

**ANSWERS TO COMMON  
QUESTIONS ON ISLAM**



**DOES ISLAM  
OPPRESS  
WOMEN**



## 1. Introduction

When people generally think about Muslim women there is usually the stereotype of “ignorant, submissive, oppressed and almost totally enslaved by women-hating men” (Jamal Badawi 1995 pg. 43). They are seen as second class citizens who are denied rights to education, employment, involvement in politics, not allowed to speak to men outside their family circle, not allowed to drive, have to walk ten paces behind her husband etc who need to be liberated.

These images of Muslim women are today propounded mainly through certain elements of the media and film industry so much so that they are rarely questioned. They are not new though they have been perpetuated for centuries in Europe by so-called experts on Islam as part of a propaganda war against Islam. Islam has been viewed as a “menace” for centuries, when the Muslims were a strong political force and even since colonialism when they have been politically weak.

Is there any truth behind this negative image? Tragically this is the position in some parts of the Muslim world. This situation though is not universal in the Muslim world and these practices go against Islam. One should not confuse the culture of some Muslims countries with Islam.

Parallels maybe drawn with Christian states. In Northern Ireland there is a culture amongst certain aspects of the community of sectarian violence and punishment beatings. During the Bosnian War, Serbia (a Christian power), conducted massacres against the Bosnians, raped Bosnian women and murdered Bosnian children. In European countries we also see increased in crime rates; acts of violence, theft, child abuse and the effects of individualism encouraging people to be selfish rather than selfless resulting in the breakdown of families and communal life. All these are against the teaching of Christianity.

Thus, if we wish to know what is the position of women in Islam we need to go back to what the religion actually says. In Islam there are two primary sources of guidance on which all other secondary sources are based. These primary sources are believed by Muslims to be relevant for all places and all times. The most important of these two primary sources is the Qur'an which Muslims believe was the final revelation from God to be revealed to human-kind which is actually the word of god. The second form of guidance is the Sunnah i.e. the saying and actions of the final Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) and those actions of his companions which he knew about and did not criticize. The Sunnah is recorded as ahadith (sing hadith). Both these two sources; the Qur'an and the Sunnah form the basis of Islamic Law.

## 2. Equity

'O Humankind! We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and female. And made you into tribes that you may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you and God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Qur'an Chapter 49 verse 13).

"The Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves" (Qur'an Chapter 42 verse 11).

Gender relations in Islam are based on equity. Pairs naturally are different men and women therefore complement each other though there are areas of equality. To understand gender relations in Islam one can look at four main areas: the spiritual aspect, the social aspect, the economic aspect and the political aspect.

## 3. Spiritual Aspect

According to Islamic teachings Eve was not solely responsible

for the first human sin, but Adam was jointly responsible with her. They both repented and both were forgiven. Both males and females are equal in relation to their rights and duties towards God.

“Every soul will be (held) in pledge for their deeds” (Qur’an Chapter 74 verse 38)

“Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him we give a new life that is good and pure, and we will bestow on such their reward according to their actions” (Qur’an Chapter 16 verse 97)

#### 4. Social Aspect

**Daughter:** Favoring sons or daughters is forbidden. The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) said “Whoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her and does favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise”.

**Wife:** A woman is not allowed to be forced into marriage against her will. She does not change her surname after marriage. A wife should be treated with kindness by her husband. The prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) said “The most perfect believers are the best in conduct the best of you are those who are best to their wives”.

**Polygamy:** Islam is usually associated with men having more than one wife. This practice is not exclusive to Islam. In the first few countries of Christianity polygamy was practiced, (this continued up until the mid Middle Ages amongst the Irish aristocracy) and is still practiced amongst some African Christian today.

Why is polygamy practiced? In most societies there are more women than men. The last Irish census 1996 revealed that there are 25,623 more women than men in Ireland. Dr.



Jamal Badawi explains in such a situation there are three options, firstly, the excess females practice celibacy; this is not encouraged in Islam, the sexual relationship is seen as a positive natural act within the marriage thus it would be wrong to deprive some women of this. Secondly, adultery which is forbidden in Islam as in Christianity. Thirdly, polygamy within limits.

The limits set by Islam are that the maximum number of wives should be four. All should be treated equally in relation to time spent with them and also materially. Thus if one buys a house and you have to buy houses for the others, when you buy jewelry, clothes etc for one at the same time you have to buy it for others.

‘If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with them, then marry only one’ (Qur’an Chapter 4 verse 4)

The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) also referred to a severe punishment in the next life for the man who has more than one wife and does not treat them equally.

Polygamy is only practiced by approximately 2% of the World-wide Muslim population which is about 1.4 billion. Muslims are not allowed to practice polygamy in countries which are not Muslim whose laws forbid polygamy. Muslims have to abide by the law of the land in which they live.

Mother: Motherhood is valued, not seen as a second class role.

‘Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents’ (Qur’an chapter 17 verse 23)

The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) said “Paradise is at the feet of your mother “ ie to enter Paradise you have to serve your mother. Muslims see it as an honour to care for their parents in their old age (should they need this); there is no concept

of care homes for the elderly in Islam. The elderly also not seen as burden but a valuable part of the society due to their wisdom and experience.

**Extended Family:** The family unit in Islam is believed to be the building block of the society. Muslim family's are not nuclear but extended. In Muslim countries it is the norm for three generations to live in one household and common for extended family to live close to one another. One of the benefits of extended family for women is that enables them to work whilst another female member of the family looks after their children.

**Education:** The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) said "Seeking knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim". The word Muslim here refers to both females and males. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) one of his wives Ayesha (a wife of the Prophet p.b.u.h) was seen as a major reference point for Muslim community for knowledge about the religion as she was one of the most prominent scholars' she narrated 2210 ahadith. Historically some of the most famous male Muslim scholars have had female scholars amongst their teachers e.g. Sayyida Nafisa (grand daughter of Hassan who was a grandson of the Prophet) was one of the teachers of Imam Shafi.

**Dress Code:** Both Muslim men and women have a modest dress so that we deal with each other on the level of minds rather than bodies. T.V. advertising for example which uses beautiful women in skimpy clothes to sell products is viewed by Islam to be exploitive of women. Husbands and wives are encouraged to both dress up and make themselves attractive for their spouse in the privacy of their homes but not for the benefit of the general public.

## 5. Economic Aspect

Muslim women have the right to their own income and property this does not change after marriage i.e. wife's income/ property is not seen as part of family's income/ property it is exclusively her own, her husband has no right over it. The husband has to provide for his wife and children but she is not obliged to spend even a penny on the household.

Although women are allowed to work if they have children it is believed that the rearing of their children should be their first priority. Muslim women have the right to be paid the same wage as their male counterparts. Muslim women also have the rights of inheritance.

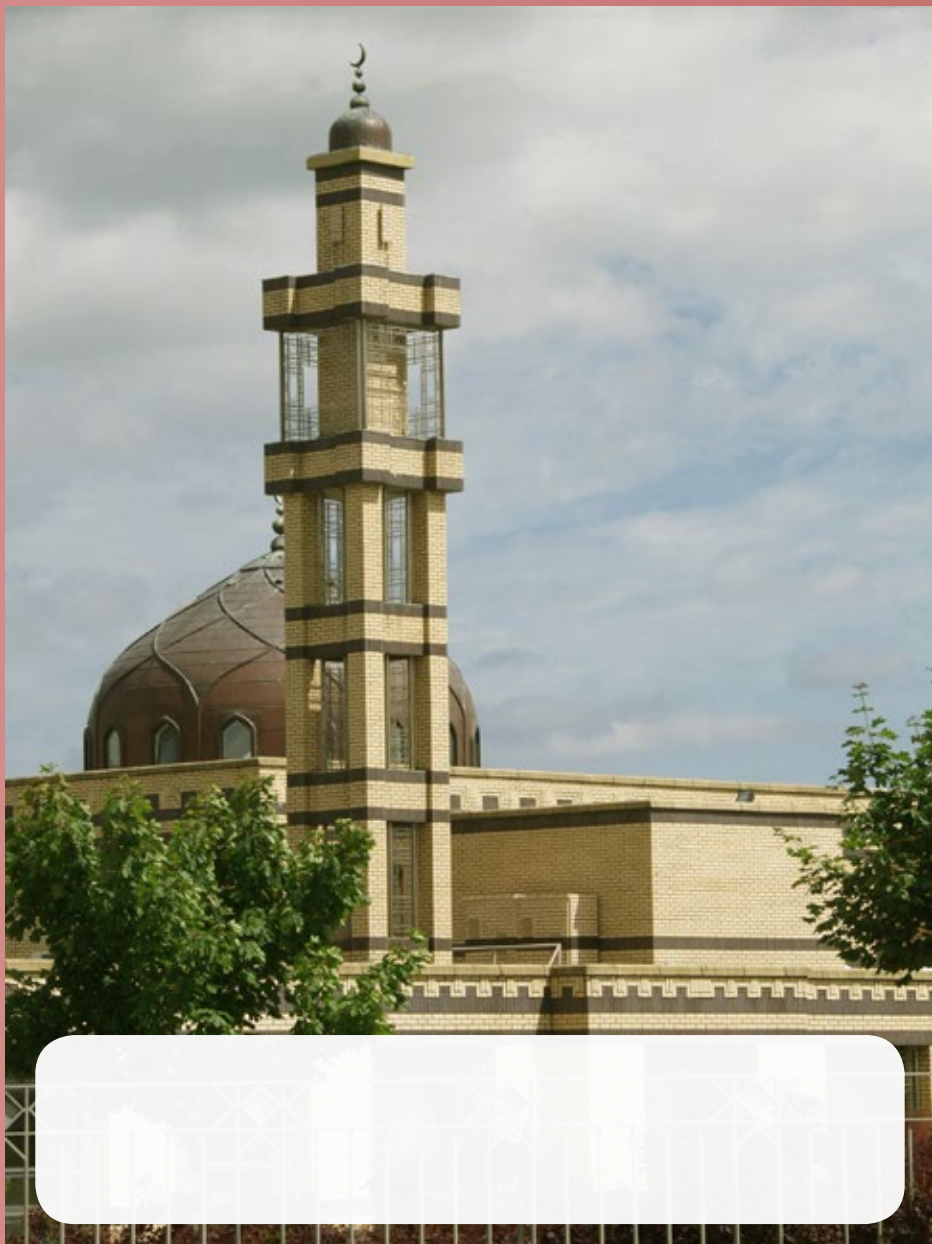
An example of prominent business woman was Khadijah the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h). The British on conquering Egypt in the nineteenth century were shocked to see Muslim women doctors working in the hospitals (a practice for centuries) as there were no female doctors in the U.K.).

## 6. Political Aspect

Both males and females have the right to vote and the right to be elected to political office. Both historically and today we can see the involvement of Muslim women in politics. For example today Sudan has one of the highest proportions of female members of parliament in the world.

## 7. Conclusion

We can thus see that Islamic Law therefore liberates rather than oppresses women.



For any further queries, information and tours, please feel free to contact

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