



WOMEN IN ISLAM

What do You see?

A Muslim woman has just come into view. You look at her. You see that she is young; that she wears the traditional “hejab” or cover. All you can see of her is her face and hands as she pushes a pram in which sits a small child smiling up at you. Her face is pleasant and you wonder about the lifestyle of this young woman and why she appears to be so serene in view of the fact that the voices of those around you are speaking scathingly of her in tones which surely she must hear.

You find yourself contemplating this strange situation. What is it about Islam that causes these women to live so contrary to modern Western fashion? Are they being forced into this situation by their fathers or husbands? You think about the woman you have just seen and somehow you know in your heart that this is not so – not in this case at least. It is apparent by her demeanour that she is confident and at peace within herself.

Your questions have often been echoed by others and you realize that the subject of women in Islam has, over the years, been a hot topic of conversation for both men and women who are not, themselves, Muslim. The words, “oppressed”, “degraded”, “mere chattels” are some which spring to the minds of many who have been steadily fed negative morsels of information from anti-Islamic sources. What is the truth of the matter? We invite you to look and evaluate for yourself. It is only when all facts of the matter are fully revealed to you that it will be possible for you to make an informed judgement.

The Time of Ignorance

Before the message of Islam had been delivered to the Prophet Muhammad, the plight of women in Arabia was a dreadful one. This time is referred to by Muslims as the *Jahilliyah* or ‘time of ignorance’.

Previously every derogatory phrase being used today to describe the situation of Muslim women, by those who are ignorant of Islam, was true of that time prior to Islam. They were, apart from a select few of noble birth, indeed oppressed, degraded, mere chattels, and much more. They commonly had no rights whatsoever and were of such little value that many female children were buried alive at birth. The Qur’an paints a vivid and heartrending picture of this era and the people of ignorance: *When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female, 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 it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide upon! Qur’an 16:15, 16.*

However, what one must realize is that this time of ignorance was not just in Arabia, but was a worldwide phenomenon, and we would do well to refresh our memories about this. The fate of women worldwide was little or no better and we find the following regarding their status in other lands and cultures:

Greece

Socrates had something to say about women which was not at all complimentary and reflected the early Greek thought on the matter: *Woman is the greatest source of chaos and disruption in the world. She is like the daffodi tree which outwardly looks very beautiful, but if sparrows eat of it they will die without fail.*"

Rome

In E.A. Allen's "*History of Civilization*" the position of the Roman wife is described as being that of a babe, a minor, a ward, she was not free to do anything according to her own individual taste, but was continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband.

China

Chinese women were not permitted to leave their homes and described as "*waters of woe*". Female infanticide was not unknown to this region.

India

In "*Status of women in Mahabharata*" by Professor Indra we find that women there were considered to be the most sinful of creatures. Spoken of as "a burning fire" and "the sharp edge of a razor", men were told that they should not love them. As may be supposed again, female infanticide was not unknown here.

England

Well, of course it is natural to think that women were in a much better position in England than may have been in other countries. However, as late as 1870, English Common Law stated that "All real property which a wife holds at the time of marriage becomes a possession of her husband". As such he, alone, was entitled to benefit from anything that came into his possession through marriage.

Religious view of women in Europe

It is difficult to believe that religion could discriminate against women but it surely did, and we find that the early Church fathers were influenced by both the Genesis account and the words of Paul about Creation and man's fall from grace. Biblically it was said: "*And the man said, 'the woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat' (Gen.3:12); 'And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in transgression.'*" (1 Tim.2:12). Therefore original sin really was laid at the feet of the first woman, Eve. It is no wonder then that St. Tertullian addressing women in *de Coltu Feminarum* gave the following verdict: *Do you know that each of you is an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must necessarily live also. You are the Devil's gateway you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first deserter of the Divine Law...."*

Needless to say this then made women responsible for all the woes within humanity. It should come as no surprise then that a conference in France in 1586 was convened by the Church to debate the question: "*Does woman have a soul? Is woman to be considered a human being or not?*" The Verdict: "*Woman is a human being, but she is created to serve man.*"

Therefore we see that for women worldwide it was still the darkest of nights. Womanhood had no value.

Islam and the Salvation of Women

In the early part of the seventh century of the Christian era, Muhammad, the Prophet of Allah was given a revolutionising message which would change an entire nation. However, those most affected were the women. It may be said that salvation came first for the women of Arabia in the form of Islam.

From being downtrodden and devoid of human value, the messages regarding the position of women, given from God to Prophet Muhammad, proceeded to bring light and mercy. Laws were dictated that would protect and uplift the community in all situations, but specifically was this so in the case of women, who began to be regarded as valuable members of that community.

It is of interest in this context that we recognize that the first adult believer in Islam was a woman, Khadijah, the wife of Muhammad, and the first martyr was a woman whose name was Sumayah. A proud heritage indeed!

Respect and Mutual rights

The Qur'anic admonition was given: *"O Mankind, reverence your Guardian Lord Who created you from a single soul, created of like nature his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women - Fear Allah through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights) and (reverence) the wombs that bore you."*(Q 4:1).

Original Sin?

In Islam the tenet of Original Sin does not exist, and further, woman has never been blamed for Adam's fall from grace, which we note in the following verses: *"Then did Satan make **them** slip from the garden"* (Q2:36); *Then began Satan to whisper to **them their** shame ... and he swore to **them both** that he was **their** sincere adviser...so he brought about **their** fall when **they** tasted of the tree..."* (Q7:20-22) So we see here that they were mutually deceived. However, just in case there may still be some ambiguity, there is a verse in which Adam (alone) is mentioned: *"Thus did Adam disobey His Lord and allowed himself to be seduced."* (Q.20:121). This of course stands to reason, for if Adam had been created first, being given responsibility for his wife, then he, as her leader and protector would have had to stand ahead of her in blame.

Spiritual equality

In the Qur'an we are told, *"Whosoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him (or her) will We give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to their actions."* And again it is written: *"I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. Ye proceed from one another."* (Q. 3:195) Women stand equally responsible before Allah. The rights and privileges, as well as the responsibilities which come with them belong to both men and women.

What about marriage?

In previous eras, in most regions on the earth, it was not considered wise to love women – perhaps some did, regardless of all that had been decreed regarding their status. However, Islam brought a different view: *"He it is Who did create you from a single soul and therefrom did create his mate that he might dwell with her (in love)."* (Q 7:189)

From the Traditions of Muhammad (pbuh) he has said: *"Women are the twin souls of men."* Let us remember that if this is so, then no man despises his own soul, and thus his wife should be held in love and respect as being part of him.

Differences

The Qur'an tells us: *"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard."* (Q 4:34) This, therefore, is a pattern for partnership and they are told in the Qur'an to have mutual consultation and mutual consent in matters pertaining to them and their households.

Muslim mothers

From the Qur'an and the traditions it is stated unequivocally that mothers are to be treated with the utmost respect. As we have earlier seen, the Qur'an commands to *"reverence the wombs that bore you"* (Q 4:1). In other words, *honour your mothers*. *"Paradise is at the feet of the mother"*, said Muhammad (pbuh). For the first time recognition was given of the role of 'mother' as being an important one for the future of the child and for that of the nation. This nurturing was both physical and spiritual.

Rights of Muslim women

With Islam came the following rights for women:

Education – *"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim (male and female)"* – al Bayhaqi.

Choice of husband – In the tradition it was reported by Ibn Abbas that a girl came to the Messenger of God and said that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice in accepting the marriage, or invalidating it. (Ibn Hanbal No. 2469). Parents may advise but the decision is not theirs.

Rights of Inheritance

Legally women could inherit and in fact it was law for female members of family to be included in all wills of their male relatives (fathers or husbands).

Rights of Ownership

Any property which belonged to a woman, it was stipulated, remained her property, even that which had been given as a dowry prior to marriage.

Rights of ownership of business and entering the professions

Along with education came woman's right to own a business or to work within a professional capacity if she so chose. This does not give her husband the right to stop supporting her financially, nor yet is any remuneration required to be paid to him from her earnings.

In the history of Islam you will find many women who were educated and partook in business. For example there was Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet who was a renowned business woman; Shifa bint Abdullah was not only an educator but controller of markets.

Equality of earnings

In today's world, the Muslim woman who works in a profession within a Muslim country must be paid a wage equal to that which would be paid to any man in the same occupation.

Recognition of abilities and intellectual prowess

Women's abilities were not limited to trade and commerce, they began to be noted for their intelligence in matters also of religion. Of the wives of the Prophet, two in particular, Aishah and Salma, became noted for their lecturing abilities. Through the early years it has been noted that women became proficient in the science of religious law, and one great scholar, Rabiyyah of Basra was often requested by male scholars to give her determination regarding this law or that. Another post-prophetic era Muslim woman who has been upheld as an example of a great

scholar of religious law was Sayyida Nafisa who, it has been recorded, actually taught Imam Shafi' Founder of the Shafi school of Islamic Law.

The Feminist Movement

While all this had been happening for Muslim women, for women elsewhere there was no such release from the bondage which made their lives insufferable.

Throughout the many years non-Muslim women have struggled to obtain rights and respect. They have sought an equality which even today is not forthcoming. From the early twentieth century the *Western Feminist Movement* commenced, gaining more strength in the sixties and seventies. In 1970 one of these women, Shirley Chisholm wrote in "Unbought and Unbossed": *Of my two handicaps being female put many more obstacles in my path than being black.*

Women openly called, and even fought for recognition. While they were in some instances considered successful, or partly successful (even today women's wages do not compare to those of their male counterparts), this has come at a terrible price. One well-known Feminist, Gloria Steinem, was reported to have said: "Some of us are becoming the men we wanted to marry."

We have all witnessed the breakdown in families and Western culture which has occurred in many instances, not just because of lack of equality, but because of lack of mutual respect.

The differences between the success of the Islamic revolution which took place for women and the less than successful results of the Feminist Movement are because one was from God and the other from a source which did not recognise God; one recognised that women had been created differently - physically and emotionally, to men but that the two were meant to co-exist in harmony; the others pitted their strength against men in an effort to seize their rights; one recognised that spiritual values are the secret of the success of their mutual respect and partnership; the other had no recognition of the Creator or spiritual values.

What is now apparent?

You will again see a Muslim woman as she goes about her duties - shopping, going to university or work, perhaps to a mosque. You will recognise her by her hejab, that covering which she so proudly wears because it is part of her religious belief and who she is. Perhaps now you will understand why she is so composed, so serene, so confident. Her heritage is a proud one in the annals of feminine history and her practice is not under duress, for she knows only too well her Lord's command: "*Let there be no compulsion in religion*" (Q.2:256)



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Written for website "What do you see - Islam"