

COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

This article proposes to deal with comparative ideas on gender justice and the status of women, including the problems societies face regarding women's participation in government, as illustrated in the struggle for women's suffrage and the opposition it faced in Western societies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Comparisons will be made as to the rights of women accorded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, the participation of women in early Muslim society, the misconceptions which have led to the erosion of the status of Muslim women, and recent developments in relation to the efforts for gender justice.

WOMEN IN THE WEST

Historically, the recognition that women, as well as men, should be allowed to fulfill the role of citizenship was not obtained without a great struggle. I shall quote rather extensively from the writings of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries as many of their viewpoints and prejudices may seem very surprising today, when the concept of women's rights and gender equality is often taken for granted as being an integral part of Western culture. The discussion on the women's movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries will focus on the movement in England, as that period also coincides with the period of British colonialism in Malaya.

Traditional views on women

In the late 18th century, the idea of women's political representation

was first hinted by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) in *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*¹ in 1792, but she did not expect the idea to be taken seriously and was aware that it might be made the subject of ridicule:

though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called to fulfil the duties of wives and mothers, by religion and reason, I cannot help lamenting that women of a superior cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence. I may excite laughter, by dropping a hint, which I mean to pursue, some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government.²

The *Vindication* was more concerned with the educational rights of girls and observations on the state of degradation and acts of foolishness to which women were reduced due to ignorance through their lack of proper education. Wollstonecraft accepted that most women would be fulfilling the roles of wives and mothers, emphasizing that a sound education was needed in order to be good wives and mothers. As the care of children is one of the grand duties of women, this duty alone “would afford many forcible arguments for strengthening the female understanding.”³ She only wished that exceptional or “superior” women would not be prevented from having an opportunity for pursuing wider usefulness and independence. She deplored the prejudices against women prevalent in those days, and argued against some of the writers of that century who had rendered women into objects of pity, bordering on contempt.⁴ Among those

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited with an Introduction by Miriam Brody, (P.P.: Penguin Books, 1992).

² *Ibid.*, p. 259-260.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chap. 5.