

They hate women, don't they?

How can anyone justify Islam's treatment of women, when it confines Afghan to be dominating and makes Pakistani girls marry strangers against their will? How can you respect a religion that forces women into polygamous marriages, mutilates their genitals, forbids them to drive cars and subjects them to the humiliation of "instant" divorce? In fact, none of these practices are Islamic at all. There is a concept that to understand any religion you have to separate the religion from its cultural norms and style of society. It's very important to understand the status of women in society from its various aspects - spiritually, socially, economically, and politically.

There are Qu'ranic and other teachings regarding women. In the midst of darkness that entered the world, the divine revelation that echoed in the desert of Arabia with a universal message to humanity was; "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" (Qu'ran 4: 1). ¹

This verse deals with the humanity of the women from all aspects with such amazing clarity. This is a natural conception, then the Qu'ran states:

He (God) it is 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 spiritual aspect of women is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of the rights and responsibilities. The Qu'ran repeatedly addresses both the *believing men and the believing women* and according to Islamic teachings every human being is responsible for his or her own actions. "Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds" (Qur'an 74:38). It also states:

¹ The Holy, Qu'ran: Translation of verses is heavily based on A. Yusuf Ali's translation, Qu'ran, text translation, and Commentary, The American Trust Publication, Plainfield, IN 46168, 1979.

...So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one from another ...(Qur'an 3: 195).²

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the their actions. (Qur'an 16:97).

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 she is nursing her baby if there is any threat to her health or her baby's. If the missed fasting is obligated (during the month of Rammadan), she can make up for the missed days whenever she can. She does not have to make up for the prayers missed for any of the above reasons. Although women can and did go into the mosque during the days of the prophet and thereafter attendance at the Friday congregational prayers is optional for them while it is mandatory for men (on Friday).

This is clearly a brief overview of the Islamic teachings for they are considerate of the fact that a woman may be nursing her baby or caring for him, and therefore may be unable to go out to the mosque at the time of the prayers. They also take into account the physiological and psychological changes associated with her natural female functions. Spiritually speaking, man and woman, it says, "were created of a single soul," and are moral equals in the sight of God. Women have the right to divorce, to inherit property, to conduct business and to have access to knowledge.

The social aspect of Islam focused on children and adolescents is that the act of killing a female infant forbades this custom. Among some Arabian tribes this is a social

² Hashmi, Taj. Women and Islam in Bangladesh. Pulgrave: New York, 2000.

acceptance. The Qu'ran criticizes the attitudes of the parents who decide to do such a horrendous crime. The Qu'ran 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.³ According to the Prophet of Muhammad "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."⁴ The right of females to seek knowledge is not different from that of males. These are the social circumstances outlined for children and adolescents.

The social concern of being a wife plays a dominant role. The Qur'an states that a women's religious status like their social status, is as high as that of men. Marriage in Islam is like a contract where both spouses agree to share certain responsibilities and obligations. The women of pre-Islamic time were much liberated in their movements then they are accordingly allowed to be. "Contrary to that popular notion in the West, a Muslim woman cannot be legally forced into marriage without her consent."⁵ The Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two people in society, and that its objectives, besides pro-creating human life, you have to maintain a emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Marriage is based on love and mercy. The most impressive definition in the Qu'ran is as follows:

"And among His signs is this: That 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. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect."⁶

³ Abd Al-Ati, Hammudah, Islam in Focus, The American Trust Publications, Plainfield, IN 46168, 1977.

⁴ Allen, E. A., History of Civilization, General Publishing House, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1889, Vol. 3. Al Siba'i, Mustafa, Al-Alar'ah Baynal Fiqh Walqanoon (in Arabic), 2nd. ea., Al-Maktabah Al-Arabiah, Halab, Syria, 1966.

⁵ Mace, David and Vera, Marriage: East and West, Dolphin Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc., N.Y., 1960.

She has every right to be firm upon any unreasonable condition including the chosen right to divorce if she is not pleased with any act of her husband, including his taking another wife. When a woman wants to renounce her divorce there is a form known as *khula*. A Muslim has a genuine reason for divorce only if a spouse's behaviour goes against the sunnah of Islam - in other words, if he or she has become cruel, unforgiving, abusive, unfaithful, neglectful, selfish, sexually abusive, oppressive, perverted - and so on.

According to Islamic Law, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent.

"Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad (P.), and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice . . . (between accepting the marriage or invalidating it). In another version, the girl said: "Actually I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force a husband on them)" ⁷

It is believed that for a woman's protection they have the right to ask for a *Mahr* which is a marriage gift, which is given by her husband including a nuptial contract. The concept of a *Mahr* is to basically symbolize the love and affection the husband has for his wife. The rules of married life in Islam uplift human values and equality of rights with harmony. Considering the psychological, biological make-up of a man and woman, both have human rights and claim each other.

The Qu'ran states: "And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." (Qur'an 2:228).

This implies that there is no superiority or advantage before the law. The nature of man is to be a leader in relation to his family but does not mean dictatorship over his wife. More specifically, some aspects of Islamic Law concerning marriage and divorce are interesting and are worthy of separate treatment.

When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible for any reason, men are still taught to seek a gracious end for it.

⁶ Encyclopedia Biblica (Rev.T.K.Cheynene and J.S.Black, editors), The Macmillan Co., London, England, 1902, Vol.3.

⁷ Engineer, Ashghar Ali. The Rights of Women in Islam. Sterling Publishers Private Limited: New Delhi, 1992.

What about polygamy, which the Koran states up to the limit of four wives per man? In the past of course was a time when the economy was suffering through political warfare and there was an increasing amount of widows who were left with children and no money. In these circumstances, polygamy was encouraged as an act of charity. Needless to say, the widows were not sexy young women, but usually mothers of up to six children, who came as part of the deal. Polygamy is no longer common, for various good reasons. The Koran states that wives need to be treated fairly and equally - a difficult requirement even for a rich man. Also, if a husband wishes to take a second wife, he should not do so if the marriage will be abused.

Sexual intimacy outside marriage is not allowed in Islam, including sex before marriage, adultery, or homosexual relationships. However, within marriage, sexual intimacy is allowed and should be experienced as a form of worship so that each considers the happiness and satisfaction of each other, rather than self-pleasure.

When Muslims die, strict laws are given to spilt the property and money they may leave to others; daughters usually inherit less than sons, but this is because the men in a family are supposed to provide for the entire household. Any money or property owned by women is theirs to keep, and they don't have to share it. It's the same thing in marriage, a women's salary is hers and it cannot be controlled by her husband unless she allows it to be.

Socially, as a good Muslim mother, for her part, should always be trustworthy and kind. She should strive to be cheerful and encouraging towards her husband and family, and keep their home free from anything harmful (covers all aspects of harm, including bad behaviour, abuse and forbidden foods).

Regardless of her skills or intelligence, she is expected to accept her man as the head of her household -, therefore, take care to marry a man she can respect, and whose wishes she can carry out with a clear conscience. However, when a man expects his wife to do anything contrary to the will of God - in other words, any nasty, selfish, dishonest or cruel action - she has the right to refuse him.

Her husband is not her master; a Muslim woman has only one Master, and that is God. If her husband does not represent God's will in the home, the marriage contract is broken.

"A famous saying of The Prophet is ***"Paradise is at the feet of mothers."*** (Al Siba'i, Mustafa, Al-Alar'ah Baynal Fiqh Walqanoon)." ⁸

⁸ Allen, E. A., History of Civilization, General Publishing House, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1889, Vol. 3.

The Economic aspect of women in Islam “decrees a right of which woman was deprived both before Islam and after it (even as late as this century), the right of independent ownership.”⁹ According to Islamic Law, woman's right to her money, real estate, or other properties is fully acknowledged. This right doesn't allow any change whether if she is single or married. She has her full right to buy, sell, mortgage, or lease anything she wants or all her properties. Nowhere does it exist in the Law that a woman is a minor simply because she is a female. “It is also outstanding that such right applies to her properties before marriage as well as to whatever she acquires thereafter. With regard to the woman's right to seek employment it should be stated first that Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential one. Neither maids nor baby-sitters can possibly take the mother's place as the educator of an upright, complex free, and carefully reared children. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as “idleness.””¹⁰

However, there is no decree in Islam, which forbids woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her most. Examples of these professions are nursing, teaching (especially for children), and medicine. Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from woman's exceptional talent in any field. A woman can apply for the position of a judge, where there may be a tendency of stereotypes and to doubt a woman's emotional nature. Even for the position of a judge, where there may be a tendency to doubt a woman's emotional nature for the job. History has proven this stereotype wrong because we find early Muslim scholars such as Abu-Hanifa and Al-Tabary holding there is nothing wrong with it. In addition, Islam restored to woman the right of inheritance, after she herself was an object of inheritance in some cultures. Her share is completely hers and no one can make any claim on it, including her father and her husband.

“Unto men (of the family) 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 in is one-half the man's share, with no suggestion that she is worth half a man! “This variation in inheritance rights is only consistent with the variations in financial

Al Siba'i, Mustafa, *Al-Alar'ah Baynal Fiqh Walqanoon* (in Arabic), 2nd. ea., Al-Maktabah Al-Arabiah, Halab, Syria, 1966.

⁹ Encyclopedia Americana (International Edition), American Corp., N.Y., 1969, Vol.29.

responsibilities of man and woman according to the Islamic Law. Man in Islam 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 given up nor reduced because of his wife's wealth or because of her access to any personal income gained from work, rent, profit, or any other legal means.”¹¹

Woman, on the other hand, is far more secure financially and doesn't have to worry about being burdened with claims on the things that she owns. Whatever she owns before marriage do not transfer to her husband and she even keeps her maiden name. She has no obligation to spend on her family out of such properties or out of her income after marriage. She is entitled to the "Mahr" which she takes from her husband at the time of marriage. If she is divorced, she may get alimony from her ex-husband.

An examination of the inheritance law within the framework of the Islamic Law implicates not only justice but also the love and compassion for a woman.

The political aspect of Islam travels through the depth of history, where you can find clear evidence of woman's equality with man in what we call today "political rights." These rights include the rights to elections as well as nominations. It also includes woman's right to participate in public affairs. Both in the Qur'an and in Islamic history we find examples of women who participated in serious discussions

According to Islam, the head of the state is usually a figurehead. He leads people in the prayers, especially on Fridays and festivities; he is continuously engaged in the process of decision-making. This demanding position usually doesn't make fit for a woman because they go under physiological and psychological changes. "Such changes may occur during an emergency situation, thus affecting her decision, without considering the excessive strain which is produced. Moreover, some decisions require a maximum of rationality and a minimum of emotionality - a requirement which does not coincide with the instinctive nature of women.”¹²

Even in modern times, and in the most developed countries, it is rare to find a woman in the position of a head of state acting as more than a figurehead. One can not possibly ascribe this to backwardness of various nations or to any constitutional limitation on woman's right to be in such a position as a head of state or as a member of the parliament. "It is more logical to explain the present situation in terms of the natural and indisputable differences between man and woman, a difference which does not

¹⁰ The Encyclopedia Britannica, (11 th ed.), University Press Cambridge, England, 191 1, Vol.28.

¹¹ Mace, David and Vera, Marriage: East and West, Dolphin Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc., N.Y., 1960.

imply any "supremacy" of one over the other. The difference implies rather the "complementary" roles of both the sexes in life." ¹³

"Muslim women have achieved many gains. In Islamic cultures, where education for women often began only three or four decades ago, women whose mother's are totally illiterate frequently earned advanced degrees. One need only look to the percentage of women teaching in universities in Muslim countries to see how fast change is occurring for women." ¹⁴

The political advancement of women has been tremendous including election in office. "In Syria 26 of the 250 members of Parliament are female. In Iraq the numbers are 19 out of 250. Four Muslim countries have been currently led by women." ¹⁵

So does Islam oppress women?

The history of Muslims is filled with great contribution of women as early as the seventeenth century BC. It is now impossible for anyone to justify any mistreatment of women in the Islamic Law. It is valuable to state that the status of women that has survived through this present era was not gained by the kindness of men. Rather it was gained through a long struggle, sacrifice's, only when society needed her contribution and work, during the two world wars. Through the threads of history, women have carried a well-respected reputation and are admired for their spiritual, social, economic and political status.

¹² The Encyclopedia Britannica, (11 th ed.), University Press Cambridge, England, 191 1, Vol.28.

¹³ Allen, E. A., History of Civilization, General Publishing House, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1889, Vol. 3.
Al Siba'i, Mustafa, Al-Alar'ah Baynal Fiqh Walqanoon (in Arabic), 2nd. ea., Al-Maktabah Al-Arabiah, Halab, Syria, 1966.

¹⁴ Engineer, Ashghar Ali. The Rights of Women in Islam. Sterling Publishers Private Limited: New Delhi, 1992.

¹⁵ Allen, E. A., History of Civilization, General Publishing House, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1889, Vol. 3.
Al Siba'i, Mustafa, Al-Alar'ah Baynal Fiqh Walqanoon (in Arabic), 2nd. ea., Al-Maktabah Al-Arabiah, Halab, Syria, 1966.

