



WOMEN THROUGHOUT THE AGES: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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“For his day, Prophet Muhammad was a feminist. The doctrine he laid out as the revealed word of God considerably improved the status of women in 7th century Arabia. In local pagan society, it was the custom to bury alive unwanted female newborns; Islam prohibited the practice.

Women had been treated as possessions of their husbands. Islamic law made the education of girls a sacred duty and gave women the right to own and inherit property. Prophet Muhammad was a liberal at home as well as in the pulpit, and even darned his own garments.”

(Time magazine Dec 2001)

Historical Contribution of Muslim Women

- 1400 years ago, Muslim women engaged in all facets of public life:
public debate, trade, education, going on expeditions, participating in and even leading battles
- Book: “Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam,” by Mohammad Akram Nadwi
- This book provides a biography of 8000 female hadith scholars dating back 1400 years

Spiritual Equality



- Islam stipulates that women have just and equitable access to sacred places and houses of worship

The Prophet Muhammad stated *“Do not prevent women from attending the Mosque.”*

- Muslim women are required to perform pilgrimage

Rights of Muslim Women

- Earn equal wages as men
- Choose or refuse her husband
- Initiate divorce
- Inherit
- Earn, possess and dispose of property
- Retain her maiden name
- Education to the highest level



*“The acquisition of knowledge is compulsory
on every male and female.”*

(Saying of Prophet Muhammad)





*“ For believing men and women,
For devout men and women,
For truthful men and women
For men and women who are patient
For men and women who humble
themselves
For men and women who give in
charity
For them God has prepared
forgiveness and a great reward ”*

Quran 33:35

Women in Islam



- This verse demonstrates that women have the same duties as men and receive the same reward for their acts of worship

Mothers in Islam

Prophet Muhammad stated that
“Paradise lies at the feet of Mothers.”





“ There is no merit of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor of a white over a black person, or of a male over a female, only God-conscious people merit a preference with God ”

... Saying of Prophet Muhammad

Dress Code

- Males and females have a dress code
- Statement of faith (many Catholic nuns and orthodox Jewish women similar)
- Should be an act of choice
- Not worn to prevent rape
- Not required at home, among relatives







Dress Code

- Self empowering
- Should be an act of choice
- Most challenging aspect is overcoming stereotypes



The demise

- Disunity; led to weak political and military institutions
- Mongol invasion 13th century
- Complete destruction of libraries in Baghdad
- Spanish inquisition
- Weakened institutions led to less rigorous debate, more conservative approach
- Number of female scholars diminished

Other factors

- Muslim women became exoticised and eroticised in Orientalist discourse
- First half of 20th century; modernisers in Turkey, Tunisia and Iran depicted veiled women as backward and oppressed
- Post revolutionary Iran and Taliban Afghanistan led to forced veiling of women
- Wahhabism
- globalisation

Women in Islam

Reasons for negative stereotypes

- Cultural practices
- Patriarchal interpretation
- Lack of practice of true teachings
- Media



Feminism



- Secular/Western inspired Feminism
- Muslim feminism

Secular/Western Inspired Feminism

- Many perceive Muslim women as an undifferentiated mass, victims of a misogynistic religion
- Enlightenment and liberation only achieved through abandonment of Islamic practices and aping of western cultures



Muslim Feminism

- Commitment to work to improve the conditions of Muslim women through the teachings of Islam not in spite of them



Muslim Feminism

- “Amongst Muslim women, those that see themselves as feminist are those that have reached the conclusion that there is nothing incompatible between their religious beliefs and the basic vindication for women’s equality. It is their very condition as Muslims that leads them to call for the repeal of discriminatory laws and to vindicate the equal treatment to reinterpret their traditions and to cast doubt on the very textual foundations on which patriarchy is built.”

Turkey

- In Turkey, *Diyanet* have appointed 400 female scholars or '*vaizes*', to monitor the work done by Imams in mosques



Morocco



- In Morocco over 50 Muslim female scholars have graduated from the most esteemed Islamic institution
- 2003 Government passed reforms to the nation's shariah- based family law

Saudi Arabia



- Protest movement to end male guardianship of females, and to allow women to drive
- Tens of thousands of female activists involved
- Led to the #I Am My Own Guardian campaign
- Clerics have stated these laws are not based on Islamic law, simply government law
- Saudi Arabia is the only Muslim majority country that has these laws which proves it is based on patriarchy

Sisters in Islam, Malaysia

- Group of female lawyers, activists, journalists and academics, established 1987.
- Seek to articulate women's rights in Islam
 - emphasise the need to interpret the Quran & Hadith in their proper historical, cultural contexts
- Lobbying has led to changes to Islamic family law
- Focus now diversified to other areas; social justice



Progress in Jordan; Queen Rania



- Lobbying to introduce harsher penalties for men who commit honour killings
- Initiated a widespread campaign educating Jordanians that honour killing is a barbaric cultural practice that violates Islamic principles
- Some Muslims do not discern between culture and religion

Muslim women are not a monolith

- Journalist, Ayse Bohurler interviewed over 200 Muslim women in 2006
- These women were from different classes and different countries: Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Oman, Yemen, Sudan, Egypt Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Algeria, Palestine and Jordan
- Concluded Muslim women extremely diverse; no standard prototype as is promoted in the West



Challenges to Muslim Feminism

- Patriarchal interpretations
- Misguided religious leaders and Imams
- Some western feminists
- Local and international scale; vast improvement
- Long road ahead

“By going back to primary sources and interpreting them afresh, female scholars are endeavouring to remove the fetters imposed by centuries of patriarchal interpretation”

Amina Wudud, USA





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