

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

INTRODUCTION

Sisters in Islam is a group of Muslim women studying and researching the status of women in Islam. We have come together as believers because we want to achieve the rights granted to us by Islam.

Islamic resurgence in the past two decades has affected the lives of Muslims all over the world. It has prompted among many of the Faithful a renewed endeavor to understand the meaning of Islam as a comprehensive way of life (al-din). We believe that women and men who constitute the *ummah* must participate as equal partners in this noble effort.

We are concerned over certain attitudes towards women prevalent in the Muslim world today. From its very outset, Islam was a liberating religion that uplifted the status of women and gave them rights that were considered revolutionary 1400 years ago. In spite of this founding spirit, Muslim practices today often oppress women and deny them the equality and human dignity granted in the Qur'an.

Our research has shown that oppressive interpretations of the Qur'an are influenced mostly by cultural practices and values which regard women as inferior and subordinate to men. It is not Islam that oppresses women, but human beings with all their weaknesses who have failed to understand Allah's intentions.

It has been a liberating experience for us to return to the Qur'an and study Allah's actual words in an effort to understand their true meaning. The Qur'an teaches "love and mercy" (30:21) between men and women, that men and women are like each other's garment ('2:187). that "be you male or female, you are members of one another" (3:195), and that "men and women are protectors, one of another" (9:71).

It is this spirit of equality and justice so insistently enjoined by the Qur'an that guides our efforts. We now wish to share our findings with our sisters and brothers in the hope that together we can create a world where equality and justice may prevail.

Sisters in Islam
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ARE WOMEN AND MEN EQUAL BEFORE ALLAH?

1. Are women and men created equal before Allah?

In the Qur'an there is no difference in the value given to the creation of woman and the creation of man. The Qur'an states "And of everything we have created pairs [zawjayn]" (51:49). Several other verses in the Qur'an also talk about the characteristic of pairs in creation, (53:45, 78:8, 50:7, 22:5, 36:36). (Allah *swt* is not created, therefore He is not part of a pair, which means Allah does not have a gender).

In the creation of human beings, the male and the female make up the pair. Since everything created must be in pairs, the male and female must both be necessary, must exist by the definition of createdness. Neither one comes before the other. This means that in Allah's creation of human beings, no priority or superiority is accorded to either man or woman.

However, due to a number of historical and cultural factors, many Muslims have come to believe that Allah *swt* created woman from man's rib, and woman is, therefore in her origin, derivative and secondary; that men are inherently superior to women; and that women are for men's use.

These beliefs have imprinted themselves on the Muslim mind, causing immeasurable harm to women throughout the centuries. More essentially they contradict the true spirit of the Qur'an. Since everything created comes in pairs, one does not come from the other, or before the other. One is not superior to the other. One is not the derivative of the other. The woman is not for created as a utility for the man, rather they are both created for the mutual benefit of each other.

2. Are women and men created the same?

No. They are not created the same. At the physical biological level, women and men are of course not the same. But these differences do not mean that women and men are not of equal value. In the eyes of Allah *swt*, Muslim women and men are equal participants in all aspects of Islamic life. In several verses in the Qur'an (33:35-36, 9:71-72, 4:124, 3:195, 40:40, 16:97), Allah *swt* specifically addresses both women and men, giving them equal roles and responsibilities in spiritual life and in the Islamic struggle, and equal rewards and punishment for their actions.

The Believers, men and women are protectors, one of another; they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, pay zakat and obey Allah and his Messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise. Allah has promised to Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein (9:71-72).

Since the equal status of women and men in spiritual matters is not only recognized but insisted upon in the Qur'an, what more the equal rights and obligations of women and men in temporal matters.

3. Are there things that only women or men can do in Muslim society?

Whereas only women can bear children, there is nothing in the Qur'an which is exclusive to men. Even "*risalah*" (being a Messenger) is not a general characteristic of the male gender, rather it is exclusive to a few exceptional individuals that happen to have been male. Verses 21:7-8 of the Qur'an state that messengers were men, only to explain that they were human beings and not angels.

The belief that only men can be leaders is contrived since neither the Qur'an nor the Hadith say that a woman cannot be a leader. In fact the Qur'an extols the leadership of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba (27:23-44).

Bilqis's qualities as a good leader were not measured by gender, but by:

- i) her capacity to fulfill the requirements of the office
- ii) her political skills
- iii) the purity of her faith
- iv) her independent judgment

The principle used here is the one best suited to fulfil the requirements of good and effective leadership. If a woman is qualified and the one best to fulfil a task, there is no Qur'anic injunction that prohibits her from any undertaking because of gender.

4. What are the problems in Qur'anic interpretation with regard to the equal rights of women and men in Islam?

The oppression of Muslim women is based on a basic fallacy that women and men are not equal in Islam. There are other reasons why such a fallacy exists.

- (i) One problem is the isolation of a Qur'anic verse from its context and turning it into a universal rule or moral injunction. For example, Muslims who consider that polygamy is a "right" of men have overlooked that verse 4:3 states "if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, three or four..." It is explicit here that polygamy is not a right, but a responsibility to ensure that justice be done to orphans. In practice, however, is polygamy a rarely about orphan's care.

The verse then goes on to state "If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one". It is obvious here that the Qur'an does not promote polygamy. This is further strengthened by 4:129 which states "you are never able to do justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire". When the Qur'an explicitly stresses just conduct toward women and equal

treatment among wives, it also recognises the impossibility of living up fully to these ideals (4:129). Accordingly, it in effect advocates monogamy as the original and ideal state of marriage in Islam (4:3).

It is essential that Muslims read and understand all that the Qur'an says on any particular subject. A passage or a verse from the Qur'an cannot be taken out of context or in isolation because the Qur'an is a highly integrated and cohesive text.

- (ii) The Qur'an was revealed in stages over a period of 23 years. For example, while earlier revelations discourage intoxicants and gambling (2:219. 4:43), later revelations clearly condemn and prohibit them (5:90-91). If someone claims that on the basis of 2:21') the Qur'an permits the consumption of alcohol, we should quote verses 5:90-91 to show that Islam prohibits such acts. (For a demonstration of this methodology with regard to male-female equality, see question 6.)
- (iii) In addition, the Qur'an was revealed within a particular socio-historical context. Some of the traditional ulama believe that even though a verse might be occasioned by a certain situation, its application is universal. For example, in Verse 2:282, the injunction calls for two witnesses to a written transaction or contract. The witnesses can be two reliable adult males or one male and two females "so that if one of them errs, the other oilier can remind her. At the time of this revelation women were unskilled in business and financial transactions. To ensure justice, if that witness erred, the other was needed to remind her. However, some traditionalists understand this specific situation as universal in its application and make eternal the law that two female witnesses equal one male.

It is necessary to understand the context of Qur'anic verses in order to understand the values and principles that lay behind them. "To insist on a literal implementation of the rules of Qur'an, shutting one's eyes to the social change that has occurred and that is so palpably occurring before our eyes, is tantamount to deliberately defeating; its moral-social purposes and objectives."¹

Thus, the interpretation that the testimony of one woman was considered less reliable than that of a man because of her inexperience in financial transactions would be restricted to that socio-historical context. In modern times when women are highly educated and involved in business and finance, this injunction would no longer apply. The underlying value was that justice be done. When women are equally educated and conversant in business as men, there is no reason why her evidence cannot be equal to that of a man.

To say otherwise is an outrageous affront to the Qur'an's stress on justice and human egalitarianism. It is important to remember that while the Qur'an gives solutions to and rulings on specific and concrete historical issues, the Holy Book at the same time provides, either explicitly or

implicitly, the rationales behind these solutions and rulings. It is by considering these rationales that one can then extract general principles. It is these general principles of the verses, not the specific socio-historical case, that have eternal validity.

5. Verse 4:34 has been commonly cited to subjugate women in the name of Islam. How can this verse be interpreted?

Surat An-Nisa' ayat 34 states:

Men are *qawwamuna* over women, (on the basis) of what Allah has [*faddala*] preferred some of them over others and (on the basis) of what they spend of their property (for the support of women)...

This verse has been misinterpreted to mean:

- i) Men have authority over women.
- ii) All men are superior to all women.

i) Do men have authority over women?

In the beginning of this verse the (Qur'an establishes that men are *qawwamuna* (have responsibility) towards women. It does not mean that women are incapable of handling their own affairs, controlling themselves or of being leaders, whether among women, men and women, or even of nations, as has been assumed. Rather, it intends to establish a responsibility of men for the protection and maintenance of women in a restricted social context. Biologically, only women can bear the future generations of Muslims. The Qur'an creates a harmonious balance in society in this case by establishing a functional responsibility for males that facilitates this biological function exclusive to females.

In the Qur'an, responsibility and privileges are linked. Whoever has greater privileges, and other advantages, has greater responsibility² and vice versa. The material responsibility of men in the Qur'an, that they are invested with the responsibility of spending for women's support, has corresponding advantages (like a greater portion of inheritance). This verse is not a sanction of men's inherent superiority. It establishes mutual responsibility in society. Responsibility is not superiority.

ii) Are all men superior to all women?

The Qur'an does not say that 'all men are superior to or better than all women'. Nor even that all men are preferred by Allah *swt* over all women. Advantages are explicitly specified in the Qur'an. Men have a certain advantage materially, resulting in certain responsibilities (or vice versa). When the Qur'an says that "some (unspecified gender) are preferred by Allah *swt* over others", it uses general language which corresponds directly with the observable reality in creation: some creatures have some advantages over others

- even some humans over others. All men do not always have an advantage over all women, nor all women always over all men.

This description of the universal organisation in creation is significant in our discussion of the relationship between advantages and responsibilities. Some are more advantaged than some others, thus their responsibility correspondingly increases. Men have an advantage materially, and an increased responsibility: spending "for the support of women".

It is important to restrict this verse to the particulars mentioned for two reasons:

- a) only then would it remain consistent with the Qur'anic criterion of evaluation in humankind: "the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the one with the most *taqwa'* (49:13).
- b) the resulting arbitrary discrimination creates disharmony between the female and the male.

These two reasons can have negative consequences on the spiritual well being of men. If they are falsely led to believe that they are inherently better than women, without exerting any moral effort on their part, they might not strive to develop the level of *taqwa* necessary to truly be seen as noble in the sight of Allah *swt*.

6. Are there other verses in the Qur'an which talk about equality and mutuality in the relationship between women and men?

As the Muslim society in Medina developed towards an ideal state, Allah *swt* reminded women and men of their equality and mutuality. This can be found in several verses in the Qur'an which many ulama have left their pronouncements on the relationship between women and men in Islam.

In 2:187, the Qur'an describes the Muslim men and women as each other's garments. In his commentary on the Qur'an, Abdullah Yusuf Ali describes this to mean that women and men "are for mutual support, mutual comfort and mutual protection, fitting into each other as a garment fits the body."³

In 3:195, the Qur'an states "be you male or female, you are members, one of another" (*ba'dukum mim ba'din*). The verse goes on to talk about women's role alongside men in the Islamic struggle including hijrah and jihad and the equal rewards that await both.

Verse 9:71, quoted in question two, is the final verse on female/male relationship. In it, the Qur'an talks about women and men being each other's '*awliyya* – protecting friends and guardians. And it also talks about the obligations of both women and men in Islam, such as enjoining what is just and forbidding what is evil and observing regular prayers, zakat and obedience to Allah *swt* and the Prophet *saw*.

Revealed in 8 Hijrah towards the end of the Prophet's life, this verse sums up the Islamic way of life within a relationship of women and men as each other's protectors and friends. It sums up the spirit of equality and mutuality that the Qur'an preaches in the relationship between women and men.

Thus we see that the universal truth, wisdom and beauty of the Qur'an continue to shed a guiding light not only on our daily affairs but even on the problems that have resulted from misunderstanding its noble message. The solution to the problems that have arisen in the relationship between women and men lies in a closer look at that noble message to unveil the ultimate spirit of the book with regard to relationships of such intimacy: to develop "love and mercy" (30:21) between them.

Notes:

¹ Fazlur Rahman, **Islam & Modernity - Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition**, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 19.

² So the wealthy have more responsibilities than the poor; the free have more responsibilities than the slave; the prophets have more responsibilities than the people.

³ **The Holy Qur'an**, text, translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. (Singapore: The Muslim Converts Association of Singapore), p. 74.