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## Women Empowerment and their Role in Economic Sustainability: A Critical Review of Prosperous Businesswomen of Islamic History

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the historical contributions of successful female businesswomen in Islamic societies, shedding light on their pivotal roles in fostering economic empowerment, upholding ethical principles, and promoting overall economic prosperity. The study delves into the lives and achievements of these women, examining the unique challenges they faced within the context of Islamic history. By analysing their strategies for success, ethical considerations, and the impact of their economic endeavours, this research seeks to provide insights into the intersection of gender, commerce, and ethics in Islamic societies. Through a nuanced exploration of these historical narratives, the abstract aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the diverse role's women played in shaping economic landscapes and ethical standards within the Islamic historical context.

**Keywords:** Successful, Businesswomen, Economic Sustainability, Women Empowerment, Historical Context

### **1. Introduction:**

Women empowerment and their role in economic sustainability have gained significant attention in contemporary dialogue, reflecting the recognition of women's agency and contribution to economic development. This critical review delves into the historical context of women's economic empowerment, focusing on the exemplary role of prosperous businesswomen in Islamic history. Throughout Islamic civilization, women have played pivotal roles as entrepreneurs, traders, and financiers, contributing to economic prosperity and societal advancement. By examining the narratives of successful female businesswomen and entrepreneurs in Islamic history, this review seeks to elucidate their strategies, challenges, and impact on economic sustainability. Through a nuanced exploration of historical precedents, this review aims to extract

valuable insights that can inform contemporary efforts to promote women's economic empowerment and foster sustainable development.

## 2. Research Objectives:

The objectives of this study are:

- To provide an overview of the concept of women empowerment and its major aspects.
- To highlight the role of women in economic sustainability.
- To determine the role of women in financial rights and economic stability by studying the lives of successful business women in the history of Islam.

## 3. Literature Review:

In current era, the mentioned topic is considered to be very important, that's why many researchers have made it the subject of their research and compilation. A lot has been written on the subject of women's empowerment and economic prosperity in Eastern and Western societies. It is difficult to enumerate all the studies, but some of them are as follows:

- **"Women and Economic Development: A Critical Review"** by Ester Boserup: This seminal work explores the relationship between women's economic activities and overall development. Boserup's analysis underscores the significant contributions of women to economic sustainability, particularly in agricultural economies, and emphasizes the importance of empowering women to achieve broader development goals.
- **"Women Entrepreneurs and Financial Inclusion: A Literature Review"** by Aparajita Das: This study examines the role of women entrepreneurs in driving economic growth and development. It explores various factors influencing women's entrepreneurship, including access to finance, education, and social norms. The study highlights the potential of women-led businesses to contribute to economic sustainability and calls for targeted policies to support women's entrepreneurship.
- **"Islamic Perspectives on Women's Economic Empowerment"** edited by Azizah Y. al-Hibri and Asifa Quraishi-Landes: This edited volume delves into Islamic teachings and historical precedents related to women's economic empowerment. It offers insights into the entrepreneurial activities of women during the early Islamic period and explores how Islamic principles can inform contemporary efforts to promote gender equality and economic sustainability.

- **"Women, Islam, and Economic Justice: A Brief Review of Literature"** by Asghar Ali Engineer: This review examines the intersection of Islam, gender, and economic justice, with a focus on women's rights and economic empowerment in Islamic societies. Engineer discusses the historical role of women in Islamic commerce and highlights the potential for Islamic teachings to support women's economic empowerment in modern contexts.
- **"Empowering Women Entrepreneurs: A Literature Review on Success Factors and Challenges"** by Chitkala Zutshi and Saurabh Arora: This literature review synthesizes existing research on the factors influencing women's entrepreneurship success and the challenges they face. It identifies access to finance, education, networking opportunities, and institutional support as critical factors affecting women's entrepreneurial endeavours, offering insights relevant to understanding the experiences of prosperous businesswomen in Islamic history.

These scholarly works provide valuable insights into the historical contributions of women to economic sustainability, particularly within the context of Islamic civilization, and offer theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence to inform contemporary discourse and policymaking on women's economic empowerment..

#### **4. Economic Sustainability:**

Economic sustainability refers to the ability of an economic system to maintain its productivity and growth over time while ensuring the well-being of current and future generations. It encompasses practices that promote long-term viability, efficiency, and resilience within the economy, without depleting natural resources, causing irreversible environmental damage or compromising social equity. Economic sustainability involves balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social equity, aiming to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It often involves considerations such as resource conservation, diversification of economic activities, promotion of innovation and technological advancement, equitable distribution of wealth, and the integration of environmental and social factors into decision-making processes. Sustainable economic development aims to create inclusive and prosperous societies that can thrive in the long term while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and society.<sup>1</sup>

#### **5.1. Women Empowerment:**

Women's empowerment is a fundamental aspect of Islamic teachings, which emphasize the importance of gender equality and women's rights. The

Qur'ān and the Prophet Muḥammad's (ﷺ) teachings have consistently promoted the empowerment of women, challenging patriarchal norms and societal limitations. In Islamic teachings, women are considered equal to men in the eyes of God, with the same spiritual potential and responsibilities. The Quran states,

فَأَسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِّنْكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ بَعْضُكُمْ مِّنْ بَعْضٍ<sup>2</sup>.

So their Lord accepted of them (their supplication and answered them), "Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female.

According to Āyah, women have the right to education, inheritance, and financial independence, as well as the freedom to make their own choices and decisions. The Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) himself set an example by empowering women in his community. He encouraged women to participate in religious and social activities and appointed women as leaders and teachers. Women like *Khadija*, *'Aisha*, and *Fāṭima* (R.A) played significant roles in the early Muslim community, demonstrating women's capabilities and contributions. Islamic teachings also emphasize the importance of gender justice and protection from oppression. The Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) said:

خيركم خيركم لامهله<sup>3</sup>.

The best of you are those who are best to their wives.

The above mentioned Hadith emphasizes the importance of treating wives with kindness and respect. When individuals adhere to this guidance, several positive outcomes can result:

- **Stronger Marital Bonds:** Practicing kindness and respect towards one's wife fosters a supportive and loving marital relationship. Mutual respect and compassion strengthen the bond between spouses, leading to a healthier and happier marriage.
- **Emotional Well-being:** When spouses treat each other with kindness and respect, it creates an emotionally secure environment within the marriage. This can lead to increased emotional well-being for both partners, as they feel valued and appreciated in the relationship.
- **Family Harmony:** A household where the husband treats his wife well tends to be more harmonious and peaceful. When spouses prioritize kindness and respect in their interactions, it sets a positive example for children and contributes to a nurturing family environment.
- **Social Benefits:** Practicing kindness towards one's wife extends beyond the household and influences social interactions. When individuals uphold the principles of respect and kindness in their

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marriages, it contributes to a more compassionate and harmonious society.

- **Spiritual Growth:** Adhering to the teachings of the Hadith fosters spiritual growth for individuals and strengthens their connection to their faith. Treating one's wife with kindness and respect is not only a reflection of good character but also an act of worship in Islam.

## 5.2. Major Aspects of Women Empowerment:

Women empowerment encompasses various aspects aimed at enhancing the social, economic, political, and personal agency of women. Here are some major aspects of women empowerment:

1. **Economic Empowerment:** This involves ensuring equal access to economic resources, opportunities, and employment for women. It includes initiatives such as promoting women's entrepreneurship, providing access to credit and financial services, and closing the gender pay gap.
2. **Education:** Education is a fundamental aspect of women empowerment. Ensuring equal access to quality education for girls and women can help break the cycle of poverty, improve health outcomes, and foster economic independence.
3. **Political Participation:** Women's representation and participation in political decision-making processes are crucial for gender equality and empowerment. This aspect involves advocating for women's rights, increasing women's representation in government and leadership positions, and promoting gender-sensitive policies and legislation.
4. **Health and Well-being:** Women's empowerment also includes ensuring access to healthcare services, including reproductive health services and information. It involves addressing issues such as maternal mortality, access to contraception, and combating gender-based violence.
5. **Legal Rights:** Ensuring that women have equal rights under the law is essential for their empowerment. This includes legal reforms to address discriminatory laws and practices, such as laws related to inheritance, property rights, and marital status.
6. **Social and Cultural Empowerment:** Challenging gender norms and stereotypes is crucial for women's empowerment. This involves promoting gender equality in social and cultural spheres, challenging harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation,

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and promoting women's voices and representation in media and cultural spaces.

7. **Access to Technology:** Bridging the digital gender gap and ensuring women's access to and proficiency with technology is important for their empowerment in the digital age. This includes initiatives such as providing access to digital literacy programs and promoting women's participation in STEM fields.
8. **Safety and Security:** Women's empowerment also involves ensuring their safety and security in public and private spaces. This includes efforts to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination.

By addressing these various aspects of women empowerment, societies can work towards achieving gender equality and creating environments where women can fully participate, thrive, and realize their rights and potential.

### **6. Prosperous Businesswomen of Islamic History:**

The intersection of women's rights and religious traditions has been a subject of global discourse, and within the tapestry of religious diversity, Islam holds a significant place. The relationship between women and Islam is intricate, shaped by centuries of interpretation, cultural influences, and evolving societal norms.

To understand the position of women in Islam, it is crucial to delve into the historical context. The advent of Islam in the 7th century brought about transformative changes in the status of women in the Arabian Peninsula. The Qur'an, introduced principles advocating for the dignity and rights of women, challenging prevailing societal norms. Prophet Muḥammad's (ﷺ)'s teachings emphasized the equality of men and women before God, granting women rights in inheritance, property, and marriage an innovative concept in the 7th-century Arabian society. Islamic principles uphold the intrinsic dignity and rights of women, emphasizing justice, compassion, and equity. The Qur'an addresses issues pertinent to women, promoting their education, economic independence, and participation in public life. However, interpretations of these principles vary, leading to diverse practices across different Muslim-majority societies.

This article explores the stories of some exemplary women, drawing on references from classical Islamic texts and historical sources. The study of following three reliable and successful business women in the history of Islam is a part of this research:

- Khadīja Bint Khuwaylid (R.A).
- Umm e Salmā (R.A).
- Shifā Bint 'Abdullāh (R.A).

**6.1.1. Khadīja Bint Khuwaylid (R.A):**

The narrative of Khadīja bint Khuwaylid, the first wife of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ), stands as a beacon of economic empowerment in the early days of Islam. Among her many remarkable qualities, Khadīja's success as a merchant stands out prominently.

**6.1.2. Early Life and Business Acumen:**

Born into the prestigious Quraysh tribe in Mecca, Khadīja inherited her father's prosperous business after his demise. She swiftly emerged as a shrewd and astute businesswoman, managing extensive trade caravans that traversed the Arabian Peninsula. Her ability to navigate the complexities of the bustling trade routes, coupled with her keen financial acumen, contributed to her reputation as one of the most successful businesswoman in Mecca.<sup>4</sup>

**6.1.3. The Marriage with Muḥammad (ﷺ):**

Khadīja's business ventures led to her crossing paths with the young and honourable Muḥammad (ﷺ), who worked as a trade agent for her. Impressed by his honesty, integrity, and wisdom, Khadīja proposed a business partnership that eventually blossomed into a deeper personal connection.<sup>5</sup> Their union not only marked the beginning of a profound and loving marriage but also set the stage for a transformative era in Islamic history.

**6.1.4. Supporting the Prophet:**

Khadīja's unwavering support for Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) extended beyond their personal relationship. When Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) received the first revelations from Allah through the angel Gabriel, Khadīja became his pillar of strength. Her steadfast belief in his mission and her financial contributions played a pivotal role in the nascent Muslim community's survival during times of persecution and economic boycott.<sup>6</sup>

**6.1.5. Legacy of Empowerment:**

Khadīja's legacy as a successful merchant and a devoted supporter of Islam resonates through the ages. Her entrepreneurial achievements shattered traditional gender roles of her time, demonstrating that women could excel in the business realm. Khadīja's financial independence and her pivotal role in the early years of Islam serve as an inspiration for Muslim women seeking empowerment and success in various fields. Khadīja was a successful merchant with a thriving trade network that extended beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Her business ventures played a pivotal role in supporting the nascent Islamic community. The Prophet's marriage to Khadīja reflects the esteem in which her economic prowess was held, dispelling any notion that Islam marginalizes or restricts women in economic roles.

Khadīja bint Khuwaylid's story transcends time, illustrating the transformative power of a woman who defied societal norms to become a

trailblazing figure in the business world and Islamic history. Her legacy is a testament to the idea that success knows no gender and that the principles of honesty, determination, and compassion are universal keys to triumph. As we celebrate the achievements of historical figures, Khadija's story continues to inspire and motivate individuals, especially women, to pursue their dreams with resilience and purpose.<sup>7</sup>

#### **6.2.1. Umm e Salmā (R.A): Early Life and Marriage**

Umm e Salmā, one of the Prophet's wives, actively engaged in the caravan trade, a central economic activity of the time. Umm e Salmā, a significant figure in early Islamic history, played a crucial role in various facets of the Muslim community, including trade. As one of the wives of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ), her contributions extended beyond the domestic sphere, making her an exemplar of women's participation in trade during the formative years of Islam.

Umm e Salmā, also known as Hind Bint Abī Umayya, was born into the prominent Makhzūmī tribe in Mecca. She married Abū Salmā, a companion of Prophet Muḥammad, and they were early converts to Islam. Following Abū Salmā's death, Umm e Salmā faced the challenges of widowhood and played an active role in the emerging Muslim community.<sup>8</sup>

#### **6.2.2. Trade and Economic Contributions**

Umm e Salmā's engagement in trade activities showcased her resilience and business acumen. In the bustling marketplaces of Mecca, she became known for her astute negotiations and fair business practices. Her involvement in trade not only contributed to her economic independence but also served as an example of how women in early Islamic society could navigate commercial enterprises.

Umm e Salmā's role in trade illustrates the diversity of economic activities women pursued during the early Islamic period. Her participation in commerce was not only a source of financial independence but also a demonstration of the dynamic role's women played in the economic landscape of the nascent Muslim community.<sup>9</sup>

#### **6.2.3. Migration to Medina and Economic Challenges**

The migration to Medina marked a pivotal moment for Umm e Salmā and the Muslim community. Economic challenges accompanied the migration, and Umm e Salmā's adaptability and resourcefulness shone through as she actively participated in trade to support her family and the community. Her experiences highlight the economic dynamism of the early Muslim society and the integral role women played in sustaining economic stability.

#### **6.2.4. Supporting the Prophet and the Community**

Umm e Salmā's role in trade was not confined to personal gains; she utilized her economic resources to support the Prophet and the nascent Muslim



community. During times of hardship, her contributions went beyond the financial realm, demonstrating the interconnectedness of economic and community welfare.

### **6.2.5. Legacy and Implications**

Umm e Salmā's legacy in trade underscores the multifaceted contributions of women in early Islamic society. Her ability to navigate economic challenges, coupled with her dedication to community welfare, provides a nuanced understanding of the role's women played in shaping the economic landscape of the time. Studying Umm e Salmā's life enriches our comprehension of the diverse and essential contributions made by women in the economic sphere during the foundational period of Islam.

#### **6.3.1. Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh (R.A): Trading in the Golden Age:**

Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh, an illustrious figure in Islamic history, stands as a testament to the entrepreneurial prowess of women during the early days of Islam. Her narrative unfolds as a compelling story of resilience, business acumen, and societal impact. The Abbasid Caliphate's Golden Age witnessed the rise of Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh, a successful businesswoman known for her contributions to trade and finance.<sup>10</sup>

Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh's economic ventures extended into various realms, showcasing the breadth of opportunities available to women during this era. Her success in trade and finance not only added to her personal wealth but also contributed to the economic prosperity of the Islamic world during a period of cultural and scientific flourishing.

#### **6.3.2. Early Life and Business Ventures**

Born into the influential tribe of Quraysh in Mecca, Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh inherited a legacy of business acumen from her family. Her early ventures into trade showcased a keen understanding of commerce and a determination to excel in a field traditionally dominated by men. Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh's ability to navigate the intricacies of trade routes and establish prosperous business dealings marked the beginning of her extraordinary journey.

#### **6.3.3. Entrepreneurial Success and Trade Networks**

Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh's success as a businesswoman extended beyond local markets, reaching into expansive trade networks across the Arabian Peninsula. Her strategic vision and adept negotiation skills contributed to the flourishing of her business endeavours. Engaging in trade across various regions, Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh played a vital role in connecting communities and fostering economic growth.<sup>11</sup>

#### **6.3.4. Integration into the Muslim Community**

As Islam began to spread, Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh embraced the new faith, and her business practices reflected the ethical principles espoused by Islamic teachings. Her integration into the Muslim community showcased a

harmonious blend of her entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to moral and ethical conduct in trade.

### **6.3.5. Support for the Early Muslim Society**

Beyond her personal success, Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh actively contributed to the welfare of the early Muslim society. Her financial support played a crucial role in sustaining the community during challenging times, highlighting the interconnectedness of economic prosperity and social responsibility in her life.<sup>12</sup>

### **6.3.6. Legacy and Historical Significance**

Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh's legacy endures as a symbol of female empowerment and economic prowess in Islamic history. Her achievements challenge stereotypes about women's roles in pre-modern societies and underscore the inclusive economic principles advocated by Islam. Studying Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh's life provides valuable insights into the ways in which women, through their entrepreneurial endeavours, contributed to the economic vibrancy of early Islamic civilizations.

## **7. Results from the Above Mentioned Narrations:**

In last, major results from the study of the lives of successful businesswomen are described below:

### **7.1. Ethical Business Practices in Islam:**

Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of ethical business conduct. The Quran, as the primary reference in Islam, provides guidance on fair trade, honesty, and the equitable treatment of all parties in a transaction. Verses such as those found in Surah Al-Baqarah underscore the significance of justice and ethical behaviour in economic dealings.<sup>13</sup> Apart from this, there are Aḥādīth of the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) in this regard. One of them is:

ان التجار يبعثون يوم القيامة فجارا الا من اتقى الله و بر وصدق-<sup>14</sup>

The merchants will be raised on the Day of Resurrection as immoral people, apart from those who fear Allah and act righteously and speak the truth (i.e. those who are honest).

The exemplary conduct of these successful businesswomen aligns with Islamic ethics. Khadīja's fair-trade practices, Umm e Salmā's integrity in the caravan trade, and Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh's ethical approach to commerce demonstrate the inseparability of Islamic principles from economic pursuits.

### **7.2. Challenges Faced and Resilience Displayed:**

The historical accounts of these successful businesswomen also reveal the challenges they faced. Living in societies where traditional gender roles often restricted women's economic activities, these women navigated obstacles with resilience and determination. Khadīja's journey as a widow managing her deceased husband's business, Umm Salmā's endeavours in the male-dominated caravan trade, and Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh's success in a

society that sometimes-questioned women's roles in commerce speak to the strength of character and resilience exhibited by these pioneering women.

### **7.3. Contemporary Relevance and Reflections:**

The narratives of these historical figures provide valuable lessons for contemporary Muslim women seeking inspiration in their professional pursuits. The principles of ethical business, financial independence, and social responsibility outlined in Islamic teachings offer a framework for navigating the complexities of the modern economic landscape. In contemporary times, Muslim women worldwide engage in diverse economic activities, from entrepreneurship to corporate leadership. The success of these women is rooted in the enduring principles of Islam that promote justice, equality, and ethical conduct in economic endeavours.

### **8. Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the stories of successful female businesswomen in Islamic history serve as a testament to the compatibility of Islam with women's economic empowerment. Khadija bint Khuwaylid, Umm e Salmā, and Shifā Bint ‘Abdullāh, among others, exemplify the diverse roles women played in the economic life of the Muslim community, breaking societal norms and setting enduring standards of ethical business conduct. The ethical principles outlined in the Quran, coupled with the resilience and determination displayed by these women in the face of challenges, provide timeless lessons for contemporary Muslim women navigating the complexities of the modern economic landscape. By drawing inspiration from the principles of justice, integrity, and compassion embedded in Islam, contemporary Muslim women can continue to contribute meaningfully to economic development and as well as sustainability while upholding the values of their faith.

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