

The Permissibility of Women's Social Presence from an Islamic Viewpoint

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Abstract

This article tries to demonstrate that Islam recognizes women's social presence and endorses their participation in political, economic, and cultural activities in society. The claim is supported by the Quranic reports of women's social activities in the past nations and by a number of *jurisprudential verses* (*āyāt al-aḥkām*) pertaining to social matters. Further evidence for the claim consists in reliable historical reports, as well as hadiths, according to which women were active in the nascent Muslim community and the Prophet (s) expressed no disagreement towards their social activities. This article is written with a descriptive-analytic method, using reliable Shiite and Sunni sources.

Keywords: social presence of women, women-specific rulings, Islamic viewpoint.

Introduction

Social concepts and issues are preceded by the formation of human communities; their meanings develop throughout history, and their domains and instances change constantly. "Social presence" is one such notion which was first introduced by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie. They maintained that social presence is a level of

relationship between two persons via electronic and digital devices (Short, Christie, and Williams 1976, 65). This definition of social presence is restricted to indirect participation and activities in the cyberspace, but more recent definitions extend it to physical presence in pivotal structures of power and decision-making, which constitute social life. According to these definitions, social life refers to participations in all aspects of life, whether social, political, economic, or cultural; it is the active and well-informed presence of people as members of society in political and social realms, playing their respective social roles (see Palmer, Stern, and Gaile n.d., 102-3). According to theorists in social sciences, however, it is essential for human beings to enjoy social relationships regardless of their professions, outlooks, and cultural backgrounds (see Blau 2009, 3). However, if the scope and manner of such relationships as well as their norms and regulations are not specified, conflicts in social relationships will ensue. Such rules are sometimes originated in ethnical customs and manners and tied with human intelligence, and sometimes rooted in religious frameworks and have a divine origin.

In this article, I aim to unearth the Islamic attitude towards the social presence of women, focusing on the Islamic view on the permissibility of women's social presence, which can be gleaned from Quranic verses as well as the Prophet's encounters with socially engaged women. Thus, in what follows, I will consider two types of evidence: Quranic evidence and historical events during the lifetime of the Prophet.

A. Quranic Evidence

The Quran illustrates Islamic laws and rituals in a variety of ways to facilitate a better understanding of their meanings. In some cases, it specifies the required manners in the form of explicit laws, and, in other cases, teaches them using the stories of the past nations.

I. Evidence from Certain Quranic Stories

Considering that Quranic stories were intended to contain messages and lessons for the readers of the Quran, an exegete can infer such teachings either through verses in which the purpose of the story is explicitly stated or through narrations of the past events on which the Quran has left no comment, since it implies the Quran's consent.

There are a number of Quranic verses in this regard. Some verses introduce female role-models and mention their conduct. This includes Mary the mother of Jesus and Asiya the wife of Pharaoh, referred to as role-models of men and women at all times and places (Quran 66:12). Some other verses report certain past events in which women were involved, without criticizing their involvement, which can count as a tacit approval of its permissibility. Below, I will discuss four instances of the latter type of verses.

i. The Queen of Sheba

The Queen of Sheba was a ruler at the time of Solomon, and was called by him to convert to his religion. The Quranic verses concerning the story of the Queen of Sheba and her conversation with her courtiers depict the glory of her reign: "She said, 'O eminent ones, advise me in my affair. I would not decide a matter until you witness [for] me.' They said, 'We are men of strength and of great military might, but the command is yours, so see what you will command'" (Quran 27:32-33). Nowhere in the story does the Quran criticize the fact that she had such a high role in society.

ii. Shu'ayb's Daughters

Shu'ayb was a prophet, whose daughters, according to the Quran, used to shepherd and thus be present in society. The Quran reports their social presence along with male shepherds, because of which they met

Moses. Both Shu‘ayb and Moses were prophets and their practices—as reported in the Quran—imply the permissibility of women’s social presence: “And when he came to the well of Madyan, he found there a crowd of people watering [their flocks], and he found aside from them two women driving back [their flocks]. He said, ‘What is your circumstance?’ They said, ‘We do not water until the shepherds dispatch [their flocks]; and our father is an old man’” (Quran 28:23).

iii. Moses’s Sister

When Moses’s mother threw him, by God’s command, to the Nile, his sister followed him to Pharaoh’s palace and there she said that she knew a family that could take care of the baby Moses. The Quran endorses her act, characterizing it as part of the divine plan for Moses to be returned to his mother: “[And We favored you] when your sister went and said, ‘Shall I direct you to someone who will be responsible for him?’ So We restored you to your mother that she might be content and not grieve” (Quran 20:40).

iv. Social Presence of Wives of Prophets

The stories of prophets in the Quran are intermingled with reference to practices of their wives. The wives of Noah and Lot had social presence, but the reason why they were reprimanded in the Quran was their disbelief and betrayal, not their social presence: “Allah presents an example of those who disbelieved: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them, so those prophets did not avail them from Allah at all, and it was said, ‘Enter the Fire with those who enter’” (Quran 66:10).

On the other hand, the Quran refers to two righteous women, both of whom had social presence: Asiya, the wife of Pharaoh, who was persecuted by him for her faith, and Mary:

And Allah presents an example of those who believed: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds and save me from the wrongdoing people.' And [the example of] Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into [her garment] through Our angel, and she believed in the words of her Lord and His scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient.'" (Quran 66:11-12).

II. Evidence Inferred from Quranic Jurisprudential Rulings

The second type of Quranic evidence implying the permissibility of women's social presence is certain jurisprudential rulings that can be implemented only through social presence. Thus, to comply with these rulings, women must have social presence. The main rulings in this regard are stated in Sūra al-Nūr (Quran 24). Exegetes have highlighted the cultural teachings of this Sūra such that some of them take it to be a chapter on chastity (Makārim Shīrāzī 1374 Sh, 14:437). Moreover, the continuity of the context throughout Sūra al-Nūr gives a picture of the Islamic view on the formation of healthy social relationships and the protection of social safety in the relationships between men and women. Four general rulings can be inferred from this Sūra.

i. Rulings Pertaining to Women's Clothing in their Social Presence

Clothing requirements for women are not specific to Islam. Historical precedents of such requirements date back to the pre-Islamic era in the Arabian Peninsula; women in this era allegedly covered their heads with headcovers. This is evidenced by the first Quranic ruling concerning women's clothing: "And tell the believing women ... to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests" (24:31). The verse indicates that Arabian women wore headcovers even prior to Islam and the revelation of this verse, since it implies that they already had headcovers, and the verse commanded them only to cover their

chests and necks with it as well. The order is not preceded by an explanation of what *khumur* (headcovers) are. It shows that it was known to people at the time, and, as emphasized by some commentators, Arabian women used to wrap their headcovers behind their ears (see Mudarrisī 1419 AH, 8:303) or hang them from behind their heads such that their necks and chests appeared (Qurṭubī 1364 AH, 13:230). Therefore, the phrase “*ḍarb ‘alā juyūb*” means to wrap the headcovers over the necks and chests, contrary to the common practice among women in the Age of Ignorance (Jāhiliyya) (Fāḍil al-Miqdād 1419 AH, 2:222; Ḥusaynī al-Jurjānī 1404 AH, 2:362).

In the second Quranic verse, which increases the restrictions, God orders the Prophet to tell his wives and daughters and the women of the faithful to wear *jilbāb* in order to be recognized and thus protected against social harms: “O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments [*jalābīb*]. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful” (33:59). According to the majority of philologists, *jilbāb* is a piece of clothing larger than a headcover and smaller than a robe (see Farāhīdī 1410 AH, 6:132; Ibn Manzūr 1408 AH, 2:117). However, there is disagreement among Shiite and Sunni exegetes of the Quran over the extent to which *jilbāb* covers the body. Some maintain that it covers the head and the chest (Ṭabrisī 1372 Sh, 8:581; Zamakhsharī 1407AH, 3:560); others take it to be a shirt, clothing, headcover, or anything else that a woman is covered with (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1417 AH, 16:339); a third group consider it a cover over a woman’s clothes or an item of clothing covering the whole body (Zuḥaylī 1418 AH, 22:106; Qurṭubī 1364 Sh, 14:244); some others hold that *jilbāb* covers the head and the face (Kiyāharrāsī 1405 AH, 4:350; Jaṣṣaṣ 1405 AH, 5:245; Khusravānī 1390 AH, 7:60; Aṭyab 1378 Sh, 10:527); others believe that it could

cover a woman's face and body (Shubbar 1412 AH, 1:404; Ḥusaynī al-Shīrāzī 1423 AH, 1:438; Karamī al-Ḥuwayzī 1402 AH, 6:306); and finally some scholars take it to be a cover over the headcover (Ibn al-'Arabī n.d., 3:1586).

However, regardless of which parts of a woman's body are covered with jilbāb, it is obligatory only when women make a public presence in society, which presupposes that their social presence is permissible.

ii. Covering the Adornments

Another Islamic ruling concerning women's social presence is the obligation of covering the adornments. Women usually wear adornments, a characteristic which is mentioned in the Quran without any criticism against it (Quran 43:18). Thus, women are permitted to use adornments and ornaments, but they should not expose their adornments to *non-mahram* men.¹

1. In the Bible, women's manifestation of their adornments is reprimanded; for example, in the Book of Isaiah, arrogant women of Jerusalem who exposed their adornments were warned against the divine punishment:

The LORD says, "The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, ... with ornaments jingling on their ankles. ... In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, the earrings and bracelets and veils, the headdresses and anklets and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, the signet rings and nose rings, the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls. Instead of fragrance there will be a stench; instead of a sash, a rope; instead of well-dressed hair, baldness; instead of fine clothing, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding. (Isaiah 3:16)

Paul also emphasized that women should be modest in their clothing and adornments. He believed that Christian women should be known for their benevolence and good moral characters, rather than their hairstyles or adornments or shiny clothes (1 Timothy 2:9-10). The point is also made in the First Epistle of Peter addressed: "Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." (1 Peter 3:3-4).

The Quranic command not to expose the “adornment except that which appears thereof” (24:31) implies that it is not permissible for women to show some of their adornments when they encounter men in their social presence, while it is permissible for them to show some others. This has led to discussions among the commentators. Some believe that women’s adornments should be covered when they are on body parts (Makārim Shīrāzī 1374 Sh, 14:439; Kiyāharrāsī 1405 AH, 4:312); others understand the verse as referring to covering the parts of the body on which the adornment is placed (Muqaddas al-Ardabīlī n.d., 1:543; Zuḥaylī 1418 AH, 18:217; Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1415 AH, 15:111; Mughniyya 1424 AH, 5:415; Ālūsī 1415 AH, 9:335; Ṭabrisī 1372 Sh, 7:217; Zamakhsharī 1407 AH, 3:230); a third group interpret the word “adornment” in the verse as referring to both innate adornments (the beauty of a woman’s face and body) and external adornments (Ibn al-‘Arabī n.d., 3:1368; Muṣṭafawī, 1430 AH, 4, 397); and other scholars consider the verse as referring to innate beauty (Fakhr al-Rāzī 1420 AH, 23:363). However, the rest of the verse provides evidence against the latter view, because it permits women to expose their adornments before *mahram* men, such as their husbands, fathers, fathers of husbands, sons, and so forth, and it is obvious that women are not permitted to expose their bodies to *mahram* men (except their husbands). So, the adornment in the verse is not the body. Therefore, the adornments that must not be revealed are acquired adornments and parts of women’s bodies on which they are put.

Some commentators maintain that the apparent adornments—the adornments that do not need to be covered in social presence—are the face and hands (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1417 AH, 15:111; Quṭb 1412 AH, 4:2512; Ibn al-‘Arabī n.d., 12:229; Ṭabrisī 1372 Sh, 7:217), and others hold that the feet, kohl, henna, and rings are permitted to appear as well (Mudarrisī 1419 AH, 8:302; Ālūsī 1415 AH, 9:335; Jaṣṣāṣ 1405 AH, 5:172).

ii. Avoiding to Attract Men's Attention in Social Presence

In order to prevent any intrusions on women and to preserve the community's health, Quran 24:31, for instance, prohibits women from stamping their feet on the ground to produce sounds that make known their hidden adornments and attract men's attention. The prohibition is meant to prevent lustful desires in men (Fāḍil al-Miqdād 1419 AH, 2:224). This behavior counts as an instance of *tabarruj* which is prohibited in Quran 33:33: “[A]nd do not display yourselves as [was] the display [tabarruj] of the former times of ignorance.” Thus, *tabarruj* means to display oneself and one's adornment in order to grab the attention of non-mahram men (Fayūmī 1928, 1:42; Farāhīdī 1410 AH, 6:115). Quranic exegetes agree on the prohibition of a woman exposing herself to non-mahram men. This is prohibited in other religions as well; for example, women of Jerusalem were reprimanded for displaying themselves and trying to grab the attention of men and were warned against the divine punishment (Isaiah 3:16-24).

Although the three above-mentioned instructions or commands specify certain restrictive rulings for women's presence in society, the Quran does not aim to restrict their social presence. What is important for the divine legislator is to guarantee a healthy social environment. Thus, men are also obliged to make their own contributions to a healthy community for women by controlling their gaze: “Say to the believers they should lower their gaze” (Quran 24:30). The verse prohibits men from gazing at non-mahram women (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 18:92; Ṭabarsī 1372 Sh, 7:217; Ḥusaynī Shīrāzī 1423 AH, 365; Ḥusaynī Jurjānī 1404 AH, 2:358; Ibn al-‘Arabī n.d., 3:1365). Men's control of their gaze prevents sinful behaviors and result in the safety of the community. It is remarkable that the ruling is not specific to Islam. According to the Gospel of Matthew, a lustful gaze is tantamount to adultery: “You have

heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28).

B. Historical Events in the Prophet’s Time

Women’s social presence is significant throughout the history of Islam and especially in the early Islamic history. Historical evidence for the positive view of Islam on women’s social presence includes women’s pledging their allegiance to Prophet Muhammad (s), their participation in the promotion of Islam, their occupations, and their active presence in the battles.

i. Women’s Allegiance to the Prophet

In their accounts of the Prophet’s allegiances in 13 AH after the beginning of his mission, historical sources have reported that, in addition to the seventy-three men in the Second Pledge of ‘Aqaba, two women also pledged their allegiance to the Prophet (Ibn Hishām n.d., 1:454, 466-7; Ibn al-Athīr 1409 AH, 1:443). It is also reported that women pledged their allegiance to the Prophet in Medina in 1 AH (Ibn Sa‘d 1410 AH, 8:11) as well as in the Pledge of Riḍwān in 7AH (Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī 1415 AH, 6:436). This is further evidence for the social presence of women in the Prophet’s time.

ii. Women’s Participation in the Promotion of Islam

Calling people to Islam was a social activity in which women in the time of the Prophet participated and the Prophet endorsed it. Ghazīyya the daughter of Jābir b. Ḥakīm converted to Islam soon after the beginning of the Prophet’s mission. She then began to proselytize and was consequently persecuted by the polytheists (Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī 1415 AH, 8:417-8). Asmā’ the daughter of ‘Umayy, the wife of Ja‘far b. Abī Ṭālib, among other women, was present in the migration to

Abyssinia under the leadership of Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib (Balādhurī 1417 AH, 4:1784-5).

iii. Women's Engagement in Social Activities

Trade was a popular occupation among the Arabs in the Prophet's time, and it was not restricted to men. The most remarkable Muslim woman in the Prophet's time who engaged in trade was the Prophet's wife Khadīja (Ibn Hishām n.d., 1:188; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī 1415 AH, 8:100; Miqrīzī 1420 AH, 1:15). Qayla al-Anmāriyya was another female merchant who met the Prophet and asked him about certain legal issues (Ibn Hishām n.d., 1:220).

The Prophet's permission for women to sell their goods in festivals (Ṭūsī 1407 AH, 3:287) implies that it is generally permissible for women to work in public places. Among the jobs that are explicitly considered permissible for women are handicraft (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1412 AH, 4:1849-50; Ibn al-Athīr 1409 AH, 6:126), selling perfumes (Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī 1415 AH, 8:95), and breast-feeding (Miqrīzī 1420 AH, 1:12; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1412 AH, 4:1813).

iv. Women's Participation in Battles

Women's participation in the battles in the Prophet's time was so well-known that a section is devoted to it in some hadith collections. For instance, al-Bukhārī has a section in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* titled "Women's Battling and Their Combat with Men," in which he mentions the women who attended the battles and carried the injured and the martyrs back to Medina (Bukhārī n.d., 6:420). ʿĀ'isha and Umm Salama, the Prophet's wives, attended the Battle of Uḥud, supplying water to the thirsty warriors (Bukhārī n.d., 6:418).

In his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muslim has also devoted a section to this topic. He reports, on the authority of Anas, that the Prophet took Umm Salīm and the women of the Anṣar to battles in order for them to take care of the injured (Muslim 1392 AH, 5:196). Further evidence for the Prophet's endorsement of the social presence of women include watching over the equipment in the Battle of Khaybar by Umm Sanān al-Aslamī (Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 8:96), Umm 'Ammara's defense of the Prophet in the Battle of Uḥud when many men had left the battlefield (Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 8:304), the bravery of Umm Salīm in the Battle of Ḥunayn (Muslim 1392 AH, 196), the bravery of Umm Ḥārith al-Anṣārī and her martyrdom in that battle (Ibn al-Athīr 1409 AH, 6:312; Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī 1415 AH, 8:372; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 1412 AH, 4:1928), and Ṣafīyya's combat in the Battle of Khandaq (Ibn al-Athīr 1409 AH, 1:482; Bayhaqī 1405 AH, 3:442).

Conclusion

Women's social presence—in the sense of their conscious and active participation in political, social, and economic affairs—is endorsed by Islam. The Quranic evidence for the permissibility of their social participation consists in stories of the social activities of women in the past nations and certain jurisprudential verses which presuppose the permissibility of women's social presence. Historical events involving women's social participation in economic, political, and cultural activities in the Prophet's time and his endorsement of those activities also constitute further evidence for the permissibility of women's social presence.

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