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Women in A Qur'anic Society

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The topic of this paper was chosen out of the conviction that humanity is suffering today from a number of serious social problems related to women and to the interrelations of the two sexes in society. Although these problems may be more pronounced, disturbing, more debilitating for some of us than for others, there are probably few if any regions of the contemporary world whose citizens have not felt in some way the repercussions of these problems.

Therefore, there is a pressing need for exploring possible solutions. The problem of women is linked, for the present study, with the Qur'an, and what I have called the "Qur'anic society," out of strong conviction that the Qur'an offers the most viable suggestions for contemporary social reform which can be found in any model or any literature.

Many of you may be puzzled by the title of this paper-"Women in a Qur'anic Society." You may ask yourselves, "Why didn't she say "Women in Muslim Society" or even "Women in an Islamic Society?" Let me explain why the expressions "Muslim" and "Islamic" were rejected for this paper, and how the use of the rather unusual appellation, "Qur'anic society," is justified.

There are at least three reasons for my choice of that title. The first of these derives from the concern that many beliefs and practices have been labelled "Muslim" or "Islamic" without warranting those names.

There are approximately 40 nations of the world which claim to have a Muslim majority population and therefore to be exemplary of "Muslim" or "Islamic" societies. This of course results in a great deal of confusion as the question is asked: Which of these regions represents most faithfully the true "Islamic" society?

Among Muslims that question is most frequently answered by the claim that their own national or regional society is the truest to the intentions of Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala.

Non-Muslims, on the other hand, and especially the Western anthropologists who travel around the world to investigate the customs and mores of its peoples, tend to treat each variation within the Muslim World as equally valid.

This results from their adherence to what I call the “zoo theory” of knowledge. Adherents of that theory regard all Muslims-and of course similar treatment of other non-Western people is discernible-as different species within the human zoo. The “zoo theory” protagonists go to the field, record and snap pictures of every strange or exotic practice they see and hear; and for them, this is Islam or Islamic practice.

A trip to another part of the Muslim World with the ubiquitous devices for recording and photographing generates a different body of materials documenting superficial variations in customs. But this, too, is Islam or Islamic practice for the “zoo theory” investigator or ethnographer.

There is far too little effort spent on understanding Islam as a whole. As a result, the basic premise of skepticism and relativism is confirmed in the mind of the researcher; and he/she returns home convinced that there is not one Islam, but scores of Islams existent in the world. In like fashion, the researcher reports that there are many definitions or descriptions of the status and role of women in Muslim society.

Each one of the resultant definitions or descriptions is dubbed as “Muslim” or “Islamic” even if we as Muslims may hold some of these practices to be distortions or perversions of our principles and beliefs by the misguided or uninformed among us.

It was partly to avoid confusion with these variant descriptions and misunderstandings that I have chosen the appellation “Qur'anic” for the present discussion. In this way, I hope to move beyond the limited relevance and particularism of a “zoo theory” of investigation to a presentation which avoids such fragmentation and is ideologically in conformance with the true prescriptions of Islam.

In regard to matters so determining of our destiny and very existence, we can never be satisfied with mere reportage about certain human animals in the “zoo” who are statistically “Muslim” or whose customs have been labelled as “Islamic.” Those designations have sometimes been misapplied. “Qur'anic,” on the other hand, is a term which is unequivocal. It points clearly to the topic of this paper.

Secondly, “Qur'anic society” was judged to be the most suitable title for it orients us towards discovering those core principles in the Qur'an itself which form the underlying framework for our societies throughout the Muslim World.

It is the society based on Qur'anic principles which is the goal of all of us, even though we may unknowingly deviate from time to time from those principles. It is the conformance to a Qur'an-based society for which we must all work if the Muslim peoples are to enjoy a felicitous future.

It is not an Indonesian, Pakistani, Saudi Arabian, Egyptian or Nigerian version of that society that we

should regard as indisputable norm, but one firmly based on the teachings of the Holy Qur'an. Only therein can we find a proper definition of woman's role in society. Since it is these teachings which are the subject of my paper, “Women in a Qur'anic Society” seemed the most proper title.

Thirdly, I wish by this choice of title to emphasize that we should regard the Holy Qur'an as our guide in all aspects of our lives. It is not only the prime source of knowledge about religious beliefs, obligations, and practices, it is also the guide, whether specific or implied, for every aspect of Islamic civilization. In the centuries of past glory, it determined the political, economic, social and artistic creativity of the Muslim peoples.

If we are to succeed as members of an Islamic society in the coming decades and centuries, it must again determine our thinking and our actions in an all-inclusive way. Din is not limited to the Five Pillars of the shahadah, salat, siyam, zakat, and the hajj.

Din in fact defies simple equation with the English term “religion,” for the former's significance penetrates into every nook and cranny of human existence and behaviour. Surely it should be our goal to relate every action to our Din. We can only do this by allowing the Holy Qur'an to in-form and re-form every realm of our lives.

As a step in this direction, let us consider what the Qur'an has to teach us about the society towards which we should be striving, and ponder its effect on the position of women. What are the basic characteristics of a Qur'anic society which particularly affect women?

Five characteristics - which seem basic, crucial and incontrovertible - of Qur'anic society will be considered. Although they are presented in a series, each one rests upon the others and affects them. The interdependence of these five characteristics makes it difficult to speak of any one of them without mention of the others, and of course they do not and cannot exist in isolation from one another.

1. Equal Status And Worth Of The Sexes

The first of these characteristics of a Qur'anic society which affect women is that both sexes are held to be equal in status and worth. In other words, the Qur'an teaches us that women and men are all creatures of Allah, existing on a level of equal worth and value, although their equal importance does not substantiate a claim for their equivalence or perfect identity. This equality of male and female is documentable in the Qur'an in passages pertaining to at least four aspects of human existence and interaction.

A. Religious Matters

The first of these Qur'anic confirmations of male-female equality are contained in statements pertaining to such religious matters as the origins of humanity, or to religious obligations and rewards.

1. Origins of Humanity. The Qur'an is devoid of the stories found in the Old Testament which denigrate women. There is no hint that the first woman created by God is a creature of lesser worth than the first male, or that she is a kind of appendage formed from one of his ribs. Instead, male and female are created, we read, min nafsin wahidatin ("from a single soul or self") to complement each other (Qur'an 4:1; 7:189).

Whereas the Torah or Old Testament treats Eve as the temptress of the Garden of Eden, who aids Satan in enticing Adam to disobey God, the Qur'an deals with the pair with perfect equity. Both are equally guilty of sinning; both are equally punished by God with expulsion from the Garden; and both are equally forgiven when they repent.

2. Religious Obligations and Rewards. The Qur'an is not less clear in commanding equality for men and women in its directives regarding religious obligations and rewards. We read:

Lo! Men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who persevere (***in righteousness***) ***and women who persevere and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give aims and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who guard*** (***their modesty***)***, and men who remember Allah and women who remember-Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward.*** (***33:35***)

B. Ethical Obligations and Rewards

Secondly, the Qur'an reveals to mankind the desired equality of the two sexes by establishing the same ethical obligations and rewards for women and men.

And who so does good works, whether male or female, and he (***or she***) ***is a believer, such will enter Paradise and they will not be wronged the dint in a date-stone.*** (***4:124***)

Whosoever does right, whether male or female, and is a believer, him verily We shall quicken with good life, and We shall pay them a recompense according to the best of what they do. (***16:97***)

If Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala had not deemed the two sexes of equal status and value, such explicit statements of their equality in ethical obligations and rewards would not have been made in the Qur'an.

C. Education

Although the more specific commands for the equal rights of women and men to pursue education can be found in the hadith literature, the Qur'an does at least imply the pursuit of knowledge by all Muslims regardless of their sex. For example, it repeatedly commands all readers to read, to recite, to think, to

contemplate, as well as to learn from the signs (ayat) of Allah in nature. In fact, the very first revelation to Prophet Muhammad (S) was concerned with knowledge.

In a Qur'anic society, there can never be a restriction of this knowledge to one sex. It is the duty of every Muslim and every Muslimah to pursue knowledge throughout life, even if it should lead the seeker to China, we are told. The Prophet (S) even commanded that the slave girls be educated, and he asked Shifa' bint 'Abdillah to instruct his wife Hafsah bint 'Umar. Lectures of the Prophet (S) were attended by audiences of both men and women; and by the time of the Prophet's death, there were many women scholars.

D. Legal Rights

A fourth evidence in the Qur'an for the equality of men and women is its specification of legal rights which are guaranteed for every individual from cradle to grave. Unlike the situation in the West, where until the last century it was impossible for a married woman to hold property on her own, to contract with other persons, or to dispose of her property without the consent of her husband, the Qur'an proclaims the right of every woman to buy and sell, to contract and to earn, and to hold and manage her own money and property.

In addition to these rights, the Qur'an grants woman a share in the inheritance of the family (4:7–11), warns against depriving her of that inheritance (4:19), specifies that the dower (mahr) of her marriage should belong to her alone and never be taken by her husband (2:229; 4:19–21,25) unless offered by the woman as a free gift (4:44).

As with any privilege, these rights of women carry corresponding responsibilities. If she commits a civil offence, the Qur'an tells us, woman's penalty is no less or no more than that of a man in a similar case (5:41; 24:2). If she is wronged or harmed, she is entitled to compensation just like a man.

It is clear that the Qur'an not only recommends, but is even insistent upon, the equality of women and men as an essential characteristic of a Qur'anic society. The claim of the non–Muslim critics that Islam denigrates women is denied emphatically by the Qur'an.

Similarly denied are the arguments of certain Muslims that women are religiously, intellectually and ethically inferior to men, as Jewish and Christian literatures had earlier maintained.

2. A Dual Sex Rather Than Unisex Society

Now let us consider the second basic characteristic of the Qur'anic society which affects the position of women. This is found in the directives for a dual sex rather than a unisex society. While maintaining the validity of the equal worth of men and women, the Qur'an does not judge this equality to mean equivalence or identity of the sexes.

Probably all of you are familiar with the contemporary move toward unisex clothes and shoes, unisex jewellery and hair styles, unisex actions and entertainments. In fact, it is often difficult in America to decide whether one is looking at a boy or a girl.

This results from the current notion in Western society that there is little if any difference between the two sexes in physical, intellectual and emotional endowment; and that, therefore, there should be no difference in their functions and roles in society. The dress and the actions are but superficial evidence of this deeper conviction.

Accompanied by a downgrading of the qualities and roles traditionally associated with the female sex, this current idea has generated a unisex society in which only the male role is respected and pursued. Although meant to bring a larger measure of equality for women, the idea that men and women are not only equal, but equivalent and identical, has actually pushed women into imitating men and even despising their womanhood.

Thus it is generating a new type of male chauvinism. Tremendous social pressures have resulted in stripping women of their role-responsibilities formerly performed by them, and they are forced to live a life devoid of personality and individuality.

The society based on the Qur'an is, in contrast, a dual-sex society in which both sexes are assigned their special responsibilities. This assures the healthy functioning of the society for the benefit of all its members. This division of labour imposes on men more economic responsibilities (2:233, 240-241; 4:34), while women are expected to play their role in childbearing and rearing (2:233; 7:189).

The Qur'an, recognising the importance of this complementary sexual assignment of roles and responsibilities, alleviates the greater economic demands made on male members of the population by allotting them a larger share than women in inheritance. At the same time it grants women the right to maintenance in exchange for her contribution to the physical and emotional well being of the family and to the care she provides in the rearing of children.

The unisex ideology generates a competitive relationship between the sexes which we find in America and which is disastrous for all members of society: the young; the old; the children; the parents; the single and the married; the male and the female.

The dual-sex society, by contrast, is a more natural answer to the question of sexual relationships, a plan encouraging co-operation rather than competition between the sexes. It is a plan which has been found suitable in countless societies through history. Only in very recent times did the idea of sexual non-differentiation or identity achieve prominence, and then primarily in the Western society.

Even the medical evidence for mental or emotional difference between the sexes is suppressed in Western research, for it threatens the prevailing trends of thought. How long this socially disastrous movement will continue before it is rejected as bankrupt is not known. But certainly we as Muslims

should be aware of its deficiencies and dangerous consequences, and make our societies and young people aware of the disaster caused by it.

Protagonists of the unisex society have condemned the dual-sex human organisation as dangerous for the well-being of women. If dual sex means that one sex is superior to the other, such a situation could have arisen. But in the true Qur'anic society, toward which we all aspire to move, this is not possible.

As we have seen above, the Qur'an advocates eloquently the equal status of women and men at the same time as it recognises their generally relevant differences of nature and function. Thus while acknowledging the religious, ethical, intellectual and legal equality of males and females, the Qur'an never regards the two sexes as identical or equivalent. It justifies this stand in its assignment of variant responsibilities and its provisions regarding inheritance and maintenance which match those responsibilities.

3. Interdependence Of The Members Of Society

The third characteristic of the Qur'anic society which is strongly assertive of women's position is the insistence on the interdependence of the members of society. Contrary to the contemporary trend to emphasize the rights of the individual at the expense of society, we find the Qur'an repeatedly emphasising the interdependence of the male and female as well as of all members of society.

The wife and husband, for example, are described as "garments" (libas) of each other (2:187), and as mates living and dwelling in tranquillity (33:21; see also 7:189). Men and women are directed to complement each other, not to compete with each other. They are the protectors of each other (9:71). Each is called upon to fulfil certain assigned responsibilities for the good of both and the larger group.

In order to insure this interdependence which is so necessary for the physical and psychological well-being of both men and women, Allah, in the Holy Qur'an, stipulated the reciprocal or mutual duties and obligations of the various members of the family-men and women, fathers and mothers, children and elders, and relatives of all degrees (17:23-26; 4:1, 7-12; 2:177; 8:41; 16:90; etc.). The care of and concern for other members of society is equally a duty of the Muslim.

It is not righteousness that you turn faces to the east and the west; but righteous is he who believes in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and gives his wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free ... (***2:177***)

The Qur'an thereby instils in the Muslim a sense of a place within, and responsibility to society. This is not regarded or experienced as a repression of the individual. Instead the Muslim is constantly encouraged in this interdependence by experiencing the benefits it brings.

The economic, social and psychological advantages of such close relationships and concerns within the

social group provide more than ample compensation for the individual to sublimate his/her individualistic aspirations. The anonymity and lack of social interdependence among its members in contemporary Western society have caused many serious problems.

Loneliness, inadequate care of the aged, the generation gap, high suicide rates, and juvenile crime can all be traced back to the ever-worsening breakdown of social interdependence and the denial of the human necessity for mutual care.

4. The Extended Family

Closely intertwined with interdependence is the fourth basic characteristic of the Qur'anic society which serves to improve male-female relations. This is the institution of the extended family. In addition to the members of the nucleus that constitutes the family- mother, father and their children-the Islamic family or 'a'ilah also includes grandparents, uncles, aunts and their offspring.

Normally Muslim families are "residentially extended;" that is, their members live communally with three or more generations of relatives in a single building or compound. Even where this residential version of the extended family is not possible or adhered to, family connections reaching far beyond the nuclear unit are evident in strong psychological, social, economic and even political ties.

The extended family solidarity is prescribed and strengthened by the Holy Qur'an, where we find repeated references to the rights of kin (17:23-26; 4:7-9; 8:41; 24:22; etc.) and the importance of treating them with kindness (2 :83; 16: 90; etc.). Inheritance portions, for not only the nuclear family members but those of the extended family as well, are specifically prescribed (2:180-182; 4:33,176).

Dire punishment is threatened for those who ignore these measures for intra-family support (4:7-12). The extended family of Islamic culture is thus not merely a product of social conditions, it is an institution anchored in the word of God Himself and buttressed by Qur'anic advice and rules.

The extended family is an institution which can provide tremendous benefits for both women and men when it exists in conjunction with the other basic characteristics of a Qur'anic society.

1) It guards against the selfishness or eccentricity of any one party, since the individual faces not a single spouse but a whole family of peers, elders and children if he or she goes "off course."

2) It allows for careers for women without detriment to themselves, spouse, children or elders, since there are always other adults in the home to assist the working wife or mother. Career women in an Islamic extended family suffer neither the physical and emotional burden of overwork nor the feeling of guilt for neglecting maternal, marital or familial responsibilities.

In fact, without this sort of family institution, it is impossible to imagine any feasible solution for the problems now facing Western society. As more and more women enter the work force, the nuclear

family is unable to sustain the needs of its members. The difficulties in the single parent family are of course magnified a hundred-fold.

The strain that such family systems put on the working woman are devastating to the individual as well as to the marriage and family bonds. The dissolutions of families which result and psychological and social ramifications of the high divorce rate in America and other Western nations are the growing concern of doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists and sociologists as well as, of course, of the unfortunate victims of these phenomena.

3) The extended family insures the adequate socialization of children. A mother's or father's advice in a nuclear or single parent family may be difficult to be followed by an unruly or obstinate child, but the combined pressure of the members of a strong extended family is an effective counter to non-conformance or disobedience.

4) The extended family provides for psychological and social diversity in companionship for adults as well as children. Since there is less dependence on the one-to-one relationship, there are less emotional demands on each member of the family. A disagreement or clash between adults, children or between persons of different generations does not reach the damaging proportions it may in the nuclear family.

There are always alternative family members on hand to ease the pain and provide therapeutic counselling and companionship. Even the marriage bond is not put to the enormous strains that it suffers in the nuclear family.

5) The extended family or a'ilah guards against the development of the generation gap. This social problem arises when each age group becomes so isolated from other generations that it finds difficulty in achieving successful and meaningful interaction with people of a different age level. In the 'a'ilah, three or more generations live together and constantly interact with one another. This situation provides beneficial learning and socialization experiences for children and the necessary sense of security and usefulness for the older generation.

6) The 'a'ilah eliminates the problems of loneliness which plague the isolated and anonymous dwellers in the urban centres of many contemporary societies. The unmarried woman, or the divorced or widowed woman in an Islamic extended family will never suffer the problems that face such women in contemporary American society, for example.

In a Qur'anic society, there is no need for the commercial computer dating establishments, the singles' clubs and bars, or the isolation of senior citizens in retirement villages or old people's homes.

The social and psychological needs of the individual, whether male or female, are cared for in the extended family.

As marriage-bonds grow more and more fragile in Western society, women tend to be the chief victims of the change. They are less able to re-establish marriage or other bonds than men, and they are more psychologically damaged by these losses.

7) The extended family provides a more feasible and humane sharing of the care of the elderly. In the nuclear family unit, the care of the elderly parent or parents of one spouse may fall entirely on one individual, usually the mother of the family. She must provide for the extra physical care as well as for the emotional well-being of the elderly.

This is a tremendous burden on a woman who probably has children's and husband's needs to attend to as well. If she is a working mother, the burden can be unmanageable; and the elderly are put in an old peoples' home to await death. With the shared responsibilities and duties that the extended family provides, the burden is significantly lightened .

5. A Patriarchal Family Organization

The fifth basic characteristic of a Qur'anic society is that it is patriarchal. Contrary to the goals of the Women's Liberation movement, the Qur'an calls for a society which assigns the ultimate leadership and decision-making role in the family to men.

Any society is made up of smaller organisations of humans, governments, political parties, religious organisations, commercial enterprises, extended families, etc. Each of these organs needs to be stable, cohesive and manoeuvrable if it is to be beneficial to its constituents. In order to acquire these characteristics, the organisation must assign ultimate responsibility to some individual or some group within its ranks.

Therefore, the citizens may vote, parliament may legislate, and the police may enforce the law; but it is ultimately the head of state that carries the burden of making the crucial decisions for the nation, as well as the onus or approval, i.e., the responsibility, for those decisions.

In like manner, the work of a factory is conducted by many individuals, but all of them are not equally capable of making the ultimate decisions for the company. Neither is each employee equally charged with the responsibility for the organisation's success or failure.

The family also has need for someone to carry the burden of ultimate responsibility for the whole. The Qur'an has assigned this role to the most senior male member of the family. It is this patriarchal assignment of power and responsibility which is meant by such expressions as “wa lil rijali 'alathinna darajatun “ (2.228; see supra, pp. 40, 41), and “al-rijalu qawwdmuna 'ala al-nisa'i.... “ (4:34).

Contrary to misrepresentations by the Qur'an's enemies, these passages do not mean the subjugation of women to men in a gender-based dictatorship. Such an interpretation shows a blatant disregard of the Qur'an's repeated calls for the equality of the sexes and for its command to show respect and kindness

to women. The passages in question point instead to a means for avoiding internal dissension and indecision for the benefit of all family members. They advocate for a patriarchal society.

In addition, we would draw attention to the use of the word qawwamun in the statement, al-rijalu qawwamuna 'ala al-nisa'i ... (4:34). Certainly the verb qawwama, from which the verbal noun qawwamun is derived, does not imply despotic over-lordship.

Instead, the term refers to the one who stands up (from qama, "to stand") for another in a protective and benevolent way. If an autocratic or domineering role for the male half of the society had been meant, there are many other verbal derivatives which would have been more applicable, for example, musaytirun and muhayminun.

Other instances of the Qur'anic use of the term qawwamun confirm this supportive rather than authoritarian or tyrannical meaning of the term (see 4:127-135; 5:9). Ascription of a different significance to the passage in question is, therefore, ideologically inconsistent as well as linguistically unsupportable.

Why should the Qur'an specify male leadership for the 'a'ilah, i.e., a patriarchal family, rather than a matriarchal organisation? The Qur'an answers that question in the following manner:

Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (***for the support of women***)*....*(***4:34***)

Physical and economic contributions and responsibility are, therefore, the Qur'anic reasons for proposing a patriarchal rather than a matriarchal society.

Some Westerners, confronted by the problems of contemporary society, are beginning to ask such questions as: Where can we turn for help? What can we do in the face of the present social disintegration? It is a time of despair and searching as Western society reels under the blows of steadily increasing personal disorientation and societal dissolution.

What can we do as Muslims to help? First of all, we must build true Qur'anic societies throughout the Muslim World. Without these, we cannot establish equitable and viable accommodation for the interaction of men and women in society.

In addition, we cannot hope to establish in the coming generations a respect for and loyalty to our societies and their accompanying institutions if pseudo-Islamic societies are the only ones we are capable of producing and maintaining.

Pseudo-Islamic measures or institutions are actually anti-Islamic; for they posit a model which cannot be respected, and attach to it the label of "islam" in the minds of many Muslims as well as non-Muslim. this results in a wrongful transfer of the onus of the faulty institution to the religion of Islam itself.

We must educate our fellow Muslims-and especially the youth for they are the leaders of tomorrow-with

regard to the importance and viability of their Qur'anic traditions concerning women, the family and society.

Despite the failure of alternative contemporary Western social patterns, some Muslims seem to hanker after the Western brand of sexual equality, its unisex ideas and modes of behaviour, overemphasis on individualism or personal freedom from responsibility, and the nuclear family system.

We must awake to the dangers which accompany such social ideas and practices. If the consequences of these ideas and practices are not pointed out and combated, we are doomed to an unfortunate future as such social experiments are to fail ultimately.

But even this is not an adequate response for us as Muslims. As vicegerents of Allah on earth (2:30), it is our duty to be concerned about the whole world and about all of God's creatures. In the light of the command to propagate the will of Allah in every corner of the earth, we should not neglect to suggest or offer the good that we know to others.

It is time for Islam and the Muslims to present their solutions of the problems of contemporary society, not only to the Muslim audience, but to the non-Muslim audience as well.

This can and should be done through the living example of true Qur'anic societies in which the problems of men and women are resolved. It should also be done through informative writings and discussions by our scholars which could be made available to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

There is no better way to serve the will of Allah and the whole of mankind. There is no better da'wah than such offering of a helping hand to the struggling victims of contemporary society.

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