

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

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Almost one out of every ten people on earth today is a Muslim woman and they are as individual as they are numerous. There is a wide range of social distinction, degrees of literacy and local customs in different countries, which don't make it easy to give guidelines on this subject.

Most probably, in the majority of cases, three things characterise these women:

1. The domination by man.
2. The fears controlling her daily life.
3. The insecurity in her spiritual life.

1. The Domination of Man

From early childhood the girls come under the protection and watchful eye of their father, brothers or cousins. The boys of the family are encouraged to dominate the girls' lives, and to discipline them - even physically. When they reach puberty, segregation of the genders begins. Girls have to wear veils, or the *hijab*, when they leave the house and enter the public domain. They can only choose and meet friends with whom their brothers or fathers agree. Meeting across gender is carefully regulated and those who venture outside can be subject to harassment.

Hijab is there to guard the beauty of the woman from the gaze of men and to protect her body from those who want to harm her. Allah himself created the hijab to give women freedom and dignity and to create a healthy society. To wear it is a duty for Muslim women. More western-oriented people like the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Bhutto, the father of Benazir Bhutto, made it clear that the *real* hijab is that of inner modesty and never forced his children to wear it.

The virginity of the girls and females in the house is regarded as the honour of the family. The Egyptian doctor Nawal El Saadawi writes: “... *sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility; whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation.*”

Weddings are arranged by the family, ideally with the consensus of the girl. Most marriages portray a contract between two families and not a love relationship chosen by the couple. The father's consent is essential to a marriage, otherwise it is considered invalid.

After marriage the bride comes under the *domination of her husband*. She is subject to him in all spheres of life. He has complete authority over her. She has to live for his pleasure, be available for him at any time, and bear him children. There is no real partnership between husband and wife, no biblical “leave and cleave.” According to Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, “*Marriage is a power relationship, husbands are masters and not lovers. A husband-wife relationship is seldom perceived as friendship.*”

Women are seen as dangerous and deceitful. “... *for they are created from a rib and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it and if you leave it alone it will remain crooked, so act kindly toward women.*” (*Mishkat Al Masabih*)

The *Hadith* lays the blame on Eve for leading her husband into sin and ever since all women are considered a trap and temptation to men. The *Hadith* tells us that Muhammad said, “*after me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women.*” (*Al-Bukhari, Vol. 1, p.688*). Mernissi and El Saadawi agree that the malpractice towards women is not the idea that women are

inferior. To their mind Islamic culture rests on the premises that a woman is powerful, not weak, positive and not passive, capable of destroying and not easily destroyable and if anyone needs protection it is the man rather than the woman. (*Partners or Prisoners*, p. 59.) Therefore women get the blame for everything. She has to be on her guard at all times.

An ideal wife must be young and beautiful, wealthy, and devoted to her religion with a family status not higher than that of her husband.

The Marriage relationship - The Qur'an teaches that the husband has many duties towards his wife, to care for her, to provide for her, to protect her. But can she really expect love? In Surah 30:21 we read that "*Allah has created help meets for men and has put love and mercy between their hearts,*" but nowhere do we read a command that husbands shall love their wives. On the contrary, their duty is to discipline their wives; they are, to some degree, responsible for their wives' behaviour. "*Men are in charge of women, because Allah made the one of them to excel the other... So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart and scourge them. Then if they obey, seek not a way against them.*" (Surah 4:34)

If the wife does not obey her husband or if she withholds herself from him, the angels and the *houris* themselves are angry with the wife till the morning. Houris are the two special wives in paradise with big lustrous eyes! (*Al-Burkhari, Bad' al-khalq8*)

A husband does not have to explain why he hits his wife. Although the relationship should be one of mutual love, most of them seem rather to encourage a relationship of domination and fear. Such is the husband's authority over women that Muhammad said that, if it were possible, he would have commanded women to worship their husbands. If there are loving Muslim families around us, it is because of the image of God in men through creation and not because of Islam.

Why are husbands masters rather than lovers?

Love between a man and his wife is seen as dangerous. Intimacy between them is discouraged. At the moment of love making the couple should not have their heads pointing towards Mecca and they must recite some Arabic phrases. Sex and intercourse is seen as polluting not uniting. But still a strong sexual appetite is encouraged, mainly within the boundary of marriage. A deep devotional love for a woman can be seen as competing with the devoted worship of the one and only God.

The Muslim view is that husband and wife have different roles. The husband outside the home and the wife inside the home. There she is the queen. She gets her honour by having children, especially sons. Her relationships to her children are stronger than to her husband and her children love and respect her greatly.

Islamic tradition says: "Paradise lays at the feet of the mother"

Wives find their fulfilment in bearing and raising children and their close attachment to their sons creates many problems when the daughter-in-law appears.

2. Fear Controlling Her Daily Life

Fear of her mother-in-law - The mother-son bond is perhaps the closest family tie in Islamic societies. It is fostered by many Hadith and by the Qur'an itself. For example, Surah 46:15 states:

"And we have enjoined on man to be dutiful and kind to his parents. His mother bears him with hardship. And she brings him forth with hardship, and the bearing of him, and the weaning of him is thirty months, till when he attains full strength

and reaches forty years, he says: 'My Lord! Grant me the power and ability that I may be grateful for Your favour which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents, and that I may do righteous good deeds, such as please You, and make my offspring good.'"

Traditionally, the young couple will remain in the husband's home. The mother-in-law controls the household and does not like to give her son away to another woman. The son is forced to please his mother first, before his wife. Her opinion is usually more important than his wife's. Fatima Mernissi said that this mother-son bond brings about a split between love and sex in a man's life: "*His main love is to be towards his mother, with whom he cannot have sex. His sexual partner is his wife, to whom he cannot show too much affection without alienating his mother.*" Mernissi also sees this as one of the major factors preventing strong marital bonds.

It is the job of the young wife to live to her mother-in-law's satisfaction and win her love and appreciation. If the marriage was arranged by the mother-in-law she can be a blessing to the young wife, or otherwise a misery and source of suffering.

Fear of divorce - Although Muhammad said that the most detestable lawful act to Allah is divorce, it is still remarkably easy for a Muslim to divorce his wife. He has just to say three *talags* (the divorce formula) at once, which means he says three times, "I divorce you." The divorce is legal and the wife has to go. If he regrets it and wants to take her back he can only do so if she has been married to someone else, even if only for one night. "*... someone else must have tasted her sweetness first.*" (Surah 2:230)

A woman is unable to dispute a divorce instigated by her husband, but she does have the right to also seek a divorce if the husband does not care for her. This is called self-redemption, which means she can buy herself back from him, but it is still he who has to divorce her. Listen to the Hadith at this point: "*If any woman asks her husband for a divorce without some strong reason, the odour of paradise will be forbidden to her.*" (Mishkat Al-Masabih. Vol. 1, p.696)

Consequences of the divorce - The divorced woman loses her children, her home, her income and has to go back to her brother or father where she is unwanted. Her only way out seems to be prostitution or a quick new marriage. What is worse is if the husband does not divorce her, but instead leaves her without support and care, preventing her from getting married to another man.

A divorced woman will always have to live with the blame and the shame that she was not able to please her husband. She is seen as the guilty one, the reason why the marriage did not last. If she had been a better wife or mother, things would be different. If her children are straying, it is also likely to be blamed on the wife.

Fear of a co-wife - Because Muslim men may have up to four wives, the fear of a co-wife is very real. Surah 4:3 says "*... marry women of your choice, two, three or four, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly, then only one ...*"

Modern Muslims tell us Islam is actually for monogamy because nobody can deal justly with more than one wife. The best example of polygamy is their prophet himself; there was great jealousy among his 12 wives. How can it be different today?

Perhaps it was his awareness and the pain of the conflict in his own home that led him to forbid his son-in-law, Ali, a second wife. Muhammad believed that if Ali wanted another wife, he should rather divorce Fatima than expose her to a rival: "*... because Fatima is part of my body, and I hate what she hates to see, and what hurts her, hurts me.*" (Sahih al Bukhari, Vol. VII, p. 115-116)

Fear of gossiping tongues - Old women go around from house to house spreading trouble, separating husbands and wives, slandering their good name, bringing shame upon the family. Many young wives keep totally to themselves because of their fear of gossip. Moroccan proverbs describe older women in uncomplimentary terms. A man who reaches eighty becomes a saint, a woman who reaches sixty is on the threshold of hell. What takes Satan a year to do is done by an old hag (woman) within an hour. (*Partners or Prisoners*, p. 53) While the younger woman is dangerous because of her fatal attraction, the older one is dangerous because of her frustration and intrigue.

Fear of evil eye and jealousy curse - There is much fear of the evil unseen world around them which can harm them. They fear neighbours or jealous people who want to destroy them, especially during joyous periods, like pregnancy and the birth of a baby. Young mothers would often hide their babies so that nobody may bewitch them with the evil eye. They fear sickness and misfortune, even death, as a result of the evil eye. Many Muslim women never look into a stranger's eye, from fear of the power of the evil eye. (This gives you a problem if you want to build relationships while shopping, etc.)

3. Insecurity in their Spiritual Lives

God is so distant - How do we know whether God accepts us with our good works?

They are only “half a person” in the matter of inheritance on this earth—what about eternity?

They are separated in the mosques and in their prayers - What about the fellowship with God in paradise?

Muhammad's view on Women in Paradise

One of Muhammad's companions tells us the following story:

“After Muhammad came out from the place of prayer, he saw a few women and told them, ‘O women give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hellfire were you (women).’ They asked, ‘Why is this so, Messenger of God?’ He replied, ‘You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you.’ The women asked, ‘What is deficient in our intelligence and religion, Messenger of God?’ He answered, ‘Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?’ They replied in the affirmative. He said, ‘This is the deficiency in your intelligence. Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?’ The women replied in the affirmative. ‘This is the deficiency in your religion.’”(Al-Bukhari, Haidh 6; Muslim Iman 13; Abu-Dawud, Sunna 15)

Some more sayings from the Hadith:

“One woman of ninety-nine women, is in heaven, and the rest of them are in Fire.”

“Fire has been created for the senseless, the women, except for the one who obeyed her husband. Men perish when they obey women.”(Kanz al-ummal, 22:10)

One can't help wondering why God ever created women. The way He made them, it looks like they can never reach paradise because they are falling short of all the things they should do and cannot do.

Religious Duties Muslim apologists tell us that in religious affairs there is no difference between men and women—they are equal. But when we look into the traditions of the prophet, a woman's religious freedom is limited and can be further limited by her husband.

Prayer - Women are not allowed to pray and read the Qur'an or enter a mosque when they are menstruating. They are polluted just because of their nature and physical make up. This is significant in a religion that teaches that rewards are given according to what is done, and rather than only by the grace of God.

Women are encouraged to pray at home in the "inner-most" room and not go out to pray where women will be a distraction for men. *"The prayer of a man will be interrupted if a dog, an ass or women pass in front of the believer."* (Abu Huraira, in Muslim Salat 285)

Fasting – This helps to build the most credits for the future life. Muslim women cannot fast without their husband's permission. This is because fasting includes abstinence from sexual intercourse and women are to be available to their husbands at all times.

Alms-giving – Free-will giving is called sadaqah (feeding the poor) and required giving is named zakat, which gains extra merit before Allah. Women are only allowed to give alms if their husbands give them permission to do so because it is, in most cases, his money she uses.

Pilgrimage - the hajj is believed to be a sure way to forgiveness and a new start in life. A woman's freedom is curbed even here by her dependency on men as she is not allowed to make a journey on her own. She needs male protection from one of her male relatives.

In each of these acts of piety and Islamic practice, women are at a disadvantage. They cannot carry out their basic religious duties without male help and approval.

Why do Muslim women stay Muslims? Because the Qur'an says that men and women who do righteous acts will enter paradise, see Surah 33:35 and 9:72. (They ascribe the problem as the wrong interpretation of their leaders, not to Islam or Muhammad himself.)

Islamic Paradise

Islamic heaven is described in the Qur'an and Hadith as a place of sensual delights as well as of the nearness to God. Surah 38:49-52 and 83:22-25 speak of beautiful green gardens, reclining chairs, rivers of wine and many female companions to be enjoyed. It seems more like a kingdom for Muslim men than a dwelling place for both sexes because of the sexual rewards described. (Surah 44:51-54)

"The lowliest in paradise will have eighty thousand servants and seventy-two wives." (Mishkat Al-Masabih Vo., 2, p.1204) *"The believer will be given the sexual capacity of a hundred men."* (p. 1200)

What about the female believers?

The Hadith considered in this section **do not give freedom and equality to women**, nor make her a co-heir with man of eternal life. In her present life she is the victim of a religion and system, and in the life to come she will remain a victim of the same religion. In this world she is abused and looked down upon. In the world to come she is in danger of the everlasting fires of Allah.

Muslim Women's Dilemma

In the Islamic version of moral order, women play a key role and yet God remains far away for these women. "God won't listen to my prayers when I'm menstruating. How can I become righteous before God when I fall further and further behind on the required prayers each month?" With God so distant, many turn to magic, charms and spirit mediums for answers. Others, in handfuls all around the world, are finding answers in Jesus Christ. He is bringing them into personal relationship with the living God who wants a relationship with his creatures. Just as Jesus long ago touched - or let himself be touched - by a women with a flow of blood and didn't consider himself polluted, so today he is touching Muslim women.

How can we get involved in this process?

- ◆ Don't just see a Muslim woman as a person who is very religious, proud or unreachable.
- ◆ See the real state of Muslim women. Although always surrounded by many women, deep in her heart she feels lonely, not trusted, lacking of friendship, and is very insecure of God and herself. She hungers for meaning and real fulfilment. She feels a big gap between herself and God, which she tries to bridge either through a very devoted lifestyle and fanaticism towards her religion or through indifference and fatalism.
- ◆ If you meet Muslim women at hospitals, waiting rooms, buses, markets or shopping centres pray that God will help you to make contact and to build a relationship with them.
- ◆ Keep visiting them in their homes, even if they don't return a visit very quickly. Make a point to visit them on their special Muslim festivals, which will give you a chance to also invite them at Christmas or Easter to your home. These Christian holidays give good opportunities for sharing about our Christian faith and the deeper meaning behind these festive occasions.
- ◆ Be there for them in sickness and bereavement, and also in joyous occasions like weddings, birthdays or at the birth of a new baby. In these special emotional times people are more open to spiritual input and appreciate your personal involvement and friendship with them.
- ◆ After you build a relationship you might be able to invite them to join some activities with other women, like cooking or baking classes. Muslim women enjoy new recipes and it boosts their image if they can contribute something new and unique to others in the community. Start a sewing or craft class and run it as a mixed group with Muslims and some true Christians. This provides a basis for long-term relationships and other Christians can learn to share Christ with Muslim women too.
- ◆ When you get to know each other's problems and fears, you might be able to invite them to a discussion group about marriage, raising children, and how to handle rebellious teenagers. Muslims have very little literature on these topics and they are very keen to get help from you. A few good books: *I married you*, by Walter Tobisch; *How to really love your child*, and *How to really love your teenager*, by Ross Campbell.
- ◆ They like to get good videos and books for their children. The *Narnia* books by C.S. Lewis, as well as the videos, are very stimulating and appreciated.
- ◆ From Patricia St. John you can recommend *Treasures of the snow*, or *The Secret Garden* - also in book and video form. This might bring an opening from which you may be able to show the Jesus film and invite them to some studies on comparing the Qur'an and the Bible using correspondence courses like "Al Kitab" or the Series from the "People of God." If the ladies have less education you can suggest a storytelling group where you teach the Bible chronologically and in story form, starting from Genesis to Jesus using the main stories from the Old Testament and New Testament.

The most important part is that you start making contacts in one way or another and build relationships. God is on your side and he has built a little door into the walls of the fortress of Islam which provides you with an opening into the Muslim community, "the door of hospitality." Be bold enough to enter through it into their homes and God will show you ways to enter into their hearts too. God encourages us in Ezekiel 22:30 to become people who stand in the gap between those who do not yet know God.

Challenge: *How can we stand in the gap, become a real friend and win them for Christ?*