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THE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN AT THE ERA OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD PBUH

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ABSTRACT

The topic of economic activities of women has been one of the significant issues on which traditional and modern Muslim scholars have been debating since long. This paper studies this issue objectively and go through the literature including Quran, Hadith, Seerah traditions and social practices of the time of the Holy Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him. This literature survey brings forth eleven various economic activities in which women at the time of Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him involved, which reasonably prove that women freely and safely have been engaging with economic activities. These economic activities include agriculture, livestock, trade, tailoring, handicrafts, nursing, education, fosterage, services, perfume industry and management of business.

INTRODUCTION

The Prophetic period begins with the declaration by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH of his prophecy and ends with his death in the year of 11 AH. The present research paper focuses the economic activities of women in the said period. Dr. Mazhar Yaseen Siddiqui (1944-2020), a well-known Seerah author, in his book

“The Holy Prophet and Women: A sociological Study” has mentioned free and full participation of women in various economic professions of the time including business, laboring, buying and selling from the Market and door to door marketing and selling of their commodities.¹

Regarding the earning livelihood and dealing in trade and business, Dr. Siddiqui further elaborates as follows:

“Women of that time are found buying various commodities from men traders and whole sellers and vice versa. Various men traders have been recorded to have their businesses with women traders based on Mudaraba (partnership), leasing and joint venture even to accept to be their marketing agents. It is also evidently recorded that they, men and women, have been doing work shoulder to shoulder in agriculture and livestock to increase the Gross domestic production (GDP).²

By the careful study of the literature on Seerah and history, the following economic activities of women at the time of Prophet Muhammad PBUH have been noticed by which they have proved to not only to be well-mannered housewives but also successful professional ladies of the society.

Agriculture

The women at the time of Prophet Muhammad PBUH have been recorded to work in agriculture. However, it was not the profession of all the women of that time rather it was the profession of some women inhabited in the lush green places. In the city of Madinah, all women of Ansar (Dwellers of Madinah who welcomed and helped the Migrants of Makkah) have been doing crops in agricultural lands specially cultivating vegetables. Maulana Waheeduddin Khan (1925-2021) in his book “Khatoon-e-Islam/the Women of Islam” writes mentioning the economic activities of the women of that time:

‘In the life of the city of Madinah, such type of events is in great number. At that time, the women have not only been doing work inside their homes but also doing most of the works outside of their homes. The obvious reason of this is that men, most of the time, have been engaged in jihad and preaching of Islam and they could not spare time to take up household responsibilities. Therefore, the women of that time have been taking care of their homes, agriculture and livestock too’.³

As regards women engagement in agriculture, the following traditions are found in the concerned literature:

1. Narrated by Jabir b. Abdullah RA that his aunt was divorced, and she wanted to take care of her date palms. When it came to notice, someone

¹Siddiqui, Dr. MazharYaseen, The Holy Prophet and the Women: A Sociological Study, Lahore: Nashriyat, 2011, p.156

² Ibid. p. 170

³ Khan, MaulanaWaheeduddin, The Woman in Islam, Lahore: Dar al-Balagh Publishers, 2016, p.196.

criticized her (due to going out of her home during Iddah). She went to the Holy Prophet PBUH and told the story. The Holy Prophet PBUH said: why not? You may go and take care of your date palms. It is certainly possible that you spend in the way of God or do any other good deed out of the income of those date palms.⁴

2. Narrated Sahl b. Sa'd al-Sa'idi RA telling the story of a woman who had her own agricultural land wherein she cultivated the crop of beetroot. On Friday, Sahl RA and some other Sahaba RA used to go to her and she used to serve them with mixture of beetroot and floor.⁵

3. It is reported that Umm-e-Mubashir Ansariya RA had a garden of date palms. One day, the Holy Prophet PBUH went to her garden of date palms and asked her whether those date palms belong to a Muslim or a disbeliever. She replied that those belong to a Muslim. The Holy Prophet PBUH said that whosoever plants a tree or any crop and some bird, human or animal eats from it then that will be sadaqah (financial righteous deed) for him.⁶

4. Asma b. AbiBakr RA is reported to have said that when she was married to Zubair RA, he did not possess any land or nay wealth except one camel which was being used for the transportation of water and one horse. I used to feed horse myself and bring water and floor. The Holy Prophet PBUH had granted a piece of land to Zubair which was located three Farsakh(one farsakh is equal to 5.5 kilometers) away from my home. I used to go there and pick up pyrene.⁷

Livestock

Regarding the livestock, the following tradition is reported:

Mu'awiyah b Hakam Al-Sulami is reported to have said that he had a concubine who used to graze my goats in the fields. One day, the wolf attacked the goats and eaten up one goat. This angered me and I slapped on her face. After a while, I felt sorry for what I did. I came to the Holy Prophet PBUH and after telling him the whole story, I asked him whether I should release her. The Holy Prophet PBUH asked me to bring her before him. When I brought her before him, He asked her: Where is Allah? She replied: in the heavens. He again asked her: Who am I? She said: You are the messenger of Allah. Then, the Holy Prophet PBUH advised to Mu'wiyah to release her as she was a believer.⁸

⁴Qushayri, Muslim b. Hajjaj, Sahih Muslim, Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-Arabi, 1483 AH

⁵Bukhari, Muhammad b. Isma'il, SahihBukhari, Dar Tawq al-Najat, Hadith No. 938.

⁶Qushayri, Hadith No. 1553.

⁷Bukhari, Hadith No. 5224.

⁸Qushayri, Hadith No. 537.

Trade

Some women in the time of Prophet Muhammad PBUH have been reported to have been engaged in trade and were popular for their profession in the society such as Sayyidah Khadijah RA whose trade was on a larger scale. This is mentioned in detail in *Tabaqat* of ibn Sa'ad as follows:

'Khadijah al-Kubra was an honorable, noble and a wealthy businessperson. She used to export her commodities to Syria. Her Caravan of camels loaded of her commodities equals to that of the caravan of camels of the whole Quraysh tribe. She hired men for her trade. She used to invest her capital with others and shared the equal profit agreed upon'.⁹

With reference to trade, the following narrations are reported:

1. Qaylah Umm-e-BaniAnmar RA narrates that the Holy Prophet PBUH came to the mount of Marwahand I came there with the help of walking stick and sat beside the Holy Prophet PBUH. I said: O Messenger of Allah! I am a businessperson, sometimes I want to buy something having decided its price in my mind and I pay lesser than what I had in my mind and by bargaining I buy on the price that I had in my mind. Likewise, sometimes I used to sell something, and I tell the customer higher price than what I had in my mind and then by bargaining I sell the commodity to the customer at the price that I had in my mind. The Holy Prophet PBUH said: Qaylah! Do not do that whenever you buy something buy on the price that you want to buy whether or not you get that commodity, and whenever you sell something sell on the price that you want to sell whether or not you get that price.¹⁰

2. Umrah b. Tabikh RA narrates that one day she while accompanying with her concubine had purchased fish from the market and put it on the cradle, but as the cradle was small thus the head and tail of the fish remained out. Sayyidna Ali RA happened to cross there and after looking at that asked as to how much did it cost. That is so big and nice, the whole family of a house may lose their appetite.¹¹

Tailoring

1. By the study of the biography of Fatimah b. Thabya RA that women of Ansar generally did work of tailoring. The wife of Abdullah b. Mas'ood RA is reported to be expert in industry and handicrafts and through this she meet up the expenses of her husband and children. One day, she came to the Holy Prophet PBUH and requested:

انى امرأة ذات صنعة ربيع منها وليس لى ولا لزوجى ولا لولدي شيء

⁹IbnSa'd, Muhammad b. Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1990, v. 8, p. 31.

¹⁰ Ibid. v. 8, p. 363.

¹¹ Ibid. v. 8, p. 212.

(I am skilled woman and produce commodities and then sell them (by this way I earn livelihood) but my husband and children have nothing, thus they do not possess anything).

She asked whether she could spend on them, he replied yes, and you will be rewarded for that.¹²

2. The husband of Khawlah b. Tha'labah RA is reported to have said to her unintentionally that she is like his mother to him. Later, they both came to the holy Prophet PBUH to inquire about the event. As for now, there was not any instruction on this matter, therefore, the Holy Prophet PBUH asked her husband to stay away from his wife until he is permitted. Having heard that, the wife asked:

يارسول الله! ماله من شيء وما ينفق عليه

) O Messenger of Allah! He has nothing to spend (It is me who spends on him) (.¹³

Umm-e-Sabiyya'Khawla' b. Qays RA reports:

We, during the time of the Holy Prophet PBUH and during the reign of Umar RA, used to make friendships in the Masjid and sometimes we used to spin wheel and sometimes some women produce various things out of leaves of date palms.¹⁴

Handicrafts and Embroidery

With reference to this, the following narrations are found:

1. Zainab RA, the wife of Abdullah b. Mas'ood RA was expert in handicrafts and through this she used to manage the expenses of not only her children but also her husband. One day, she came to the Holy Prophet PBUH and requested: I am expert in handicrafts and manufacture handicraft items and then sell them. My son and husband have nothing to do a business. It is me who spends upon them and due to spending on them I cannot spend on poor and less privileged people as a sadaqah, I want to ask whether or not I will be rewarded for spending on my son and husband. The Holy Prophet PBUH replied: why not? Whatever you spend on them you certainly will be rewarded.¹⁵

2. Umm al-Mu'mineen Zainab b. Jahsh RA is reported to have manufactured various handicraft items and then sold them and whatever she earned from it, she spent in the way of Allah. Aishah RA states: I never came

¹² Ibid. v. 8, p. 212.

¹³ Ibid. v. 8, p. 276.

¹⁴ Al-Asqalani, IbnHajar, Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1415 AH, V. 18, P.255.

¹⁵ Ahmad b. Hanbal, Musnad, Beirut: Muassasah al-Risalah, 2001, Hadith No. 16086.

across any other woman better than Zainab b. Jahsh who earned by herself and then spent in the way of Allah.¹⁶

3. Sahl b. Sa'd RA narrates that a woman brought a shawl to the Holy Prophet PBUH which handcrafted at its sides. She requested: O Messenger of Allah! I have made this shawl with my hands so that I can put it on you. The Holy Prophet PBUH accepted her gift.¹⁷

Nursing And Surgery

It is reported that Ruqayyah, Umm Ita', Aslamiyyah, Zainab b. Jahsh, Laila, Umaymah, Umm-e-Ziyadat Rabi', Umm-e-Atiyyah, Umm-e-Sulaym RA were experts in nursing and surgery. They used to medicate the patients and nurse the wounded at both the time of peace and war. In this regard, the following narrations are found:

1. In the battle of trench, when Sa'ad RA injured by the arrow, the Holy Prophet PBUH said he should be sent to the tent of Rufaidah RA so that I can visit him from nearby. Whenever the Holy Prophet PBUH passed by her tent He inquired about the health of Sa'ad RA. O Sa'ad! How is your morning and evening? And then Sa'ad reported about his health.¹⁸

2. Anas RA narrates that in the battles, Umm-e-Sulaym RA and other women from Ansar used to accompany the Holy Prophet PBUH, and they bring water during war and dress the wounded and give medicine to the sick.¹⁹

3. Umm-e-Atiyyah RA narrates that I accompanied the Holy Prophet PBUH in seven battles, I prepared food for Mujahidin, dressed the wounded and prescribed for the patients.²⁰

4. Kharijah b. Zaid RA narrates that Umm-e-Alla RA told her that Uthman b. Maz'oon RA fell ill in the lodges which were endowed by the Ansar for the Muhajireen and he stayed with us until his death.²¹

Education

1. The Holy Prophet PBUH asked Shifa b. Abdullah RA to teach Hafsa RA supplication (Du'a) for disease of Namlah (Eczema) as she has also taught her writing.²²

2. Aisha RA narrated 2210 traditions; around three hundred Sahabah and Tab'een have narrated several traditions from her. Umm-e-Salamah RA has been considered by the scholars among the Jurists. Ibn al-Qayyim wrote that if her Fatawa are collected, a book may be produced. Around one hundred Sahabah and Tabi'een have narrated traditions from her.²³

¹⁶Qushairi, Hadith No. 2452; Ibn al-Athir, Usud al-Ghabah, v. 5, p.494.

¹⁷Bukhari, Hadith No. 2093.

¹⁸ Al-Asqalani, v. 8, p. 111.

¹⁹Qushayri, Hadith No. 1810.

²⁰Qushayri, Hadith No. 1812.

²¹Bukhari, Hadith No. 1241.

²² Al-Sijistani, Sulayman b. Ash'ath, SunanAbiDawud, Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Asriyyah, Hadith No. 3887.

²³ Al-Jawziyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1996, v. 1, p. 10-12.

3. Rib'i b. Muawiz RA was a great scholar. Ibn Abbas RA and Ibn Umar RA used to learn from her. Likewise, Fatimah b. Qays RA was the teacher of Sa'eed b. Musayyab and Urwa b. Zubair. Aisha b. Sa'ad b. Abbi Waqqas was also a great scholar among whose students is Imam Malik RA. Likewise, Imam Shafi'i learnt the science of Hadith from Sayyidah Nafisa, who was the granddaughter of Imam Hassan RA.

4. Similarly, in the field of literature and Arts Khansa, Atika, Umm-e-Ayman RA are very famous. Imam IbnTaymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim were the students of a famous scholar Fakhr al-Nisa'. IbnAsakir has got education from eighty-one and Imam Muslim from seventy-one women scholars.²⁴

In the field of Hadith, it is sufficient for the honor and proud of Women that a large number of men narrators have been accused of fabricating Hadiths and of weakness, there have been not a single woman who has been accused of this fault. Imam Zahabi wrote:

وما علمت في النساء من اتهمت ولا من تركوها

(I do not know that a single woman has been accused in the narrations of Hadith nor a single Muhadith has abandoned a single woman for her weakness).²⁵

Fosterage

Fosterage was a well-known profession at the time of the Holy Prophet PBUH and a lot of women were attached to this profession. The Holy Quran has commanded to give compensation to fostering women as per customs.

1. It is mentioned in the Qur'an:

فان ارضعن لكم فاتوهن اجورهن واتمروا بينكم بمعروف وان تعاسرتم فسترضع له اخرى²⁶

(Then, if they give suck for you, give them their due payment and consult together in kindness; but if ye make difficulties for one another, then let some other woman give suck for him (the father of the child))

2. Anas b. Malik RA narrates that the Holy Prophet PBUH said: I have been blessed with a baby boy last night and named him with the name of my grandfather Ibrahim AS. It is reported that the Holy Prophet PBUH handed this baby boy to Umm-e-Saif, a wife of the ironsmith for fosterage. It is narrated in another tradition by Anas b. Malik RA Ibrahim stayed with the fostering women in the vicinity of highlands of Madinah. The Holy Prophet PBUH used to go there, together with us, He entered that house which was full of smoke because

²⁴ Abu Ghadhah, Zaki Ali al-Sayyid, Amal al-Mar'ah bain al-Adyan wa al-Qawanin wa Du'at al-Tahrir, Beirut: Dar al-Wafa, 2007, p. 176.

²⁵ Al-Zahabi, Muhammad b. Ahmad, Mizan al-I'tidal, v. 4, p. 604.

²⁶ Al-Qur'an, al-Talaq, verse. 6

of the work of ironsmith. The Holy Prophet PBUH kissed the baby and then returned home.²⁷

Services Department

Generally, people need a servant for their household works such as cooking and cleaning just to name few. On occasions, it seems preferable to hire a mad servant for these services instead of man servant. In this regard, the following traditions are recorded:

Umm-e-Salamah RA narrates that the Holy Prophet PBUH saw a spot on the face of mad servant and instructed her to cure it.²⁸

Ibn Suwaid RA narrates that we Banu Muqrin had only one mad servant, someone from amongst us had slapped on her face. When it came to the notice of the Holy Prophet PBUH, he said that she may be released. We requested: O Messenger of Allah! We had only that mad servant. Then He said it is ok then. However, as soon as your conditions improvise, you should release her.²⁹

The Business of Perfumes

1. In this regard, the following traditions are recorded:

From amongst the Sahabiyat, Asma b. Mukhzama RA used to deal in perfumes. IbnSa'ad narrates that her son Abdullah b. Rabi'ah buy perfumes from Yemen and exports to her, and she sells them. Rabi' B. Muawwiz narrates that we few women purchased perfume from her. Whenever she filled the bottles with perfumes, she said:

اكتبن لى عليكن حقى

) Write down what you owe me (.³⁰

Hawla'Al-Attarah RA is reported to be so famous in business of perfumes that she was popular with the name of perfume seller. Whenever she came to the Holy Prophet PBUH, He recognized her by her perfume. One day, she came to the House of the Holy Prophet PBUH, he asked Aisha RA as to why not she purchased a perfume from her. She replied that she did not come for selling her perfumes on that day rather she came to complain against her husband. Then, then Holy Prophet responded to her complaint.³¹

2. The mother of Sa'ib b. Aqra' al-Saqafi RA, Mulaykah used to deal in perfume business. Sa'ib RA narrates that one day his mother went to the Holy Prophet PBUH to sell her perfumes. After purchasing perfumes, the Holy Prophet PBUH asked her about her needs. She replied that she did not need

²⁷Qushayri, v. 7, p. 76.

²⁸Bukhari, Hadith No. 5739.

²⁹ Ahmad, Hadith No. 2370.0

³⁰IbnSa'd, v. 8, p. 220.0

³¹Ibn al-Athir, Usud al-Ghabah, Tehran, 1938, Vol.5, pp.432-33.

anything, however, she requested for a supplication (du'a) for her child accompanying with her. The Holy Prophet PBUH put his hand on baby's head and made a supplication for him.³²

Management of a Business

During the time of the Holy Prophet PBUH, the women were not only engaged in their business, but they were also successful entrepreneurs. In this regard, the following traditions are reported:

Imam Bukhari reported from Jabir b. Abdullah RA a woman from Ansar requested the Holy Prophet PBUH to get a pulpit made for him to sit on for speeches and lectures. The Holy Prophet PBUH said it may be made if she wanted. Then that woman got the pulpit made for him. On Friday, the Holy Prophet PBUH used to sit on that pulpit and deliver his speeches and lectures.³³

Khadijah RA had also been dealing in a similar business as she used to invest her capital and supervise the business and get share of the profit agreed upon from her partner. She had invested her capital with the Holy Prophet PBUH based Mudaraba (partnership) who then used to do a business.

CONCLUSION

It is proved from the Quranic verses, Hadith, seerah traditions and historical events that intermingling of men and women was fully permitted, rather it was a social tradition of the era which was also supported by the Holy Prophet PBUH and consensus of the companions. The origin and the right way regarding intermingling of opposite sexes was that method practiced by the Holy Prophet PBUH and the Sahabah RA, not the way of those so-called rigid Jurists and nor the way of those liberal social philosophers. The wellbeing of this material world and the next lies in the way of the Holy Prophet PBUH and the Sahabah.³⁴

Based on the above-mentioned discussion of the Quran, Hadith and Seerah, it is evident that according to Islam, the women can participate in all economic activities which are allowed by the Shari'ah within the prescribed framework so that they can play their role to fulfill their responsibilities.

Furthermore, the overall attitude of the Shari'ah regarding their participation in economic activities is that Islam has permitted them to participate in all economic activities as per needs and set-up of the society and time. However, Islam has not made it obligatory upon them to involve in economic activities rather it has just permitted them to do so.

³²Abu Nu'aym al-Asfahani, Ma'rifat al-Sahabah, Dar al-Watan, 1998, Entry Mulaykah.

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³³Ibn al-Athir, v. 5, p. 432.-

³⁴ Ibid. v. 7, p. 260.