

As interest about Islam grows especially following recent world events, we see a heavy focus on the subject of rights of Muslim women. Most of women's rights enjoyed in the West have only been won in the last five decades after many long, hard battles. Those in power ceded these rights grudgingly and only because of changes that made it ultimately inevitable. In distinction, God did not wait for the political climate to be ripe. In His final revelation (the Qur'an), the rights demanded by Islam for both men and women are not only extraordinary, they are not subject to changing tides of popular opinion.

The Islamic law is established on the benefits of the individual and that of the community. Its rulings are designed so as to protect these benefits and facilitate improvement and perfection of the conditions of human life on earth. They also seek to preserve religion, life, lineage, intellect, health and wealth. These are, by definition, essential to the preservation of natural social order and spiritual well-being of individuals. Therefore, the rulings in Islam on the rights of women and men seek to protect and promote these values and validates measures for their preservation and advancement.

The Western criticism of the status of women in Islam homes in on different elements of Islamic teachings and we have attempted to respond to those criticism in this little pamphlet with the aim in mind to promoting increased understanding of Islam and Muslims.

WOMEN IN ISLAM

Jewels of the Society



1 - How does Islam view the humanity of the woman?

Islam firmly places both man and woman as equal human being before the Creator as stated in the Qur'an, "O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of same kind) and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women..." [Qur'an 4:1]. A scholar who pondered about this verse states: "It is believed that there is no text, old or new, that deals with the humanity of the woman from all aspects with such amazing brevity, eloquence, depth, and originality as this divine decree." Stressing this noble and natural conception, Qur'an further states: "It is He (God) who did create you from a single soul and therefrom did create his mate that he might dwell with her (in love)..." [Qur'an 7:189] "The Creator of heavens and earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves" [Qur'an 42:11] "And God has given you mates of your own nature, and has given you from your mates, children and grandchildren, and has made provision of good things for you. Is it then in vanity that they believe and in the grace of God that they disbelieve?" [Qur'an 16:72]

2 - Do man and woman in Islam have spiritual equality before God?

The Qur'an provides clear-cut evidence that woman is completely equal with man in the sight of God in terms of her obligation and reward. The Qur'an states: "Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds." [Qur'an 74:38] It also states: "...So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female..." [Qur'an 3:195] "And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer - those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed." [Qur'an 4:124] Woman according to the Qur'an is not blamed for Adam's original sin. Both were jointly wrong in their disobedience to God, both repented, and both were forgiven. [Qur'an 2:36, 7:20-24] In terms of religious obligations, such as the daily prayers, fasting, poor-due, and pilgrimage, woman is no different from man. In some cases indeed, woman has certain advantages over man. For example, the woman is exempted from the daily prayers and from fasting during her menstrual periods and forty days after childbirth. She is also exempted from fasting during her pregnancy and when nursing her baby.

3 - Are women allowed praying in congregation with men in the Mosque?

At the beginning of Islamic era, women participated in public gatherings and in all prayers conducted in the Mosque, as they have always fulfilled all the rites of hajj pilgrimage, then and now. Although women can and do attend congregational prayers in the Mosque, it is optional for them while it is mandatory for men. This is clearly a tender touch of the Islamic teachings to give a woman privilege and practicality when nursing or caring for her children and household. Thus, women are rewarded more for praying in the privacy of their homes, while men are rewarded more for praying with congregation in the Mosque. Muslim congregation prayer involves worshippers standing in rows shoulder-to-shoulder, foot-to-foot. Often, the persons standing next to you could be strangers. The prayer itself involves some compromising postures such as bowing and prostrating. Thus, to maintain focus and concentration, women are preferred to occupy back rows when men and women are praying in the same space. In fact, the front-most rows carry more reward for male worshippers and the back-most rows carries more reward for female. More recently, Mosques are built with separate section for women to give them more freedom and comfort, but they still follow the Imam from the main prayer hall through public address system.

4 - How does Islam view female children?

The Qur'an forbade pre-Islamic Arab custom of female infanticide and considered it a crime like any other murder. "And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed." [Qur'an 81:8-9]. Islam criticizes the attitudes of such parents who reject their female children, the Qur'an states: "When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on (sufferance) and contempt, or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on?" [Qur'an 16:58-59]. Far from saving the girl's life so that she may later suffer injustice and inequality, Islam requires kind and just treatment for her. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, "Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise." In another report, "Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the Day of Judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together)." (Sahih Bukhari & Sahih Muslim)

5 - What does Islam say about woman's rights in a marriage?

Marriage in Islam unites two halves of the society in mutual love and harmony. Its objective besides perpetuating human life is emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its basis is love and mercy. Among the most impressive verses in the Qur'an about marriage: "And among His signs He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy..." [Qur'an 30:21] In Islam, woman cannot be forced to marry anyone without her consent. She has the full right to her dowry (a marriage gift that symbolizes love and affection) which is included in the nuptial contract. The rules for married life in Islam are clear and in harmony with upright human nature and have all provisions to protect woman in wedlock. Men and women are physiologically and psychologically different and as such have different but mutually dependent roles in the family and society. The Qur'an states: "...And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." [Qur'an 2:228] Such degree is maintenance and protection. Islam emphasizes taking counsel and mutual agreement in family matters. Over and above her basic rights as wife comes the right which is emphasized by the Qur'an and Sunnah: kind treatment and companionship. The Qur'an says: "...consort with them in kindness..." [Qur'an 4:19] The Prophet said: "The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best to my family," and "The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives." (Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim)

"I knew nothing more factual about Islam than would fill the back of a postage stamp. Of course I'd subscribed to all the myths about women being subjugated and how it was an evil and violent religion full of fanatics. But, after reading the Qur'an, a 'magna carta for women' I converted to Islam in the summer of 2003. Having been on both sides of the veil, I can tell you that most Westerners who lament the oppression of women in the Islamic world have no idea what they are talking about. They go on about veils, child brides, female circumcision, honor killings and forced marriages, and they wrongly blame Islam for all this - their arrogance surpassed only by their ignorance. These cultural issues and customs have nothing to do with Islam. A careful reading of the Qur'an shows that just about everything that Western feminists fought for in the 1970s was available to Muslim women 1,400 years ago. Women in Islam are considered equal to men in spirituality, education and worth, and a woman's gift for childbirth and child-rearing is regarded as a positive attribute. When Islam offers women so much, why are Westerners so obsessed with Muslim women's attire?"

[Yvonne Ridley, Muslim Convert, UK]

6 - Does woman in Islam has the right for divorce?

As the woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognized, so her right to seek an end for an unsuccessful marriage is also recognized. For the stability of the family and in order to protect it from hasty decisions under emotional stress, certain steps and waiting periods are observed in Islam by men and women seeking divorce. Women can initiate divorce proceeding before the judge. When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible, men are still taught to seek a gracious end. The Qur'an says: "When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and do not keep them intending to harm..." [Qur'an 2:231]. In another verse, "Divorce is twice. Then, either keep [her] in kindness or release [her] in kindness. And it is not lawful for you to take anything of what you have given them..." [Quran 2:229]. "O you who have believed, when you marry believing women and then divorce them before you have touched them, then there is not for you any waiting period to count concerning them. So provide for them and give them a gracious release." [Qur'an 33:49] The Prophet taught that "of all the things God has permitted, divorce is the one He most dislike." The Qur'an repeatedly urges that "conciliation is best" and provides for a method of arbitration of troubled marriages. "If you fear a breach between them twain, appoint (two) arbiters, one from his family, and the other from hers; if they seek to set things right, Allah will cause their reconciliation: for Allah has full knowledge, and is acquainted with all things." [Qur'an 4:35] While divorce is believed to be on the rise globally, the rate of divorce in Muslim countries is relatively smaller in comparison to the rest of the world.

7 - Does Islam provide women with any economic right?

Islam restored a right of which woman was deprived both before Islam, and in the West it continued until 1900's - the right of independent ownership. According to Islamic Law, woman's right to her money, real estate, or other properties is fully recognized. This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married. She retains her full rights to buy, sell, mortgage or lease any or all her properties. Nowhere in the Islamic law is suggested that woman is minor simply because of her gender. With regard to the woman's right to seek employment, Islam regards her role in society as wife and mother as the most sacred and essential one. Neither baby-sitters nor day-care centers can possibly take the mother's place as educator of an upright, complex-free, and carefully-reared child. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as "idleness". The basic rule is woman does not need to work, however, there is no decree in Islam which forbids woman from seeking honorable employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her most such as nursing, teaching (especially for children), medicine, or benefiting from her exceptional talent in any field.

8 - Is there any disparity in the Islamic law of inheritance between men and women?

Islam restored to woman the right of inheritance, when she was herself an object of inheritance in other cultures. "Unto men belongs a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, and unto women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be a little or much - a determinate share." [Qur'an 4:7] Her share is hers to keep and in most cases is one-half that of man's, with no implication that she is worth less than man. This variation in inheritance is only consistent with the variation in financial responsibilities between man and woman according to the Islamic law. Man is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, his children, and in some cases of his 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, etc. Woman, on the other hand, is far more secured financially and is far less burdened with any claims on her possessions. She is not obliged to transfer her wealth to her husband or spend on her family. The law of inheritance in Islam is both justice and compassionate for woman.

9 - Does Islam provide women with any political rights to women?

Any fair investigation of the teachings of Islam into the history of the Islamic civilization will surely find a clear evidence of woman's equality with man in what we call today "political rights." This includes the right of election, nomination to political offices and participation in public affairs. Both in the Qur'an and in Islamic history we find examples of women who participated in serious discussions and argued even with the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself (see the Noble Qur'an 58:14 and 60:10-12). During the Caliphate of Umar Ibn al-Khattab, a woman argued with him in the mosque, proved her point, and caused him to declare in the presence of people: "A woman is right and Umar is wrong". Umar recruited the first female chief inspector of markets (Al-Shifa) in the city of Madinah, Arabia. She was later posted in the city of Basrah, Iraq. Prophet Muhammad's young wife, Aisha recorded not less than 2,000 meticulously memorized reports (Hadeeth) about her husband on various issues and rulings; she also committed to memory the entire Qur'an; by interpreting the Qur'an and the Hadeeth of the Prophet in the manner of a legal scholar, she emerged as a great political player after the death of the Prophet.

10 - What are the roles of man and woman in the family?

Husband-wife relationship in Islam is based on mutual love and compassion as highlighted in the Qur'an, "And among his signs is this, that he created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and he has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect..." [Qur'an 30:21]. "They are as a garment for you, and you are as a garment for them." [Qur'an 2:187] The man is required to support his family and is accountable before God for the welfare of his family. Like any team, a family needs team leader for important decisions. A quote from the Prophet is clear about the husband's moral obligation: "Perfect in faith among the believers are those who are the best in character and behavior, and the best of you are those who treat their family best." It is the wife's duty to counsel and support her husband in order to reach joint decisions. The wife is the one who has the task of childbearing, breast-feeding and upbringing. She carries the main responsibility for the welfare of the children and this is her most important gender-specific task. This does not, however, mean that bringing up and taking care of children is to be solely her effort.

11 - Do men and women in Islam considered equal?

As a fundamental principle, Islam holds that women are indeed equal to men in their origin, their humanity, their honor and their accountability to God. They are also equal in their need to fulfill their physical and material needs, to possess property and dispose it as they wish. Both sexes are required to obtain knowledge. It is part of the mission of Islam to establish justice and harmony between the genders with due consideration to the inherent natural differences. God has laid down certain rights and obligations for men and women, each in accordance with the nature determined by their gender, and complementary to each other. If either departs from their specific nature, an unnatural "equality" will be forced. Before God the two have equal standing, yet in relation with each other the rights of the individual are different in the same way as man and woman are different by nature. In accountability to God, man and woman are equal. The Qur'an mentions in many verses that reward and punishment in the Hereafter does not depend on gender. "... I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors [in My way], be it man or woman..." [Qur'an 3:195]. Within marriage, men and women are equal in terms of their rights and obligations and these are allocated in accordance with their nature. There are differences only in those areas where the nature of the sexes is different. With regard to religious duties, there are certain concessions for women pertaining to their biological nature. The variation in law of inheritance takes into account the obligation of the man to provide for his family.

"Men and women are equal, but different. Islam respects women as women, not as imitators of men. Today women would rather die than admit that they are housewives, because they are ashamed of such traditional role. Islam gives each the capacity to develop in a particular way. If your capacity is to be a wife and mother, why be ashamed of it? But on the other hand, we have example of the Prophet's wife, Khadija. She not only employed him, but also proposed to him. Even in this day and age, Western women are still reluctant to be assertive. What other example do we need of female equality? In the West a woman dresses up beautifully when going out, showing off as much of herself as possible. Her husband is proud to show off her beauty to everyone. In Islam, it is exactly the opposite. When she goes out, the woman covers up, for her beauty is only for the enjoyment of her husband. This is much practical and logical: and does it not help to prevent promiscuousness? I wish Muslim women in Hijab receive the same respect as nuns. Nuns are never questioned on their dress code, but we are. They are simply accepted as women of religion, knowledge and compassion - women who help society regardless of sex, race, color or creed."

[Corrine Gulfam, Muslim Convert, the Netherlands]

12 - What is the position of the Muslim woman as a mother?

Mother ranks very highly in Islam. She is the principal person in the child's first few years of life. The Qur'an mentions the relationship between parents and their children and gives prominence to the efforts of the mother from the time of pregnancy and throughout the period of raising infants. Islam even goes so far as to give a divorced mother the right to claim financial compensation from her ex-husband for breast feeding the children [Qur'an 65:6]. The importance attributed to women as mothers is reflected in a saying by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who, when asked which parent deserved preferential treatment, said for the first three instances "your mother" - and only thereafter "your father", following with "your close relatives". Islam considered kindness to parents next to the worship of God. "And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents: His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness..." [Qur'an 31:14] [See also Quran 46:15, 29:8] Moreover, the Qur'an has a special recommendation for the good treatment of mothers: "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents..." [Qur'an 17:23] A man came to the Prophet asking: O Messenger of God, who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet said: Your mother. The man said then who else: The Prophet said for the first three instances, "your mother" - and only thereafter "your father". A famous saying of the Prophet is: "Paradise is at the feet of mothers." It is the generous (in character) who is good to women, and it is the wicked who insults them."

13 - Why a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim?

The Qur'an forbids Muslim woman to marry non-Muslim, but allows Muslim man to marry Jewish or Christian woman (Qur'an 2:221, 60:10). Marriage and family are protected in Islam mainly as the basic social unit that guarantees the continued existence of the Muslim community. A marital relationship between partners of different faiths and philosophies of life may lead to substantial tension such as observance of religious duties and obligations, the religious education of children, the practicing of religious festivals, etc. A marriage to thrive requires partners to achieve common ground and to have mutual respect for each other's beliefs. Muslims believe that Judaism and Christianity have divine origin; that Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them) were God's mighty messengers; that God gave both Moses and Jesus Scriptures. In contrast, Jews and Christians do not believe in the divine origin of Islam, its Book, or its Prophet. Since societies tend to be patriarchal, Christian or Jewish wife to a Muslim would live under the protection of a man who respects the basic tenets of her faith, her Scripture, and her Prophets. In contrast, Muslim wife to a Jewish or Christian would live with a man who doesn't recognize her religion, Scripture, and her Prophet.

14 - Why is a Muslim woman not allowed to marry several men?

Some feminists question the logic of allowing Muslim men to have more than one wife while denying the same "right" to women. While almost every society has supported the concept of man having more than one woman (polygamy), seldom had any social order ever supported the concept of a woman being married to more than one husband (polyandry). The foundation of an Islamic society is justice and equity. God created men and women equal as human beings, but not identical in nature. They have innate differences in physiology and psychology. Their roles and responsibilities may differ, but they serve to complement one another. Some points to consider: (1) Polygamy deals with the problem of declined male-female ratio, polyandry will compound the problem; (2) Men are polygamous by nature, women are not; (3) Shared parenting of children could be problematic; (4) Difficulty of performing duties of wife to all husbands; (5) Mixing of seminal fluids from different men in the womb has been medically proven to cause serious infectious diseases. The Qur'an has prescribed a waiting period for the woman who has been divorced or widowed so as to allow enough passage of time for her womb to deanse of any seminal traces from previous husband; (6) Security as a basic need of a woman.

15 - Is a Muslim man allowed to beat his wife?

It would seem unimaginable that the Qur'an would sanction wife beating, though that's what some critics accuse and many Muslims scholars have translated verse 4:34 of the Qur'an as such. Because of the mistranslation, commentators have gone on the defensive and scrambled to find an explanation. Many have translated to "beat lightly" as with a toothbrush or with a handkerchief. The Qur'an never allowed men to beat their wives. The most appropriate translation and commentary seem to be from Yuksel and Emerick. The Arabic word in the verse 'idhibuhunna' takes multiple meanings akin to English 'strike' or 'get'. The Qur'an uses the same verb in multiple verses and with multiple meanings. The most logical translation, and the one most consistent with the Qur'an overall message and Prophetic teachings, "... As for those women from whom you fear disloyalty, then you shall advise them, abandon them in bedchamber, and separate (from) them." (Qur'an 4:34) Even if we consider the 'light beating', in a family built on true partnership, this translation is bound to remain without much significance. The Prophet himself never beat his wives and he is reported to have said "Is it really possible for you to beat your wife as if she were a servant and then go to her at night?" Once it was reported to the Prophet that some of his companions beat their wives whereupon he said, "certainly those are not the best among you." As the Prophet is the binding model for all Muslims, fortunately Muslims never took verse 4:34 as a license for abusing their wives and the Muslim world has fewer occurrences of domestic violence in comparison to other societies.

16 - Why are Muslim women wearing a headscarf?

Islam values modesty as one of the supreme virtues in both sexes. It is an essential element in preserving human dignity. In the Holy Qur'an (24:30-31) the injunction on modesty first addresses the men and then the women. Thus, in traditional Muslim societies, it is customary for both men and women to expose only face and hands when going out. Men will typically wear turban or cap, and women a scarf which conceals the hair. The exact style and color of Muslim dress is not fixed, and varies from country to country. Covering the whole face is not required in Islam and is falling into increasing disfavor in cultures where it is practiced. At home, dress codes are relaxed. Muslims do not see the headscarf as a symbol of oppression as seen in the West, but of freedom. When dressed modestly and with dignity, it is easier for men and women to deal with each other without making superficial judgments. Muslims regret the current popularity of revealing dress codes, and exploitation of sex appeal in advertising. The trend increases the risk of temptation and marital infidelity. Public display of the body may enrich the fashion and cosmetic industries, but they oppressively marginalize many who physically fail to measure up to the current images of perfection. Modesty is thus liberating rather oppressive.



Islamic Information Center
Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque,
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
TeleFax: +968 24505170
Email: info@iicomman.om
Website: www.iicomman.om



17

Is celibacy allowed in Islam?

Celibacy and monasticism are not allowed in Islam. Marriage is not only about satisfying our carnal desires but it is significantly about the reproduction and continuation of the human race through the family and bringing about comfort, harmony and tranquility of the soul, the unit family and the society at large which we need for a happy and satisfying life. Allah says in the Glorious Qur'an: "And among his signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect. (Qur'an 30:21). Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, has said: "He who can marry must marry", and he also said, "He who has married has obtained (fulfilled) half of his religion. Hence he should fear Allah in the other half". The family is the building block of the society and nations and it is in the family where children are raised and developed to continue the growth of human civilization and prosperity. Marriage is an essential institution for mankind and hence men and women are required to get married unless there is a compelling reason not to do so, such as chronic illness or extreme poverty.

18

How does Islam view women working outside the home?

In the early days of Islam women went out to work, and participated in all feasible social and cultural activities. A famous case is Shifa bint Abdullah, who was appointed by the caliph Umar to be chief inspector of markets in the Islamic city of Madinah. Today, women are engineers, professors, deans, cabinet ministers, physicians, company directors, and bankers in many Muslim lands. Women can keep their income, and husbands are still obligated by Islam to support them. In the middle ages, Muslim women were frequently merchants, physicians and scholars who taught in the mosques and colleges. For instance, the Central Asian Karima Al-Marwaziyya (d. 1070) was one of the most famous Islamic scholar of her age. No less distinguished was Fatima bint Al-Hasan who was both hadith scholar and calligrapher. Some other names of Muslim women scholars include Shuhda the scribe (d. 1178), Ajiba bint Abi Bakar (d. 1339), and her pupil Bint Al-Kamal who lectured in Damascus to a number of leading scholars, including the famous Moroccan jurist and traveler Ibn Battuta, Umm Hani (d. 1466) who mastered all the great academic disciplines. In literature we have names such as Wallada of Cordova, Fitnet of Istanbul (d. 1780), Queen Nadira of Kokand in Central Asia (d. 1842).

19

Does a Muslim woman have a right to education?

The obligation for education applies equally to males and females in Islam. According to a saying by the Prophet (peace be upon him), "Striving for knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim." The fact that Muslim girls in some countries are not being given the chance for further education is due to local traditions and customs, and is not connected to Islamic teachings. Islam regards the woman's role in society as a wife, mother, and educator to be her most sacred, noble and vital one. In his book 'Muhaddithat' (Interface Publication, 2007), Muhammad Akram Nadwi compiled biography of more than 8,000 Muslim women who studied and taught hadith. It demonstrates the central role women had in preserving the Prophet's teaching, which remains the master-guide to understanding the Qur'an as rules and norms for life. Within the bounds of modesty in dress and manners, women routinely attended and gave classes in the major mosques and madrasas, travelled intensively for the knowledge, transmitted and critiqued hadith, issued fatwas, etc. Some of the most renowned scholars among men have depended on, and praised, the scholarship of their women teachers. The women scholars enjoyed considerable public authority in society, not exceptionally, but as the norm.

20

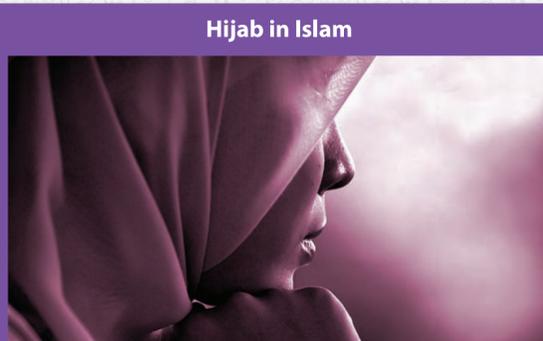
Why is the testimony of two women is required in place of one man in Islam?

Contrary to Western critic, the witness of two women being equal to the testimony of one man is not always the case in Islam. The Qur'anic verse that specifies this is related to financial dealings in view of the fact that financial responsibility is usually shouldered by men, and therefore, they are expected to be better versed in financial transactions than women. This doesn't reflect at all inferiority on the woman's part. Some women surpass many men in various aspects, including religious, commitment, reasoning and memory. They may be able to give testimony better than that of man regarding the issue about which they have knowledge and insight. They can even become experts in those matters, as did some women at the time of the Prophet. A judge may accept testimony of any person of exceptional qualifications. Two female witnesses are not always considered equal to one male witness, because there are other verses in the Qur'an which speak about witnesses without specifying male or female. Aisha, the Prophet's wife, related not less 2,000 narrations on various Islamic rulings which are considered authentic only on her solitary evidence. In fact, female witnesses are preferred when issues are pertaining to women alone such as childbirth or menstruation as related to divorce disputes or private matters where no men were present.

21

Why Islam restricts the free mixing of sexes?

Islam discourages free mixing between men and women but does not disallow all forms of interaction. The intention of the restriction is to keep interaction at a modest level so as to ensure decency, protection of honour and safeguarding of family and marriage. Men and women can interact and work together, provided a certain level of manners and decorum is maintained, and Islamic rules of decency and modesty are observed. Both men and women are required to dress modestly and lower their gaze (Qur'an 24:30-31). Attraction between the sexes is natural but it must be controlled and decently channeled. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "He who believes in God and the Last Day should not be alone with a woman in seclusion, otherwise Satan will be the third party between them." A man and a woman can be alone in public space. It is this consideration of gender differences and safeguarding of women's chastity and honor which defines Islam's approach to strict regulations in gender mixing in public activities, and Islam's fierce opposition to the exploitation of women.

**Hijab in Islam**

Muslims, men and women alike, are required to dress modestly and control their behavior by lowering their gaze. Women in view of their physical nature are required that in public space they cover their hair and wear an over-garment, (or clothing that does not caricature their bodily form) which is referred as 'hijab'. The meaning of hijab is to conceal - not revealing or projecting bodily presence. The purpose of hijab is not that women should be absent or invisible in the public domain, but rather they should be present and visible with the power of their bodies switched off. What are the benefits of this? First, most of the time men and women dress to look normal, not to attract one another. But dress normality for men (except for the anxieties of early adolescence) is derived from what other men see normal; women, on the other hand, even when dressing normal only for each other, still evaluate their look among themselves by its appeal to men. Hijab can screen women from that anxiety, at least when in public, of being subject to and evaluated by their sexual gaze. Second, hijab has an educative function. It teaches chastity to the individual who learns by wearing hijab to inhibit the need to be appealing to men; it also teaches the society in which the need to be self-disciplined is signaled and facilitated. Third, hijab publicly and emphatically marks gender differences. It therefore enables women, whilst assuming their active roles in the public domain, to project themselves simply as women without being taken up as objects of desire by men.

22

Is a Muslim girl allowed to have an intimate relationship with a boy?

The Western view of man-woman relationships is usually that of permissiveness, one that accepts premarital sexual relationship as a norm. There is also a level of tolerance to extramarital and illicit intimate relationships. There is an increasing driving passion among people for more wealth, more comfort and more pleasure, particularly physical pleasure. The greatest casualty of irresponsible sexual behavior has been the family, in particular children. Islam views sexual relationship outside of marriage as a serious matter because they destabilize the family and thus contribute to the breakdown of the whole social fabric. In Islam, girls and boys are protected by their parents from having any kind of intimate relationship that may lead to premarital sexual experience. As a matter of principle, Islam rejects any form of sexual relationship outside the marriage framework and that includes any pre-marital, post-marital, extramarital and other illicit intimate relationship. Islam aims at removing opportunities for indecency and immorality and this applies equally to males as to females. For that reason, Islam highly recommends an early marriage. Even those who feel they would not be able to bear the expenses of family are urged to put their faith in God, as He is the Giver of Sustenance, and go for an early marriage.

23

Why is polygamy permitted in Islam?

The Qur'an allows multiple marriages for men up to four wives, but with certain conditions and responsibilities attached. Islam made polygamy much less desirable than monogamy. The Qur'an says: "... marry those that please you [of other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one ..." [Qur'an 4:3] It must be pointed out that polygamy was practiced in the pre-Islamic Arabia (and indeed in all other societies) before the revelation of the Qur'an, but was uncontrolled and without regulation. Islam does not encourage or promote polygamy. On the contrary, Islam attempts to limit polygamy to having maximum four wives and attaches condition to it. Criticism against Islam involving polygamy quickly dissipate, because with less than 2% of Muslim population who are having more than one wife, even Western critics admit, "for all intents and purposes, monogamy is prevailing in the contemporary Muslim world. God made the privilege of multiple marriages with up to four wives strictly dependent on the fulfillment of the condition of equal treatment. The Qur'an says: "... But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one. ..." [Qur'an 4:3] The Prophet (peace be upon him), who serves as an example for all Muslims, was married exclusively to his first wife for 25 years until the time of her death. Of the women he married thereafter there was only one virgin; all others were either widowed or divorced. In all cases, not only did the women benefit in social security, but the political alliances thus contracted strengthened the stability of the society in which Muslims lived. Can there be a clearer and more straightforward divine statement of no confidence in the widespread practice of polygamy than the following verse? The Qur'an says: "And you will never be able to be equal [in feeling] between wives, even if you should strive [to do so] ..." [Qur'an 4:129] But verse 4:3 is not without practical significance. In times of severe shortages of men, such as after major wars, leaves the option of husband-sharing open and that can be blessing. Married couples with medical issues or sterility may also find this option a blessing. Criticism against multiple marriages from those who tolerate extramarital relations and sexual promiscuity is unfounded.

How The Qur'an Addresses Both Men & Women

Even though the Arabic language uses the masculine when referring to a mixed-gender group, the Qur'an repeatedly calls to: "Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward."

[Qur'an 33:35]

24

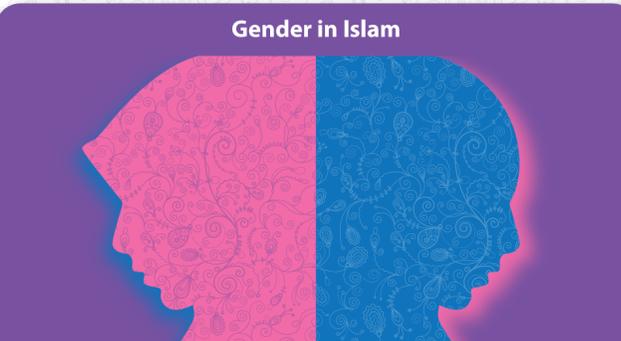
Does Islam oppress women?

Many people in the West think of Islam as chauvinistic religion that demeans women, and the stereotypical image of the completely seduced and oppressed Muslim woman is all too common. They cite the condition of women in some Muslim countries to emphasize the point, but their error is that they fail to make a distinction between the practices of those people and the true teachings of the religion that they profess. Although Muslim women have been oppressed in some cultures, this would not be understood as coming from the religion; rather, it reflects customs that are inconsistent, if not completely contrary to Islamic teachings. And it is true that some Muslim men still oppress women; but then, so do non-Muslim men. When Muslims are at fault, it is either because of cultural habit or ignorance about Islam. In actual fact, Islam expects its adherents to uphold the rights of women, protect their social status, and prevent their degradation in any way. The status of women in all earlier civilizations was so low that they were denied basic human dignity. Many considered women to be basically evil, subhuman and inferior to men. Islam uplifted women and gave them honor and equal status; and it requires that this status be upheld and maintained. Islam secured for the woman her intellectual, religious, social, economic and political rights, including the right to an education, the right to own property and to use it at her own discretion, and the right to work. A Muslim woman is a completely independent personality. In addition to her right to think and believe as she likes, Islam considers her to be active member of society who can make a valuable contribution. From the dawn of Islam, women engaged in many occupations such as commerce, agriculture and manufacturing. A Muslim woman can make any contract or bequest in her own name. She is entitled to inherit in her position as mother, a wife, a sister and a daughter. It is not permissible for anyone to take a woman's wealth without her consent. A Muslim woman has a completely independent economic existence that allows her to execute economic activities, like buying, selling, leasing, giving gifts, and giving collateral. Women have the right to a decent life without facing aggression or being wronged. She has the right to be educated, to air her views, to give sincere advice, to enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil, and to invite people to Islam.

25

Are Muslim girls allowed to participate in sports and swimming lessons?

Islam not only recommends sports as a source of enjoyment and recreation, but also advocates it for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The Prophet (peace be upon him) recommended sports such as horseback riding, swimming, and archery, and himself was engaged in sports. There is no general provision in Islam that limits women's participation in sports. However, sports must be practiced within the requirements of the Islamic dress code and gender segregation. Modest dressing for both sexes and gender separation is particular necessary when it applies to sports such as swimming in co-educational environments. In general, Muslim women face fewer hurdles in engaging in sports in their countries where Islamic requirements are provisioned. For certain sports, Muslim women would be easier to participate as issues regarding dress code and gender segregation can be easily managed. Many Muslim women in non-Muslim majority countries find it difficult to engage in sports and comply with their set practices at the same time. However there are many other countries, where schools are trying to be more inclusive. For example, track suits are allowed to be worn instead of shorts; separate-sex physical education training is increased; more privacy is given to changing rooms and shower facilities.

**Gender in Islam**

Men and women in Islam are equal, but they are not identical. They have exactly the same religious obligations and promise for equal rewards. However, Islam recognizes the physiological and psychological differences of the sexes and accordingly accommodates these differences in the practical aspects of life and religious duties. For example, the rights and duties of a husband and a wife in a family are different but they complement each other. Furthermore, Islam cherishes and upholds the woman's right of the protection of her chastity and honor. Allah says in the Glorious Qur'an: "Verily those who blaspheme unsuspecting chaste believing women will be cursed in this world and the next; and for them there will be severe punishment." (Qur'an 24:23) In another verse He says, "Those who defame chaste women and do not bring four witnesses should be punished with eighty lashes, and their testimony should not be accepted afterwards, for they are profligates." (Qur'an 24:4) It is this consideration of gender differences and safeguarding of women's chastity and honor which defines (a) Islam's approach to gender dress codes and strict regulations in gender participation in public activities, and (b) Islam's fierce opposition to the exploitation of women in advertisements, film industry, beauty contests and many other evils. To a non-Muslim this approach may be seen as discriminatory to women, but this Muslim approach is in harmony with the natural differences of sexes. No dear minded person would argue that if a man can walk in the street with a bare chest, a woman should also be allowed to do so simply because women are equal to men. Thus Islam is not against women's freedom but it is against their exploitation by men.

26

Is a Muslim woman allowed to be treated by a male doctor?

In principle, a Muslim woman should be treated by a female doctor in order to preserve her dignity and modesty; and a Muslim man should be treated by a male doctor for the same reasons. This ideal should pose no problem when one can choose one's own doctor and often, a Muslim woman will in any case prefer a female doctor, Muslim or non-Muslim; and a Muslim man will also prefer a male doctor, Muslim or non-Muslim. In emergencies, when only a male doctor is available, the well-being of the woman takes precedence over all other considerations. It is recommended that a Muslim woman should consult a female doctor, but if a male doctor is sought because of his reputation in medical expertise or cheaper in fees, so no conflict of conscience should arise for a woman if she chooses a better-qualified male doctor over a female doctor, or a lesser-expensive male doctor over a female doctor. Care should be taken to only uncover the part of 'aura' (private area - anything other than hands and face) that are necessary for treatment, and only for the duration of time needed. A male doctor (whether Muslim or not) should never be alone with a female patient, rather a relative should always be present.

27

Is a Muslim allowed to use contraception?

It seems to be the general consensus among Muslim scholars that birth control is allowed, providing certain conditions are fulfilled. It should not be permanent, unless the woman has a pressing medical condition that endangers her life or her health or otherwise valid reason not to conceive. As for the woman who has already had several children and does not feel that she can adequately care for more, some scholars say she may employ birth control indefinitely, while others say she may use it only to space her children for a reasonable length of time. Any artificial method of contraception that has health risks to the woman is not permissible, here natural methods are recommended. The Qur'an recommends for Muslim mothers to breastfeed their children for a full two years (Qur'an 2:233); which serves as a natural protection against further pregnancy for that period. Other natural methods include observing woman's menstrual cycle and the couple abstain from having sexual intercourse during the time when an egg is available to be fertilized by a sperm, and withdrawal of male organ before ejaculation during sexual intercourse. Muslims know, of course, that God's will is always carried out, whether or not precautions are taken.

28

Is abortion allowed in Islam?

The Qur'an forbids killing of children: "Hence do not kill your children for fear of poverty. It is We who shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily, killing them is a great sin." (17:31). Abortion is thus forbidden in Islam unless when the life of the mother is endangered. The Qur'an describes embryology in details, "... We create man out of the essence of clay, then We cause him to remain as a drop of sperm in [the womb's] firm keeping, and then We create out of the drop of sperm a germ-cell, and then We create out of the germ-cell an embryonic lump, and then We create within the embryonic lump bones, and then We clothe the bones with flesh - and then We bring (all) this into being as a new creation..." (Qur'an 23:12-14). The Prophet has also elaborated, "The creation of each one of you is put together in the womb of your mother from a drop of sperm in forty days, then for the same period it exists as a dot of congealed blood, thereafter for the same period a lump of flesh, then an angel is sent to breathe into it the spirit of life." The fetus becomes a human being when an angel has united a soul with the developing body. Muslim scholars unanimously agree that abortion at any stage is forbidden in Islam, but pregnancy can be medically terminated at any stage in case of compelling circumstances where the mother's life is in danger.

29

What is Islam's position on adoption?

The Qur'an and Prophet's teachings continually exhort humankind to care for orphans. Examples, God said: "... Worship none but God and be good to your parents and to relatives and orphans and the needy..." (Qur'an 2:83), and the Prophet said: "I and the guardian of orphans will be in one place in the hereafter." The fostering of children is considered a great virtue in Islam. Orphanage houses were unknown in classical Islamic countries, as foundlings were regularly taken in by foster parents as an act of piety. The Prophet (peace upon him) was himself an example - an orphan and a foster child. Adoption the way it is practiced in the West where the adopted children take names of their foster parents and sever links with their biological parents is forbidden in Islam. The Qur'an says: "Call them by the name of their (biological) parents, which is more just in the sight of God." (Qur'an 33:5) A Muslim couple may, however, bring up somebody else's child and care for him/her. God promised a great reward for fostering, more so when the child is an orphan. The fostered children cannot inherit their foster parents. The parents though can assign to their foster children up to a third of their estate by way of a will.

30

What is Islam's view of sexuality?

Islam affirms human sexuality as a gift from God. The legitimate and considerate enjoyment of this gift will bring divine reward, as the Prophet affirms: "In the sexual act of each of you is a form of a charity." Celibacy is regarded as an obstacle to the religious life. The Prophet said: "Whoever among you is capable should marry, for that is more modest for the gaze and safer for one's chasteness." One early Muslim was in the habit of praying all night and fasting all day, and the Prophet approached him with the words, "Your eye has rights over you, your guests have rights over you, and your wife has rights over you." Islam commends sex within marriage, and forbids all sexual activities outside of it. "Do not approach adultery, for truly it is corruption and evil way." [Qur'an 17:32] Islam teaches that body and soul are linked and that any sexual activity outside the framework ordained and blessed by God will subtly damage the soul rather than uplift and purify it. It may also weaken the institution of marriage, which is the cornerstone of a stable and caring society. God's purpose in creating sexuality is the joining of two complementary principles and the bringing into the world of a new generation, thus Islam regards sodomy, lesbianism and gay marriage as sinful and totally unacceptable.

WOMEN ARE THE TWIN HALVES OF MEN

Since its early days, Islam has practically lived its principle of equality between men and women which has manifested in the many prominent positions women assumed in the Islamic history and the contributions they have made in the society and development. In our modern times in the Muslim world there have been no less than four female Heads of State. Muslim women serve as Cabinet Ministers, MPs, Ambassadors and Advisors. Many more are CEOs, Entrepreneurs, Doctors, Geologists, Engineers, Professors, Writers, Bankers, Financial Experts, HR Specialists, etc.

The story of Islam cannot be told without women - not merely as oblique references to mothers and wives, but specific women like Khadija, Sumayya, Umm Salama, Nusayba, Khawla, Aisha and many others who, from the earliest days of Islam, embodied the Qur'anic message of human equality and the Prophetic teaching that women are the "twin halves of men." That more is not known about these women is a real disservice to women's history.

Khadija - When Muhammad received his "annunciation," the first encounter with the Archangel Gabriel left him terrified. A popular man with many friends to whom he could have gone. Instead, his first thought was to seek the comfort of his wife, Khadija. Dazzled by his experience, Muhammad asked her what will happen to him. Having only known him to be composed and dignified, she responded with remarkable poise and cool, "You uphold family ties. You give to the poor. You endure misfortunes. You honor guests. You help others when misfortunes decreed by heaven descend. Your Lord will never humiliate you." She then attested that what had come to him was none other than the revelation from God. Thus, the first revert to Islam was a woman, Khadija, who knew Muhammad better than anyone else. The story of their life together is one that transcends culture and time and still reads as a beautiful love story. She was his most steadfast ally, and the year she died is recorded in Muslim history as the Year of Sadness. It was no coincidence that Khadija is the "First Lady" of Islam. She was competent, wealthy, and widowed prior to marrying Muhammad - she established the precedent that virginity and youth are not the sole allotments of women.

Nusayba - When the tribal leaders of Madinah came to pledge their allegiance to Muhammad, four of the fourteen members of that original allegiance were women. One of those women was Nusayba. During the Battle of Uhud, Nusayba was attending the battle like other women, and her intention was to bring water and food to the soldiers, while her husband and two sons fought. But after the Muslim archers disobeyed their orders and began deserting their high ground believing victory was at hand, the tide of the battle changed, and it appeared that Muslim defeat was imminent. When this occurred, Nusayba entered the battle, carrying a sword and shield. The Prophet later said that every direction he turned, he seemed to find Nusayba there, fighting bravely. Nusayba was revered by most senior Companions, who like Caliphs Abu Bakar and Umar, sought her counsel and wisdom.

Aisha - She was the Prophet's youngest wife and daughter of his friend Abu Bakar, the man who later became the first Caliph. Aisha's young age is often brought up by those who intend to demonize Prophet's character. Though there was a considerable age difference between Aisha and the Prophet, but the marriage was not consummated until Aisha had reached the puberty age. There wasn't at the time, nor is there now, anything inappropriate about this arrangement. Aisha's youth provided the Muslim community with a scholar who long outlived the Prophet and who narrated over 2,000 hadiths, many of which are central to Islamic teachings and the understanding of the Prophet. In the initial moments of the birth of Islam, the Prophet took comfort in the arms of his wife, Khadija. At the end of his life, a time that mark the end of revelation, we find him again in the arms of his wife, the young Aisha.

Umm Salama - She came from a well-known tribe and because of her beauty, knowledge and wisdom she held an eminent position. She first got married to Abu Salama, who emigrated with her twice, to Abyssinia and Madinah. Her first husband was killed during the Battle of Uhud, and she remarried to the Prophet. In the day of Hudaibiyah, the Prophet commanded his companions to perform their Umrah's rituals after he concluded the truce with the Makkian Polytheists. However, the companions did not respond well. They thought that the terms of such truce were not in their favor - a kind of oppression to Muslims. The Prophet repeated his command three times without any response. Accordingly, he went to his tent angry and mentioned what had happened to Umm Salama. With her female intuition she said, "O Prophet of God, you can't make these fifteen hundred men do what they don't want. Just do your own duty, which God has imposed on you. Go ahead and perform your own rites yourself in an open place so that everyone can see you." The Prophet realized the sense of this advice. He stepped out of the tent, slaughtered his animal and started shaving his head. As soon as the people saw him, they followed suit.

Khawla - She was the wife of Aws Ibn as-Samit who fought in all battles along with the Prophet. Once Khawla annoyed her husband and out of anger he rejected his wife with the vulgar expression, "be to me like my mother's back." According to old pagan custom among the Arabs, the husband would be free of conjugal responsibilities, but the wife was not set free to leave husband's home or to contract a second marriage. Whatever the reason, after so many years of marriage, these words completely devoid Khawla of sensual attraction to Aws. Sympathetic family and friends had no power to override such customs. When Khawla went to the Prophet to complain of this injustice, the Prophet indicated that existing customs remained normative unless God revealed a new ruling. Khawla's appeal to the higher power than social custom and patriarchal authority - to God Himself. It was this occasion that chapter 58 of the Qur'an entitled "She Who Pleaded" was revealed. It begins with these words, "God has indeed heard the statement of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and carries her complaint to God. And God always hears the argument between both sides among you, for God hears and see all things." On the basis of this revelation, the justice of her plea was recognized, and this iniquitous custom, based as it was on a false set of values, was finally abolished. Much later when Khawla was an old woman, she once blocked Umar's way to give him advice when one of Umar's companions who thought she was impudent to the Caliph asked her to stop. Umar said, "Let her speak. Do you know who she is? This is Khawla the one whose plea was heard above the seventh heaven. She above all deserve to be heard out by Umar."

Sumayya - Little was known about Sumayya before she became a Muslim other than she was a slave. She then married to Yasir Ibn Amir and they had a son, Ammar. All three were among the earliest converts to Islam. When the Prophet began to preach Islam publicly, the result was active persecution of the small Muslim community in Makkah. The first to be targeted were those who did not have tribal protection like Yasir and his family. Often they would tie them and beat them up. Sumayya was finally stabbed to death by Abu Jahl, the Makkah leader, when she refused to renounce her faith - making her the first martyr of Islam. The Prophet was very troubled by the persecution of the Muslims and the murder of Sumayya. He was quoted in a hadith trying to comfort them, "Patience Oh family of Yasir, for you are destined for Paradise." Sumayya is remembered for her strength, courage, and faith in a period when the Muslims were heavily persecuted. She is important because her active commitment to her faith dispels the image of Muslim women nowadays that they are oppressed.