

WOMEN IN ISLAM - MYTH VERSUS REALITY.

-Dr. Shamim Sayed.HOD – Dept. of Accountancy.

NSS College of Commerce and Economics. Tardeo

Email: ssayed2000@gmail.com

Abstract

A lot has been written and spoken about how women are treated in Islam. This topic is in fact, one of the most commonly debated issues throughout the world. Whether, it's the Indian news channels that have shouting matches on the issue of triple talaq almost every day or the French ban on Burqas, Islam and women are a favorite topic of discussion globally.

While some Muslim's have tried to respond to critics through debate and discussions, others have decided to look the other way, hoping for the world's interest to fade in the matters they consider incredibly personal and outside the purview of scrutiny and deliberation. As a Muslim woman who struggles with these issues every day, I believe that there needs to be more discourse on the issue. It isn't the fact that the matter at hand lacks coverage; on the contrary it gets more airtime than it needs. However, as members of a free society, we owe it to the world to give them proper answers to their questions. Ignorance breeds hate and discontent. Men fear what they do not know. Hence, in this paper, I have tried to shed light on the rights of women in Islam in the light of Holy Quran and Hadith.

In my paper, I have extensively relied on the Quran and the interpretation of the Islamic sharia, which is one of the five schools of thought in Islam.

"Whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned." Quran 6:152

PROPHET MUHAMMED AND THE ARABIAN SOCIETY.

Mecca, where the Holy Prophet peace be upon him (pbuh) was born, was a society steeped in ignorance and superstitions. Tribes would be at war for decades altogether over matters as petty as a lost sheep. Drinking, gambling, poverty, killing, and female infanticide were all a part of pre Islamic Arabia. In fact, the girl child was considered to be an embarrassment and hence, a father burying his daughter to prevent her from bringing shame to him was not uncommon. The Quran states in this regard, in chapter 16, verse 58-59,

"And when a daughter is announced to one of them his face becomes black and he is full of wrath. He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that which is announced to him. Shall he keep it with disgrace or bury it (alive) in the dust? Now surely evil is what they judge."

It was in this environment that Prophet Mohammad was given the mammoth task of uplifting the woman from the clutches of a society that was designed to undermine and exploit her and establishing her position as that of an equal.

Islam not only declared the act of killing the female child as unlawful and a punishable offence in the eyes of Allah, it even promised a great reward to those who raised their daughters in a loving and compassionate manner. In one instance the Prophet said, 'Blessed is the woman whose first child is a daughter,' while in another meeting he declared, 'One who brings up three daughters or sisters and is patient enough in earning for their maintenance till the time they are married..He and I will be in Paradise like this, (he showed his index and middle finger joined)' someone asked, 'O Messenger, what if he brings up two?' The Prophet replied, 'even if two.' 'What if he brings up only one?' The reply was, 'Even if he brings up only one daughter.'

While most Abrahamic religions today portray Eve, the wife of Adam, as a temptress who forced him to sin, Islam places no such blame of Eve. In fact, when we look at the narration of this incident in the Quran, it places equal blame on both Adam and Eve for eating from the forbidden tree. While many may consider the mention of this event, irrelevant in today's day and age, it is imperative to understand that the portrayal of Eve as the reason for Adam's sin had an adverse impact on the position of women throughout the world. All women were believed to have inherited from their mother, both her guilt and her guile.¹

If it was not for the reformation brought about by Islam, the position of women would not have changed. There are a number of accusations on Islam when it comes to women. In the paper, I have tried to broadly go over them and separate rumors and misinterpretation of the sharia through the use of the Holy Quran and as well as both Shia and Sunni narrations.

Women and Education.

When the Taliban shot a young Malala Yousufzai, for going to school, the world rightly erupted in outrage. However, this was not the first case of extremists targeting a young child. According to a report by GCPA (Global Coalition to Prevent Education from Attack), 'In areas affected by Taliban militancy, hundreds of schools were blown up and proponents of female education were killed. According to data, the total number of reported militant attacks on schools in 2009-2012 was at least 838 and could be as high as 919. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported 505 schools damaged or destroyed in 2009 alone.'²

This was even before the gruesome attacks in Peshawar in 2014. It is evident that between 2012-2017 the numbers have sadly gone up.

The effect of these attacks however has been to create anti Islamic sentiments and has created the false narrative that Islam is against modern education, which is far from the truth.

The Quran and the Sunnah, both repeatedly emphasize on the importance of knowledge. In fact, there have been countless books written on this subject by Islamic scholars.

The very first verse of the Quran that was revealed to the Prophet was, "Read in the name of your Lord who created. He created man from a clot. Read and your Lord is the Noblest. The One who taught (to write) with a pen. Taught man what he knew not..." (Chapter 96: Verse)

The Quran applies to both men and women alike. In addition, Prophet Mohammed himself said, 'it is obligatory upon every Muslim to seek knowledge.'

In the Qur'anic perspective there can never be a restriction of this knowledge to one sex. It is the duty of every Muslim man and every Muslim woman to pursue knowledge throughout life, even if it should lead the seeker to "China," we are told. The Prophet even commanded that the slave girls be educated, and he asked Shifa' bint

¹¹ Women in Islam versus The Judaeo Christian Tradition: Myth and Reality: Page 13

² Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, State of Human Rights in 2009, February 2010, 12.

'Abdillah to educate his own wife - Hafsa bint 'Umar. In fact by the time the Prophet passed away there were many women scholars in Medina.³ In another instance Prophet Muhammad said, 'seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.' In fact his daughter and granddaughter were scholars and were revered and respected throughout the Islamic world for their intellect and knowledge.

The above narrations are only a part of the many that propel Muslims, both men and women to seek knowledge. Thus, the rhetoric of the extremists who claim to be 'defending and representing Islam' is rendered hollow by the Quran and the Prophet himself. The Quran time and again asks man, to think, ponder and research. Ignorance and mindlessness are ignoble and have no place in Islam.

INHERITANCE.

One of the major differences between Islam and its contemporaries is the attitude towards right of inheritance. While the matter of inheritance is a comprehensive and complex one.

Allah says in the Quran, Chapter 4, verse 7: 'Men shall have a portion of what the parents and the near relatives leave, and women shall have a portion of what the parents and the near relatives leave, whether there is little or much of it; a stated portion.' The chapter further goes on to explain the division and allocation of inheritance to the different family members of the deceased.

While in some instances man receives two shares, the woman receives one. However, this is not due to prejudice against the females sex, rather it is based on rational and practical aspects of life. One of the reasons why the male inherits a larger portion is because the man is liable to provide for all the members in his family. His wife, children, sisters, near of kin are all dependent on him. Under Islamic law, the woman can even charge her husband for feeding her own baby! Moreover, all expenditures of the household must be borne by him. In contrast, the woman be it a sister, mother, wife, daughter or aunt is under no such obligation. It is in fact her essential right to be provided for by first her father, then her husband and later her son.

A woman's property and her income are her own. And no member of her family can claim any right to it. When one keeps these laws in mind, it makes sense as to why the man inherits a larger share, because, *Equality is not the same as identicalness.*

MARRIGE AND DIVORCE.

Marriage is one of the most sacred and celebrated institutions throughout the world. However, more and more women today view it as a source of bondage and a system that is anti-woman. Statistics show that almost 50% of marriages in the US end up in divorce. In India, the rate too is picking up speed, though nowhere as close to the USA.

Moreover, throughout the world, especially in developing countries there are thousands of instances of forced marriages. Under Islamic law, the consent of the girl is the most important aspect in a marriage. In fact, the Nikah nama, that is, the marriage contract is not complete without the signature and the approval of the bride.

In fact the words of the Nikah that are recited in Arabic, literally translate to, "I have given away myself in *Nikah* to you, on the agreed *Mahr*." To this the bridegroom replies, "I have accepted the *Nikah*." In cases where the priests recite the marriage contract, the one who represents the bride first seeks her consent to officiate on her behalf, and so would the other who acts on behalf of the groom. Naturally, there would be a slight variation in the pronouncements, because the persons reciting them are appointees. A person who represents the bride would initiate

³ Status of Women in Islam: A Critical Analysis on A Matter of Equality :Gholam Hussein Adeel

by saying, "I give away in *Nikah* the woman who has thus appointed and authorized me, to the man who has authorized you, on an agreed *Mahr*."⁴

This clearly shows that a marriage contract is invalid if it takes place without the consent of the bride. Moreover, unlike in other systems, the bride's family is not obliged to give anything in the form of gifts or dower to the bridegroom's family. In fact, 'mehar' has been ordained by Allah to be given to the bride by the groom.

It is imperative to note here that the 'valima' that is the dinner party that is to be thrown to the family and friends of the newlyweds after the nikah is to be initiated by the groom. Islam thus puts no burden of any sort on the parents of the girl or the girl herself.

The precedent of how a marriage should be conducted was in fact demonstrated by the Prophet himself. When he married his daughter, Lady Fatima to Hazrat Ali, the latter gave the mehar by selling off his armor. It was through this money, that the Prophet asked his companions to buy essential things for the soon to be wed couple. Islam encourages its adherents to follow this tradition of the Prophet. In one instance, Prophet Mohammed remarked, 'The best of men are those who are the best of husbands...'

Regarding the issue of divorce, just as a woman is the initiator of the marriage, the man is given the right to divorce. However, the woman too can seek separation from her husband through what is known as 'khula.' Here the female, gives a certain amount to her husband in exchange for the dissolution of the marriage. One must note that Islam provided us with the instrument of divorce, recognizing the fact there would be cases where it would be impossible to carry on with the marriage. Most faiths in the world, including Christianity and Hinduism, did not have a provision for divorce until modern times. Despite this, the Quran instructs the men to deal kindly with the woman they divorce and puts the responsibility of raising the children on the father, so as not to burden the woman or obstruct her from marrying again.

Remarriage of both divorcees and widows is not only permitted, it also encouraged.

HIJAB

Most discussions today center around the narrative that the hijab oppresses women, very few ask in order to understand. More often than not, those who question already come with their pre conceived notions and opinions.

While Hijab is compulsory for both men and women, it differs in respect to what it constitutes. The first is the hijab of the eyes. The Quran in Chapter 24, verse 30-31, commands the believers, "***Say to the believing men that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them.***"

A lot of people believe that the reason why the Quran commanded the women to cover was because Arabia was a desert and such type of clothing would protect them from the desert's sun and storm. However, this is not the case. The hijab was in fact mean to liberate the woman. It sought to free her from the prison of the gaze of men, and give her an identity which would protect her beauty and chastity, while allowing her to participate in society without having to fear for her safety. This does not mean that there are no restrictions on how men are supposed to dress and conduct themselves. For instance, it is not suitable for a man to wear extremely tight fitting or revealing clothes. It is also compulsory that they sport beards and lower their gazes. The Quran itself answers the question as to why it delegates women to dress up in a certain manner, in Chapter 33, Verse 59, "***This is more appropriate so that they may be known and thus not be harassed.***"

Crusaders of women's rights often write about the subjugation of the woman through the hijab or the veil. What is striking here is if we leave aside the argument that the hijab is decreed as compulsory by Islam, many women

⁴ Islamic Marriage : Sayyid Athar Hussain Rizvi

choose to wear it voluntarily. There is no denying that many women are forced into hijab in some countries, however, that is not the fault of Islam as a religion. Islam recognizes man as a rational and responsible individual. It places the consequences of a person's action on his own shoulders. Hence, to force or coerce someone to follow Islam and its tenants is immoral.

In the same way, to assume that the hijab is a barrier to a woman's growth is an unfounded argument. The world is full of Muslim woman who sport the hijab and are a successful doctors, engineers, artists, writers, sports persons, even actors!

France has been in the news for multiple reasons, from the ban on wearing the veil, to the ban on wearing long skirts to school and most recently the burkini ban. The reason they gave was almost laughable, it said that the burkini was, "not respectful of [the] good morals and secularism" of France.

The French Minister of Women's rights Laurence Rossignol, provoked worldwide outrage when she said that women who chose hijab were like 'Negroes, who supported slavery.'

Would the minister say the same thing about a Christian Nun who chooses to cover up? What about orthodox Jewish women? Covering up is seen as a sign of modesty by most people in the world. Nudity in fact, is a punishable offence.

In the article, "My Body Is My Own Business", Ms. Naheed Mustafa , a young Canadian born and raised, Muslim woman writes, "The Quran teaches us that men and women are equal, that individuals should not be judged according to gender, beauty, wealth or privilege. The only thing that makes one person better than another is his or her character." She goes on to say, "In the Western world, the hijab has come to symbolize either forced silence or radical, unconscionable militancy. Actually, its neither. It is simply a woman's assertion that judgment of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction."⁵

A Muslim women wearing hijab faces many problems and none of them stem from the 'covering' itself. Rather, these problems are the preconceived notions of the people. What the world needs to understand is the fact that Islam just like any other institution has laws that govern it. Whereas to the outsider they may seem unpleasant, Muslims embrace these laws with the knowledge that every law that Islam has, has a definite reason behind it. After all this was the first religion to grant women not only a position in society, but place her on an equal footing with men.

Some others rights that were granted to women with the advent of Islam are, right to vote/consultation, Right to hold rulers to account., Right to choose marital partners, the right to keep their maiden name, right to divorce, Right to engage in contracts, right to welfare support, maintenance, right to run their own business, conjugal and domestic rights. This was at a time when Europe was still debating if women had souls or not.

CONCLUSION:

"And whoever does good deeds whether male or female and he (or she) is a believer- these shall enter the garden, and they shall not be dealt with a jot unjustly."
-Holy Quran, Chapter 4: Verse 124

There is no doubt that the laws of Islam have been misinterpreted by men to suit themselves. From Afghanistan to Saudi, women's rights have been trampled upon. However, this is not Islam. When a man shoots a girl for going to school- it is not Islam. When a father brutally murders her daughter for not wearing the hijab or voicing her right to marry who she wants- it is not Islam. When a girl is forced into a marriage – this is not Islam. When a man beats his

⁵ Mustafa, Naheed. "My Body is My Own Business.": Shia International

wife or daughters black and blue- it is not Islam. When Saudi refuses to allow women to drive- it is definitely not Islam.

When Lady Khadija spends all her wealth for the sake of the believing men and women- this is Islam. When Lady Fatima gives away all her food to the poor who knock at her door for three consecutive days, and remains hungry- that is Islam. When Lady Zainab stands bravely in the face of the man who murdered her family and challenges his illegal government- that is Islam.

It is the responsibility of every Muslim to break the shackles that patriarchy has put into our legs in the name of Islam. We need to help victims of abuse; it is our duty as believers. At the same time we need to reclaim the legacy of the great Muslim women who passed before us- The determination of Lady Khadija, the steadfastness of Lady Fatima and the bravery of Lady Zainab. This is the need of the hour.

Allah's foremost characteristic is that he is Just. Unfortunately, Muslims are not. We fall and we falter. Hence it would be incorrect to judge Islam by the actions of *some* Muslims. Thus I conclude with a verse often quoted in Muslim circles, 'When she is born opens the gates to Paradise. When she marries she completes half of her husband's faith and when she becomes a mother, heaven lies under her feet.' .

