

WOMEN IN ISLĀM

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

It is impossible for anyone who studies the life and character of the great Prophet of Arabia who knows how he taught and how he lived, to feel anything but reverence for that mighty Prophet, one of the great Messengers of the Supreme.

And although in what I put to you I shall say many things which may be familiar to many, yet I myself feel whenever I re-read them, a new way of admiration, a new sense of reverence for that mighty Arabian teacher.”

Annie Besant, *The Life and Teachings of Muhammad*, Madras, 1932, p. 4



WOMEN IN ISLĀM

Much has been said about women in Islām, but mostly from people who know very little about the religion. Islām liberated women 1400 years ago. Long before the suffragettes and women's rights movements came into play, women were given human rights such as the right of inheritance, the right to own property, the right to education, and the right to choose a husband. Islām is the fastest growing way of life in the West, and 80% of the converts to Islām in the USA and the majority in the UK are women (The Times, 9 November 1993). If you know little about women in Islām you may well ask yourself: "Why do so many 'liberated' Western women want to become Muslims?" This leaflet will briefly discuss some of the reasons why.

PREVIOUS INJUSTICES TO WOMEN

Eve is viewed in the Old Testament of the Bible as an evil temptress responsible for the fall of Ādam and hence responsible for the 'original sin' (Genesis 2:24-3:4). The Bible states: "No wickedness comes anywhere near the wickedness of a woman... Sin began with a woman and thanks to her, we all must die" (Ecclesiastes 25:19,24). Much of the oppression of women that took place for centuries was built upon this false premise, that women are inherently evil and misguided.

Late 19th century English common law stated that a woman's possessions belonged to her husband. Only in 1887 were women allowed to own property. Cambridge and Oxford universities gave women equal rights to education in 1964. Compare the above to the status and rights of women in Islām that were given to them more than 1400 years ago.

THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT

In Islām, there is absolutely no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to Almighty God is concerned as both are promised reward for good conduct and punishment for evil conduct. Almighty God states in the Qur'ān that was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (prayers and peace of Allāh be upon him) 1400 years ago: "Muslim men and women, believing men and women, devout men and women, truthful men and women who are patient and constant, men and women who humble themselves, men and women who give in charity, men and women who fast, men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who engage much in God's remembrance - for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward" (Qur'ān, 33:35).

THE SOCIAL ASPECT

At the time of the emergence of Islām, it was socially accepted by the Arabs and most societies to treat women poorly and to favour males. In fact, first-born females were often killed due to the shame that it would bring upon the families. Even in these times, many cultures frowned upon female children and even abort them, purely on the basis of gender. Islām completely forbids these notions and actively encourages parents to cultivate and show good treatment to daughters, and God makes that a cause for good parents to enter into Paradise. Islām made it a part of faith to treat women well. The Prophet Muḥammad (prayers and peace of Allāh be upon him) taught, "The most perfect amongst believers in

faith is the best in conduct. And the best of you is the best to his womenfolk.” The Prophet Muḥammad (May Allāh raise his rank and grant him peace) himself had daughters, amongst them was Fāṭimah, about whom he would say, “Whatever hurts my Fāṭimah hurts me!” He also said, “God has perfected four women: Mary the mother of Jesus, Āsiyah the believing wife of the Pharaoh, Khadījah the daughter of Khuwaylid and Fāṭimah the daughter of Muḥammad!” These sayings, and many more, place honour and reverence for believing women in the heart of a true believer and teaches him/her to regard women with importance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Islām requires that girls are treated kindly and justly and greatly encourages educating them. The Prophet (prayers and peace of Allāh be upon him) said: “Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim.” The order to seek knowledge and be educated is aimed equally at both sexes. Many societies see it as shameful to educate females, even some Muslim communities frown upon women being educated. This is wrong and opposes the Qur’ānic texts and the Prophetic tradition. The wife of the Prophet, ‘Ā’ishah, was renowned for her intelligence and Islamic knowledge. Her student, ‘Urwah, said, “I did not see a greater scholar than ‘Ā’ishah in the learning of Qur’ān, obligatory duties, lawful and unlawful matters, poetry, literature, Arab history and genealogy.” The great theologian, Nawawī, said about another female disciple, Ṣafiyyah: “She was the most intellectual among the learned women!” Umm Salamah, a wife of the Prophet (prayers and peace of Allāh be upon him), had at least thirty-two great scholars who learned Prophetic traditions from her and then narrated them on her authority. A great scholar, Marwan, used to say: “Why should we turn to others when the wives of the Messenger are among us?” The list of learned women in Islām is endless. It shows that women were not kept illiterate and ignorant but were fully encouraged to participate in the process of learning Islām and its scholarship for the purpose of being the first teachers to their children. There were instances that showed that some women challenged great scholars of their times if they said something which was against the rights granted to women by the Qur’ān and Sunnah (Prophetic tradition). Muslim women do not only acquire knowledge but also combine it with the high moral qualities that Islām seeks to imbue in the future mothers of mankind.

Muslims should be knowledgeable about their religion, which will inevitably ward off doubts that are spread against Islām and its position towards women.

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

Here are just a few facts about women's rights in Islām, established over 14 centuries ago:

- Islām condemned pre-Islamic practices degrading and oppressing women.
- Islām gave women the right of inheritance and the right of individual, independent ownership, unhampered by father, husband, brother, son or anyone else.
- Islām gave women the right to accept or reject a marriage proposal, free from pressure; forced marriages are not from Islām.
- Islām does not require a woman to change her name upon marriage

nor give up her wealth.

-Islām protects the family and condemns the betrayal of marital fidelity. It recognises only one type of family: husband and wife, united by an authentic marriage contract.

-Islām enjoins sound morality in thinking, behaviour and appearance. Clothing and social patterns that reduce the woman to a sex object and exploit her as such are not acceptable in Islām. A woman is judged on the basis of her piety and excellence of character.

-The observance of chastity and moral standards is equally demanded by Islām from both men and women. “Women are the twins of men” is a saying of Prophet Muḥammad (prayers and peace of Allāh be upon him).

-The mother has a great right to be shown kindness, goodness and obedience.

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Marriage in Islām is seen not only to perpetuate human life but is also a source of emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. The Qurʾān emphasises this essential unity of man and woman in a most beautiful similitude: “They [your wives] are your garment, and you are a garment for them” (Qurʾān, 2:187). Just as a garment hides our nakedness, a husband and wife, by entering into the relationship of marriage, secure each other’s chastity. The garment gives comfort to the body; similarly, the husband gives comfort to his wife and vice versa. The garment is grace, beauty, and embellishment of the body, so too are wives to their husbands and husbands to their wives.

The basis of the marriage is love and mercy as God mentioned in the Qurʾān: “And among His signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed signs for a people who reflect” (Qurʾān, 30:21).

Instead of being forced to marry against their will, Muslim women are allowed to play an active role in choosing their husbands. They do not (as many people believe) have to marry anyone against their will. Indeed, a marriage against the will of the woman is invalid in Islamic law. Many Muslims who follow cultures and traditions oppose this Islamic right of women to refuse a proposal, but that should not be attributed to Islām but rather to cultural practises alien to Islām.

The status of being an individual partner in marriage is emphasised by the fact that the woman keeps her maiden name after marriage. This is opposite to what occurs in the West, which is based on the Greco-Roman culture, where a woman took the name of her husband because she was considered his property. Divorce is allowed in Islām if necessity dictates. However, Islām commands that the rights of both parties are respected, and one does not go beyond bounds.

THE MOTHER

Islām recognises the sacrifices parents (especially the mother) make in raising children. The mother thus has a very honoured position in Islām. The Prophet (prayers and peace of Allāh be upon him) advised a man who asked: “O Messenger of God, who among the people is most worthy of my good company?” The Prophet (prayers and peace of Allāh be upon him) said, “Your mother.” The man asked, “Then who else?” The Prophet

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THE VEIL AND HIJĀB

Women in Islām are considered to be very precious and beautiful and therefore are respected and honoured. The veil is seen by Muslim women as liberation rather than oppression as it enables them to be accepted for their mind, personality and spirituality instead of being judged according to their physical attributes. The veil ensures protection rather than exploitation. The exploitation of women and their bodies by men is one of the causes for the increase in crimes such as rape, assault and child abuse. It is interesting to note that nuns dress similarly to Muslim women, yet they are viewed as exercising freedom of expression; however, Muslim women are thought of as being oppressed and compelled. The respect that women and their bodies are given in Islām is emphasised by the fact that a man found guilty of rape is punished severely. This indicates the gravity with which Muslims view crimes against women.

ECONOMICS AND THE RIGHT TO WORK

Islām decreed a right for women which they were deprived of before it: the right of independent ownership and inheritance. According to Islamic law, a woman’s right to her money, real estate or other properties is fully acknowledged. With regard to the woman’s right to seek employment, it should be stated first that Islām regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential. A mother’s place cannot be replaced by maids or baby-sitters. However, Islām does not forbid women from seeking employment, especially in positions which are needed by society such as nursing, teaching and medicine. In Islām, the man is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, children and in some cases, needy relatives, especially the females. This responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife’s wealth or because of her access to any personal income gained from work, rent, profit or any other legal means. This variation of financial responsibility between the man and the woman is reflected in the inheritance rights; she inherits less because her financial responsibility and burden is less.

POLYGAMY

Whenever Islām is mentioned, people talk about the question of four wives. It is important to note that the Qurʾān commands with justice amongst one's wives: "Marry women of your choice, two or three or four, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly [with them], then marry only one" (Qurʾān, 4:03). Thus if a man has more than one wife, he must act justly with his wives, and each wife must be provided for equally. This is in stark contrast to a system where men have many extra-marital affairs and mistresses; everything is hidden and secretive. The women (and children who are born as a result) have very little, if any, rights, resulting in the destruction of marriages and therefore the family structure. Interestingly, many Jews and Christians criticise Islām for polygamy. However, most of the prophets in the Old Testament had numerous wives. Also, Jesus never revoked the Jewish law on polygamy, thus implicitly agreeing with it.

In defence of polygamy, it could also be said there are more women in the world than men, therefore it is just a way of ensuring all women can get married. And as married women, they can be maintained financially by their husbands and also fulfil their role as wives and mothers.

CONCLUSION

To understand the status of women in Islām, we need to realise that Islām asserts that although men and women are equal in the sight of God, in terms of reward and punishment in the Hereafter, they are inherently different; therefore, the laws governing them are different. It is clear that many Muslims (often due to ignorance or cultural fanaticism or both) treat their wives badly, but this is a flaw of the individual and not the religion. The basic reason why Muslims do anything is because we believe that the Qurʾān is one of God's miracles, the Word of God, in a complete and unadulterated form, and Muḥammad is His final messenger, and as such, we follow the divine teachings. Why not find out for yourself and read the Qurʾān? Why not find out more about the Prophet Muḥammad? God states, "And if you are in doubt as to what we have revealed to Our servant, then produce a chapter like it and call your witnesses or helpers besides God if you are truthful, but if you cannot, and of a surety you cannot, then fear the Fire whose fuel is men and stones which is prepared for those who reject faith" (Qurʾān, 2:22).

You owe it to yourself to find out the truth. You can see from these brief words that women are not badly treated by Islām. So perhaps Islām is not what you thought it was. Almighty God states: "You denied my revelations although you knew nothing of them. What was it you were doing?" (Qurʾān, 27:84).

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