

Status and Position of Women in Islam

According to primary Sources

Study-Subject

Women in Islam

Missiologie

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THE STATUS AND POSITION OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

Muslims take pride in the supposed fact, that Muhammad improved the position of women tremendously compared to the pre-Islamic time and since then provided Muslim women with a recognizable status and position alongside man. If these Islamic principles of Gender-Relationship would be taken as world order, it would bring about an ideal society for everyone. Unfortunately we do not find many objective sources underlining these statements, which makes us to rely more or less on traditions or pre-positions from the Islamic side. A short study of primary sources of the Qur'an and Hadith shall help us to get a clearer picture of the *status and position of a Muslim woman* concerning "equality" between male and female religiously as well as in their gender relationships in family and society.

1. Equality seen through Muslim eyes

1.1 Equality of Muslim women and men according to the Qur'an

Muslim apologists keep pointing out the equality of men and women before Allah, mainly based on the creation Surahs - which emphatically say:

4: 1 and 7: 189, *He created man and woman from a single soul (person)
And made his mate of like nature in order that
He might dwell with her (in love).*

S. 9: 71 continues...*that men and woman are "protecting friends" to each other,
To enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil.
He created for you mates from among yourself, that you might find rest and joy in them.*

1.2 Equality of Men and Women before Allah

Women are also seen as having equal status before Allah in their performance of their religious duties, in their obligation to follow the five pillars and in receiving the reward for it.

S. 16: 97 reads: *Whoso doeth that which is right, whether male or female, and has faith, verily to him we will give a new life and life that is good and pure and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.*

S. 3:195 *We have believed. Forgive oh Lord, our sins and our mistakes... and let us not be shamed on the Day of Judgment...He answered them: Not one good deed will get lost, whoever might have done it, man or women...*

S. 24:23 *Those who slander and gossip wrongly over respectful and devoted women, shall be condemned in this world and in the world to come and endure immense punishment.*

The above verses seem to show Allah's value on women in the same way, he values men, and if women endure injustice, Allah will not leave those unpunished who inflict it on women. Although these verses don't show any asymmetry in respect of rights, duties or gender hierarchy, the gender-relationship in Muslim societies and countries is far from being equal.

2. The In-equality of Women and Men in Society

We are aware that there are numerous verses giving clear hierarchical positioning for men above women in family and society.

2.1 Men have a degree over women

The following verses are not only distressing to non-Muslim women, many Muslim women themselves feel uncomfortable, when these verses are recited or pointed out to them.

S. 2: 228 And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them...But Men have a degree over them - and commentators explain, that men are physically and intellectually stronger and above women.

S. 4: 34 Men are the protectors and managers of the affairs of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means...

The Qur'an commentator Ibn Kathir explains this verse in the following way: "...men are above (or superior) to women and a man is better and more perfect than a woman...!"

He continues to say, because Muslim men are the providers for the wife and the children, and support them from their own means, they also have their "Say" or power over them. Women are not supposed to manage or control their own affairs and life situations, they are expected to live under the protection of men in their family and society. Men have the right to limit their movements, their choices and their relationships outside the family.

2.2 The legal Position of Women in the Society

2.2.1 In **legal situations** two female witnesses make up for one male witness to testify in court or at any other legal function or transaction.

S: 2:282 Get two witnesses out of your own men, and if there are not two men, than a man and two women, so that if one of them errs the other can remind her.

Muslim Scholars tell us, that women are too emotional and have critical days, where they are not able to rely on their memories. It is seen, that a woman usually needs the support of another woman who is able to help to remember an incident clearly. Only together they are trustworthy and can testify about it.

2.2.2 Also **the Law of Inheritance** further determines that a male offspring gets double the inheritance of a female.

S. 4: 11 Concerning your children, Allah degreed the following: Male heirs shall have as much as two female heirs...

The reason is given that a son one day becomes a husband and has to support his new family. Therefore he needs more money to cope with the demands on him, than a daughter does. As she gets married her husband is supposed to support her, which means that she needs only a portion or half of what the males in the family need. This might have been quite an improvement for the women at that time compared to the former Arabic culture, seeing that

till today in many African tribes, women do not even get a small portion of the inheritance, where everything is given to the sons and the girls have to depend completely on their husbands or start from scratch in their new family.

The Qur'an is not the only source of authority when it comes to the status of women in Islam. The Traditions (the Hadiths) have at least equal say next to the Qur'an and hold many more negative and humiliating statements than in the Qur'an itself.

2.3 Muhammad's personal view on the value of Women

"Those who entrust their affairs to women, will never know prosperity!"! There is a fear, that one can not fully trust a woman... because Muhammad said himself:

"After me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women." (Al-Bukhari, Vol.1, p.688)

Another Hadith says, *"... a man is never alone with a woman, where the devil is not the third among them."* She is the one, who is seen as temptation to men wherever she goes and whatever she does.

Muhammad himself laid the foundation that men can look down on women on various aspects. As he once left the mosque after prayer, he is told to have met some women, whom he challenged on their intelligence and on their religion:

"After Muhammad came out from the place of prayer, he saw a few women and told them: 'O women give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hellfire were you (women). Why is this so, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you.' The women asked: 'What is deficient in our intelligence and religion, Messenger of God?' He answered: 'Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?' They replied in the affirmative. He said: 'This is the deficiency in your intelligence. Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?' The women replied in the affirmative. 'This is the deficiency in your religion.'" (Al-Bukhari, Hadith 6; Muslim Iman 13; Abu-Dauwd, Sunna 15)

The way women are seen with limited intelligence, with a peculiar biological and physical make-up and their regular "un-cleanliness", they are incapable to exercise their religion fully. Therefore they are encouraged to strive for many more "additional good works", to catch up on their short comings.

Out of these reasons they will not be able to ever hold an office as a judge or as imam or religious leader. Women are much more seen as compassionate people, who can rather be doctors, nurses, teachers or hold administrative positions and today we see many women striving for education, careers and high positions, maybe to dispute the fact, that they shall have a deficiency in their intelligence?

3. Women Roles within the Family

The Qur'an supports the common portray of women as potentially dangerous and the majority of the 300 verses in the Qur'an that deal with legal issues focusing on women, deal mostly in form of restrictions: what she is allowed to do, what she is to avoid, how she has to submit to her husband, what duties she has towards him, what rights he has over her, how he can divorce her etc.

3.1 Girls up-bringing

From early childhood the girls come under the protection and watchful eye of their father, brothers or cousins. The boys of the family are encouraged to dominate the girls' lives, and to discipline them - even physically. When they reach puberty, segregation of the genders begins. Girls have to wear veils, or the *hijab*, when they leave the house and enter the public domain. They can only choose and meet friends with whom their brothers or fathers agree. Meeting across gender is carefully regulated and those who venture outside can be subject to harassment and punishment.

3.2 Dress Code and Veiling

The way girls dress is not just a matter of custom or modesty, it has much to do with the religious practice code. Only with the right way of dressing, one can perform the ritual prayer or visit the Mosque.

Outside the family girls and women have to be veiled, not to be a temptation to men and Islam claims that the veil gives honour and dignity to Muslim women by protecting them and helping them to guard their chastity.

The *Hijab* is there to guard the beauty of the woman from the gaze of men and to protect her body from those who want to harm her. Allah himself created the hijab to give women freedom and dignity and to create a healthy society. To wear it is a duty for Muslim women. More western-oriented people like the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Bhutto, the father of Benazir Bhutto, made it clear that the *real hijab* is that of inner modesty and never forced his children to wear it.

Muhammad was advised several times to see that his wives and other female believers cover themselves as they leave their houses.

S. 33: 59 *Oh Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their bodies (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested...*

S. 24: 31 *Believing women should guard their modesty, should not display their beauty and their ornaments, except what must appear. They should draw their veils over their bosom and not display their beauty, except to their husbands, their fathers... etc.*

The necessity to cover the whole body in a way that only the face and hands are exposed, are often drawn from these verses. How strictly communities apply this, depends on the traditions and the determination of the Islamic culture of each country. (extrem form appeared in Afghanistan where the Talibans forced women to walk in public totally covered like mummies).

While in the western world already the head covering is seen as an instrument to oppress and restrict women in their personal freedom, in the Islamic world it is rather seen as a sign of an upright moral life style and as protection of lustrous eyes and forbidden body contact. It declares the woman as honourable and committed to her religion and tradition.

3.2.1 A Christian comment to the Islamic veiling

The problem of unclean thoughts and adulterous desires can not just be solved by complete covering of women and giving them no access to public places or to enforce stricter gender separation. Jesus deliberately talked with women, accepted their hospitality encouraged them

to be messengers of the resurrection news, and in this way He showed the New Testament church that co-operative friendly social relations between men and women is possible.

3.3 Importance of virginity

The virginity of girls and females is regarded as *the honour* of the family. The Egyptian doctor Nawal El Saadawi writes: “ ... *sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility; whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation.*” Any conduct to a man outside the family can already be seen as trespassing the borderline of honourable behaviour and bring great problem for the girl and shame for the family.

3.4 The Islamic pattern of Honour and Shame

An important dynamic in Islam entails the concept of *honour and shame*. The women are the carrier of *the honour* in the family and the women are responsible not to offend any male member of their society...

Honour can easily be lost by women, but can not be regained by women. Honour can only be restored by the men of the family, therefore women are watched closely. To have honour means to behave according to the role assigned for you. Any conduct between men and women can only happen between close relatives or husbands and wives. Whenever women overstep their boundaries, they come certainly under the suspicion of immoral behaviour. It's up to the man to control the woman and publicly reinstate the honour by punishing her. This can not be done in secret. The public needs to see that the man is still in control, sometimes through very drastic measures, like honour killing or locking the woman out of public life.

In the company of men, a woman is expected to turn down her eyes as prescribed in the Qur'an.

S. 24:31 *Tell the believing women, to lower their eyes and protect themselves before anything that might tempt them and that they cover their beauty, except for the parts, which need to be visible and that they should cover their bosom with their veil...*

She is expected to show feelings of shame, to hold herself back and cover herself. There is a saying by Muslim theologians: “*The most valuable jewellery of a woman is her feeling of shame and the best expression of her feeling of shame is the lowering of her eyes.*”

This pattern of honour and shame reveals the man as ruler and the wife as obeying servant, who can not overstep her role or boundaries.

Whenever she is going out, she ought to wear a veil, never use perfume or in any way attract a man to herself. She is never allowed to greet strangers of the opposite sex, shake hands or allow them into the house, if she is alone. She should never travel without a female guardian or close male relative.

If she is not veiled in public and a man is tempted by her and abusing her, it is counted her fault and not the man's.

4. Marriage in Islam

According to the Muslim theologian Abdur Rahman **the ideal wife** must be young and beautiful, wealthy and devoted to her religion with a family status not higher than that of her husband.

4.1 Marriage according to the Qur'an

Marriages are usually arranged by the parents ideally with the consensus of the girl. Most marriages portray a contract between two families and not a love relationship chosen by the couple. The father's consent is essential to a marriage, otherwise it is considered invalid. Both parties are concerned about their relationship, in keeping their wealth together and not lowering their status. A romantic, individual love between two people is not a pre-requisite for starting a marriage. In a good relationship love might grow after some time, but is not a necessity or guarantee for a lifelong marriage...

Marriage is of utmost importance in Islam. It is God's purpose for mankind to be married and a sign that God is acting in this world. A man has to get married to be able to fulfill the God-given roles in society.

S. 24: 32 encourages: *"Marry the spouseless among you"* and the Traditions confirm that also a spiritual component is attached to it:

"If a servant of God gets married, he is fulfilling half of his religion."

To get married is praiseworthy and honourable. Allah gives credits for marriage.

"The best among you are those who are good to their wives and kind to their people."

4.2 Husbands duties and rights in a Marriage relationship –

The Qur'an teaches that the husband has many duties towards his wife, to care for her, to provide for her, to protect her. But can she really expect love?

4.2.1 He has to support her.

S. 4: 34 *Men are the protectors and managers of the affairs of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means...*

This support does not only mean the monthly support of housekeeping and other expenses, this also includes the dowry, which the husband has to pay to the wife as he is getting married. She gets this "wedding gift" also as a special pre-caution for the case of a future divorce.

S. 30: 21 says: *"He created for you mates from among yourselves that you might find rest and joy in them and has put (ordained) love and mercy between their hearts..."*

But nowhere do we find a command that the husband has to love his wife unconditionally till the end of their lives. The biblical principle of, *"leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife"* is a foreign concept for a Muslim.

On the contrary, their duty is to discipline their wives; they are, to a large degree, responsible for their wives' behaviour.

4.2.2. He has to control her and discipline her

S. 4: 34 *As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next) refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly). But if they turn to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance); for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all).*

We find clear steps to discipline: Admonishment – maybe verbally, than he shall not share the bed with her and finally he is allowed to beat her. Many try to figure out what "beating

lightly” means. Some told me, just with a thin scarf , to show the seriousness of the issue, others told me with a thin stick and others told me of a thick scourge, which the husband has in reach to hit her, if necessary...

A husband does not have to explain why he hits his wife. Although the relationship should be one of mutual love, most of them seem rather to encourage a relationship of domination and fear. Such is the husband’s authority over women that Muhammad said that, if it were possible, he would have commanded women to worship their husbands.

Question to think about: If we see loving Muslim families around us, is it because of the image of God in men through creation or because of Islam?

4.2.3 He can always demand the availability of his wife

S. 2:223 *Your wives are as a tilth (field) unto you, so approach your tilth when and how you will.*

The prophet of Allah said:

“When a man calls his wife to satisfy his desire, let her come to him though she is occupied with the oven...” (Mishkat al–Masabih, Hadith 61, Duties of husband and wife)

A man’s sexual needs are considered so urgent, that it is better for food to burn in the oven, than a man to burn in waiting for his wife to satisfy his desire. If she refuses, the angels of heaven will turn against her.

If the wife does not obey her husband or if she withholds herself from him, the angels and the *houris* themselves are angry with the wife till the morning. (Houris are the two special wives in paradise with big lustrous eyes!) (*Al-Burkhari, Bad’ al-khalq*8)

4.3 The Muslim view of Marriage

The husband works and represents the family outside the home and the wife inside the home. Muslim Theologians are trying to convince others that the differences between man and women come from God given roles as husband and wife, which are foundationally different. While the wife has to look after the house, the children and the needs and honour of her husband, the husband is responsible for the affairs outside the house and bound to care for the wife and family financially. S.4:34

“The woman is the ruler of the house of her husband and she is answerable for the conducts of all the affairs.”

Because the husband pays a dowry to his wife and brings in the money to support wife and children, he can make any decision about the family:

He will usually decide where to live, what profession he or his wife can take, how much freedom the wife and other females in his house have to move around, whether the wife can take an outside job and what kind of education his children should receive.

Muslims emphatically defend the different roles of husband and wife, which are not able to be exchanged or equalized, because God has distinctly ordained them differently in society and before the law. This is not oppression of the woman, this is her God given place and role.

In the Middle East we can surely not overlook a grave hierarchal distinction, which brings serious restrictions to women and is not really for her benefit.

4.4 Marriage according to the Hadith

A companion of Muhammad – Ibn Masud valued marriage so high that he exclaimed:

“Even if I had only 10 days left to live, I would still get married to not to appear before God unmarried.”

There are more traditions, which show the expected pleasure and obedience the wife is due to give to her husband...

“Abu Hurairah reported that the Messenger of Allah was asked: Who among women is the best? He replied: She, who gives pleasure to him (husband) when he looks, obeys him when he bids, and who does not oppose him regarding herself and her riches fearing his displeasure.” (Mishkat 1, p.212)

“Abu Hurairah reported that the Messenger of Allah said: If I were to order anybody to make prostration to anybody I would have ordered a woman to prostrate before her husband.” (Mishkat 1, p. 210)

Some Hadith speak about that Muhammad saw in women “a toy”, which the husband can play with or put aside as he feels like, while another Hadith calls a woman “a crooked rib”, which breaks when one tries to straighten it... and which bothers the man as it remains in its crookedness. (Sahih Muslim)

Women are seen as dangerous and deceitful. *“... for they are created from a rib and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it and if you leave it alone it will remain crooked, so act kindly toward women.”* (Mishkat Al Masabih)

The *Hadith* lays the blame on Eve for leading her husband into sin and ever since all women are considered a trap and temptation to men. The Hadith tells us that Muhammad said, *“after me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women.”* (Al-Bukhari, Vol. I, p.688). Mernissi and El Saadawi agree that the malpractice towards women is not the idea that women are inferior. To their mind Islamic culture rests on the premises that a woman is powerful, not weak, positive and not passive, capable of destroying and not easily destroyable and if anyone needs protection it is the man rather than the woman. (*Partners or Prisoners*, p. 59.) Therefore women get the blame for everything. She has to be on her guard at all times.

What has been recorded here shows how much a woman is degraded from the God-intended partnership to an object of use or abuse which starts right after marriage as the bride moves into her husband's home and comes under the *domination of her husband*. She is subject to him in all spheres of life. He has complete authority over her. She has to live for his pleasure, be available for him at any time, and bear him children. There is no real partnership between husband and wife, no biblical “leave and cleave.” According to Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, *“Marriage is a power relationship, husbands are masters and not lovers. A husband-wife relationship is seldom perceived as friendship.”*

Why are husbands masters rather than lovers?

Love between a man and his wife is seen as dangerous. Intimacy between them is discouraged. At the moment of love making the couple should not have their heads pointing towards Mecca and they must recite some Arabic phrases. Sex and intercourse is seen as polluting not uniting. But still a strong sexual appetite is encouraged, mainly within the

boundary of marriage. A deep devotional love for a woman can be seen as competing with the devoted worship of the one and only God.

Fulfillment of Muslim women

Despite of all these negative aspects a woman gets her honour from having and raising children, especially from having sons. Her relationship to her children is stronger than to her husband and her children love and respect her greatly. In her home she is the Queen.

Elderly women are usually well respected in the society and are often seen as the protector of the traditions, religion and proper behaviour.

An Islamic tradition says: **“Paradise lies at the feet of the mother!”** which explains why the children usually treat their mother like the queen of the house and support her as best as they can.

4.5 Parents and Mother-in-law –

The mother-son bond is perhaps the closest family tie in Islamic societies. It is fostered by many Hadith and by the Qur’an itself.

S. 46:15 states:

“And we have enjoined on man to be dutiful and kind to his parents. His mother bears him with hardship. And she brings him forth with hardship, and the bearing of him, and the weaning of him is thirty months, till when he attains full strength and reaches forty years, he says: ‘My Lord! Grant me the power and ability that I may be grateful for Your favour which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents, and that I may do righteous good deeds, such as please You, and make my offspring good.’”

Traditionally the mother-in-law controls the household in which the new bride usually moves into. It is not easy for the mother to give her son away to another woman and she will often interfere into their relationship. The son is forced to please his mother first, before he can please his wife. Her opinion is generally more important than his wife’s. Fatima Mernissi said that this mother-son bond brings about a split between love and sex in a man’s life: *“His main love is to be towards his mother, with whom he cannot have sex. His sexual partner is his wife, to whom he cannot show too much affection without alienating his mother.”* Mernissi also sees this as one of the major factors preventing strong marital bonds.

It is the job of the young wife to live to her mother-in-law’s satisfaction and win her love and appreciation. If the marriage was arranged by the mother-in-law she can be a blessing to the young wife, or otherwise a misery and a great source of suffering.

5. Polygamy

Muhammad himself was the leading example in proving polygamy as an established tradition within Islam. History tells us that polygamy was a widespread practice in pre-Islamic times and that Muhammad simply brought order into society by restricting the number of wives, while he himself was allowed to have about twelve wives and even some extra concubines.

5.1 Polygamy - only an option for man

Muhammad cautioned the Muslim men in Surah 4: 3

“If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three, or four. But if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing unjustly.”

Because Muslim men may have up to four wives, the fear of a co-wife is very real. Modern Muslims tell us Islam is actually for monogamy because nobody can deal justly with more than one wife and therefore prefer a monogamous home, not only because of economical burdens, but because of the social frictions they have experienced in their own polygamous background. Jealousy among women and rivalry among the different lots of children is still a major factor.

5.2. Warnings about Polygamy

To warn his followers not to be less concerned about equal treatment of their wives he said: *“A man who marries more than one wife and than does not deal justly with them, will be resurrected with half of his faculties (limbs) paralyzed.”*

The Prophet himself was quite concerned to appease his wives in order to avoid jealousy in his own home, which was apparently the best example of polygamy and where rivalry still could not be avoided. How can it be different today? A few years ago in Kenya we experienced a third wife poisoning her husband, because she was deadly jealous about his treatment of the other wives and their children.

Perhaps it was his awareness and the pain of the conflict in his own home that led Muhammad to forbid his son-in-law, Ali, a second wife. Muhammad believed that if Ali wanted another wife, he should rather divorce Fatima than expose her to a rival: *“... because Fatima is part of my body, and I hate what she hates to see, and what hurts her, hurts me.”* (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. VII, p. 115-116) Why these different standards?

5.3 Reasons for polygamy

The main arguments in favour of polygamy are that the physiological and sexual needs of men are more compelling than those of women and last to an advanced age. In addition infertility, chronic illness or long menstruation, hinder healthy relationships. (see S. 2:222) To guard from the sin of adultery and to protect women in immoral societies, the Qur'an proposes polygamy (S. 70: 29-31 *Wives and female slaves are permitted...*)

Although Muslim women grow up and marry with the prospect, that the husband may take another wife, they still feel the pain of rejection when it finally happens. (Exceptions are seen by old nomad women, who encourage their husbands to take a young wife to do their hard work.)

(There are some Muslim countries like Pakistan and Morocco, where monogamy is the norm, except the wife is barren or mentally and chronically ill. Only with a special permission of the first wife can than a man take a second wife.)

Abdur Rahman opposes these views with the following comment.

“These countries which have prohibited polygamy by law have gone against the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. If polygamy were not allowed, the Prophet would have stopped people practicing it in his lifetime. There is no single Hadith that suggests that polygamy is forbidden.” (from “Women in Sharia” –Abdur Rhaman)

What does Abdur Rahman want to say here? A Muslim does not really need any arguments to try to justify polygamy. Muhammad himself was the leading example in proving polygamy as an established tradition within Islam. What more does a Muslim need!?

A Christian response to Polygamy:

Christians and even the Western countries (in which deteriorating morals are our deep concern) reject polygamy, *because it inhibit or exterminates exclusive, devoted love.* Love between the sexes ought to be exclusive; otherwise it is degraded in essence to mere sexual fulfillment. No woman who loves her husband and wishes to be fully loved in return can tolerate a partner. One may lose sight of this fact in a polygamous society, but even Aisha, the favourite wife of Muhammad, confessed of having been jealous. How much more would the other wives have been! (Muhammad's Marriage to Aisha)

But there is one further aspect: Monogamy gives recognition, status and value to a woman. It is silly to argue that a polygamous society makes prostitution unnecessary. What about sexual fulfillment for the woman, who has to share her husband with other wives? And what about the men who surely have to go without wives, because someone else has more than one?

5.4 War - a Reason for Polygamy

Muslims tell us that polygamy balances the surplus of women in this world and that this surplus is about 1:4... but the fact is, that the numeric superiority of girls over boys is too insignificant to justify the legalization of polygamy.

We can also not accept the argument that during the "Holy Wars", when many men were killed, polygamy was a justifiable provision for the widows. According to notes in (Sahih Muslim, 3, p. 491), in all the 82 hostilities during the lifetime of Muhammad, only 259 Muslims lost their lives. When Muhammad moved to Mecca with 10 000 men, how many of them would have had a chance of marrying even one widow? Just 2%!

6. Divorce

Although the Qur'an allows divorce, Muhammad called it "*the most detestable of permitted things*"! (Sura 2: 226- 240)

Tradition says: *What Allah hates most among what is allowed is a divorce.*

6.1 Divorce- easy for Man

Although Muhammad said that the most detestable lawful act to Allah is divorce, it is still remarkably easy for a Muslim to divorce his wife. He may divorce his wife without any misbehaviour on her part, or without assigning any cause or reason. He can utter the divorce orally three times "I divorce you", I desert you, "You are free" and no matter if he said it for fun or while drunk, under compulsion or free... it is still binding as a deliberate utterance, if the husband is sane and adult.

If he regrets it and wants to take her back he can only do so if she has been married to someone else, even if only for one night.

S. 2:230 "... *someone else must have tasted her sweetness first.*"

Does the husband say the "Tagalac" (divorce-phrase) only once or twice, the divorce can be reversed and he can take his wife back within a period of three months. But has the husband

uttered the word for divorce three times, the man can only take his wife back if she had become the wife of another man in the meantime and had been given a divorce by him too.

S. 2: 230 *“If a husband divorces his wife (irrevocably) he cannot after that, re-marry her until after she has married another husband and he has divorced her. In that case there is no Blame on either of them, if they reunite...”*

This regulation was introduced by Muhammad to actually protect the women and that a man should not allow a sudden gust of temper or anger to induce him to take hasty action.

To avoid quick divorces the Qur’an suggests to appoint arbiters of the two parties, and if the couple wants reconciliation, God will help them to succeed in their marriage afterwards.

(Sura 4, 35)

Seeing that divorce is so easy for men to arrange, thus the wife hopes that her family arranged marriage will soon be “glued-together” with the blessing of many sons to safeguard her from an early divorce.

A woman is unable to dispute a divorce instigated by her husband, but she does have the right to also seek a divorce if the husband does not care for her. This is called self-redemption, which means she can buy herself back from him, but it is still he who has to divorce her. Listen to the Hadith at this point: *“If any woman asks her husband for a divorce without some strong reason, the odour of paradise will be forbidden to her.”* (Mishkat Al-Masabih. Vol. 1, p.696) A man can divorce his wife without eternal consequences, while the wife can not!!

6.2 Consequences of the divorce –

Whenever a divorce becomes final, it is usually the woman’s fault. It is expected of her to keep the family together, to obey her husband and not annoy or anger him through aggressive behaviour, disputes or unnecessary demands.

After the divorce a husband has no duty to care for his wife financially, only for his children. If the woman is still pregnant from her divorced husband, he has to care for her till the Baby is weaned. A strange proposition is given in the Qur’an, which shows some fairness towards ladies in the process of being divorced:

S. 65: 6 *“Let the women live (in iddat) in the same style as ye live, according to your means. Annoy them not, so as to restrict them. And if they carry (life in their womb) then spend (your substance on them until they deliver their burden. And if they suckle your (offspring), give them their recompense; and take mutual counsel together, according to what is just and reasonable. And if ye find yourselves in difficulties, let another woman suckle (the child) on the (father’s) behalf.”*

Children of a divorced marriage belong -according to the Islamic law- to the father, while the mother usually receives the right to care for the kids in their early years and maybe visit them later on.

The divorced woman loses her children, her home, her income and has to go back to her brother or father where she is unwanted. Her only way out seems to be prostitution or a quick new marriage. What is worse, if the husband does not divorce her, but instead leaves her without support and care, preventing her from getting married to another man.

6.3 Reasons for divorce

Most common reasons for a divorce are the infertility of his wife, mental sickness, refusal to embrace Islam (one partner coming from a different background), the inequality of race or tribe, because of an insufficient dower or by Apostasy from Islam (whether the Apostasy be of the man or of the women, an immediate dissolution of the marriage takes place without a decree from the Qazi) Dictionary of Islam, pp. 87ff

A Christian response:

There is no promise of a lifelong faithfulness and commitment to marriage given during an Islamic wedding celebration, nor any moral promise of any kind or any blessings of Allah. On the contrary the marriage contract contains regulations for the day of divorce through the dowry, which is given to the wife on the wedding day. The Islamic marriage is more like a civil contract between two families, which helps to a functional lifestyle and to regulate financial matters.

This has much to do with the View of Allah in Islam. He is not a God who keeps his promise, he can change his word, and does not have to stay faithful and true to himself.

On the other hand in the same way as the God of the Bible never breaks his covenant with men from his side and is forever faithful, trustworthy and unchanging, the Christian marriage is meant as a relationship with one partner for a lifetime in faithfulness and giving of oneself. For Christian couples can missed support, sickness, or sexual failure not be a reason for divorce like in Islam, on the contrary, exactly in these situations should a Christian marriage proof itself to it's promise, to come alongside the partner in good and difficult days, when the other one needs the healthy one even more.

7. Religious Life

The tragic consequence is that the husband can not only determine her life here on earth, with what to do, whom to associate, where to go, and how to please himself best, the conduct towards him also influences her life after death.

Her obedience towards her husband is not optional, it determines her *eternal* destiny.

“Whosoever female dies while her husband is pleased with her, will enter Paradise.”

(Mishkat al Masabih – Hadith 11.60)

“Fire has been created for the senseless, the women, except for the one who obeyed her husband.”

or Muhammad warned one woman saying to her:

“Watch how you treat your husband for he is your paradise and your hell.” (Kanz-el-Umma Vol. 22 – Hadith 868)

According to the Tradition, Aisha challenged her husband after hearing some of the above Hadith asking what hope women have to enter paradise and it is said, that after that Muhammad received the following Surahs, which should show equal possibilities and opportunities between men and women to enter Paradise.

S. 16: 97 reads: *Whoso doeth that which is right, whether male or female, and has faith, verily to him we will give new life and a life that is good and pure and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions...*

S. 33:72 *“For the believing man and women, Allah has promised Gardens, where rivers flow and where they will live forever. A wonderful dwelling place are the Gardens of Eden, but more wonderful for them is Allah’s favour...”*

7.1 Allah - is so distant -

No one can approach Allah, except as a slave! The God of Islam can not be approached as heavenly father and is certainly not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Women ask: How do we know whether God accepts us with our good works? They are only *“half a person”* in the matter of inheritance on this earth—what about eternity? *They are separated in the mosques and in their public prayers -* What about the fellowship with God in paradise? Will God be far there too?

Muhammad’s view on Women in Paradise

One of Muhammad’s companions tells us the following story:

“After Muhammad came out from the place of prayer, he saw a few women and told them, ‘O women give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hellfire were you (women).’... (Al-Bukhari, Haidh 6; Muslim Iman 13; Abu-Dawud, Sunna 15) (Continuation on Page 3 in this paper)

Some more sayings from the Hadith:

“One woman of 1000 women, is in heaven, and the rest of them are in Fire.”

“Fire has been created for the senseless, the women, except for the one who obeyed her husband. Men perish when they obey women.”(Kanz al-ummal, 22:10)

One can’t help wondering why God ever created women. The way He made them, it looks like they can never reach paradise because they are falling short of all the things they should do and cannot do not matter how hard they try.

7.2 Religious Duties

Muslim apologists tell us that in religious affairs there is no difference between men and women—they are equal.

S. 33: 35 *“For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women... who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, ... who fast... who guard their chastity and engage much in Allah’s praise – For them has Allah prepared Forgiveness and great reward.”*

But when we look into the traditions of the prophet, a woman’s religious freedom is limited and can be further limited by her husband.

7.2.1 Prayer – Salat. Women are not allowed to pray and read the Qur’an or enter a mosque when they are menstruating. They are polluted just because of their nature and physical make up. This is significant in a religion that teaches that rewards are given according to what is done, rather than only by the grace of God.

Women often pray for long periods in the evening after their daily duty is done, to make up for the lost prayer times during the day, where they were busy with house-core and children.

They are encouraged to pray in the “inner-most” room in their home and not go out to pray where women will be a distraction for men. “*The prayer of a man will be interrupted if a dog, an ass or women pass in front of the believer.*” (Abu Huraira, in Muslim Salat 285)

When Aisha heard this teaching she was abhorred. She challenged Muhammad and said, you put us on the same level with dogs and donkeys... but Muhammad stayed silent.

Even today women like to participate in the Mosque, because the prayers in the Mosque count more than prayers at home. One of my friends travels every year to Mecca for the Umra, just to increase her credits before Allah, because she can pray in the biggest Mosque there, where her prayers are counted a few thousand times more than at home.

7.2.2 Fasting – Saum. The month of Ramadan is a great event in the year a Muslim and his community. They feel close in their “suffering” and celebrating and it brings them together as families and friends. It helps to build most credits for the future life.

Muslim women cannot pray and fast when they are menstruating and have to lose out in their participation, so they often try to fast extra days outside of Ramadan. This presents a problem because she can not fast without her husband’s permission. Fasting also includes abstinence from sexual intercourse and women are to be available to their husbands at all times. Sad to say a husband can determine his wives destination, by not allowing her to fast as much as she would like or need to.

7.2.3 Alms-giving – Free-will giving is called *sadaqah* (feeding the poor) and required giving is named *zakat*, which gains extra merit before Allah. Women are only allowed to give alms if their husbands give them permission to do so because it is, in most cases, his money she uses. If she has money of her own, from her inheritance or from her job, she will try to add extra payment to what she was losing out in fasting and other duties.

7.2.4 Pilgrimage - the *Hajj* is believed to be a sure way to forgiveness and a new start in life. A woman’s freedom is curbed even here by her dependency on men as she is not allowed to make a journey on her own. She needs male protection from one of her male relatives.

In each of these acts of piety and Islamic practice, women are at a disadvantage. They cannot carry out their basic religious duties without male help and approval.

Why do Muslim women stay Muslims? Religiously they cling to the verses in the Qur’an saying,... *men and women who do righteous acts will enter paradise*, see Surah 33:35 and 9:72. (They ascribe the problem and dark insecure future as wrong interpretation of their leaders, not to Islam or Muhammad himself.) They also stay Muslims because of their social and economical environment and pressure and their close-knitted society and family. They need the assigned place in their community to feel secure and even if it is a place of oppression and little freedom. Allah will be too angry with them, if they bring shame to their family clan, by venturing out or breaking some of their boundaries.

7.3 Islamic Paradise

Islamic heaven is described in the Qur’an and Hadith as a place of sensual delights as well as of the nearness of God. (Although Allah is not described to be present in Paradise, rather seen from afar, like the moon or waving from behind a cloud ...) Surah 38:49-52 and 83:22-25 speak of beautiful green gardens, reclining chairs, rivers of wine and many female companions to be enjoyed. It seems more like a kingdom for Muslim men than a dwelling place for both sexes because of the sexual sensation and rewards described. (Surah 44:51-54)

"The lowliest in paradise will have eighty thousand servants and seventy-two wives." (Mishkat Al-Masabih Vo., 2, p.1204) *"The believer will be given the sexual capacity of a hundred men."*(p. 1200)

What about the female believers?

In Islamic practice and piety, women are in the disadvantage and especially the Hadith does not give equality to women nor grant them to be "co-heirs with men" in the life to come. She is a victim of abuse in this life and even in the life to come:

"Of a Thousand women one will be in paradise and the rest will be in the fire." (Al-Bukhari V. 7 pg 74)

The challenge is, that women are not able to keep up with all the demands the religion is putting on them.

A Christian Response:

Islam does not have an all-reaching "church structure", which means that women have a very limited sphere of tasks in the Mosque. Each woman must live her faith pre-dominantly in her private realm and is not encouraged by Allah to influence and imprint her environment and her society spiritually or intellectually together with her husband. The couple does not enter into a spiritual covenant and has no common task in the "church" and society as a spiritual unity. In the same way there is also no common future hope to spend eternity in the closeness and presence of God together.

8. Folk Islam

Because God is so distant, and the hope for eternity so blurred, many women turn to charms and "holy men" to help them in times of need. Among women *Folk Islam* and seeking power by witch doctors or "Muslim sheiks" is much more prevailing, then among men. Wearing amulets for protection, drinking the ink-water of Qur'an verses and even passing them on to new born babies is a very common practice.

8.1. Fear of evil eye and jealousy curse –

There is much fear of the evil unseen world around them which can harm them. They fear neighbours or jealous people who want to destroy them, especially during joyous periods, like pregnancy and the birth of a baby. Young mothers would often hide their babies so that nobody may bewitch them with the evil eye. Women fear for their children, for their own lives and try to find help and protection from the "*Evil Eye*"!

They fear sickness and misfortune, even death, as a result of the evil eye or jealousy curse. Many Muslim women never look into a stranger's eye, because no one knows who has the power of the evil eye and can harm you by looking at you. (This gives you a problem if you want to build relationships while shopping, etc.)

8.2. Seeking help from the spiritual realm

Every woman wants a happy marriage, a faithful husband and healthy children, esp. sons. Who wonders, why women pay big sums to Imams for special prayers in this regard, why women go to "holy men" for help and even put a few drops of urine in the morning tea of the husband to make him remember her and stay faithful to her? Women fear the jealousy and envy of their neighbour, friend and sometimes even relative... They seek protection and favour of Allah through their good works, in their prayers and in their giving.

8.3 Fear of gossiping tongues –

Old women go around from house to house spreading trouble, separating husbands and wives, slandering their good name, bringing shame upon the family. Many young wives keep totally to themselves because of their fear of gossip. Moroccan proverbs describe older women in uncomplimentary terms. *A man who reaches eighty becomes a saint, a woman who reaches sixty is on the threshold of hell. What takes Satan a year to do is done by an old hag (woman) within an hour.* (Fatima Mernissi in *Partners or Prisoners*, p. 53) While the younger woman is dangerous because of her fatal attraction, the older one is dangerous because of her frustration and intrigue.

8.4 Muslim Women's Dilemma – a Christian Chance

In the Islamic version of moral order, women play a key role and yet God remains far away for these women. "God won't listen to my prayers when I'm menstruating. How can I become righteous before God when I fall further and further behind on the required prayers each month?" The Muslim woman's dilemma is her spiritual insecurity, despite of all her religious effort.

Therefore with God so distant, many turn to magic, charms and spirit mediums for answers. Others, in handfulls all around the world, are finding answers in Jesus Christ. He is bringing them into personal relationship with the living God who wants a relationship with his creatures. Just as Jesus long ago touched - or let himself be touched - by a woman with a flow of blood and didn't consider himself polluted, so today he is touching Muslim women.

This dilemma is the greatest Chance of Sharing Christ with Muslims, because he is a God who is near, personal and able to empower women to cope with the daily challenges and live a life pleasing to God. He is not offering a new Religion. He is offering New Life and this not only for "good and righteous women", but even for outcasts, for burdend and rejected women.(John 4)

9. Conclusion with a Christian response:

Has Muhammad really improved the position of women?

We have to conclude that Muhammad simply brought *human* solutions. His solutions are certainly imperfect. He did not reinstate the ideal of mutual love and respect as reported in the Bible. Muhammad made some rules that improved the status of women, like forbidding to bury unwanted girls alive as soon as they are born (which makes Muslims till today very proud of their Prophet), but his laws and rules did not reach far enough.

Stuttgart, 25.10. 2007 Christel Gschwandtner

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