

## Chapter 5: Position of Women in Islam

### 5.1 Gender Equality

No gender differentiation is found in the Qur'an. The following *ayat* provide a few examples of the all-embracing nature of the Qur'an vis-a-vis men and women:

***I do not permit the efforts of workers male or female to be unappreciated – all of you stem from the same source (Qur'an 3:195)***

***Believers male or female who commit righteous deeds shall surely enter paradise ... (Qur'an 4:124)***

***We shall certainly ensure that the male and female believers, who commit good acts and live virtuous pure lives, will be rewarded for their actions. (Qur'an 16:97)***

***Male or female believers, who commit good acts, will certainly enter the garden of paradise and receive sustenance beyond measure. (Qur'an 40:40)***

***O humankind, we created you male and female and appointed you races and tribes so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing among you. (Qur'an 49:13)***

From the above *ayat* it is clear that gender differentiation is not a component of Qur'anic teaching.

Further, in a Qur'anic *ayah* that refers to laudable qualities, repeated reference to both 'men and women' emphasizes that the same standards apply to both sexes and that Allah's recompense is in no way related to gender:

- Muslim men and Muslim women
- Faithful men and faithful women
- Obedient men and obedient women

- Truthful men and truthful women
- Patient men and patient women
- Humble men and humble women
- Charitable men and charitable women
- Men who fast and women who fast

***Men who control their private parts and women who control Men who frequently remember Allah and women who remember Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and great reward. (Qur'an 33:35)***

However, vis-a-vis rights and obligations, some duties are considered to be the province of men and others of women. For example, in Islamic law a husband is required to maintain his home and family, while his wife is not required to contribute anything to it, be she a millionaire or not. That is why the Islamic Law of Inheritance provides sons with double that of daughters, not in any way to indicate discrimination, but rather to reflect their actual responsibilities and duties<sup>1</sup>.

## [5.2 Preparation for motherhood](#)

As mothers are, de facto, at the helm of family life, motherhood is considered to be the cornerstone of Islamic society. For Muslims, the concept of motherhood is inextricably linked to the Islamic concept of leadership and nationhood – for, in the Arabic language, both are derived from the same root word:

Um = mother

Ummah = nation

Imam = leader

The question is, if a sound and healthy society depends on good mothers, how is this achieved? Muslim interest in the importance of motherhood does not in any way imply that Muslim women should not be educated or fulfill their career objectives (See sections 1.4 Education, 5.1 Gender equality and 5.5 Women jurists and scholars), or be isolated from society, but it does underline the significance of preparation for this most important role. A quotation comes to mind,

*Parents wonder why the streams are bitter, when they themselves have poisoned the fountain.*<sup>2</sup>

A whole panoply of scientific research indicates that, before and during conception, fetal development and birth, a new organism's nourishment and well-being depends on, and is affected by, its mother's physical and psychological condition. Whilst the following facts have been uncovered over the last 30 years or so, Islam has always promoted the well-being of Muslim society by encouraging family life, insisting on no-premarital sex and prohibiting the consumption of substances that can be harmful, such

as alcohol.

## Contemporary society

Research into contemporary concerns for motherhood has been undertaken by a gamut of scientists such as Larry Bumpass, PhD, N. B. Ryder Professor of Sociology at University of Wisconsin–Madison. In his paper, 'The Changing Contexts of Parenting in the United States', he refers to increasing instability in the lives of children in Europe and the United States, brought about by the changing social context in which parenting interactions and child development take place. He asks, 'do we really value stable relationships and parenting?'

## Pregnancy

Research studies in prenatal stress and risk for psychopathology early or in later life by Anja C. Huizink, Edu J. H. Mulder and Jan K. Buitelaar, who refer to the work of Hepper and Lake, suggest that maternal stress during pregnancy may lead to offspring with much higher rates of childhood autism, psychosis, schizophrenia, emotional and behavioral disorders, and psychiatric disorders in general. Further, it has been reported by Dr Joy Goodfellow that population studies conducted in the last decade suggest that environmental factors active during embryonic and fetal development have substantial consequences vis-a-vis the occurrence of metabolic and cardiovascular disorders in adulthood.

## Substances

### Caffeine

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advises pregnant women to eliminate or limit the consumption of products containing caffeine, including coffee, colas, tea, cocoa, chocolate and some over-the-counter remedies. Caffeine has been implicated in miscarriages and low birth weight. Caffeine stimulates increased heart and metabolic rates in babies, just as it does in adults. Furthermore, caffeine may remain in the baby's bloodstream longer and at higher levels, because a baby's immature liver cannot get rid of the caffeine as quickly as its mother's can.

### Smoking

Lower birth weight may result from nicotine poisoning narrowing uterine blood vessels and reducing blood flow to the baby. Increased levels of carbon monoxide reduce blood oxygen that in turn affects the development of the baby's organs. The level of carbon monoxide in the blood of pregnant women who smoke is 600–700 per cent higher than in those who do not. Brain injury results not only from reduced oxygen but also from chemicals in cigarette smoke that poison developing brain cells.

Children of mothers who smoked during pregnancy have also been found to have smaller head circumferences, decreased mental performance scores at one year, reduced IQs and diminished

academic performance at school, compared with the children of mothers who did not smoke. There is also an increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) if mothers smoke – if both the father and mother smoke, the risk of SIDS is nearly double.

### Alcohol

Alcohol has the potential to damage male sperm and women's eggs and decrease the chances of conceiving by 50 per cent or more. As women do not necessarily know they have conceived for the first four to six weeks of pregnancy, abstention from drinking alcohol will prevent babies from being exposed to it during the early weeks of growth and development.

The World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that there is no safe level of alcohol for women during pregnancy and recommends abstinence from all alcohol for the entire pregnancy. Heavy alcohol consumption during pregnancy can cause Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), a disorder that encompasses a variety of abnormalities. FAS babies are lighter, shorter and have smaller brains than normal babies. Their brains are sometimes malformed and as a result they sometimes suffer mental retardation.

### Illegal drugs

When a mother takes a substance, so does her baby! If a mother is addicted, so is her baby. If she breast feeds, the baby will drink drug-laced breast milk. If she does not breast feed, her baby will suffer symptoms of drug withdrawal – convulsions, no appetite, bluish pallor, heavy sweating and endless high-pitched crying. Possible effects of illegal drugs on the developing baby include stillbirth, miscarriage, reduced birth weight, mental retardation, prematurity, and an increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Researchers believe that such drugs may constrict blood vessels in the placenta and thus reduce the oxygen supply to the unborn baby – a suffocation effect similar to that caused by nicotine.

In the Holy Qur'an, the significance of the 'Immaculate Conception' is to illustrate that every precautionary measure had been taken to ensure the safe delivery of Isa (a.s.). In the following *ayah*, Allah employs the word 'peace' to embrace both physical and spiritual purity in reference to the successful completion of the first stage of life – the period of pregnancy. ***'Peace be with him the day he was born ...'*** (*Qur'an 19:15*), and in another *ayah*, Isa (a.s.) says, ***'Peace be with me the day I was born ...'*** (*Qur'an 19:33*).

In Islam, preparation for motherhood begins with the selection of a suitable marriage partner. As both genetic background and educational environment contribute towards personality, it would be wrong to ignore them. This is why the background of a prospective spouse is considered to be so important in Islamic culture:

*Do you expect, forsooth, that a mother will hand down to her children principles that differ from her own?*<sup>3</sup>

As it is parental behavior, especially that of the mother, that establishes the standard pattern of a child's behavior, it is highly desirable that parental behavior is exemplary. Imam Ali (a.s.) said:

*The best legacy to leave one's children is good manners.*[4](#)

*The question for the child is not 'Do I want to be good?' but 'Whom do I want to be like?'*[5](#)

For women to be effective role models they, of course, need to participate in, and be part of, society. It is nonsensical to expect them to be in a position to guide the younger generation if they themselves are isolated from, and unaware of, what occurs within society.

## **5.3 Hijab is to protect, not to isolate**

To understand *Hijab* we need to look at the following:

1. What the Qur'an and *aHadith* teach us about *Hijab*.
2. The different styles of *Hijab*.

### **What the Qur'an and ahadith teach us about hijab**

Tell Muslim men to dress modestly and to lower their gaze [when in mixed company] for that will contribute to their spiritual purity...

And tell Muslim women to lower their gaze, to be modest, to conceal the embellishment of their beauty [e.g. jewelry and cosmetics] – other than that which is outwardly visible. To draw their veils over

***Hijab is to protect, not to isolate their bosoms and to only reveal their embellishments to their husbands, brothers, nephews... (Qur'an 24:30-31)***

***O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and those women who believe, to conceal their bodies under long loose garments so that they do not excite attraction. (Qur'an 33:59)***

The precise word for virtuous, modest conduct – an essential Islamic teaching – is the Arabic word *Haya'*, that is considered to lie at the root of self-discipline and moral behavior.

The Prophet (S) said:

*Modest behavior encapsulates the whole of religion.*[6](#)

Imam Hasan (a.s.) said:

*Those who do not behave with modesty have no religion.*[7](#)

Imam Sadiq (a.s.) said:

*Absence of modest behavior equates to the absence of faith.* [8](#)

Imam Baqir (a.s.) said:

*Modest behaviour and faith are linked – where one goes, the other follows.* [9](#)

In recognizing the compelling effect of sexual attraction, Islam guides us to regulate and direct our natural urges and avert their uninhibited expression. This is analogous to the trickles of pure sweet water that burble from mountain springs to flow into streams and rivers. If unchecked, these may later rise to become great torrents of water that cascade over riverbanks and flood defences, to overwhelm and destroy everything in their path. To avert such destruction, society regulates and directs such waters into reservoirs and dams to contain and preserve their mighty volumes for future use.

Sigmund Freud based his studies on the sexual urge being the foundation of all human characteristics and activity. He started with the identification of two main and powerful human objectives – the defense and protection of each human being's very existence, and the expression of each human being's sexuality. However, he later ignored the first to concentrate solely on the second. The damaging result of this indicates that love loses its spiritual purity and is transformed into sexual gratification. This distortion led him to link suckling at the mother's breast to the provocation of adult sexuality by the female bosom. He also considered the relationship between teacher and pupil, fatherly love for offspring and purity of friendship to be emanations of sexuality. Today, there is a voluminous and complex literature in this area.

At the opposite end of the scale, some consider sexual activity to be almost sinful. Indeed, ascetic Christian, Buddhist and Hindu orders link spiritual progress to a celibate life – the renunciation of sexuality.

Islam rejects both these views as extreme. It considers sexual intercourse to be a natural, beautiful and pleasurable act that is to be enjoyed, even when not indulged in, to ensure the continuation of the human race. As mentioned above, Islamic teaching is to regulate and direct natural sexual urges towards beneficial and fruitful ends, e.g. to strengthen the bonds of love and mercy between men and women within the secure boundaries of marriage:

***Among His signs is that He created mates for you, with yourself same essence so that you may dwell together in tranquility, and He instilled between you love and compassion. (Qur'an 30:21)***

The most suitable means to secure the above objective is to advocate and promote 'modest behaviour – Haya'.

In the story of the Prophet Musa (a.s.) two girls wait for their turn to water their flocks. As stronger shepherds pushed them aside to jump the queue, the Prophet Musa (a.s.) helped them. Afterwards while resting in the shade, he prayed, 'O my Lord, I have need of the good that You have sent me.'

Later, one of the girls came up to him in an exceedingly modest manner to tell him that, despite her father being too frail to come himself, he wanted to thank Musa (a.s.) for his kind help. This incident eventually led to her marriage to *Hijab* is to protect, not to isolate Musa. [10](#)

The respectful, decorous way in which the girl conveyed her father's message exemplifies the manner in which all contact between males and females should be conducted. *Hijab* is entirely to serve the above purpose.

### Does Hijab hinder the freedom of women?

Those who claim that *Hijab* limits freedom and hinders women from taking their rightful place within society do not in reality understand the concept of freedom. A woman in *Hijab* is free to express her views, own property in her own right, decide if she wishes to accept a proposal of marriage, etc. Her parents cannot force her in one direction or another.

*Hijab* does not prevent her from pursuing her studies and fulfilling her potential, nor does it prevent her from driving a car, earning her own living or directing a commercial or industrial enterprise. Rather, *Hijab* enhances her dignity and encourages males with whom she comes into contact to behave in a respectful manner towards her.

While western society ridicules *Hijab* and claims it to be oppressive, Muslims believe that it is the answer to a multitude of societal problems. The *Hijab* is protection to shield them from the unwanted and lascivious gaze.

### Different styles of Hijab

Having explained the concept of *Hijab* according to Islamic teaching, we now look at a variety of cultural approaches to meet the requirement. Women in diverse parts of the Muslim world deal with this matter differently. In parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, some cover themselves completely in a *burku* leaving only a small grid before their eyes. In other parts of the world, women only cover their heads with a scarf and wear modest contemporary clothes. Here is a small variety of examples of the *hijab*:

1. Scarf – The headscarf, regarded by many Muslims as a symbol of both religion and womanhood, comes in a myriad of styles and colors and is commonly seen in the West as a covering of the head and neck – leaving the face clear, provided that no cosmetics are used.
2. *Niqab* – This is a veil that covers the face leaving only the area around the eyes clear. Jurists differ regarding the necessity for a *niqab* to be worn – especially when no cosmetics are used and there is no intention to attract the notice of others.
3. *Khimar* – This is a long cape-like veil that hangs down to just above the waist. It covers the hair, neck and shoulders completely, but leaves the face clear.

4. *Chador* and *Abaya* – Both of these full-body cloaks may be accompanied by a smaller headscarf beneath them. The *chador* is worn by Iranian women and the *abaya* by Iraqi women.

## The fuss over covering the hair

There is some debate over whether women covering their hair is an aspect of *Hijab* or not. What is significant?

## Mark of a woman

As is seen in the following, hair is recognized by society to be a secondary sexual characteristic.

'Hair is so significant because of what it is and where it is,' says Dr Martin Skinner, social psychologist at the University of Warwick. 'It is part of us, much more intimate than things like clothes. If you cut it away, you are cutting away a bit of yourself. Whatever we do with it is very much part of our identity.'

So why is hair – particularly long hair – viewed as such a defining part of a woman and inextricably linked to femininity? Zoologist Desmond Morris suggests that women traditionally have long hair because their ancestors, the aquatic apes, developed long hair to give their babies something to hang on to. In recent times, he argues that women have styled their hair to reflect their self-image, with long hair suggesting a certain availability.

Nature also plays a role. People are programmed to take notice of hair because it is a secondary sexual characteristic.

'Thick, healthy, long, glossy hair or fur is seen as a sign of good hormonal health and is one of the things animals use to select a mate – humans are no different,' says evolutionary psychologist Nick Neave of Northumbria University.

Why long hair is so linked to femininity could come down to many things, say experts. It is about youth, health, grace and movement.

Just look at shampoo advertisements, typically featuring models swinging their long, glossy locks. And look at how much the average woman spends on her hair – £600 a year, according to one study. Men spend just £90.

How this association started is not so easy to answer, but it has been entrenched in what is seen as the feminine for centuries' says psychologist Lorraine Sherr. 'As far back as cavemen, there are drawings of women with longer, glossier hair. [11](#)

The purpose of the *Hijab* is then to shield this important aspect of feminine sexuality and beauty from unwanted attention.

## 5.4 Share of inheritance

Under Islamic law, a male is entitled to inherit twice the share a female is entitled to inherit. This ruling may appear objectionable – some say it is unjust, others that it is a sign of Islam's low regard for women.

However, for a better understanding of women's rights under *Shari'ah*, we need to explore family law according to the Qur'an and *ahadith*.

First, as soon as a marriage is conducted, it is incumbent on the husband to care for his wife's every need. A woman is not expected to make any contribution towards the family's living expenses, regardless of the extent of her personal wealth. Indeed, should a woman elect to accept employment, her earnings are not expected to contribute to the family.

Second, any dowry a woman receives remains her personal property – to be invested or disposed of as she wishes.

As an illustration of inheritance distribution, if a man dies leaving a wife, a son and a daughter, his assets would be distributed in the following proportions:

The wife's share of the estate is 12.5%.

The balance of 87.5% is divided into three equal parts. One to go to the daughter – 29.166% –and two parts to the son – 58.333%.

In this distribution it is understood that when the son marries he is expected to pay a dowry and to maintain his wife. However, when the daughter marries, it is she who receives a dowry and lifelong maintenance from her husband – this is in addition to keeping everything that she inherited from her father.

Once in possession of these facts, Islamic inheritance laws no longer appear to be inequitable.

In cases in which parents share in an inheritance, the deceased's mother and father receive equal shares, namely 16.66% each. Indeed, in some situations the mother receives twice the share of the father. For further details see references on Islamic law.

## 5.5 Women jurists and scholars

There has never been a time, throughout Islamic history, when women were faced with discrimination in their pursuit of Islamic knowledge. From the time of the Prophet (S), women played prominent and highly respected roles in the collection and dissemination of *Hadith* – and this has also been the case in every subsequent period of history. Biographies of a large number of women are recorded in tomes such as Ayatollah Khoei's 24-volume Encyclopaedia of *Hadith* Narrators – *Mu'jam Rijal al-Hadith*.

The most notable women at the time of the Prophet (S) were the Lady

Fatimah; Asma, the daughter of Abu Bakr; her sister 'Aisha; Um Salamah; Anas bin Malik's mother Um Salma; and Amamah daughter of Abul 'As. In later generations, many prominent lady scholars are also recorded as having taught the Qur'an, *ahadith*, Arabic literature, etc.

Towards the end of the first Islamic century, "Amra, daughter of "Abd al-Rahman, Hafsa, daughter of Ibn Sirin, and Umm al-Darda were acknowledged to be the most prominent traditionalists of their time. "Amra's reputation was so distinguished that the Caliph "Umar ibn "Abd al-"Aziz ordered Abu Bakr ibn-Hazm, the celebrated judge of Madinah, to notate all the traditions of which she was the recognized leading authority.

Zaynab, daughter of Sulayman – whose father was cousin to Al-Saffa, the founder of the "Abbasid dynasty – a most celebrated traditionalist, was mentor to many renowned scholars. Another famous woman scholar of the seventh century AH known simply as Karimah the Syrian<sup>1</sup>, is described by biographers as the supreme Syrian teacher of *ahadith*.

In his work Hidden Pearls – *Al-Durar al Kamina*, Ibn Hajar names and provides brief biographies of 170 prominent women of the eighth century AH.

In mentioning Juwayriya, the daughter of Ahmad, he records that many of his contemporaries, as well as some of his own teachers, attended her discourses. Umm Hani (d. 778 AH), who learned the Qur'an by heart as a child, later became learned in all the Islamic sciences, including Theology, Law, History and Grammar. She pursued her study of *ahadith* under the renowned *Hadith* scholars of Cairo and Makkah. She is also celebrated for her mastery of calligraphy, her command of the Arabic language and her poetry. She carried out a rigorous programme of lectures at the great colleges of Cairo, where she had the authority to grant licenses of competence to many of the scholars of the time.

Throughout Islamic history there have been many women who took their seats as students and teachers in public educational institutions – along side male counterparts at the highest levels. In the last century, a renowned jurist – *mujtahid* – from Isfahan in Iran, Mrs Amin, taught Islamic Law, Jurisprudence, Exegesis and Arabic Grammar for many decades. Many still refer to her legal opinions for guidance.

In contemporary times, there are colleges and religious centres headed by women in Qum, Mashad and Tehran, in addition to those beacons of illumination and guidance, the women professors at the University of Tehran.

<sup>1</sup> See section 5.4 Share of inheritance.

<sup>2</sup> John Locke, 17th-century English philosopher.

<sup>3</sup> Juvenal's Satires, Sat. vi, 1.239.

<sup>4</sup> Ghurar al-Hikam.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, 20th-century German/American child psychologist and author.

<sup>6</sup> Kanz al-Ummal, Vol.3.p.121.

[7.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 78, p. 110.

[8.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 71, p. 331.

[9.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 78, p. 177.

[10.](#) See Qur'an 28:23-28.

[11. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6375683.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6375683.stm) [1]

'Mark of a woman' by Denise Winterman BBC News Magazine, 20th February 2007.

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