

The Role of Faith (*Iman*) in Women Empowerment

Dr. Abdul Latif Abdul Razak*

ABSTRACT

Undeniably, the roles of women in any development are very essential. However, there are women who are being side-lined. Their roles are being marginalized and even worse when they are being denied their rights. Indeed, women have rights to the elevation of their common sense, self-worthiness, determination of their own choices, and the right to social change for themselves and others. To achieve that objective, there many tools that can be used in which one of them are spiritual in nature, i.e., faith (*Iman*), a strong belief in Almighty Allah. It is not merely a vain wish but it is that which is established in the Heart and verified with works. It has three integrated aspects, namely profession by the tongue, conviction by Heart and practice by physicals. A good believer is the one who upholds all the three integrated conditions that make the person strong and tranquil. The true belief in Allah is able to raise women above all their living problems. This writing will elaborate in detail on the what, why and how *Iman* is essential in women empowerment.

Keywords: *Women empowerment, faith (iman), spirituality, Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

Women are the jewel of this world. In their softness lies their strength. Their roles in life are growingly significant. The proverb “The hand which swings a cradle will shake the world” defines their potentials. Many great men have enjoyed great achievements with the help of women. The best example is the Prophet Muhammad PBUH where his wife *Ummu al-Mu'minin* Khadijah has sacrificed her time, energy and even her life in the success of the Prophet's mission. Her death costs the Prophet PBUH's emotion whereby her death has become one of the reasons why that year is called the year of sadness (*'am al-huzn*).

As an honor to women, one of the verses of the Qur'an has been named the Verse of Women (*Surat al-Nisa'*). Besides that, al-Qur'an also mentioned few women who contributes significantly to the world history such as Asiah, the wife of Pharaoh, Maryam, the mother of Isa al-Masih. The Prophet PBUH commands all Muslims to kindly treat women. He says: “Treat women kindly, for woman was created from a bent rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is the top part, so treat women kindly.”¹ In another hadith, the Messenger of Allah PBUH said: “Verily, Allah enjoins you to be good to women. Verily, Allah enjoins you to be good to women, for they are your mothers, your sisters, and your aunts.”² As a model to humankind, the Prophet PBUH set a very high standard in the matter of dealing with family. His wife, Aishah RA reported that the Prophet PBUH said, “The best of you are the best to their families, and I am the best to my family.”³ Indeed, a very high privilege is enjoyed by a woman in Islam which is not given to man. The Prophet PBUH mentioned about this glad tiding in a hadith:

“If a woman prays her five daily prayers, fast her month (Ramadhan), guards her chastity, and obeys her husband, it will be said to her: Enter paradise through whichever of the doors you wish.”⁴

* Assistant Professor, Department of Fundamental and Interdisciplinary Studies, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (AHAS KIRKHS). al_nuha@iiium.edu.my

¹ Narrated by Bukhari and Muslim

² Sahih al-Mu'jam al_Kabir, no 648.

³ Narrated by Al-Tirmidhi, no. 3895.

⁴ Narrated by Ahmad, no. 1661.

In another hadith, he PBUH said:

Among my followers, the best of men are those who are best to their wives, and the best of women are those who are best to their husbands. To each of such women is set down a reward equivalent to the reward of a thousand martyrs. Among my followers, again the best of woman are those who assist their husbands in their work, and love them dearly for everything, save what is a transgression of Allah's law.

In contrast to these enlightened teachings of Islam in respect of women, they are generally perceived negatively as weak physically, unstable emotionally and easy broken psychologically. There are also many reported cases of home violence, abuse and mistreatments in polygamy. In this article, the author is going to expound on faith as the most powerful and effective mechanism to empower women so that they will be consistently strong in emotion, rational in decision making and wise in action taken. This consequently will help women to unleash their potential, and thus to live the fullest.

THE CONCEPT OF *IMAN*

True faith (*Iman*) is not merely a vain wish but it is that which is established in the heart and verified with works. It has three integrated conditions, namely profession by tongue, conviction by heart and physical application. A good believer is the one who upholds all the three integrated conditions that makes him strong and tranquil. *Iman* as listed by the Prophet PBUH are six, namely belief in Allah, the angels, the books, the messengers, the hereafter and the decree of good and bad. In general, indeed, *Iman* is a strong belief in Allah. The belief is grounded upon four fundamental and true knowledge which are the knowledge about Allah, the self, this world and the hereafter. True knowledge serves as the efficient means towards moulding a person's cognitive functioning in respect to thinking, belief and reasoning.

1. True knowledge About God

The first thing to know is about God. He has ninety-nine beautiful names that also reflect His Divine attributes. God is the Most Compassionate (*al-Rahim*), the Most Knowing (*al-'Alim*), the Most Powerful (*al-Qawiyy*), the Most Particular (*al-Khabir*), the Most Hearing (*al-Sami'*), the Most Rich (*al-Ghaniyy*), the Determinant (*al-Qadir*) and so on. Imagine a woman who is close to Him! She is going to be strong since she is close the Strongest and the Most Powerful. Her emotion is also strong and stable since she submits all her affairs to al-Mighty Allah, who is the Most Particular, the Most Seeing and the Most Listening. She deeply realizes that all things happen with purpose (*hikmah*) and they must be good since He is the Most Good. He knows what is best for His servants.

وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَّكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢١٦﴾

Perhaps you hate a thing, and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows and you know not. (*Surah al-Baqarah*, 2:216)

Iman guides her to do her best in achieving something desirable but at the same time it prevents her from sadness and losing hope if the result is undesirable. Everything that happens is within His control and not her control. Is it worthful to depress with something beyond one's control?

مَا أَصَابَ مِنْ مُصِيبَةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مِّن قَبْلِ أَنْ نَبْرَأَهَا ۗ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

No calamity befalls on the earth or in yourself but that is in the Book before We bring it into being. Indeed that, for Allah, is easy. (*Surah al-Hadid*, 57:22)

The belief that Allah is always with her provides inner security and peace. This state of tranquillity will continue to increase when she feels that she always has Him to hold and talk with in difficulty.

وَهُوَ مَعَكُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

He is with you wherever you are. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing. (*Surah al-Hadid*, 57:4)

She must believe with certainty that no problem will be greater than His Greatness and no problem will not be solved with His help.

وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا ﴿٢﴾ وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ ۚ وَمَنْ يَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بَالِغُ أَمْرِهِ ۚ قَدْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدْرًا ﴿٣﴾ ... وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ يُسْرًا ﴿٤﴾

And whoever fears Allah, He will make for him a way out. And will provide for him where he does not expect. And whoever relies upon Allah, then He is sufficient for him. Indeed Allah will accomplish His purpose. Allah has already set for everything (a decree) extent...and whoever fears Allah, He will make for him of his matter ease. (*Surah al-Talaq*, 65: 2-4)

She must first put her full trust upon God:

1. Everything within His Knowledge
2. Never creating thing without purpose, benefit or *hikmah*.
3. Injustice is rule out.
4. Everything is scripted by Allah and He is the best scriptwriter.

2. Knowledge About Self (*Al-Nafs*)

A woman must know that Allah creates her in the best form as mentioned in *Surah al-Tin*, verse 1 to 4 and has placed her at a special position in this universe, namely as His servant (*'abd*) and His vicegerent (*khalifah*). As a servant, her main purpose in life is to worship Allah and as a vicegerent. She is the representative of Allah to manage this world properly in accordance with Shari'ah.

This much respected position of her will be downgraded if she herself put the limit to her potential. Her service as a wife is indeed her service to Allah. Thus, her obedience to her husband is conditional and not absolute and subjected to the obedience to Allah. Her ultimate love is to Allah. This will prevent her from being enslaved by the irresponsible husband.

A woman must realize that her nature and the nature of all human beings (*fitrat al-insan*) is weak (*dha'if*), ignorant (*jahil*) and poor (*faqir*). Realizing about this nature, a woman should solely depend on Allah as the source of her strength, continuously seek Her guidance to guide her in all her affairs, and tirelessly raise her hand to Allah for His blessings. This is indeed reflected in the hadith where the Prophet PBUH taught her daughter Fatimah RA to pray: "O You Who is Ever living and Sustains and Protects everything, I seek assistance through the means of your mercy, correct for me all my affairs and do not entrust me to myself for the moment of a blink of an eye."⁵

3. True Knowledge About this World

⁵ Mustadrak al-Hakim vol.1 pg.545; Shu'ubul Iman of Imaam Bayhaqi Hadith No.:760, 761)

This world is simply means and not destination. Life in this world is indeed a middle phase of human journey. It starts with the world of soul (*'alam al-ruh*), then the world of uterus (*al-rahim*), then this world (*dunya*), then the world of grave (*barzakh*) and finally the last world (*Akhirah*). All except Allah have beginning and ending. Allah says:

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ ﴿٢٦﴾ وَيَبْقَىٰ وَجْهَ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٢٧﴾

Everyone upon the earth will perish. And there will remain the Face of your Lord, owner of Majesty and Honor. (*Surah al-Rahman, 55: 26-27*)

Realizing that this world is a means and temporary, a woman should not waste her time with something marginal. Her priority is to obtain preparations as much as possible before death. Her direction is clear and she will never let her life will be diverted from this noble goal.

Also, she must accept the fact that this world is the place of trials. Allah, the Creator of this world, reminds:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ ﴿١٥٥﴾

We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient. (*Surah al-Baqarah, 2:155*)

Faith makes a woman prepared for the test in whatever grounds and forms whether in the life as a daughter, or in the life as a wife, or in the life as a worker and professional. She knows in certain that the test does not make her fail. Failure is when she answers or responds to the test wrongly. However, if she responds to the test correctly, she will be successful.

Humans are deceived by having perception that a test is something that displeases us or makes us sad. From Islamic perspective, a test indeed can be in any form either something displeases or not. Success as well as richness and even happiness is indeed a test. Humans are tested whether they are a thankful servant or not.

4. Knowledge About *Akhirah*

Belief in *Akhirah* is indeed the fifth pillar of faith. The life in *Akhirah* is better than this worldly life. Women should equip their minds with the perception that their destination is the hereafter which is better than this world. Allah affirms:

وَلَا خَيْرَ لَّكَ مِنَ الْآوَّلَىٰ ﴿٤﴾

And the Hereafter is better for you than the first (life). (*Surah al-Dhuha, 93: 4*)

Life in the hereafter should be given more attention and priority. A woman is not supposed to be persuaded with this temporary life until she ignores the afterlife. The pleasure in the hereafter is in comparable with the pleasure of this life. Allah has promised the believers in the Hereafter with the pleasures, enjoyments, and amusements as no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart has conceived".⁶

At the same time, women should not lose hope in worldly difficulties to the extent that the unending pleasure is being denied for them. Some women turn to their desires, and because of that, they are being denied the bounties of *Akhirah*. Sometime in life, their rights are not respected and honoured. They should believe that

⁶ Narrated by al-Tirmidhi

one day, in the *Akhirah*, all their rights will be returned to them. Those whose rights have been denied are in tranquillity knowing there will be a day that their rights would be returned to them without less. This belief is indeed a great console to them.

﴿٤٧﴾ وَنَضَعُ الْمَوَازِينَ الْقِسْطَ لِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ فَلَا تُظْلَمُ نَفْسٌ شَيْئًا ۖ وَإِنْ كَانَ مِثْقَالَ حَبَّةٍ مِنْ حَرْدَلٍ آتَيْنَا بِهَا ۖ وَكَفَىٰ بِنَا حَاسِبِينَ

And We place for the scale of justice for the Day of Resurrection, so no soul will be treated unjustly at all. And if there is (even) the weight of mustard seed, We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as accountant. (*Surah al-Anbiya*, 21: 47)

Furthermore, the pleasures of *al-Akhirah* are certain. Life as well as its pleasures in this world is characterized as full of uncertainty. We are always being reminded on this reality as a kind of caution. Happiness in the morning might turn into the opposite in the afternoon. The ultimate disaster is death, the most certain thing in life with the most uncertain time. Remembering death will destroy our worldly joys and happiness. This state of uncertainty causes the ultimate pain for the seekers of worldly pleasures. This is however definitely different from the happiness in the Hereafter with its certain and unending qualities. With no more death and the continuously increasing pleasures make those who miss them the greatest losers!

The burden of worldly life including the fulfilments of all religious responsibilities put women in a very stressful state. The good news is that all these burdens and responsibilities will be no longer there. It is a burden-free life with only full and unending enjoyments. There is no rest since there is no tiredness. It is the place we sow what we reap. Besides no physical burden, life in paradise is also free from psychological and emotional burdens. Allah says:

﴿٤٩﴾ ادْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْكُمْ وَلَا أَنْتُمْ تَحْزَنُونَ

Enter paradise, no fear there will be concerning you, nor will you grieve. (*Surah al-A'raf*, 7: 49)

PRACTICES TO STRENGTHEN *IMAN*

Beside equipping oneself with the right knowledge on the above four major aspects, women also should habituate themselves with certain religious practices. As a body requires food and exercise to remain fit, faith also requires food and exercise to remain strong. In Islamic teachings, there are certain exercises that help women to be strong in facing difficulties in life namely prayer (*solat*) and remembrance of God (*zikru al-Allah*).

1. Prayer (*Salah*)

Prayer which is an obligatory *'ibadah* for a Muslim, offers a lot of physical and spiritual benefits that are essential in preventing emotional disturbances. The Holy Qur'an, in short verses, clearly describes the behaviour of the unbeliever who does not offer his daily prayers as one who is always anxious, fretful when faced with problems and grudging when good things happen to him. Those who worship, as Allah says, are saved from these neurotic symptoms. Allah says:

﴿٢٢﴾ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا ﴿١٩﴾ إِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا ﴿٢٠﴾ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا ﴿٢١﴾ إِلَّا الْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

Truly man was created very anxious, fretful when evil befallerth him, and when good befallerth him, grudging; except those who are devoted and remain steadfast to their prayer. (*Surah al-Ma'arij*, 70: 19 – 23)

Prayer is indeed a comprehensive set of exercises and techniques that unites the three aspects, namely physical, spiritual and psychological aspects. Before praying, women has to ensure that their physical bodies are

clean by performing ablution (*wudu*). Using clean and cold water to wash can refresh one's body and cool down emotion. This is the reason why the Prophet (PBUH) advises those whose emotions are overwhelmed with anger to perform ablution (Abu Dawud). Besides bodily cleanliness, clothes and the place of prayer must also be clean. As a matter of fact, cleanliness contributes to tranquillity and peace of mind.

Prayer begins with intention (*niyyah*) that cuts the person from bothering with worldly affairs and problems. It is as if saying "stop" to chain of thoughts that keep penetrating and bothering one's mind. Although we know that it is artificial to equate prayer with any modern Western technique of treatment, this, in a way, reminds us of a technique used by rational emotive therapists known as thought-stopping in which the patient interrupts an undesirable thought process by the simple expedient of yelling "Stop!" Intention is then followed by the recitation of *al-Fatihah*, a verse that contains a lot of remedies to an anxious heart. This *surah* which is recited at least seventeen times per day functions as an important and continuous reminder for Muslims. It reminds us of the Mercifulness, Compassionate and the Omnipotence of Allah, to our purpose and duty, and to the fact that we have A Higher Source of help, support and guidance. All these elements, as was mentioned, give security and safety, peace of mind, self-confidence and meaning of life.

The physical positions in prayers have also some significances. While praying, one is asked to stand still in a relaxed mode while the mind is in full concentration on what we recite. This relaxed physical state will also cause the psyche and inner emotions of the person to be in a relaxed state. This is due to, as already mentioned, the intertwinement and interaction between physical body and the inner aspects of man. Ibn Qayyim in his *Medicine of the Prophet* has summarized these benefits of prayer saying that it has an exceedingly important place in giving joy and strength to the heart, so that it expands, rejoices and has pleasure. For it contains the capacity to let the heart and the spirit come near to God and approach Him, to take delight in remembering Him, to rejoice in having intimate dialogue with Him, to stand in His presence, to use the whole body and its powers and faculties in His worship, to let every limb share therein, and stay free from any attachment to created beings or involvement, or converse with them, to allow the powers of heart and limbs to be attracted to His Lord and Creator, and rest from enemy at the time of prayer. All these can be among the greatest of remedies and causes of joy, and the foods which are suitable only for sound hearts.

At the beginning, the prayers might not be very effective as one had problems with concentration and forgetting life problems. Practice focusing, that is, by concentrating on the meanings of the words they recite and to do some breathing exercise. This help to improve concentration. The concentration as well as relaxation tremendously increased.

It is important to note that one of the greatest verbal components of prayer is *du'a* (supplication). It is no wonder then that the very meaning of *Salah* itself is *du'a*. *Du'a* as well as *Salah* is a direct communication between a servant and his Creator. This means that a person can voice out his problems and hopes to Him without any intermediary. Voicing out one's problems, as already mentioned, brings relief, what is more when it is done before the Most Omnipotent and the Most Compassionate Who has promised that He always accepts the *du'a* of His servants, "And your Lord says: "Call on Me, I will answer your prayer" (*Surah Ghafir*, 40: 60). In another verse, He the Most High Says, "And when My servants question thee concerning Me, then surely I am near. I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he calls unto Me" (*Surah al-Baqarah*, 2: 186).

The Prophet (PBUH) has taught many supplications that could be used by women. The Prophet (PBUH) says:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْهَمِّ وَالْحُزْنِ ، وَ أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْعَجْزِ وَالْكَسَلِ ، وَ أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْجُبْنِ وَ الْبُخْلِ ، وَ أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ غَلَبَةِ الدَّيْنِ وَ قَهْرِ الرِّجَالِ

O Allah, I seek Your protection from worry and grief, I seek Your protection from incapability and laziness, I seek Your protection from cowardice and miserliness, and I seek Your protection from the overpowering of debt and the subjugation of men.

2. Remembrance of God (*Zikr Allah*)

Iman increases with the increase of remembrance of Allah. Being away and forgetting Allah weaken the *Iman*, and thus causing many difficulties in life. Therefore, it is obvious that the way out is to keep remembering God. Allah, in the Holy Qur'an and the prophet (PBUH) in a hadith have promised those who keep remembering Allah with the feeling of happiness and tranquility. Allah says:

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَتَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ ﴿٢٨﴾

Those who believe, and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allah: for without doubt, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find tranquillity. (*Surah al-Ra'd*, 13: 28)

CONCLUSION

Allah is the Most Knowing (*al-'Alim*), the Most Just (*al-'Adil*) and the Most Merciful (*al-Rahim*). He knows best His creations, namely their strengths and their weaknesses. Regarding women, despite their difficulties, they are so blessed in Islam with many privileges. Women should get close to Allah through faith (*Iman*) and good practices (*amal salih*). Only Allah has the power to save them. He should be their source of strength; seeking His pleasure to be their main objective, and upon Him they should wholeheartedly depend. His promise is “whoever is mindful of Allah, He will make a way out for them...and whoever is mindful of Allah, He will make their matters easy for them.”⁷

REFERENCES

- Abdul Razak, Abdul Latif. (2019). *Spiritual Health: Conceptual, Philosophical and Practical Aspects Of Iman Restoration Therapy*. IIUM Press. Selangor.
- Abdul Razak, Abdul Latif. (2018). *Penjagaan dan Rawatan Kesihatan Mental Menurut Terapi Pengukuhan Iman*. Penerbitan Telaga Biru. Kuala Lumpur.
- Abdul Razak, A. L. (2010). *Iman (Faith) Restoration therapy: Its Why, What, and How*. IRKHS Monograph. Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.
- Al-Ghazali, A. H. (1995) *The Revival of the Religions Science*; Translated by T.J. Winter (Abdul Hakim Murad). The Islamic Texts Society.
- Badri, M. (2000). *Contemplation: An Islamic psychospiritual study*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Medina Books.
- Badri, M. (2001). The Islamisation of psychology: Its why, It's what, It's how and Its when". Unpublished paper delivered at the national conference of psychology. Kuala Lumpur: IIUM, 14-19 July, 2001.
- Badawi, J. A. The Status of Women in Islam. (N. D.) Retrieved August 9, 2023 from <https://www.iium.edu.my/deed/articles/statusofwomen.html>

⁷ Surat al-Talaq, 2-4.

Malaekah, Mostafa. (2009). Woman in Islam. Retrieved August 7, 2023 from <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/2132/viewall/women-in-islam>.