

Status of Women In The Gathas

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In the 1800's women in Europe and the other parts of the world took their first baby steps towards getting their rights as equal human beings. Even today in many societies and countries women are not treated as equals. In some religions like Islam women have half the value of men. As a witness in a court the affidavit of two women is equal to that of one man or if a women is killed in a car accident the insurance liability payable is half of what would be payable to a man. Now if the women so killed is not a Muslim that amount is further reduced to half of what would be payable for a Muslim women. Women in the 21-century may succeed to change things where it comes to laws but to change religion even the authority of Jesus Christ was questioned and what he said is not followed even today.

'And I say to you: whosoever divorces his wife, except for un-chastity, and marries another, commits adultery.'
(Matthew 19:9)

And they questioned his authority for - ' They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and put her away?"
' He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wife, but from the beginning it was not so."(Matthew 19: 7-8)

In comparison the followers of Zarathushtra had equality men on their own could not divorce their wife except for un-chastity and they followed this ardently till very recently, before Western and Islamic influence changed their values of life. The important point is that, women were treated as equals and separations was not a matter of choice for men only.

Zarathushtra in his teachings the Gathas treats men and women as a PERSON he does not differentiate between the sexes. Even as a father he does not assume authority over his daughter but advises her to use

her own wisdom and decide whether to accept the standing offer of marriage from the learned Jamasp.

Zarathushtra in his Gathas calls upon all, he neither discriminates between the races or sex, his teachings are for all who desire and are eager to live a full life.

And of these shall I speak to **THOSE** eager,
That quality of wisdom that all the wise wish
And call creative qualities
And good creation of the mind
The all-powerful truth
Truly and that more & better ways are discovered
Towards perfection
Zarathushtra - Gatha - Yasna Ha 30.1 (FR)

Listen with your ears to the supreme facts
Consider with open mind
Between the paths before deciding
PERSON BY PERSON for his own self
Before greatness of this message
Is truly spread understand each one
Zarathushtra - Gatha - Yasna Ha 30.2 (FR)

When discussing the equality of man and woman in the Gathas the common quote is Yasna Ha.30.2. Some translators of the Gathas have in their over enthusiasm translated line 4 of Ha 30.2 as Men and Women while in the original Avesta language it says NAREM NAREM. It is the same word repeated twice and so one cannot be men and the other women. In line with the trend of the Gathas, the more factual translation would be Person by Person or Fard Fard in Persian. Else where in the Gathas (Ha 46.10) the word GENA is used to indicate Women. The word used for a maiden is NAIRI in Ha 54.1. If Zarathushtra had intended to use the word men and women in Ha 30.2 he would use the right word as used in the latter Ha's.

The Gathas in particular and even in the latter Avesta text we find that men and women have been treated as equals. Proper names of women have been mentioned praising their deeds. Which shows that the various writers of the Avesta collection followed in the footsteps of Zarathushtra and respected the equality of women. Physically and naturally, men and

women are different and recognizing this fact should not be labeled one way or the other. Those who do so are either naïve or intend to be disrespectful towards women.

Latter Avesta is a collection of books and papers written in a language called the Avesta, which as a language has not been commonly used to communicate for at least the last 2500 years. Included in the set was anything they found to be written in the Avesta language and as everyone did not easily understand the content, all of them were considered holy and faithfully preserved. In the last two centuries with the help of Sanskrit, a sister language which is still alive, an effort has been made to translate the Avesta, and each translator has injected his or her thoughts and belief while translating them.

With regard to the status of women, some people have made a big issue of the Vandidad, a latter Avesta text, for instructing women to rest during menstruation and not to participate in the functions they otherwise performed. Zarathushtra did not write the Vandidad and there cannot be two opinions on that. As the name Vandidad goes it is a text containing law against the Daevas - POLLUTION -the impurities. It is like a Hygienic Guide, which set out some laws to protect the population from impurities, pollution and sickness. It contains quarantine procedures to make sure that travelers did not carry any deadly germs like plague, when they returned from abroad. It seems to have been written at a very late stage and during a time when their society was passing through a difficult time, as far as health and pollution was concerned. Some of the topics covered in the 19 chapters are:

- How a physician is tested and his fees
- Classification of contracts
- Penalties for offences
- On evil of false oath
- On disposal of hair and nails
- What grieves the earth?
- What pleases the earth?
- Dead not to be buried
- The period the earth remains unclean when defiled by the dead
- How long after death decomposition of the body commences
- Cleaning of the clothes defiled by the dead, etc.

Let us consider a present day scenario. Today if you go to any municipal office to obtain a license for business you will receive an instruction book, which you have to follow and an inspector will be designated to come and check that every thing is as per standards before you are given the license to operate. For a restaurant there are sets of rules called Food Safe Rules, it is interesting to note one of the rules, where in they require the use of a set of three sinks to wash and rinse utensils. In a ritualistic form there are instructions as to the method of washing, rinsing and drying the cups, glasses, dinnerware. The method recommended are different from the normal method used in homes to do the same function. Similarly for a clinic or a hospital there are different sets of rules, so also for a place where public will gather like conferences halls and theaters. These rules include things like - disinfectants that cannot be used and those that can be used, the number of washrooms and their locations and there are different technical specifications for women and men's washrooms. Likewise for a Funeral Home and a cemetery there are rules and restrictions even as to the future use of such land. Then there are instructions for the inspectors and fines they can impose on the applicant for non-observance of the rules. These municipal rulebooks for the different trades are in the best interest of the general public, and compiled according to our present day knowledge, just like Vandidad was in the best interest of the public in those days and according to their knowledge in those days. Connecting them with the status of women and insulting women would be naive.

In ancient Iran when the teachings of Zarathushtra were followed women enjoyed equal rights taking into consideration their physical capabilities. The ancient Iranian coins show the queen on one side of the coin and there were also women who ruled Iran very successfully. Princesses, who had the capabilities, inherited the throne; there were naturally fewer women rulers keeping in mind that a ruler had to physically lead the army in a war. Pourandokht and Azarmidokht were sisters who became successive rulers. So did Homai who ruled for 32 years with great success, these are just an example.

The fact that Zarathushtra is asking his daughter to use her wisdom and make her choice shows that he considered women equal in knowledge and wisdom. The fact that he had named his baby girl PouruChista, which means 'Perfect Wisdom', further proves his belief. Women were instrumental in imparting knowledge to their children as they spend more time with their children compared to the father who had duties that kept

him away from home, this required that the women be educated enough to be able to teach their children.

According to the book keeping records excavated at Takht-e-Jamshid (Persepolis) we see that women were not only employed for building the palace but they also enjoyed paid maternity leave. After all these were the same people who gave the world its First Charter of Human Rights.

Zarathushtra calls his God the Creator of Wisdom (Ahura Mazda). This creator created the Wisdom in Existence (in Creation) (Mazda Ahura), that is the laws in nature. Otherwise why would he be called Creator of Wisdom? Everything from the innumerable galaxies to our earth and its occupants has come into existence accordingly to these natural laws. Zarathushtra does not present a creation theory like that about Adam and Eve. Latter when his followers, in a time of cultural weakness, feel the need for a theory to match that of Adam and Eve, the comparative story of Masha and Masheyaneh was written. **It is important to note that even at that time of cultural weakness, in this story of creation, the first woman was created as an equal and not from the rib of a man. This shows the continuity of their belief in the equality of man and woman.**
