



In The Name Of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

المعهد الإسلامي في تورنتو

Islamic Institute of Toronto

Education for Virtuous Living

How the Prophet Empowered Women

By Shaikh Ahmad Kutty

The Prophet's phenomenal success in his mission has always intrigued historians. As Muslims, we believe this was due in no small measure to his outstanding qualities as a leader, besides of course, divine support. Thanks to the Prophet's extraordinary leadership skills, he inspired people to join his cause and commit themselves wholeheartedly to it. He inspired both men and women, young and old, of various levels and ranks. I would like to mention some of the influential women who played crucial roles during extremely difficult periods.

Khadijah, the Prophet's wife, was undoubtedly the first person to embrace Islam. It is worth remembering that she was attracted to the Prophet (peace be upon him) by his trustworthiness and noble character. A successful entrepreneur of immense wealth, she rejected proposals for marriage from a number of men of high status. However, she was the one who proposed marriage to the Prophet. Khadija was not only the first person to embrace Islam; she was also the first to place all her wealth at the service of Islam. When the Quraysh taunted the Prophet saying that he was the poorest man in Makkah, she went out to the courtyard of the Haram where the Quraysh had gathered and declared that she had gifted all of her wealth to Muhammad! Khadijah stood by the Prophet like a firm pillar of support until the end - sacrificing everything for the cause of Islam.

Khadijah was not alone in giving up everything for the cause of Islam. Another pioneer was Sumayyah the mother of 'Ammar, who is reported to be the seventh person to choose Islam. As soon as she chose Islam her master unleashed a torrent of punishments upon her. She was offered the choice of renouncing Islam or suffering ordeals. She preferred the latter, ultimately surrendering her life. She thus became the first martyr in Islam.

The example set by Sumayyah was followed by women from all walks of life under varying circumstances. The sister of Umar stood up to her brother - a notorious and relentless persecutor of Muslims prior to his own conversion to Islam. Umm Salamah and others were among the first batch of emigrants sent by the Prophet to Abyssinia, and it was she who provided us with the narrative of their encounter with the emperor, and the story of their experience in Abyssinia.

The Prophet's own *hijrah* to Madinah was planned and executed with utmost finesse and skill. It was not a men's affair; women also played a crucial role. A highly guarded secret, it was entrusted to both Asma and Aishah. They were charge with arranging provisions for the journey; and even though Asma was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, she would deliver provisions by climbing mountains considered challenging for the toughest of men. Both refused to disclose the whereabouts of the Prophet and his companion despite threats from Abu Jahl, described as the



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pharaoh of this *ummah*.

Women did not lag behind men in any of the decisive events, but were always at the forefront alongside men. They could even be said to have wielded greater influence than men for as one scholar rightly pointed out, when women embrace a cause, they commit themselves wholeheartedly to it: this is a fact amply demonstrated in the *sirah* literature.

While reviewing the events leading up to the Prophet's *hijrah* to Madinah, we cannot ignore the undisputable role played by women of Ansaar; Nusaybah bint Ka'b, Umm Amarah and Asma bint 'Amr were partners and participants in the pact of Aqabah. They were also in the vanguard of Islam in Madinah, rendering valuable services in times of war and peace.

Umm Salamah, who had emigrated to Abyssinia earlier, played an equally decisive role in the *hijrah* to Madinah, as a participant and narrator. She related that when her husband was ready to make the *hijrah* to Madinah, he placed her son and herself on his mount; however, her tribe prevented him from taking her, and forcefully took her from him. Upon seeing this, Abu Salamah's clan retaliated by taking her son, saying that if she was not allowed to leave with her husband, they would not allow her to keep their son.

Umm Salamah had to endure a double grief for being separated from both her husband and her son. Every day she would go out and sit in the spot where her family had been split asunder, and grieve. After one year, some of her clan were moved by her plight and allowed her to join her husband. Her son was returned, and she prepared to undertake the perilous journey to Madinah on her own. However Uthman b. Talhah, who later became a Muslim, felt pity for her and offered her safe escort to Madinah.

Women like Umm Salamah were not only participants in the story of Islam; rather, they were also its narrators, learners, teachers and preachers.

Thus, they were in the forefront of da'wah - once convinced of the truth of Islam, they were instrumental in converting their husbands and relatives, many of whom had hitherto been staunch enemies of Islam. There is the example of the wife of Ikrimah b. Abi Jahal, who like his father Abu Jahal, was a relentless opponent of Islam. When the Prophet entered Makkah triumphant, Ikrimah's wife embraced Islam. She then went in search of her husband who had fled Makkah, and convinced him to become a Muslim. Thanks to her counsel, he converted and was ardent in his defense of the cause of Islam; ultimately giving his life in battle as a martyr.

And it was Safanah bint Hatim, the sister of Adiy b. Hatim, who was responsible for his conversion to Islam. Safanah, who had been taken as a prisoner and brought to Madinah, had the opportunity to observe the Prophet closely. She was deeply impressed by his magnanimity and the honorable treatment he accorded her. When she returned home, she convinced her brother Adiy, who had been fighting against the Prophet, to go to Madinah and experience for himself



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the nobility of the Prophet. Adiyy acted upon the advice of his sister; and as soon as he had visited the Prophet and observed his character, he embraced Islam. Adiyy would go on to become a key figure and leader in the expansion of Islam.

In Madinah, as described by Aishah, the beloved wife of the Prophet (peace be upon him), women participated in all aspects of communal life. They were active as learners and spokespersons, championing the causes of both men and women. Their names are too numerous to mention.

In conclusion, one of the secrets of the Prophet's success as a leader was that he empowered women as well as men to serve as pioneers in the struggle for Islam. They were not only witnesses and participants; but were narrators - shaping the historical narrative of Islam. The challenge for the Muslim community today is to empower women by following the example of the Prophet. Without this, no true Islamic renaissance is possible.