

Islam Today 6:- Gender



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Part A – Gender and Islamic Sources

It is intended here to provide an overview of some of the formative factors in relation to gender issues and issues of gender that may have affected the status of women in Muslim communities, specifically in areas delineating clear and different roles for men and women. Clearly, there are many differentials in different contexts, so the points made below do not represent ‘universal truths’ about Muslim women – but do provide some indication of possible influences and agendas.

For the purposes of this introductory discussion:

- the term ‘Muslim community’ refers to any community, in any social, religious, geographical or historical context, that has a population that defines itself as ‘Muslim’.
- Muslim communities during different time periods have had considerable variations in their approaches towards ‘beliefs’.
- It is useful to determine to what extent this reflects cultural influences, historical circumstances, and/or socio-political issues upon ‘Islamic principles’ - especially in regard to gender issues and issues of gender.
- There is a tendency within discussions to see women as perpetual ‘victims’ of Islam. This is particularly true of interpreters influenced by Western feminist perspectives, emphasising the perceived powerlessness and inability of Muslim women to facilitate their own liberation from oppressive forces.

- This paradigm can be applied to make negative statements about Islam, and on paper can disenfranchise those Muslim women who do have control, or who feel that they certainly do not require liberation in any form - especially from interfering outsiders!!

Egyptian academic Sherifa Zuhur defines gender issues as

"... a set of controversial themes involving status determinants made on the basis of gender, sex differentiation, or inequality."

whilst the issue of gender refers

"... in a general manner to the presence of sex stratification and female disadvantage within society."¹

One key area that has to be addressed is the concept of gender 'equality', from which interpretation of other issues will follow:

"In a fair manner women have the same rights against their men as men have against them; but men have a degree above them. Allah is All-Powerful, All-Wise." ² The Qur'an, *Sura al-Baqara*, 2:228

There is constant reassurance from some Muslim authorities and sources that the Qur'an seeks equality of gender, enfranchising *Muslimiyya* (Muslim Women) with a charter of rights that supersedes other belief systems, guaranteeing within its own framework a level of security determined by the Qur'an, and reflected in a *Hadith* (saying) of Muhammad:

"Fear God in the matter of women. Verily women have rights against you, as you have rights against them."³

This ideal is open to criticism, not only from outside the Muslim world, where defence of 'women's rights' can facilitate attacks on Islam as a whole:

- There are several Muslim women critics speaking out, often under dangerous circumstances.
- This voice is increasingly being articulated in academic circles, initiating and applying new interpretations of Islamic sources and history to illustrate the distinction between the actual position of women today, and the interpreted ideals as expressed in the Qur'an.
- The exercise of such expression may be relatively limited. The opportunities for such beliefs to enter a wider framework of debate - or even to be the subject of reappraisal by Muslim authorities - may be a long way off.

This is especially true when some authorities see the object of Islam as

"... to establish a social order that segregates the spheres of activity of male and female, discourages and controls the free intermingling of the sexes, and curbs all the factors that are likely to upset or jeopardise the social discipline."⁴

This 'rigidity' is an underlying theme in discussions on interpretations of Islam, by Muslims and non-Muslims, both within and outside of Islamic spheres. It is one area which stimulates considerable debate and controversy, and in which there can be a number of conflicting conclusions.

Frequently, the sources of Islam are scrutinised to establish what the 'true roles' of men and women are within Islam. However, according to some Muslim scholars, there can be unreliability within certain sources. Some scholars also show distain for specific interpretations of Islamic law, which are alleged to reflect patriarchal interests and society, either deliberately or unconsciously, at the expense of Muslim women:⁵

- There can be a tendency for the idealisation by some Muslims of the role of women within the earliest Muslim society.
- Closer examination of the contexts in which particular verse of the Qur'an *surahs* concerning women were revealed could illustrate the gap between what the Qur'an 'intended' - and what is said to have actually occurred.
- The hidden agendas of members of early Muslim society may have included the suppression of women.
- By incorporating these views within traditions or different schools of interpretation, they became difficult or dangerous to challenge. Some lines may not be crossed.
- Many of the issues concerning women stem from a particular interpretation of Islam that could be open to challenge.
- Certain topics require radical reassessment of Islam, which many would be unwilling or unable to do.
- The patriarchal domination within the majority of Muslim societies makes challenges in this area seem 'un-Islamic' or dangerous.

The Qur'an and Women Interpreted

- The Qur'an was not revealed specifically for a male audience, rather for all humanity. Every *surah* can be relevant to both men and women, in terms of the dynamic of relations between the two.
- Within the Qur'an, women can discover how they should be treated (depending on how the Qur'an is mediated).

- Criteria for successful relationships are provided.
- The Revelation addressed a patriarchal society, and some suggest it endeavoured to impart a new understanding of gender relations.
- According to some critics, the concept of man dominating woman, seen by some interpreters as the archetype of Muslim society, is not laid down within the Qur'an. There is a suggestion of equality in statements such as:

“They are your garments and ye are their garments” ⁶

There is equality in the rewards bestowed by God, as suggested in this translation (which contains notation in brackets):

"Whoever works righteousness, **whether male or female***, while he (or she) is a true believer (of Islamic Monotheism) verily, to him We will give a good life (in this world with respect, contentment and lawful provision), and We shall pay them certainly a reward in proportion to the best of what they used to do (i.e. Paradise in the Hereafter)." *Sura al-Nahl* 16:97 ⁷ (* - writer's emphasis)

- Some commentators indicate that, according to the Qur'an, there is no distinguishing between gender in terms of submitting to the principles of Islam:

"For Muslim men and women,- for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise,- For them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward. *Sura al-Azhab* 33:35 ⁸

- Some believe that this means that there are no differentials between 'believing' men and women, according to the Qur'an, in Islam. Disputing this would be like disputing the Revelation of God to His Prophet. This is emphasised in a modern commentary:

"... the chief stress is laid on the fact that these virtues are as necessary to women as to men. Both sexes have spiritual as well as human rights and duties in an equal degree, and the future 'reward' of the Hereafter ... is provided for the one as for the other." ⁹

- The search for the meaning of the Qur'an in numerous languages cannot ignore the injunctions regarding the issue of gender. Yet, in reality, many Muslim societies could be described as following different

paths - especially in their understanding of the position of women in Muslim societies.

- It is interesting to consider those traditions that directly concern the issue of gender, for example:

"The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: The most perfect Muslim in the matter of faith is one who has excellent behaviour; and the best among you are those who behave best towards their wives" ¹⁰

What is seen as 'Islamic' suppression of women can be interpreted – by some apologists - as having cultural roots unconnected directly to Muslim teachings, whilst aspects seen as 'suppressive' by outsiders are deemed 'liberating' by (some) Muslim women. The understanding of Muslim women is frequently associated with cultural conflicts and confusion (especially regarding the status of 'Asian' women in the UK).

Despite the differentials of culture, society, and environment there can also be some common ground. Asserting a Muslim identity can involve wearing *hijab* and following other 'Muslim' dress codes, even if it is not part of an individual's culture. It can also involve asserting their Muslim identity in a positive way to counter prejudices aimed against them: this can include demanding religious rights within mosques; political assertion through Muslim bodies; and creation of social welfare infrastructures. This can only challenge archetypes, and may in the future reduce non-Muslim dependence on certain formative images of Muslim women.

Suggested Reading:

Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Anne Sofie Roald, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (London, Routledge, 2001)

Part B – Gender and Relationships

Relationships

The subject of marriage is often incorporated under women's issues within many commentaries. Many themes are summarised in *Surah al-Nisa* ('The Women'), including:

- eligibility for marriage,
- marriage contracts (including dowries),
- degrees of prohibition in marriage,
- the marital home,
- polygamy,
- inheritance
- maintenance during marriage.

The relationship between husband and wife is particularly emphasised, emphasising the male and female pairing and partners being garments to one another. Marriage between men and women is seen as a 'Sign from God':

"And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye many dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect."¹¹

- The processes surrounding marriage in Islam can be contentious, often focused on the issue of 'arranged marriages' – and frequently stereotyped by commentators.
- There is also significant variation in the interpretations of marriage 'equality' from the four principal schools of Sunni Islamic Jurisprudence (Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafii, and Maliki).
- This contributes to differences in marriage contracts - both from a civil law and religious law perspective - in Islamic contexts generally. ¹²
- There can be confusion even in areas where the Qur'an makes express provision, for example on the issue of divorce. The qur'anic injunctions regarding divorce are clearly stated in *Surah al-Baqarah* ¹³, *Surah al-Nisa* ¹⁴, and *Surah al-Talaq* ¹⁵.
- There are several variations throughout the Islamic world in the forms of repudiation and reconciliation of partners. The Prophet disapproved of divorce:

"Marry and do not go about divorcing. For God does not like men and women who keep on changing partners merely for a change of taste."¹⁶

There have been examples of abuse of divorce procedures within the UK, specifically the application of coercion in its attainment.

- There is no example of Muhammad's actual practice to follow in this area, unlike that of polygamy. However, there were specific injunctions within the Qur'an relating to Muhammad and *his* relationship with his wives.¹⁷
- Critics have suggested that women are 'condemned' to monogamy, whilst men can have more than one partner (technically up to four, if they can be supported equally - there are cultural, religious and traditional variations).¹⁸

The commentator Mawdudi attempts to justify polygamy by stating that

"If polygamy is totally prohibited, men who cannot remain satisfied with only one wife will look outside the bounds of matrimonial life and create sexual anarchy and corruption."¹⁹

This does not suggest what 'unsatisfied' wives might do. According to some sources, polygamy was important because many early Muslim males died in battle, leaving widows without the traditional networks of support. This justification is not generally present today. Within areas of the Middle East, for example, according to civic law, *some* countries place barriers to polygamy without forbidding it outright. Within Britain, statistics are not available for the level of polygamy within Muslim communities.

Marriage is a crucial area for Muslims, particularly the mechanism of finding a suitable partner given the strictures of being unable to intermingle freely (in some cases). There are, of course, traditional 'arranged marriages', both to partners in the United Kingdom and abroad. Immigration restrictions, and the often-widening cultural gulf, means that this avenue may be losing the popularity it may have had when UK-based individuals brought partners for arranged marriages; domestically, it is still one method of finding (or being found) a partner.

There are a number of mechanisms that can subvert these traditional (not necessarily qur'anic) methods of finding a partner - either with or without parental approval:

- In some contexts, these might require rulings or interpretations by *religious scholars*. For example, how appropriate are personal advertisements in Islamic and other press, particularly those that go into significant detail about personal attributes?
- There is also a growth in specific Matrimonial Agencies, often utilising computer technology.²⁰
- Some agencies specialise in establishing relationships between 'practising' Muslims.

Traditional marriages between people of the same class and culture still occur, but there is an increase in 'cross-cultural marriages'. This places emphasis in the relationship upon shared faith, rather than cultural considerations. It puts the egalitarian ideal represented in Islamic texts of not distinguishing between Muslims sharply into practice:

- It has been noted that opportunities have increased for Muslim men and women to encounter one another in different forums, not just the work or study place, but environments of an Islamic nature.
- A growth in Islamic study societies, particularly in places of further education, have increasing influence in this secondary role. It would be interesting to determine the 'success rate' at such gatherings, and parental reactions.
- The issue of finding a suitable partner are not confined to Muslims in Britain. The problem has been particularly acute in Egypt, where economic and housing problems, together with dowry restrictions, are preventing people getting married and leading to aggression being channelled against an establishment seen as causing the problems (i.e. the government), in some cases through 'fundamentalist' organisations.
- Within the UK, in some cases the economic situation of women can be better than that of men - which adds its own pressures - especially regarding the role of working women in Muslim society.

Part C – Gender and Dress Codes

In association with the issue of gender, the subject of clothing is one that (rightly or wrongly) occupies a great deal of discussion. The Qur'an and Hadith seek men and women to be dressed modestly. There is a particular Surah regarding women and dress codes: *Surah al-Ahzab*, that has been interpreted by the translators to emphasise their religious-cultural perception of the clothing issue:

'O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies (i.e. screen themselves completely except they eyes or one eye to see the way). That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not be annoyed. And Allah is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."²¹

There can be variation in the interpretation of modesty, and the nuances of women's dress is usually centred on discussion of this portion of *Surah al-Nur*:

"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons or their women, or the slaves whom their right hand possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments..."²²

The interpretation of the meaning of the above portion of the Qur'an varies considerably in different Muslim contexts, and even within smaller communities there can be considerable diversity. Opponents believe that the veil is designed to

"... make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life, to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain."²³

It is not the place here to discuss in detail the specific advantages and disadvantages of *hijab*, *burqa*, and other forms of covering. Some do see *hijab* as an identity marker, a levelling process, and an escape from socio-economic limitations.

Within Egypt, there has been discussion on the need of reform on the position of the veil. Perhaps the primary issue is whether *hijab* and other Islamic dress is a question of freedom of choice, self-regulation within modesty constraints, or imposition. Arguments on nuances of dress-codes are certain to be divisive, given cultural and traditional variations in interpretation of *hijab* styles.

The concept of veiling as 'primitive' has been challenged by women in Egypt taking on the mantle of *muhaggubat* or "modern veiled women", representing several different religious interests and classes: ²⁴

"Islamic dress can be seen, not as a return to traditional dress, but as the adoption of Western dress - with modifications to make it acceptable to the wearer's notion of propriety. Far from indicating that the wearers remain fixed in the world of tradition and the past, then, Islamic dress is the uniform of arrival, signalling entrance into, and determination to move forward in, modernity."²⁵

The notion of a 'uniform standard appearance' may be interpreted as an unrealistic ideal. Unveiled women may see *hijab* as a retrogressive imposition on personal rights, and are insulted by the idea that by not wearing *hijab* they are somehow immodest or represent temptation: their feeling is that men should be exhorted to protect modesty and control sexual impulses.

Unveiled women stress they are still modest, and retain Islamic values.²⁶ Yet asserting an Islamic identity can involve wearing *hijab*, even if it is not a part of an individual's culture. There can be parental opposition to wearing *hijab*, on grounds of religion as well as personal security. Women have been attacked for wearing *hijab*. Can the price for fulfilling Islamic ideals and identity, especially in a hostile environment, be too high?

Some interpretations of the Qur'an suggest a pragmatic flexibility, unless the *basic principle of belief in one God* itself is challenged. In the Final Reckoning, according to the Qur'an, in circumstances of extreme danger God is likely to be Forgiving and Merciful to persecuted Muslims forced to subtly change their appearance to survive or ensure personal security.

Some fear that people will think wearing *hijab* was a matter of imposition, rather than of choice. Others may not wish to alienate themselves from non-Muslim society, or from Muslim friends and family who did not identify with wearing the *hijab*. Wearing *hijab* has been challenged as being a part of Islam:

"Muhammad, I modestly but passionately believe, would be shocked to encounter certain ludicrous and alien aspects that have come to be identified with Islam. At Sainsbury's the other day, I was outraged at the sight of a Muslim sister hardly able to load her trolley because she could not see to do it, covered as she was from head to foot in thick black fabric.

"Where did she think it said that *chadors*, face veils, masks, long coats, gloves, rings, are part of Islamic worship?"²⁷

This was written by a Muslim woman, expressing shock at the level of covering her Muslim 'sister' wore. It is an extreme example, perhaps. There may be consensus on modesty (not an exclusively Islamic concept) but there does not appear to be any broad agreement on whether to wear a *hijab*.

There is a connection between veiling, and limitations of movement - both of married and unmarried women. Some parents, fearful of what might happen to their daughters, do not permit any form of social interaction in a *haram* environment.

Concluding Comments



pilgrim (photo: PADIA)

Re-examination of sources can confront gender issues concerning Islam, and theoretically challenge those:

"status determinants made on the basis of gender".²⁸

Zuhur notes that these gender issues are not simply 'women's issues', but the dialogue between the sexes. As such, a dialogue based on informed interpretation of Islamic sources could challenge many pre-conceived notions regarding gender issues in Islam.

The issue of gender, defined as "...the presence of sex stratification and female disadvantage within society"²⁹ could be subject to a similar discussion, based more centrally on women's issues - according to Zuhur's definition. There should be no challenge to dialogue about Islamic issues, assuming that the Five Pillars are not threatened. After all, Muhammad "...gave his women the right to stand up to him, rebuke him, or tell him where he had gone wrong."³⁰

There has been an increase in analyses by female academics on these issues, but how much this of this information actually reaches an audience in which it could be implemented is another matter entirely. Western perceptions of Muslim women are frequently negative, ignoring both the issues concerning non-Muslim women in the West, and the positive nature of aspects of Islam in terms of the issue of gender.

Women might ask what did God, and Muhammad, really *want* from them? What specific practices are *halal*, and what practices have no foundation in Islam? At present, if Muslim women are 'equal but different', they might consider exactly how balanced and objective the contemporary interpretations of Islam are, and compare them with the relevant *Surah* within the Qur'an, which could support a more egalitarian line and positive power structure on gender issues and issues of gender.

Suggested Reading:

Altorki, Soraya , Zayn Kassam, Valerie J. Hoffman-Ladd and Valentine M. Moghadam. "Women and Islam." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*,
<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0852>

G.M. Vogelsang-Eastwood, *For Modesty's Sake?*, (Rotterdam: Barjesteh, Meeuwes & Co/Syntax Publishers Tilburg)

¹ Zuhur, Sherifa, '*Revealing Reveiling*', (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 6

² The Qur'an, *Sura al-Baqara*, 2.228, in Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an Vol. I (English version of Tafhim al-Qur'an)*, translated and edited by Zafar Ishaq Ansari, (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1988) p 176 Note that a variety of translations are applied in this discussion, in order to bring out specific nuances of meaning.

³ *Khutba-i hajjat al-Wada'*, cited in Tahir Mahmood, "Grandeur of Womanhood in Islam", *Islamic and Comparative Law Quarterly* 6:1 (1986)

⁴ Mawdudi (1939, 1983) 23

⁵ Ahmed, Leila, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992)

⁶ The Qur'an, Ali trans., n.3719, p 1116, 2.187

⁷ The Qur'an, Hilali and Khan trans, 16.97

⁸ The Qur'an Ali trans., 33.35

⁹ The Qur'an, Ali trans., n.3719, p 1116, (Jeddah: Islamic Education Centre, n.d.)

¹⁰ Hadith, al- Tirmidhi 278, *Alim* CD-ROM

¹¹ The Qur'an Ali trans., *Sura al-Rum*, 30:21

¹² Jamal Nasir, (1990) *The status of women under Islamic law and under modern Islamic legislation* (London : Graham & Trotman, 1994, 2nd ed.). p 18

¹³ The Qur'an, *Sura al-Baqara*, 2:187, 229-230, 240, 288

¹⁴ The Qur'an, *Sura al-Nisa*, 4:19-25

¹⁵ The Qur'an, *Sura al-Talaq*, 65 (general)

¹⁶ al-Tabrani, cited by 'Ajuni in vol 1, p 304, quoted in Mawdudi (1989) II, p 20

¹⁷ The Qur'an 33:28-9, 50-52

¹⁸ Fatima Mernissi, "Virginity and Patriarchy" *Women's Studies International Forum* 5:2 p 187

¹⁹ Mawdudi (1989) II, p 8

²⁰ For example, see The Guardian, How to net a husband, May 19, 2003, which discusses the websites Muslimmatch.com and muslim-marriages.co.uk: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/women/story/0,3604,958679,00.html>

²¹ The Qur'an, Hilali and Khan trans., 33.59

²² The Qur'an, Ali trans., 24.31

²³ Mernissi (1982) p 189

²⁴ Zuhur, 7

²⁵ Ahmed, Leila, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1992), p 225

²⁶ Zuhur, 115

²⁷ Gary R. Bunt MA, 30

²⁸ Sherifa Zuhur, (1992) 6

²⁹ Zuhur, (1992) 6

³⁰ Azizah al-Hibn, "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or How Did We Ever Get Into This Mess?", *Women's Studies International Forum* 5:2 (1982) 195.