

Women in Islam

Beyond Stereotypes

What comes to your mind when you think of a Muslim woman? A mysterious, veiled victim of male oppression, awaiting Western liberation? A slogan-shouting terrorist? An uneducated foreigner with whom you have little or nothing in common? Unless your social circle includes Muslim friends and acquaintances, the chances are that your impressions of Muslim women have largely been formed by negative media stereotypes - images that usually have little to do with real life, and may have been designed to attract more viewers, sell more products, or gain support for someone's political agenda.

How much do you really know about Muslim women's lives or views, and why does it matter?

Well, for one thing, Muslims account for 20-25% of the people on this planet, and Islam has become the second main religion in Europe. But did you know that the majority of European and American converts to Islam are women - not men? Would it surprise you to learn that many women in the Muslim world feel sorry for Western women and view them as being victimised? Have you ever stopped to consider why Muslim women who immigrate to the West usually maintain their identity and strive to pass it on to their children? A thinking person may well ask, if Islam is as oppressive to women as some journalists would have us believe, why aren't Muslim women running away in droves? What it is about Islam that attracts many followers outside its heartlands?

In this brochure we aim to look beyond sensationalistic or alarmist stories to take a glimpse at what Islam has to offer educated women in today's world, and understand why so many (men and) women of every race, colour, and social class have made Islam their choice. The truth, like real life, is beyond propaganda and stereotypes.

First of all, women are portrayed positively in the Qur'an and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The Qur'an is the only book of world Scripture in which women are frequently referred to alongside men, and both are described as being friends and partners in faith.

The following verses are just a few notable examples:

The believers, men and women, are protecting friends one of another; they promote the right and forbid the wrong, establish prayer, pay the poor-due, and they obey God and His messenger: As for these, God will have mercy on them. Surely God is Mighty, Wise. God has promised to believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of God: that is the supreme felicity. [Qur'an 9:71-72]

Surely for men who surrender to God, and women who surrender, And men who believe and women who believe, And men who obey and women who obey, And men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth; And men who persevere (in righteousness) and women who persevere, And men who are humble and women who are humble, And men who give alms and women who give alms, And men who fast and women who fast, And men who guard their modesty and women who guard (their modesty), And men who remember Allah much and women who remember Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward. [Qur'an 33:35]

There is no question in Islam of men and women being at odds with one another, engaged in some kind of historical struggle for power. Rather, the roles of both are complementary and essential. The Qur'an states:

O mankind! Be mindful of your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single being, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them has scattered countless men and women (throughout the earth). Fear God, in Whose (Name) you demand your rights of one another, and (be mindful of your duty) towards the wombs that bore you. God is ever Watching over you. [Qur'an 4:1]

Do not long for the favours by which God has made some of you excel others. Men shall have a share of what they have earned, and women shall have a share of what they have earned. (Do not envy each other) but ask God to give you of His bounty. God has knowledge of all things. [Qur'an 4:31-32]

The Prophet Muhammad augmented the revelations he received with further teachings and his wonderful personal example, which made him beloved by family and followers alike. He forbade violence against women, and preached against all forms of abuse of power. He warned that both men and women would be held accountable by God for those in their care or under their authority, and said:

Let no Muslim man entertain any bad feeling against a Muslim woman, if he should dislike one quality in her; he will find another that is pleasing. The best of believers are those who are best to their wives and families.

The Position of Women in other religions

While these teachings may not seem very remarkable today, they were revolutionary at the time they were revealed, for Arabs and non-Arabs alike. While Muslim sons were being taught that Paradise lay at their mothers' feet, women in Confucian China were told to obey their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their sons after their husbands' death. Hindu women were declared to be unfit for independence, inherently weak, easily misled, sinful and unintelligent. In Buddhism, women were said to be the personification of evil. At the time, Jews and Christians believed women to be responsible for the downfall of the human race, and considered menstruation and childbirth to be the consequences of a Divine curse. One thousand years after Muhammad, in 1586, French Catholics were still debating whether or not women possessed souls! English Christians burned thousands of women alive on the mere suspicion that they were witches. Married women in Europe did not gain the right to own property, obtain a divorce or enter into their own contracts until the 19th century. Not surprisingly, women who found such teachings unreasonable rebelled against them and fought for better treatment. Whereas other women have often had to pit themselves against the authority of a male priesthood, in Islam the dynamics of social change have been quite different.

The Prophet Muhammad was an extremely successful social reformer as well as spiritual and political leader, who championed the rights of the weak and oppressed. The Qur'anic verses referring to women had the effect of vastly improving the status and rights of women at the time they were revealed. Muslim women were granted the right to own, inherit and dispose of their own property as they saw fit; reject forced marriages; keep their own names and identities after marriage; initiate divorce; and obtain an education - back in the 7th century.

In contrast to the dismal situation affecting many women in developing countries today, early Muslim women were noted for their learning and accomplishments. The Prophet declared, 'To seek knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim, male and female,' and his own wife Aisha was responsible for transmitting thousands of his sayings to later generations. Aisha was also renowned for her knowledge of poetry, medicine, and Islamic law, as well as her personal qualities of character and intelligence. When she led a battle after the Prophet's death, no one objected on the grounds that she was a woman. Many Muslim women in the medieval period enjoyed positions of respect as scholars and religious authorities. Therefore, Muslims seeking to improve the position of women in society have usually focused their efforts on getting men (and women) to practice Islam, rather than trying to 'reform' it, as happened with other religions. The main obstacles to Muslim women achieving the rights guaranteed to them, then and now, have been persistent un-Islamic cultural traditions (usually dating to the period before people accepted Islam in a given locality), inadequate religious education, and the bad side of human nature.

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Women's roles, rights & obligations

Spiritual status

As shown in the Qur'anic verses above, women are considered to be the spiritual equals of men, and they have the same religious duties. This is all the more important when we consider that the main goal of a Muslim is to serve God, and that this world is regarded as no more than a testing-ground to prepare oneself for eternal life after death. Therefore, worldly accomplishments, fama, wealth and power simply do not have the same attraction for a Muslim, whose main focus is on the Next World. The Qur'an repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that the time we spend in this world is short and unpredictable, and what really counts is our character, how we treat others, and what we do with the blessings God has given us.

In this context, home and family are of paramount importance, since stable families are essential to the rearing of well-adjusted children who will transmit their faith and values to the next generation. According to a well-known Arab proverb,

'The mother is a school.'

Social Roles

Islam supports the traditional division of labour whereby women assume the main responsibility for home while men are responsible for their financial support, but with an important difference: motherhood and homemaking, like a Muslim's inner life, are not considered to be less important or rewarding than a professional career. Indeed, motherhood is one of the most important professions, and competent mothers who can successfully run a warm and welcoming home, and raise a family of happy, confident and well-disciplined children are becoming increasingly hard to find. Muslim wives and mothers are granted the respect due to all women for the struggles and sacrifices they make for the sake of their families. Furthermore, Muslims consider it unfair to burden women with both the physical and emotional demands of motherhood and the professional demands of the workplace, which end up exhausting so many women and destroying family life for the sake of financial gain. Muslims often express sympathy for women in the West, many of whom suffer from sexual exploitation and abuse at home and in the workplace, while being unappreciated in their traditional roles.

Western women who seek to be respected tend to dress and behave like men, and are expected in practise to neglect their children's needs for the sake of their careers. In Islam, femininity is appreciated, and Muslim women may seek further education, work outside the home or volunteer their services to benefit the community as long as their primary responsibilities are taken care of. Any money that a Muslim woman earns is her own, to spend as she likes; men remain solely responsible for maintaining the family.

Islamic Marriage

Although Muslim parents traditionally play an important role in arranging introductions and helping to choose marriage partners for their children, both husband and wife must freely agree to the marriage. The Prophet granted girls who had been forced into marriages against their will the right to have their marriages annulled.

The relationship between husband and wife in Islam is an interdependent one, based on love and tranquility. The Qur'an says,

And of His signs is this: He created spouses for you from among yourselves that you might find comfort in them, and He put between you love and mercy. Surely there are signs in that for people who reflect.
(Qur'an 30:21)

Both parents should strive to establish a stable, loving home and partnership. Major family decision-making should be through consultation and discussion. As the provider, the husband is expected to take the lead, as he is accountable to God for his care of the family. If no agreement can be reached, the wife should be supportive as long as her husband does not ask her to do anything that contravenes religious law. This works well as long as each spouse behaves maturely and treats the other with respect, kindness and consideration.

Polygamy

Many people are aware that Muslim men are permitted to marry more than one wife. What is not generally known is that strict conditions of equal treatment in terms of time and money are imposed on men who do, or that women may stipulate in their marriage contracts that they have the right to divorce if their husbands take another wife.

In reality, monogamy is the norm and polygamy the exception; it has never been common among Muslims except in areas where it was already practised, and it is seldom successful unless the first wife agrees.

Islam did not introduce polygamy; in reality, some form of polygamy - whether with legal marriages, mistresses, prostitution or extra-marital affairs - occurs in every society. Rather, Islam allowed and regulated it in order to protect women and children who might otherwise be taken advantage of. In certain cases, such as when the first wife is chronically (or mentally) ill or unable to bear children; when there are many widows and orphans due to war; or when a marriage has effectively broken down but the wife would prefer to remain married; open and legalised polygamy can be a workable second-best solution.

The Prophet Muhammad was married to his first wife, Khadijah, for 25 years, and he did not take other wives until after her death. His marriages to several widows and divorcees in later years were primarily contracted for political and humanitarian reasons, as was expected of a man in his position.

His home life was characterised by love, consideration, kindness and respect.

Codes of behaviour for Women & Men

In order to safeguard the moral integrity of family and society, Muslim men and women are expected to observe certain guidelines of behaviour that Westerners may find restrictive. Both sexes are expected to dress modestly in loose, non-transparent clothing and avoid situations that would put them alone with members of the opposite sex, or lead to temptation or misunderstandings. Muslim women additionally cover their hair since women are ordinarily considered to be the more attractive of the sexes. These restrictions are not observed at home among close family members, but serve to protect women's honour in public and draw attention to their personal qualities rather than their looks. In Islam, the sexual urge is considered to be natural and desirable as long as it is confined to expression within marriage. However, Muslims are saddened by the rise in the vulgar exploitation of women and the human body for marketing purposes and pornography, which inevitably result in a cheapening of sexuality and the undermining of family and spiritual life.

Islam's appeal to today's Woman

For women who enjoy being women and appreciate the differences (as well as the common ground) between the sexes, who would prefer to be respected for their intelligence and character rather than being chased after for their looks, and who would like to pursue personal and spiritual fulfilment at a human pace without having to neglect their families, Islam is a very appealing alternative.

Want to learn more?
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