

## Islam, Culture and Women

How can anyone justify Islam's treatment of women, when it imprisons Afghans under blue shuttlecock burqas 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.

Anyone wishing to understand Islam must first separate the religion from the cultural norms and style of a society. Female genital mutilation is still practised in certain pockets of Africa and Egypt, but viewed as an inconceivable horror by the vast majority of Muslims. Forced marriages may still take place in certain Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, but would be anathema to Muslim women from other backgrounds.

Indeed, Islam insists on the free consent of both bride and groom, so such marriages could even be deemed illegal under religious law.

A woman forbidden from driving a car in Riyadh will cheerfully take the wheel when abroad, confident that her country's bizarre law has nothing to do with Islam. Afghan women educated before the Taliban rule know that banning girls from school is forbidden in Islam, which encourages all Muslims to seek knowledge from cradle to grave, from every source possible.

The Koran is addressed to all Muslims, and for the most part it does not differentiate between male and female. 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.

Since women are under all the same obligations and rules of conduct as the men, differences emerge most strongly when it comes to pregnancy, child-bearing and rearing, menstruation and, to a certain extent, clothing.

Some of the commands are alien to Western tradition. Requirements of ritual purity may seem to restrict a woman's access to religious life, but are viewed as concessions. During menstruation or postpartum bleeding, she may not pray the ritual salah or touch the Koran and she does not have to fast; nor does she need to fast while pregnant or nursing.

The veiling of Muslim women is a more complex issue. Certainly, the Koran requires them to behave and dress modestly - but these strictures apply equally to men. Only one verse refers to the veiling of women, stating that the Prophet's wives should be behind a hijab when his male guests converse with them.

Some modernists, however, claim that this does not apply to women in general, and that the language used does not carry the textual stipulation that makes a verse obligatory. In practice, most modern Muslim women appreciate attractive and graceful clothes, but avoid dressing provocatively.

What about polygamy, which the Koran endorses up to the limit of four wives per man? The Prophet, of course, lived at a time when continual warfare produced large numbers 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. Needless to say, the widows were not necessarily 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. Moreover, if a husband wishes to take a second wife, he should not do so if the marriage will be to the detriment of the first.

Sexual intimacy outside marriage is forbidden in Islam, including sex before marriage, adultery or homosexual relationships. However, within marriage, sexual intimacy should be raised from the animal level to sadaqah (a form of worship) so that each considers the happiness and satisfaction of the other, rather than mere self-gratification.

Contrary to Christianity, Islam does not regard marriages as "made in heaven" or "till death do us part". They are contracts, with conditions. If either side breaks the conditions, divorce is not only allowed, but usually expected. Nevertheless, a hadith makes it clear that: "Of all the things God has allowed, divorce is the most disliked."

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, vindictive, abusive, unfaithful, neglectful, selfish, sexually abusive, tyrannical, perverted - and so on.

In good Islamic practice, before divorce can be contemplated, all possible efforts should be made to solve a couple's problems. After an intention to divorce is announced, there is a three-month period during which more attempts are made at reconciliation.

If, by the end of each month, the couple have resumed sexual intimacy, the divorce should not proceed. The three-month rule ensures that a woman cannot remarry until three menstrual cycles have passed - so, if she happens to be pregnant, the child will be supported and paternity will not be in dispute.

When Muslims die, strict laws govern the shares of 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 are not obliged to share it. Similarly, in marriage, a woman's salary is hers and cannot be appropriated by her husband unless she consents.

A good Muslim woman, 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 (haram 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 - she must, 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.

What should one make of the verse in the Koran that allows a man to punish his wife physically? There are important provisos: he may do so only if her ill-will is wrecking the marriage - but then only after he has exhausted all attempts at verbal communication and tried sleeping in a separate bed.

However, the Prophet never hit a woman, child or old person, and was emphatic that those who did could hardly regard themselves as the best of Muslims. Moreover, he also stated that a man should never hit "one of God's handmaidens". Nor, it must be said, should wives beat their husbands or become inveterate nags.

Finally, there is the issue of giving witness. Although the Koran says nothing explicit, other Islamic sources suggest that a woman's testimony in court is worth only half of that of a man. This ruling, however, should be applied only in circumstances where a woman is uneducated and has led a very restricted life: a woman equally qualified to a man will carry the same weight as a witness.

So, does Islam oppress women?

While the spirit of Islam is clearly patriarchal, it regards men and women as moral equals. Moreover, although a man is technically the head of the household, Islam encourages matriarchy in the home.

Women may not be equal in the manner defined by Western feminists, but their core differences from men are acknowledged, and they have rights of their own that do not apply to men.

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