

***The Perspective of Deobandī Ūlemā Regarding the  
Economic Empowerment of Women***  
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***Abstract:***

*The main purpose of the study is to explore the 'Perception of Deobandī Ūlemā Regarding Women's Economic Empowerment', which is closely associated with their educational and political empowerment. The study also aims to comprehend women's family and reproductive rights as they are closely linked to economic empowerment. Target population of the present study included those who are teaching in Deobandī Madrassa'h, with eight years' religious education of 'Dars-e-Nizami'. A sample size of twenty-five respondents was selected through purposive sampling technique. Among these twenty-five respondents, ten respondents were taken from rural Mardān and ten were taken from urban Peshāwar. While five female Ūlemā from rural Mardān trained in Deobandī school of thought were also interviewed to learn about their perceptions regarding women's economic empowerment. The nature of the study was qualitative and an interview guide was used for data collection. The major findings highlighted that most of Deobandī Ūlemā from rural area were not in favor of economic empowerment of women. Some of them gave conditional approval to women's education and employment but in segregated institutions. Concept of empowerment was negatively perceived by most of rural areas Ūlemā. Almost all of the Ūlemā from urban Peshāwar were supportive of women's equal access to employment, income, education and medical treatment. They considered due share of women in property, a compulsory Islamic principle, which provided opportunities to women to take part in decision making in crucial economic and socio-culture matters within the family setup. However, majority of the respondents thought women's freedom to go shopping or*

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*employment was against the teachings of Islām. It is suggested, on the basis of the findings, that religious values and ideas, which are based upon the true teachings of Islām, should be propagated and applied in true spirit through legislation and education. This will help reduce irrational behavior towards women.*

**Key words:** *Deoband, Women's , Ūlemā , Pardā'h, Islām, Pashtūn*

## Introduction

Women constitute half of our society's population. Therefore the empowerment of women is of utmost importance. A nation cannot prosper with half of the population not liberated and therefore not allowed to be empowered to contribute to the progress of the society. Economic empowerment is considered an important indicator of women's emancipation in society. Economic empowerment of women means independence of women in a society when women are not economically dependent on men. *Pashtūn* society is predominantly influenced by Sunni<sup>1</sup> Islamic faith and beliefs. Among the *Pashtūns* the *Deobandī* School is more influential. This factor gives a lot of power to the *Ūlemā* of the *Deobandī* schools following the tradition of Islamic revivalist Darul *Ūloom Deoband*. There are only few (educated people) who can dare to challenge the ever-confident views of the *Deobandī Ūlemā* who claim to be the custodians of Islamic Sharia'h. The researcher belongs to such an area where the views of *Ūlemā* regarding women economic empowerment are considered 'final' and 'unquestionable', quoting the Qur'ān and Sunnah, demanding obedience and submission of women according to the views of such *Ūlemā*. The views of religious scholars are very influential in our culture, especially regarding women rights, duties, responsibilities and participation in development activities. However the views of different religious scholars are diverse regarding women's empowerment but there is certain uniformity in the views of *Ūlemā* from a similar sect. Being influential people, these *Ūlemā*'s views regarding women are highly respected and accepted by the masses. The problem however arises when there is a conflict in their views.

This research paper aims to understand why *Ūlemā*'s views regarding

women empowerment, are so diverse when all of them try to understand the issue from an Islamic perspective. Islam is a very straight forward religion and has discussed the position of women in very clear terms. In view of the *Qur'ānic* verses (*Sūrah al Baqarā'h*, verse 228) the point is quite clear like men women too have their rights including economic ones. In *Sūrah Al-Nisā*, the *Qur'ān* has laid down the following principle in connection with acquisition of wealth:

“For men is a portion of what they earn and for women is a portion of what they earn”.<sup>2</sup>

*Sūrah Al-Nisā*, basically deals with matters relating to money and other issues that are the result of the relationships of women in different capacities in a family. So it is clear that the above-mentioned verse is related to the worldly life and that a woman has equal rights like that of a man in acquiring education, doing job or a business, dealing of property and even develop her personality (Khan & Farooq, 2002)<sup>3</sup>.

A patriarchal interpretation of Islam gives leadership of the family to men. This perceived subjugated position of women is challenged when a woman gets economic freedom which is possible in modern society. Therefore, we can divide *Ūlemā* into two broad categories - the conservatives and the progressives. The conservative *Ūlemā* that mainly belong to rural communities hold that women should not engage in economic activities and should take care of their domestic duties only. The progressive *Ūlemā* that come from the non-traditional society of urban area understand the requirements of modern living in which women cannot be kept within the four walls of their houses and therefore, support women economic empowerment if the limits of *Sharia'h* such as *pardā'h* are observed.

Therefore, does it not mean that the fault lies not in Islam but in the personal interpretations of *Ūlemā* regarding the economic empowerment of women.

The study was conducted in *Mardān* and *Peshāwar* where *Pashtūn* culture and Islamic principles shape and control the society as these areas are major culture centers of Khyber Pakhtūn'khwā. The issue of women liberation and empowerment in these areas is highly contested and

debatable. The *socio* culture significance is to give to the opinion of *Ūlemā* in Pashtūn society especially in rural communities. Although in rural communities *Ūlemā* are one of the most important opinion makers but in large sections of urban communities *Ūlemā* enjoy comparatively less influence. Majority of the population of not only *Peshāwar* and *Mardān* but also of Khyber Pakhtūn'khwā in general has great reverence for *Deobandī* school of thought. Therefore, perceptions and views of *Deobandī Ūlemā* about women participation in economic setup were studied to see their impact on women of those areas.

Half of the population in our society is women and as we know that the views of *Ūlemā* are very influential in our culture. Their rights, duties, responsibilities and participation in developmental activities need to be studied according to the perceptions of *Ūlemā*

#### **Objectives of the study**

- To analyze the views of *Ūlemā* about women's economic empowerment.
- To know why people especially women accept the misinterpretation of Islam by the sectarian *Ūlemā*.
- To minimize the misconceptions regarding women empowerment through those who have progressive knowledge of Islam.

In this research by progressive knowledge of Islam I mean those *Ūlemā* /Scholars who are not conservative and rigid in their beliefs and thoughts. They are ready to listen, debate and conclude an argument or idea.

#### **Literature Review**

Economic emancipation of women is considered as an important contributing factor for overall women empowerment (Hasan & Menon; 2004)<sup>4</sup>. Marxists-feminists hold that the economic empowerment determines and defines the status and role of women in the society. They have also argued that economic exploitation of women leads to slavery. As *Ūlemā* claim to be the interpreters of Sharia'h, their perception regarding women economic empowerment is of utmost significance. *Ūlemā* describe Islam as all-embracing and say that it is a 'complete code of life.'

However modern liberal democracies consider religious freedom as

much cherished value and its protection as the most important function of the government. These democracies defend human freedom of choice and liberty which include a wide range of other human interests, liberties, and opportunities. Among these are the freedom of movement, the right to seek employment outside the home, the right to assemble, the right to bodily integrity, the right to education, and the right to hold property by both the sexes. However, sometimes religions do not approve such liberties as they deny such rights of women among other sections of the society in favor of their social, religious and family obligations (Gupta, 2007)<sup>5</sup>.

Empowerment is defined as the process of generating and building capabilities to exercise control over one's own life. Empowerment is the means as well as goals of self-development (Sharma, 2007)<sup>6</sup>. Women empowerment is a process whereby women can establish their control over various assets and which helps them to develop their self-confidence. Empowerment is the means by which women learn about their rights, duties and laws (Mondal, 2005)<sup>7</sup>.

Many conservative men and women hold the view that in Islam women do not enjoy freedom of economic efforts. Whereas some Muslim feminists hold that it is her natural and basic right to endeavor freely in earning her livelihood and take part just like men in industry, trade, agriculture, in short, whichever economic fields she likes. Without it she cannot succeed in stabilizing her economic position and remaining helplessly dependent on man, she can find no respectable position in society. This philosophy brought together the two separate fields of man and woman in the economic efforts making them joint ventures and the one-time secluded woman joined hands with man for economic endeavors (Khan, 2002)<sup>8</sup>.

The question of the status of women in Islam cannot be properly understood without taking the social situation of its genesis into account. As Islam has its roots and beginnings in the folk society of the tribal patriarchal Arabs, it is necessary to review the position of women in Arabia before the advent of Islam when they were denied economic rights and a daughter was so undesired that she was buried alive when born. The

pre-Islamic Arabs considered it a shame to their honour when their daughters were proposed. In such circumstances, *Muhāmm'ad* is regarded as a feminist by some Western historians of Islam (Beasley, 1999)<sup>9</sup>.

Islam through *Qur'ān* has expounded a very clear notion towards the status of women in the society. The attitude of *Qur'ān* and Hadith bear witness to the fact that a woman is at least as vital to the life and society as man himself and is not inferior to him. In the *Qur'ān* women have never been mentioned to be inferior to men rather they have been treated equally in rights and religious duties (Mason, 1984)<sup>10</sup>.

Ayesha, the wife of Prophet *Muhāmm'ad* led the Meccans against Caliph Ali of Madina in what became the first civil war of the Muslim state. *Muhāmm'ad* was kind to his wives, daughters and mother. He respected women even if they were non-Muslims. He is reported to have tolerated the humiliation meted out against him by a woman at Mecca who would throw garbage on him (Barlas, 2002)<sup>11</sup>.

There is however, difference in Islamic theory and Muslim practice. Women are not economically independent in many Muslim societies especially in the *Pakhtūn* society. Their participation in economy and earning is very low. They are not allowed to play an active role in family economy. They are not self-reliant and self-supporting. Although there are a number of women who do not need to earn money in most of the cases but due to status consciousness they are compelled to carry out certain activities which can make them economically independent. Women work even harder than men to be economically independent. They bear substantially more of domestic responsibilities and so have control in their 'own' sphere (Mason, 1996)<sup>12</sup>.

Although Islam as a whole indicates a liberal attitude towards women but it has imposed certain sanctions to prevent them from massive outside interaction for the sake of their 'modesty, safety and chastity.' This Islamic injunction is misinterpreted in patriarchal authoritarian Muslim society and especially by the sectarian *Ūlemā*. They have imposed restrictions to control women's activities and to deny their rights in the society.

Muslims women are said to be more religious minded. However in

religious and ceremonial affairs men outshine women. In a Muslim society the authority of maintaining religious institutions is the domain of men. Muslim women are excluded from praying in the mosque and given no such position of religious authority like an Imam, Caliph or a public cleric. Muslim women in general are isolated from political participation. They are lacking the voice in formal and even informal political bodies of their village and locality. Their political awareness is very poor due to low education and social isolation. A great majority of Muslim women are still at the peripheries of power politics which has contributed to their empowerment and self-development (Mernissi, 2003)<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, in this study the researcher investigates the approach of *Ūlemā* towards achieving economic independence by women in our society in general and *Mardān* and *Peshāwar* in particular.

### **Methodology**

In this research qualitative approach was used for collecting data. “Qualitative method produces detailed and non-quantitative accounts of small groups seeking to interpret the meanings people make of their lives in natural settings” (Payne & Payne, 2004)<sup>14</sup>. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with *Ūlemā* While secondary data was collected from books and journals.

### **Universe of the study**

*Ūsmānia Madrassā’h* at *Ṣadār* in urban *Peshāwar* and the *Sher Gar’h Madrassā’h* in rural *Mardān* were selected for the research study where women are suppressed and deprived of their rights particularly economic rights. The purpose of selecting these two *Madāris* specifically is that these *Madāris* are the mother institutes in the Khyber *Pakhtūn’khwā* with which many other small *Madāris* are affiliated. Secondly these *Madāris* also provide course outline of studies for other *Madrassas* in this province, thus making *Ūlemā* of these two *Madāris* prominent and important. Thirdly perceptions of the *Ūlemā* of the rural areas are different from those who belonging to the urban areas regarding the issue of women empowerment. Those who belong to the rural areas are more conservatives in their belief as compared to those who are living in urban areas. The researcher felt the need to conduct a research study on the issue



of women economic empowerment as perceived by *Ūlemā* because they occupy a central position in the spiritual and social lives of the community.

### **Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling technique was used for data collection because it fulfills the study requirement. “Purposive sampling is a valuable kind of sampling for special situation” (Neuman, 2006)<sup>15</sup>. In purposive sampling, researchers choose respondents because of certain characteristics (Dooley, 2007)<sup>16</sup>. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling technique. This approach was employed because it was easy to access the respondents. It also helped the researcher to collect in-depth information from the core respondents. The researcher selects the *Deobandī Ūlemā* purposively who are the graduate of ‘*Dars-e-Nizami*’ comprising of eight years of education from a *Deobandī Madrassa*’h. *Ūlemā* were selected with a specific purpose in mind which is to find out the perception of *Ūlemā* specifically regarding women empowerment.

### **Sample Size**

“How many people do I need for my sample? This is an extremely common question with the unfortunate answer it depends” (Leary, 2005)<sup>17</sup>. Sample is a small representation of the whole universe. It was difficult to know the views of all *Ūlemā*. Therefore, the researcher interviewed 25 respondents, in which 10 respondents were taken from *Mardān* and 10 respondents from *Peshāwar*. The researcher also attempted to interview 5 female *Ūlemā*. As the topic under consideration can be best expressed by qualitative interpretation with a deep insight into the clergy’s mind and the socio-cultural dynamics concerning women’s economic empowerment. Due to time constraints 25 responses were the maximum number that the researcher can thoroughly analyze in the allotted time.

### **Tools of Data Collection**

In depth interview method was used as the tool of data collection. In-depth interview is a face to face conversation to explore issues and to get into the inner life of respondents (Sarantakos, 2005)<sup>18</sup>. Through in-depth interviews it was easy for the researcher to analyze the views of *Ūlemā*.



For the in-depth interviews, an interview guide was developed.

### **Findings**

Most of the respondents were of the opinion that the lives of the companions of Prophet *Muāamm 'ad* (PBUH) as well as the injunctions of Islam are an example for the Muslims to follow that provides a practical view for the economics and business involving women. According to most of them the business engagement Ḥazrāt Khādīja is one of the greatest examples of women's economic rights. There were also other female companions who managed business affairs.

Islam tells us that the economic emancipation of women depends upon the needs of the family. A woman from poor family or widow can engage herself in outdoor economic activities subject to observing *purdāh*.

### **Economic Empowerment:**

Some of the respondents said that Islam allows women to work outside the home. They said that women can earn money and that will be their own money. Not a single verse in the Qur'ān deprives women from earning their living by working outside their homes. They said that women are allowed to get benefit from their knowledge and personal capabilities. They strongly support that women have the right to work and earn money for their survival in the society. Women have the right to property, inheritance and *Ḥaq-e-Mehār*, but they have no access to their property. As one of the respondent said that

*“Islam chī khāzo ta kam hoqūq warkarī dasi yāo mazhāb hom na de warkarī.”* Islam has given the rights to women which are not offered by any other religion.

Few of the respondents said that Islam has given women all those rights which are not offered by any religion. Before Islam women were treated like animals. They did not have any property rights and social status in the society. In today's society women are deprived of their rights because of the cultural bonds.

### **Equity not equality**

Most of the female respondents were of the opinion that the economic status of women prescribed by Islam is based on equity and according to

the physical capabilities and the social role of women. They said that one cannot force women to work outside their home if she is not willing. If a woman is doing job outside her home willingly then no one has the right to stop her. The earning responsibility lies on the shoulder of a man. It is the responsibility of a man to fulfill all the basic needs of his family. But now a day it has become more difficult for a man to support his family on his own, so if his wife is educated and she wants to work outside her home she can do so. It will decrease the pressure on the male member of the family who is supporting the family financially.

### ***Pardā'h***

Islam permits women as long as they observe *Pardā'h*. it is like attending an educational institution using a veil. They can work outside homes by covering themselves properly. Example of JUI female parliamentarians as they observe *Pardā'h* and hide their faces. Also if there is necessary need of avoiding *Pardā'h*, they are allowed to do so i-e- medical checkup, treatment or surgery.

Some of the respondents were of the opinion that *Sharia'h* has not restricted women from visiting public places. According to one of the respondent who said that “*khāza pā kūr kha khakārī*” (A woman looks better if she stays at home). *Sharia't* does not allow women to interact freely with men in public places or in offices.

### **Gender segregations**

All of the respondents said that gender segregation is important in markets public institutions and educational institutions of society. Some of the respondents said that there is no concept of co-education in Islam and it is totally against the Islamic principle. One of the respondents said that; “*nan sabā chī da māhol sūmra kharāb dī da de co-education kharāb karā ao pa university k alākān ao jenaki yarāni kī*.(In the present time co-education has damaged the environment, boys and girls are flirting with each other in the university)”.

Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that there must be separate educational institutions for both males and females. Studying in the same institutions is disturbing the whole environment. Just take the example of religious education at institution where males and females are

separately studying in different intuitions. Now a day's people prepher modern education, which demoralize the behavior of the people. Then they adopt the living standard of western society.

### **Female doctors and teachers**

Most of the *Ūlemā* stressed the need of female doctors and female teachers for females. (*Dā khā khabrā da chī yāo khazā doctorā da khazī ilaj okī*) “ It is good that a woman who is ill is checked by a female doctor”.

Some of the respondents were not in favor of occupations like show biz, engineering, law chambers and judiciary. But others held a view that any occupation in which *Pardā'h* is not violated is open to women.

A respondent from rural *Mardān* declared that women cannot go outside their city or village but work in the neighborhood where she is known. It is beneficial for the safety of the woman herself and also does not damage the social and moral environment. If a poor woman or a widow stays in her neighborhood, she will be helped by the community as well. Women can only go abroad for work if she is occupied by male guardian, son or brother.

The female *scholars* were of the opinion that before Islam women had no social status and they did not have any economic rights. Women were treated like animals and they were used in gambling. Islam granted a respectable place to women. We have evidences that there were women in early Islamic period who were engaged in business activities. One of the example is of *Hazr'at Khadij'ah (RA)* who was the first wife of Prophet (*PBUH*) and she was the richest woman of her time. *Hazr'at Khadij'ah (RA)* was not only known as a business woman but she extended emotional and moral support to the Prophet *Muāamm'ad (PBUH)* when he was upset after having met the Gabriel, the great angel at the time of the first revelation. Moreover, when Prophet *Muāamm'ad (PBUH)* started preaching Islam she stood on his side and supported him in every possible way. It shows the importance of women in the society.

One of the female respondents said that if someone is putting restrictions on by stopping her from participating in any economic activities, he will be accountable for total injustice. She argued that the

current interpretations of Sharia to subdue women have nothing to do with Islam and are just man-made misinterpretations of sacred texts. Some people are using religion for their own benefits and personal interest. Islam has given a respectable place to women and no one has the right to violate the rights of women.

### **Conclusion:**

This study was conducted in the urban areas of *Peshāwar* and rural *Mardān*. The main objective of the study was to know the perceptions of *Deobandī Ūlemā* on the economic empowerment of women. The present study reveals that there is a contradiction and huge difference of opinion in *Ūlemā* 's views regarding the economic empowerment of women. The *Ūlemā* of rural area are predominantly more conservative and rigid in their views regarding women economic empowerment while the scholars of urban areas are more moderate in their point of view. According to the *Deobandī Ūlemā* of the city of *Peshāwar*, the economic empowerment of women means that they have the right to property, right to work, right to inheritance, right to do business and *Ḥaq-e-Mehār* etc. They do agree that Islam allows women to work outside the home subject to observing *pardah*. Women can earn money and have all their rights to their own money. They also argue that there is not a single verse in the Qur'ān that says that only men can make money and not women. Women are allowed to get benefits from their personal knowledge and skills.

Some of the respondents said that women in Islamic *Sharia* 'h are free to participate in social activities like marriage celebrations and death occasions while observing *Pardāh*. There is no doubt that the strict *Pardāh* system as it exists among *Pashtūns* has nothing to do with Islam. It is purely the male chauvinist and rigid tribal patriarchal views that have restricted women to the confines of their homes, thus imprisoning them in utter disregard for the teaching of Islam, which is propagated through the Pashto expression “*Khazā yā pa kūr dī yā pa gūr*” (Women either belong to their home or grave). It is interesting to note this type of rigidness is not practiced in but Islam shows the extreme rigid mentality of some *Pashtūn* 's culture.

It can be concluded that Allah in the holy Qur'ān has given a

respectable place to women. Women are greatly suppressed in our society. Women have inferior social and political status. They are facing a lot of problems in every field of life. Some people do not allow women to go out of their home and some people are exploiting women in the name of Islam. Islam has empowered women perhaps more than any other religion of the world. Women have the right to life, right to education right to employment etc granted by Islam.

Islam allows women to work outside the home. Women are allowed to work and earn their living. There is no single verse in the *Qur'ān* which would say that only men can work and women are not allowed to work. Some of the respondents from urban *Peshāwar* said that women in Islamic *Sharia'h* are free to participate in social activities, provided that she covers herself properly in *Pardāh* such as marriages and death occasions. There is no doubt that the *Pardāh* system as it exists among middle class Muslims has nothing to do with Islamic teachings. Some people have biased opinion about Islam and they try to paint a black picture of this religion as something that forces women to be confined to the boundaries of the house and discourage them to step out of the premises.

### Notes & References

1. One of the two main branches of Islam, commonly described as orthodox, and differing from Shīa in its understanding of the Sunna'h and in its acceptance of the first three caliphs. Compare with Shia. Sunni is a term used for a Muslim who adheres to the Sunni branch of Islam.
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