

WOMEN IN ISLAM

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This paper aims to provide information to those who work in public services and work with Muslim communities and women in particular and who wish to enhance their knowledge on this topic in this climate of misunderstanding, mistrust and fear. This is only an overview of a complicated subject matter and covers only the key areas of misunderstanding.

This topic is worthy of discussion both within Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Within Muslim communities often cultural and traditional practices passed down through generations are sometimes misconstrued as Islamic teachings. In Non-Muslim communities, current political climate and a general discomfort with Islamic religious practice including the *hijab* or headscarf can lead to misunderstandings.

This document is part of the Women and Islam course designed by Aksaa Ltd, Management and Training Consultants, to provide the basic tools and knowledge for those working with Muslim women and help to understand some of the practices that exist among Muslim communities.

It will begin with an introduction to the background of the Muslim community and Muslim women in particular and will go on to explain the key issues that affect Muslim women and focus on topics that many public sector workers come across.

Women in Islam *Half-day Suggested Programme*

Arrival, Registration, Tea/Coffee

9:00 Introduction & welcome

- Introduction & welcome
- Learning outcomes
- Knowledge quiz-Muslim women

- Status of women in Islam
 - As an individual
 - As a mother
 - As a daughter
 - As a wife
- Muslim women in Britain
- Muslim women –cultural norms & attitudes
 - Muslim women dress codes-Hijab etc

- Rights of Muslim women based on Islamic scriptures
- Sharia Law & its impact on Muslim women

- The relationship between husband & wife in Islam & the contrast in culture
- Marriage & polygamy in Islam

11:00 Break for Tea/Coffee

- Question & Answer session
- Review of knowledge quiz
- Evaluation

12:00 Close

****Please note there will be no Mosque visit or tour of Mosque facilities during this half day session.***

KNOWLEDGE QUIZ

Below are 26 Statements. Test your awareness by qualifying them as true or false.

1. In Islam women have to stay at home to cook and clean?
2. Women are not allowed to work?
3. Polygamy is widespread among Muslim communities?
4. Women are supposed to walk behind their husbands?
5. Mothers have a very high status in Islam?
6. Women are not allowed to go swimming?
7. The Hijab is an obligatory dress code in Islam?
8. The veil is not compulsory?
9. Women are equal to men in Islam?
10. Women are not required to contribute financially to the household income?
11. Muslim women are not allowed to go to University?
12. There is a saying in the Islamic Scriptures – The best among the men are the ones who are good to their wives?

**TRUE/
FALSE**

KNOWLEDGE QUIZ ..continued

**TRUE/
FALSE**

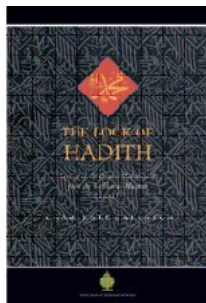
13. According to the Sharia Law women cannot drive?
14. It is a cultural practice among Muslims to have extravagant wedding ceremonies?
15. The consent of the girl is not required during marriage?
16. A small gift is given to the bride from the bridegroom during the marriage process?
17. Modesty is paramount in Islam?
18. Dating and courting is not allowed in Islam?
19. Practicing Muslims do not approve of socially interacting of mixed gender?
20. Muslim women do not usually attend the Mosque?
21. Men and women cannot pray together?
22. The birth of a girl is not welcomed among Muslim communities?
23. Muslim women cannot lead prayers?
24. "The wife is the garment of the husband and the husband is the garment of the wife". Is this a true quote from the Quran?
25. Husband and wife should not share their private life with anyone?
26. Women are required to look after children?

Sharia Law and its impact on Muslim women



To understand the context of Islamic practices one needs to know where the Islamic knowledge comes from. There are two primary sources of guidance that Muslims derive their guidance from. The first is the Qur'an which Muslims believe is the actual and unchanged word of God, revealed to Prophet Mohammad – peace be upon him (pbuh) just as the Torah, Psalms of David and the Gospel revealed to the respective Prophets Moses, David and Jesus peace be upon them all. In Islam Muslims are required to believe and respect all earlier Prophets who were sent by God as Messengers. Muslims believe in the oneness of God, who is the God of all humanity and who is described in Jewish, Christian and Muslim scripture. Muslims also believe that Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) is the last and final Prophet.

The second source of guidance is the Sunnah or practices, sayings, and preaching's of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) and his interpretation of the Qur'an, all of which were recorded over a period of his life time in books called Hadith.



Every aspect of Islamic practice has to be based on these two primary sources or where there is no direct reference of this

on a specific matter then Qiyas – Analogical reasoning to a new problem such as organ donation or Ijmah – consensus from the Scholars, can be used, and based on information drawn from the two primary sources.

With regard to the aspects relating to women in Islam there are many references of different aspects that make it clear how Muslims should lead their lives. The Qur'an, sunnah and with the help of scholars provide guidance on matters such as divorce, marriage, equity, the rights of women etc. In the Qur'an there is an entire chapter on the story of Mary – the mother of Jesus peace be upon him. Mary is highly regarded in Islam. There is also an entire chapter on women and also a number of references to women.



On certain matters Muslims may interpret the meaning of these verses of the Qur'an in different ways as per their own social and cultural situations. This is encouraged in Islam as it demonstrates diversity as long as the sources are from within the parameters of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

In other cases there are practices observed by Muslims that have no basis in Islam and are purely cultural, traditional or even criminal practices; such as women walking ten steps behind men, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and honour killings. Just as Islam does not endorse Terrorism or the killing innocent people, Islam does NOT endorse these practices. Unfortunately, in some Muslim communities, people confuse such cultural and traditional practices with religion.

It is important where such practices exist that Muslim may be educated in Islamic sources so that they see the difference

Muslim women in Britain



Muslim women have been portrayed as being oppressed, subservient to their husbands with no equal rights, mistreated as daughter-in-laws etc.

Whilst minority communities in Britain have suffered many disadvantages in employment and public services and in the past racial discrimination, there are now more Muslim women than ever before in leading positions in society.

According to The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), there are more than 100,000 Muslim women currently working in Britain who share the ambitions, aspirations and challenges of all working women; that is to have a good career and simultaneously balance marriage and motherhood. EHRC also in association with The Times and Emel magazine has published the first annual Muslim women Power List, creating a network of British Muslim women who could benefit from each other. While introducing the list the EHRC chairman Trevor Philips said "There aren't many groups I can think of who are more stereotyped, yet less understood by the wider community, than the working Muslim women.... I hope this list will make the rest of Britain sit up and take note – many members of the Muslim community are making a valuable economic and social contribution to our future."

While some remain conflicted about being lumped together as "Muslim women", all agree that it's worth it if it highlights and celebrates the fact that not all Muslim women are, as one put it, "oppressed, repressed and depressed", but, rather, active and successful in business and society.

The social Aspect of women in Islam

As a Child

In some cultures the birth of a girl child is not welcomed. Islam specifically addresses this issue and has stated that those parents who treat boys and girls equally will enter paradise. The Prophet has said that whenever a daughter is born angels visits the house and shower blessings on the house and on the family. The Prophet has also said whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, will have high status on the day of judgement and in heaven.

As a wife

In Islam marriage is a social contract in which two individuals decide to share their lives – happiness, trials and difficulties – together. As in any other social community, besides perpetuating human life, the objectives of marriage include emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Love and mercy form the basis of a couple's relationship.

There are some commonly held misconceptions about marriage in Islam that are important to clear up. Muslim women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent. Also, the Mahr – which is a marriage gift from husband to wife, is simply a gift and it does not transfer ownership to her father or husband.



As a Mother



Islam considers kindness to parents next to the worship of God. It has strongly recommended good treatment to both parents. In this regard the Qur'an states: "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents." The mother however merits even more love and respect from her children. The Qur'an asks Muslims to respect their mothers because she bore them in pain. The high status of the mother in Islam is further developed in this narration from the Sunnah - A man came to the Prophet Muhammad asking: O Messenger of God who among the people is the most worthy of respect and good treatment? The Prophet replied: your mother. The man said then who else? The Prophet said: your mother. The man asked, then who else? The Prophet said: Your mother. The man asked the fourth time, then who else? Only then did the Prophet say, your father. Another saying of the Prophet is: "Paradise is at the feet of mothers". Implying that you look after your mother (and father) in old age and you will enter paradise.

The mother is also a child's first educator. She teaches her child Islamic as well as secular knowledge much before the child first goes to school. She hence plays a vital role in the transference of knowledge across generations.

The Economic Aspect

Islam gives women the right to independently own property including financial wealth she may have earned or been gifted, real estate, or any other form of properties. This right is the same whether she is single or married. She has the right to buy, sell, mortgage or lease any or all of her properties independently. This right applies to her properties before marriage or what ever she acquires thereafter.

The woman has the right to taking up employment and having a career if she so wishes. However, Islam regards her role in society first and foremost as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential

one. Like all other women, the Muslim woman will balance her career with her domestic duties.

In Islam women also have the right to inherit property. It is important to state here that whatever a woman earns possess or inherits, it is entirely her own, to do as she pleases with. She does not have to spend of her money for the family. This is different for a man who is responsible to look after the expenses of his family and must use all sources of his income for their upkeep. This is even true if his wife earns, in which case she saves her money and he must spend on her too!

Political Aspect



Women have the right to voice their political opinion. This includes the right of election and nomination to political offices including the right to participate in public affairs. Women have participated in serious discussions and debated even with the Prophet himself. These rights of Muslim women were evident in various stages of Islamic history. During the caliphate of Omar, the second caliph, a woman debated her case with him in the Mosque, proved her point and caused him to declare in the presence of the people: "the woman is right and Omar is wrong".

There is also more recent evidence of Muslim women's political rights - many Muslim countries have had female leaders, including Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the British context, the first purpose-built

Mosque in Britain was built in Woking in 1889, by funds donated by Begum Shah Jahan, one of the four Muslim female rulers of Bhopal in India who reigned between 1819 and 1826.

Spiritual Aspect

As per the Qur'an men and women are equal before their God and Creator. They will be judged based on their righteousness and will be rewarded equally for acts of piety. There is no other differentiation that matters, good people will be blessed, the not so good, will have to account for any misdeeds. This verse of the Qur'an eloquently makes this point. It refers to men and women who for various reasons are deserving of a reward.



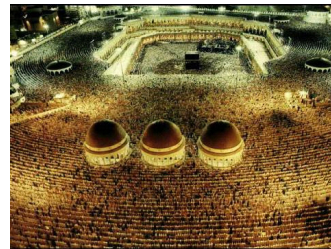
“Verily for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves before God, and all men and women who give charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly; for all of them God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward.” (Holy Qur'an, Chapter 33, Verse 35)

Diversity among Muslim women

Unfortunately in the west, Muslim women are seen as one large homogenous group. All Muslim women are the same and they are all oppressed and subjugated. On the other hand their Christian and Jewish counterparts are rarely ever stereotyped in this way.

There is tremendous diversity among Muslim women who come from all over the world – South East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa etc, just as there are Christians and Jewish women who also come from various countries. For example one would not normally classify a Philippine woman with a German woman, though they both may be Roman Catholics and hold the same beliefs.

In the same way Canadian Muslim women are different from Pakistani Muslims, who are different from Jordanian or Saudi Muslims. There is ethnic, cultural, social and economical diversity among Muslim women. Many Muslim women also believe and practice their faith differently – some are more religious than others. Some may wear the *hijab* some may not. Some may want careers, some may not. Some may be highly educated, others are not. It is important to recognize this diversity among Muslim women and understand its implications for our dealings with Muslim women and in the services we offer communities.



Muslim Women and Culture

It is also important to know that Muslim women in these different countries/communities are accorded different rights and privileges based on the relevant government and customs in the area.

There is no country in the world that follows the complete Sharia Law, which may be considered as an ideal Islamic State. In fact many countries that claim to be Islamic have discriminatory practices against women that contravene the Sharia. These actions of supposedly Islamic countries add to the negative stereotypes of Muslim women. The western media then focuses the few examples of unjust behaviour in the Muslim world, brand Islam

as backwards and fundamentalist, when in fact Islam was the religion that accorded women equal rights. This is evident in the media's preoccupation with women in such countries where there is oppression but fails to report about British Muslim women who are making strident progress in Academia, Corporate sectors, Business and even in Government.

As per Islamic rule Muslim women are supposed to be given shares in inheritance, allowed to choose or refuse prospective husbands, the right to vote and are considered equal to men. However, in many Muslim communities this egalitarianism within Islamic law has been replaced by cultural practices which are often patriarchal. Through time, with slowly changing customs Muslim Governments began placing restrictions on women which had no grounds in the Qur'an or the Sunnah. On the other hand, Christian and Jewish women in the West have slowly been awarded rights not called for in the biblical tradition.

In Islam the aspect of equality or equity is based on justice. The Qur'an states that man and woman are two units of a pair so that they can complement each other in different ways; be it in the mental, physical and emotional personalities of each other. These different qualities strengthen man and woman and establish for them different spheres of activity in their interpersonal relationships.

Marriage, Divorce and Polygamy

In any religion the solemnisation of marriage is the legalisation of a sexual relationship between a man and a woman and the legitimisation of the children produced by them.



In Islam, it is known as Nikah – a civil contract in which a woman does not lose her individuality. Her personality is not merged into that of her husband. In this way women remain absolute owner of her property in any way she pleases without any extraneous control of her husband. The woman is not even required to take her husband's surname, though women may take it if they choose to.

Polygamy is permitted in Islam but is more of an exception rather than the rule. The endorsement in the Qur'an of having up to

four wives came at a time when there was continual warfare which produced large number of widows, who were left with little or no provision for themselves and their children. In these circumstances, polygamy was encouraged as an act of charity. The widows were usually mothers of many children. Polygamy is no longer commonly practiced as the Qur'an clearly states that wives need to be treated fairly and equally – a difficult requirement. If a husband wishes to take a second wife, he should not do so if the second marriage will be detrimental to the first.

Sexual intimacy outside marriage is forbidden in Islam as is sex before marriage, adultery or homosexual relationships.

Marriage in Islam is a contract with conditions and if either side breaks the conditions, divorce is not only allowed but usually expected. If for example if a husband is being cruel to his wife then there is no point in suffering. However, of all the things that are allowed in Islam, divorce is the most disliked in the eyes of God. As mentioned earlier, the husband is responsible for the economical upkeep of his family whilst the wife must nurture the family. The husband has to work to support his family, a woman may work if she chooses to or she may choose to be a full-time mother. Either way her property is her own while her husband must spend of his property to look after his family. The husband is certainly not the master of the house. A Muslim woman has only one Master and that is God.

The husband is required to help with the household chores as was the practice of the Prophet who undertook this task including mending his own clothes. There is great emphasis in the Islamic scriptures

about the husband being good to his wife. The prophet has said that the best among you are the ones who are best to their wives. In the context of domestic abuse it is important to remember that the Prophet never hit a woman, child or an old person and rebuked those who did.

Honour Killings

The majority of the victims of honour killings are women in instances where they

have been accused of “bringing shame” upon their family. These instances include refusing to enter a marriage, committing adultery or being in a relationship that displeased their relatives. In many cases, the crimes are committed by family members against a female relative. There are, however, a few cases of honour killings where a man is the victim. All honour killings do not involve Muslim victims and perpetrators rather it is a cultural phenomenon with its roots in South Asia and the Middle-East. Victims and perpetrators may belong to any faith practiced in these areas.

Most cases have reached the UK courts in recent years but a number of crimes still remain unresolved or undetected. Honour killings originated from tribal customs and up to 12 cases are reported every year. Although the practice happens among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs and perpetrators sometimes justify their actions on religious grounds, none of the World’s religions condone honour related crimes. Rather all religions are against the unjust killing of innocent human beings.

From an Islamic point of view, Muslims must hold every human being in high esteem. According to Muslim Scholars so-called “honour killings” are based on ignorance and disregard of morals and laws, which cannot be abolished except by disciplinary punishments.

Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation preceded Christianity and Islam and possibly Judaism. The exact origin is not known but this practice has no basis in the teachings of Islam. It is common knowledge that in some countries such as Egypt, female circumcision has been practiced by both Muslims and Christians; whilst at the same time not practiced in Muslim countries such as Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. This clearly indicates that female genital mutilation is a cultural practice in many different religions rather than an Islamic practice.

This practice potentially life threatening, is an extreme form of oppression of women and should be banned. From an Islamic perspective, there is no mention of female

circumcision in the Qur’an and no known Hadith which requires this practice.

Dress code in Islam



Muslim women are required to cover their entire body, with the exception of the face and the hands. Also the clothing should not be tight fitting or transparent in order to avoid undue attention. This is drawn from the Prophets’ saying – if the woman reaches the age of puberty, no part of her body should be seen but this and this ... pointing to his face and hands. Some Muslim women may wear a headscarf and some may not. Other Muslim women may choose to wear a veil, which even covers their face. This practice was common in the early days of Islam for the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) but was not recommended for all women.

The hijab is observed in front of any man they could theoretically marry. This means that hijab is not obligatory in front of the father, son, brothers, grandfathers, uncles or young children or in front of other women. Hijab should be worn only by choice and no one should be forced to wear it; as there is no compulsion in religion. The hijab is also influenced by the cultural practices of Muslims leading to many different forms of hijab.

The dress code of Muslim women is the subject of much, often unnecessary,

debate. The headscarf that a woman may or may not wear is ultimately only a piece of cloth. Many non-Muslim women wear head scarves to keep the cold out of their ears in winter. It is important to move beyond discussions about dress code and discuss more important aspects including education, career opportunities, religious-discrimination and other more serious matters.



Education of Muslim women

Islam entitles women to the same rights as men in terms of education. The Prophet – peace be upon him said “seeking knowledge is compulsory for each and every Muslim – irrespective of whether male or female.”

The very first word that was revealed to the Prophet was “read” i.e. seek knowledge for both man and woman. The Prophet’s wife Ayesha was highly educated and a prominent scholar of her time who is credited with the recording and propagation of large sections of Islamic history, knowledge and the sunnah. Ayesha, together with many other Muslim women in history who were highly educated and who taught male and female students are role models that many Muslim women aspire to in respect of gaining a good education.



Conclusion

The rights of women in Islam have been ordained by God through the Qur’an and Sunnah. Although most Muslims just get-on with their lives and practice the teachings of Islam to the best of their abilities, including giving rights to women, there are few who wrongly use religion as a pretext to oppress women by various actions. It is important not to judge the majority on the action of the minority.

To conclude the following are some of the rights that women have in Islam and in a truly Islamic society these would be observed in the fullest extent:

- the right and duty to education;
- the right to have their own independent property;
- the right to work to earn money if they need it or want it;
- equality of reward for equal deeds;
- the right to express their opinion and be heard;
- the right to provisions from the husband for all her needs and more;
- the right to negotiate marriage terms of her choice;
- the right to obtain divorce from her husband;
- the right to keep all her own money;
- the right to get sexual satisfaction from her husband;
- custody of their children after divorce;
- to refuse any marriage that does not please them; and many more.

References & Further reading

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- ❑ Mary C. Ali – The Institute of Islamic Information and Education, North America.
- ❑ Islam and Terrorism, Exploding the Myths – Islamic Society of Britain.
- ❑ Useful websites: www.islamonline.net, www.soundvision.com, www.islamicity.com, www.channel4.com/hajj, www.educationislam.org

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