic history, Muslim women had engaged in various important administrative positions. As for accountability and proper administration of markets, the second Caliph of Islam Umar (R.A.) had appointed the instructor of market Shifa bint Abdullah (R.A.) and Umar (R.A.) often consulted her in financial matters due to her wise and practical approach. She was given the title *Al-Shifa* which means 'The Healer' due to her expertise in medicine.^{xxiv} It indicates that she not only by providing ease to society in their economics and business-related matters, but also served the society as a physician which shows her significant contribution to establishing a cohesive society.

Another example is Samrah Bint Nahik Asadiyyia (R.A.) an aged lady during Prophet ﷺ's life. She always advised the people for good deeds and to avoid evil, at whatever time she visited the Bazar. She carried a whip for those who would be found doing any destructive and anti-social activities.^{xxv} Another example from the early Muslims' history is of Umme-e-Kalsum (R.A.) daughter of Hazrat Ali (R.A.), during the caliphate of Usman (R.A.) in 28 A.H. she was sent as an ambassadorial visit to the court of the Roman Empire. When Umme-e-Kalsum (R.A.) reached the court with the expensive gifts, perfumes and drinks, the Mistress of Hercules welcome her along with the royal Roman ladies and she told to them: "These gifts are from the mistress of Arab's king and from their Prophet ﷺ's daughter."^{xxvi} Doubtlessly, these remarkable Muslim women were the torchbearer of peace and interfaith harmony and played a prominent role in multiple fields like art, literature, poetry, and even in political and administrative responsibilities for establishing a cohesive society parallel to the male fabric of society during their age.

It is pertinent to share that at that time several women were the authority in the narration of Prophetic Traditions.^{xxvii} Particularly the *ummahāt al mominīn* (Prophet's ﷺ wives) were viewed as vital custodians of the big treasure of knowledge that they had obtained during the

lifetime of the Prophet ﷺ “they were consulted for guidance and instruction and they appropriately transferred the great treasure of knowledge which they had received and derived from Prophet's ﷺ company, especially regarding the women related issues. They were specifically approached for facts and details concerning Prophet ﷺ's personal life after his sad demise. Nobody other than his (Prophet ﷺ's wives could have been a superior source about aforementioned matters related to Prophet ﷺ's personal life.”^{xxviii} Hazrat Abdullah Bin Masood (R.A.)'s wife was an artisan and she contributed to the economy and trade of her society by selling handicrafts. Hazrat Sohail (R.A) quoted a woman who yielded cane in her fields. She used to serve Hazrat Sohail and other Companions of the Prophet ﷺ with the sweet prepared cane whenever they used to visit her on Friday.^{xxix} The treaty of Hudaibiyah as known in history as a significant phase of Islam was signed to affirm peace and it demanded extreme patience due to its unexpected notch gains from the jaws of an apparent defeat. The act of the Holy Prophet ﷺ of consulting Umm-e-Salma (R.A.) during this critical situation and her wisely given suggestion for the sustenance of a peaceful environment indicates her undeniable contribution to devising a cohesive society.^{xxx} In sum, it is concluded in the light of the above-shared evidence that in Islam men and women can equally avail all the opportunities for the prosperity and betterment of individuals and society. No doubt, it is additionally important to recognize the obligations Islam has put on both so they could use their abilities in the best way for the betterment of humanity.

Responsibilities of women for the development of a Peaceful Society

Before starting the discussion about the responsibilities and significant contribution to the formation and the development of a society. Society is always a collection of individuals, and if someone claims that it's a violent or peaceful society, it indicates that the people of this society have a tendency toward violent or peaceful behavior. If we want to devise a peaceful society then from the first day, it's a dire need to nurture with **love and compassion. Indeed, it's the first and foremost contribution of a female that she plays as a mother because she is the first institution for her child and is responsible for shaping her child's behavioural patterns and demands extreme care.** In this reference a hadith recorded by Bukhari that **a woman is married for four considerations, her family, her beauty, her wealth, and her religiosity and noble character. So you should opt for the last one.** This hadith does not talk directly about parenting, but the emphasis on the nobility of the spouse plays a crucial role in developing desirable character in children.

Ibn 'Umar reported that the Prophet ﷺ said “**All of you are shepherds and each of you is responsible for his flock. A man is the shepherd of the people of his house and he is responsible. A woman is the shepherd of the house of her husband and she is responsible. Each of you is a shepherd and each is responsible for his flock**”.^{xxxi} Further indicated that beware of some negative qualities of the guardian by stating that “The worst kind of manner in bringing up the children is violent attitude (al-hutamah). I warn you that you become among those with a violent attitude.”^{xxxii} Al-hutamah means brutal; harsh; aggressive; extreme and wild.^{xxxiii} The Messenger of Allah, ﷺ and his family have said, “**Whoever has or is around children should play with them as a child!**” The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him and his family has said, “**Acquaint your children with religious teachings (of Islam)**”

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ has guided the parents to adopt warm, loving, caring and responsible behavior with their children and advised his followers by stating: “**Have a love for your children and show compassion towards them and when you promise them something, then live up to your promise since indeed they do not recognize you except as the one who**

sustains them”.^{xxxiv} In another report, the Prophet stated: “**Respect your children and cultivate in them the best of manners**”.^{xxxv} The Prophet is reported to have warned his followers: “**A person who is not kind to children and not respectful to elders is not from amongst us**”.^{xxxvi} Particularly during early childhood Islam does special focus on parenting roles and style and advice the parents to adopt less demanding and more responsive parenting during the early years of children and accept from parents for the manifestation of love and passion which provides the freedom of choice in a carefree environment to their children, and made them disciplined and socially and emotionally strong.

It would be important to mention here that if Widom (1989) stated that “violence begets violence” then conversely love and compassion would cultivate love and forbearance among the children, which doubtlessly in return a greater source of controlling violent behavior during their adolescence and youth age. Pearce and Axinn (1998) stated that mothers who place a high value on religion will have more positive relationships with their children. Religion plays a central role in shaping the core values and beliefs regarding family life, and aspects of religion affect parenting styles (Bornstein, 2016). Parents who use positive religious coping strategies seem to perform better when facing challenging parenting situations (Montgomery, 2013). Particularly, religious commitment has a significant negative relationship between aggressive and violent behavior (Ashraf et al., 2020). The provision of love and care is a greater source of positive thinking and well-being among children and encourages them to be good human beings. Most children are fortunate to have the desired home environment full of love and affection from their parents (Ibn-Shobe-Harrani, 2003).

Historically speaking that during the war in 1965, between India and Pakistan **women** played an influential **role** in enhancing the morale of the Pakistan Army and its nation by singing and composing the National songs, and in most national songs the higher rank and significance of Martyrs had addressed that promoted the bravery and courage in our nation. Pakistani women helped the nation during this critical time in many other ways like cooking food, nursing care of the injured soldiers, helping victims of war and providing relief to survivors of war also giving shelters to those whose houses had been demolished or destructed because of the heavy missiles attacks and bombardments. Which doubtlessly enforced the Pakistani Army to fight with their enemy with their maximum spirit and passion. So, if during the war women can play a significant role then how it can be impossible for the teachers, mothers and mentors of our society they could not to inculcate the message of peace and love while educating them? Doubtlessly, Pakistani women have played prominent roles in peacebuilding and social cohesion by working shoulder to shoulder with their fellow men.

Women are the central caretakers of families and everyone is affected when they are excluded from peacebuilding because they have the ability to adopt multiple potential ways of building peace and social cohesion. In Muslim-majority nations such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine, the contributions and efforts of Muslim women in building trust and peace among the warring factions are also marvelous, despite threats they received from [male] militant groups. Women groups from these areas have formed strategic partnerships and networks of women to ensure the implementation of their platform for peace. Their ability to address cultural divides and different nationalities has been among the main reasons for their success.^{xxxvii} To conclude, given the centrality of the role of women, both religious and secular, in peacebuilding, it is high time for those concerned with peace, including governments, international organizations, donors, and policymakers, to create and support

networks of women peacemakers across religion and culture. Such efforts could strengthen existing attempts and improve our understanding of what can be done to create more sustainable peace in Pakistan and how we can strengthen social cohesion.

Conclusion

Women have a unique role to play in peacebuilding and strengthening social cohesion efforts due to the positions they occupy within their families and communities due to their great potential in peacebuilding. By bringing attention to gender representation in peacebuilding, it is possible to increase their participation in every domain which is necessary for a cohesive society. There is a dire need for creating a protected environment for women, where they could work with dignity, respect and free from the fear of being harassed and abused then, in a true sense we can achieve higher productivity, prosperity, justice and economic stability that were among the important characteristics of Prophetic society. But if there is gender inequality and gender biasedness exist in Society then we would face deprivation, injustice, economic crises, violence and many other evils that are the major hindrances to a peaceful and cohesive society. In the light of the above-detailed discussion, and by the example of the Prophetic era along with the historical evidences of early Muslim women, it has been proved that Islam is a great supporter of gender equality in all the domains of life, whether it is administrative, social, civic, economic, or religious and emphasis upon the development of a peaceful and cohesive society.

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