

## WOMEN IN ISLAM

Much has been said about women in Islam but mostly from people who know very little about the religion. Islam liberated women 1400 years ago. Long before the Suffragettes and women's rights' movements came into play, women were given human rights such as inheritance, the right to own property, education, and choose a husband. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West and 80% of the converts to Islam in the USA and the majority in the UK are women (The Times newspaper, 9th November 1993). If you do not know much about women in Islam you may well ask yourself: "Why do so many 'liberated western' women want to become Muslims?" This leaflet will briefly explain 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 Adam and hence responsible for the 'original sin' (Genesis 2:4-3:24). 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. 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 equal rights to education for women in 1964. Compare this to the status and rights given to Muslim women more than 1400 years ago.

## THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT

In Islam there is absolutely no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to Almighty God is concerned as both are promised immense rewards for righteous deeds and just punishment for evil conduct. Almighty God states in the Quran that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over 1400 years ago: **"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 chastity and the women who do so, and the men who remember God often and the women who do so, for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward."** (Quran 33:35)

## THE SOCIAL ASPECT

At the time of the emergence of Islam it was socially acceptable in 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 the child in the womb purely on the basis of gender. Islam completely forbids these notions and actively encourages parents to show good treatment to daughters, and God makes that a reason for entry of parents into Paradise. It is a part of the Islamic faith to treat women well. The Prophet Muhammad 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 Muhammad himself had daughters, amongst them was Fātimah, about whom he would say, **"Whatever hurts my Fātimah hurts me."** He also said, **"God has perfected four women: Mary the mother of Jesus, Asiyah the wife of the Pharaoh, Khadeejah the daughter of Khuwailid and Fātimah the daughter of Muhammad."** These sayings and many more show the great worth Islam gives to women.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Islam requires that girls are educated by their parents. The Prophet 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 ignorant Muslims frowned upon women being educated. This is wrong and opposes the Quranic 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 study of the Quran, the obligatory duties, the lawful and unlawful, poetry, literature, Arab history and genealogy."** The great theologian Nawawi said about another female disciple, Safiyyah: **"She was the most intellectual among the learned women."** Umm Salamah, a wife of the Prophet had at least thirty two great scholars who learned Prophetic traditions from her. A great scholar Marwān used to say: **"Why should we turn to others when the wives of the Messenger are among us?"** The list of learned women in Islam is endless. It shows that women were not kept illiterate and ignorant but were encouraged to participate in the process of learning Islam and its scholarship for the purpose of being the first teachers to their children. There are instances where women would challenge the scholars of their times if they said something which was against the rights granted to women. Muslim women do not only acquire knowledge but also combine it with the high moral qualities that Islam seeks to imbue in the future mothers of humankind.

## SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

Here are just a few facts about women's rights in Islam established over fourteen centuries ago:

1. Islam condemned pre-Islamic practices degrading and oppressing women, and the mistreatment of girls.
2. Islam gave women the right of inheritance and the right of individual independent ownership unhampered by

fathers, husbands, brothers, sons or anyone else.

3. Islam gave women the right to accept or reject a marriage proposal, free from pressure. Forced marriages are not from Islam at all.

4. Islam does not require a woman to change her surname upon marriage nor give up her wealth.

5. Islam protects the family and condemns the betrayal of marital fidelity by adultery.

6. Islam enjoins sound morality in thinking, behaviour and appearance. Fashion clothing and social conduct that reduce the woman to a sex object to be exploited are not acceptable to Islam. A woman is judged primarily on the basis of her piety and excellence of character.

7. The observance of chastity and moral standards is equally demanded in Islam from men and women. The Prophet said, **"Women are the twins of men."**

8. Mothers have great rights in Islam. They must be shown kindness, goodness and be provided for.

## MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Marriage in Islam is seen not only to perpetuate human life but is also a source of emotional well being and spiritual harmony. The Quran emphasizes this essential unity of man and woman in a beautiful similitude, **"They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them."** (Quran 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. Just as 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 as their husbands are to them. The basis of the marriage is love and mercy as God stated in the Quran: **"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 people who reflect."** (Quran 30:21) Instead of being forced to marry against their will, Muslim women are allowed to play an active part in choosing their husbands, and do not have to marry anyone against their will. A marriage against the agreement of a woman is invalid in Islamic Law. Many Muslims who follow backward traditions oppose this Islamic right of women to refuse a proposal, but that should not be attributed to Islam but to cultures alien to Islam. The status of being an individual partner in marriage is emphasised by the fact the woman keeps her maiden name after marriage. This is the opposite of what occurs in the West, which itself is based on the Greece-Roman culture, where women took the name of the husband, because the woman was considered the property of the man. Divorce is allowed in Islam if necessity dictates. However Islam commands that the rights of both parties are respected and one does not go beyond bounds.

## THE MOTHER

Islam recognises the sacrifices parents makes in bringing up children. The mother has a very honoured position in Islam. A man who asked: **“O Messenger of God, who among the people is most worthy of my good company?”** The Prophet said, **“Your mother.”** The man said, **“Then who?”** He said, **“Your mother.”** The man asked, **“Then who?”** The Prophet replied, **“Your mother.”** The man asked, **“Then who?”** Then the Prophet said, **“Your father.”** This shows that the mother is given three times the concern shown to the father. Kindness to both parents is seen in Islam to be from the most noble of deeds. Almighty God stated, **“Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but He. And that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honour.”** (Quran 17:23)

## THE HIJĀB: DRESS CODE

Women in Islam are considered to be very precious and beautiful and therefore are respected and honoured. The veil is seen by Muslim women as a 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 of the increase in crime 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 religious expression, however Muslim women are thought of as being oppressed! The respect in which women and their bodies are given in Islam is emphasised by the fact that a man found guilty of rape is punished very severely as deterrent to others. This indicates the gravity with which Islam views crimes against women.

## ECONOMICS AND THE RIGHT TO WORK

Islam decreed a right for women denied in other cultures, the right of independent ownership and inheritance. According to Islamic Law, a woman's right to her money, real estate or other property is fully acknowledged. With regard to the woman's right to employment, it should be noted that Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife to be paramount. A mother's place cannot be replaced by maids and babysitters. However, Islam does not forbid women from seeking employment, especially in positions which are needed by society such as nursing, teaching and medicine. The man in Islam is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, his children and in some cases, his needy relatives, and especially the females. This responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife's wealth or her access to any personal income. This variation in financial burden between the man and woman is reflected in the inheritance rights, so

she inherits less because her financial responsibility is less.

## POLYGAMY

When Islam and women are mentioned, people often ask about polygamy. Yes, Islam does allow polygamy if both the man and woman willingly consent, with the condition that the husband is able to be just, **“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.”** (Quran 4:03) Thus if men have extra wives they must treat them fairly, and each wife must be provided for equally. This is in stark contrast with other societies today, where married men commonly sleep around, affairs are hidden and injustice is the norm. Women are regularly mistreated and abused, children who are born as a result have no rights of lineage, maintenance or inheritance. The ill-effects of such injustices are plain to see in many societies. Jews and Christians often criticise Islam for polygamy, however, most of the Prophets in the Old Testament had numerous wives. It is clear that Jesus never revoked the Law on polygamy, thus it remains. In defence of polygamy, it could also be said there are more women in the world than men, therefore it is a just way of ensuring all women can get married. A married woman can be maintained financially by her husband, thus fulfil her role as a cherished wife and mother. Studies in the UK have shown that nearly 60% of men have cheated on their wives and nearly 50% of marriages end in divorce. (independent.co.uk, *“Are we meant to be monogamous”*, 10 March 2015) Surely, Islam offers a better and more amicable solution to this great ill in our societies.

## CONCLUSION

Though pious women and pious men are rewarded by God with Paradise and eternal life, this not does mean that men and women are the same. It is naive and plain wrong to think that the two sexes are the same. They are different in many ways: physically, physiologically and emotionally. God and His Prophets throughout time have highlighted these differences and appointed for each gender rules, guidance and responsibilities. God has given guidelines regarding menstruation, marriage, dowries, childbirth, motherhood, breastfeeding, fatherhood, guardianship, family maintenance, upbringing, education, provision and so on. Some rules are specific for men, some specific for women and others shared. This is how balance and harmony is maintained in societies, where families are strong, obedient and devoted to the Lord of creation, caring and working together to make life better for everyone in society. You owe it to yourself to find out the truth. You can see from these brief words that women are not badly treated by Islam. So maybe Islam is not what you thought it was. We invite you to study Islam further.

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# HOW ISLAM LIBERATED WOMEN 1,400 YEARS AGO

Women's rights activist and writer, Annie Besant said: **“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.”**  
The Life And Teachings of Muhammad, 1932, p.4

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