



Charles Sturt  
University

# Women in Islam





**COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**  
**Copyright Act 1968**  
**WARNING**

This material has been prepared by the Islamic Sciences & Research Academy Australia ("ISRA Australia") and is subject to copyright under the *Copyright Act 1968 (Cth)*.

No part of this material is to be altered, copied, reproduced or distributed without the written consent of ISRA Australia. However, this material may be referred to or quoted from for educational purposes on the condition that it is unaltered and the source is acknowledged.



# Content

1. Women in the Qur'an and Sunnah.
2. Women throughout Muslim History.
3. Factors contributing to apparent poor status of women in Muslim countries.
4. Why do Muslim women cover their hair and some cover their face?
5. Misconceptions about Muslim women.
6. Interacting with Muslim women – some guidelines.



# Women Prior to Islam

The Pre-Islamic era is known as the *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) era.

Some practices of the *jahiliyyah* era are:

- Female infants were buried alive for fear of poverty or shame.
- Women had no say in marriage or divorce.
- Women were treated like a material possession.
- Women were not allowed to inherit at all. Any small amount of property they did manage to accumulate from trade was subject to their husband or father's control.



# Women in the Qur'an

Men and women are equally expected to fulfil all religious duties and both are included in the final, ultimate reward:

- “... *Whoever does an atom's weight of good, whether male or female, and is a believer, all such shall enter into paradise...*”

Qur'an, 40:40

Both men and women have responsibilities towards one another:

- “*And for women are rights over men, similar to those of men over women*”

Qur'an, 2:26





# Women in the *Hadith*

*“The best of you are they who behave best to their wives.”*

*“An acquisition of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim, male and female.”*

*“Heaven is under the feet of the mother.”*





# Changes that Came with Islam

Islam gave women a say in their marriage.

Islam gave women the right to divorce.

Islam gave women and children a set share of inheritance from their husband or father's property.

Islam made female infanticide a crime against God.

Islam commanded both men and women to gain knowledge.



# Women throughout Muslim history





# Aisha (d. 678)

One of her male students, Urwah ibn az-Zubayr said of her:

- *“I did not see a greater scholar than Aisha in the learning of Qur’an, obligatory duties, lawful and unlawful manners, poetry, literature, Arab history and geneology.”*

Abu Musa Al-Ash’ari, himself a famous jurist and learned scholar, said:

- *“Whenever we, companions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) encountered any difficulty in the matter of any sayings of the Prophet, we referred it to Aisha and found that she had definite knowledge about it.”*

Aisha was known as the “scholar of scholars”.





# Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (d. 801)

Rabi'a is considered one of the founders of the spiritual sciences of Islam known as *tasawwuf* (Sufism).

She emphasised the love of God as an aim far above everything else without neglecting other aspects of Islamic spirituality and practice.

Considered to be the most important of the early Sufi poets.

Her famous prayer:

- *"O God! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship You for Your Own sake, do not prevent me Your everlasting Beauty."*



# Zaynab al-Ghazali (d. 2005)

Zaynab was a prominent Egyptian Muslim woman. She was the founder of the Muslim Women's Association (*Jamaa'at al-Sayyidaat al-Muslimaat*).

Zaynab gave an enormous number of public lectures and wrote many articles.

The bulk of her work however, was concerned with education, especially the education of young women about their rights and responsibilities in Islam.

She believed strongly that Muslim women were entitled to jobs in the public sector, to take an active part in public life, to be leaders in politics or any other field and to express their opinions.



# Book: “Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam”

Mohammad Akram Nadwi developed a biographical dictionary of female hadith scholars. To date, he has found **8,000 of them**, dating back 1,400 years.

- 10th-century Baghdad-born jurist who travelled through Syria and Egypt, teaching other women.
- A female scholar in 12th-century Egypt whose male students marvelled at her mastery of a “camel load” of texts.
- 7th-century Medina woman who reached the academic rank of jurist, issued key fatwas on Hajj rituals and commerce.
- Female jurist living in medieval Aleppo not only issued fatwas, but also advised her far more famous husband on how to issue his.



Charles Sturt  
University

# Muslim Women in the Last Two Centuries





# Women in the Centre of Reforms: Last Two Centuries

In the nation-making moments

- a pillar of the nation's ethnic and
- cultural foundation.

She has been turned into an affective tool during social engineering in Muslim societies.

- She was responsible for birthing the next generation and laying the cultural foundations within the hearts and minds of that upcoming generation.
- She was also meant to be a visible and measurable symbol of social transformations.



# Women in the Centre of Reforms: Last Two Centuries

Women and women's bodies turned into the battleground for policy makers and social engineers in Muslim societies.

- **Women's outward attire**

State authorities took over the task of liberating women through state projects on women's education, employment and participation in public life.

- **State feminism or state directed change**

# Westernists' Projects on Women



In the first half of twentieth century, modernisers in Turkey, Tunisia and Iran depicted veiled women as backward and oppressed.

The transformation from veiling to unveiling, private to public, and invisible to visible simply meant to be the modern state's grant for women's emancipation.







# Some Muslim Countries Impact on Muslim Women

On the other hand, in post-revolutionary Iran (and Taliban Afghanistan as well), women's dress became a potent cultural and religious symbol and, as a result, the forced re-veiling of women has been a central motif in the 'Islamic resurgence', or the 'Islamisation of society'.

Strikingly, the mentality for both were the same: unveiling or veiling women by force.

# Status of women today



# Factors contributing to apparent poor status of women in Muslim countries

## Following culture instead of religion

- Cultural forces contrary to Islamic principles may impel some Muslims to follow cultural practices rather than Islamic practices.

## The media

- The media can sensationalise and zoom in on certain bad examples and thus give the image that Muslim women in all parts of the world are in poor status or oppressed.



University

# Factors contributing to apparent poor status of women in Muslim countries



## Third-world conditions

- In general, in all third-world countries, women, children, elderly and disabled suffer. Many reports that we hear about Muslim women are mainly from third-world countries or war-torn countries.

## Poor leadership and poor governance

- Political leaders may not give priority to womens' issues sometimes as they may feel there are higher priority issues to deal with.





# Factors contributing to apparent poor status of women in Muslim countries

## Colonisation

- Most of the issues affecting Muslim women have emerged after 19<sup>th</sup> century. When most of the Muslim world was colonised by European powers, the Muslim social structures collapsed.

## Freezing of Islamic law?

- Even if some scholars have progressive interpretations, there was no legal and political processes in place to apply these as many Muslim countries did not apply Islamic law any more.



# Factors contributing to apparent poor status of women in Muslim countries



## Lack of female scholars

- This means that the texts are interpreted mostly by men who will not be able to see issues concerning women from a woman's perspective. There needs to be more women scholars as there were in the formative years.

## All women face the challenge

- Women everywhere who have been imprisoned by patriarchal tendencies. This form of prejudice goes beyond simple racial or national boundaries, it is more innate and gender oriented.



# Facts and Figures for Today



## Women:

- Perform 66% of the world's work
- Produce 50% of the food
- But earn 10% of the income and
- Own 1% of the property

(Unifem Website)





# Conclusion

- Women were put in the heart of socio-political reforms and religious discourses.
- The status of Muslim women in today's world is highly variable.
- Islam transformed the rights of women, giving them rights that they never had before.
- Historical examples prove that when Islam was genuinely practised, Muslim women have pioneered in many areas.
- There are many factors that prevent all Muslim women from benefitting from their God given rights. Until these are addressed, we will continue to see problems in the Muslim world.





# References

- Abou-Bakr, Omaima. "Teaching the Words of the Prophet: Women Instructors of the Hadith (Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries)." *Hawwa* 1, no. 3 (2003): 306-28.
- Badawi, Jamal A. *Gender Equity in Islam*. Vol. 2: by IDM Publications, 1995.
- Canan, İbrahim. *Hadis Ansiklopedisi: Kütüb-I Sitte*. 1. Vol. 10: Akçağ, 1995.
- Deguilhem, Randi. "Consciousness of Self: Muslim Women as Creator and Manager of Waqf Foundations in Late Ottoman Damascus." *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies* (2005): 102-15.
- El Fadl, Khaled Abou. "The Nature and Role of Women." In *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, 250-74: HarperSanFrancisco New York, 2005.
- Gerber, Haim. "Social and Economic Position of Women in an Ottoman City, Bursa, 1600-1700." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 3 (1980): 231-44.
- International, Amnesty. *Broken Bodies, Shattered Minds: Torture and Ill-Treatment of Women*. Amnesty International Publications London, 2001.
- Jennings, Ronald C. "Women in Early 17th Century Ottoman Judicial Records: The Sharia Court of Anatolian Kayseri." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient/Journal de l'histoire economique et sociale de l'Orient* (1975): 53-114.
- Nadwī, Muḥammad Akram. *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam*. Interface Publications, 2007.

# Questions

