

# WOMEN IN ISLAM: MYTH VERSUS REALITY

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## *Introduction*

Western cultures have often viewed Islamic cultures as having a negative view of women. Recent outcries from Muslims have prompted studies on the actual treatment of women in these societies. One of these studies was done by Geraldine Brooks, who went to live as a Muslim woman in the late 1980's to find out what it was like to live in a culture thought of as so uncaring and unfriendly to its women. Brooks uncovered some very hypocritical views, especially in regards to the teachings of the Qur'an as opposed to the way the Muslim women are actually treated.

In this essay, I intend to offer Islam as it is in reality, as compared to how it is presented in the Qur'an. The Qur'an has a positive outlook in regards to its view of women. The genders are treated equally in the Qur'an. The Prophet Muhammad was also fairly equal in his views of women. In reality, however, neither the Qur'an nor Muhammad's teachings about women are abided by. Women are treated as less than men and sometimes as less than human. The dichotomy between the Qur'an and life in Islam is the subject of the present essay.

## *Women in Islam: Myth Versus Reality*

The true spirit of Islam, as written in the Qur'an, is one of equality between members of both genders. The Qur'an states, in passage 4: 1, "O mankind! Fear your Guardian Lord who created you from a single person, created his mate of like nature and from them both scattered countless men and women" (Thabit, 1997). This version of creation is quite different from that offered by *Genesis*. The Qur'an implies the equality of men and women in that both were created from the same materials, as opposed to *Genesis*, which suggests the first woman was created from the rib of the first man. If Islam countries today were to follow the advice as written in the Qur'an, men and women would certainly be treated as equals. Muhammad once said, "Women are the twin halves of men" (Thabit, 1997). By following the

Qur'an and Muhammad's teachings, women in Islam would be treated as men are treated. However, this is not so in present-day Islam. The Qur'an has apparently been misinterpreted to advocate male dominance.

In a book entitled *The Rights of Women in Islam*, Engineer (1992) writes that the book "is an attempt to set out women's rights in Islam in the true Quranic spirit for there has been much deviation from this spirit in practice." This is a true statement which can be proven by comparing the laws as stated in the Qur'an and the actual way women are treated. Brooks (1995) moved to Islamic cultures in the late 1980's and wrote a book about her experiences entitled *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*. This book catalogues Brooks' experience as a woman in Islam. Since the Qur'an has been badly misinterpreted to allow for male dominance, noting the original intentions of the Qur'an is important. The Qur'an is very liberal in its attitude toward women's status, and some progressive Islamic cultures are reinterpreting the Qur'an in order to place women in their rightful place of equality.

The current image held by a Westerner of an Islamic woman is a grave one. Westerners see an Islamic woman portrayed in movies and on television as the veiled and silent lesser half of a man. Recently, however, Muslims have protested against this view. They believe that women are veiled to protect them from the evils of men, who would be too tempted to control themselves if they saw a woman's flesh. Although perhaps the sentiment is in the right place, this implies that women are too weak to protect themselves. Islam may see protecting women as offering them equality, but it remains a form of discrimination. Some women view wearing *chadors* as enabling them to show their dignity, modesty, and self-esteem. These women view Western dress as permissive and less respectable. As one Muslim woman said, "Iran adopted the worst of the West, including the exploitation of women's bodies to sell modern merchandise. Because we don't tackle the real feminist issues, we just went from sex objects Oriental style to being sex objects Occidental style. Worse yet, we often get squeezed in between. Under such circumstances, the *chador* could be a tool for reasserting a woman's human dignity by forcing her people to respond to her talents and personality rather than to her body alone" (Esposito, 1991). This woman obviously respects her right to wear the *chador*.

Brooks' (1995) assistant in Egypt, a woman named Sahar, also chose to wear her *chador* after going without it for some time. She says in Cairo, "You never hear about veiled girls being raped." Although the rape of any woman is unusual compared to Western cities, suggestive comments and inappropriate fondling are more common

with women in Western clothes. Sahar also felt her *chador* gave her access to a bureaucratic women's network. Seeing a fellow veiled woman would often prompt government workers to give Sahar's requests preferential treatment. At the same time, Sahar felt it was easier for her to deal with men when in her *chador*. That way, she explains, "They have to deal with my mind, not my body" (Brooks, 1995).

In Iran, other women chose to wear their *chadors*, too, in order to show opposition to the Shah after the Iranian revolution and to remain anonymous during public demonstrations. In 1979, however, many of these same women protested against a law that would make wearing the *chador* a requirement; the women may have chosen to wear their veils, but at least they had a choice. Even after these demonstrations, wearing the *chador* became compulsory in government and public offices. In conjunction with these rules, coeducation was deemed illegal and women were shut out from entering the legal profession (Esposito, 1991).

Women are not the only ones encouraged to abide by a dress code. The Qur'an urges men, as well, to be modest in their dress. Muhammad's traditions suggested a need for men to cover the area of their bodies between the navel and the knees with opaque, loose-fitting clothing. This traditional code, however, is rarely abided by. Men all over the area wear tight jeans, and the soccer players wear shorts that reveal most of their upper leg. Since this is the case, strict Muslim women cannot take their sons to a soccer game, as it is inappropriate for a woman to see an improperly dressed man. Women are also supposed to leave the room if a man chooses to watch soccer on television. Iranian women have to swim in their *chadors* at the Caspian Sea; however, men do not have to wear swimsuits covering their navels (Brooks, 1995).

In a recent article published by the Islamic Information Centre of America, Thabit (1997) wrote an article entitled "Reflections on Woman Status in Islam" [sic]. The purpose of this article was to enlighten the Westerner on Islam's dedication to the equality of women. The article quotes several passages from the Qur'an which seem to indicate gender equality, such as "[Your wives] are your garment and you are garment for them" (2:187). Based on these phrases, Thabit makes the assumption that Islam really cares for its women. However, the language in the rest of the article seems to indicate an Islam that feels the need to receive credit from Western cultures for giving "the woman the right to education, to be an active and productive member of society, so she can learn and teach just like a man can." This phrase is incredibly gender-biased, even though it appears in an article which is aimed at showing the world how

equal Islamic women and men are! Islam expects to be praised for being so gallant as to let the women learn'? This is not equality. Equality is when everyone is equal, and no one has to think about it or receive praise for it.

Concerning marriage, Thabit writes that the household is a kingdom ruled by the husband and wife together. Despite this, Thabit also says "In each kingdom, as we know, there is always a person with the highest authority who is entitled to have the last say when a problem arises. This highest authority in the family life is given to the man ... partly because the man by nature generally makes a better leader than a woman." This thought is also reflected in a book by Rahman (1986), who writes, "... men possess natural qualities which make them better candidates for the job of leadership of the family. They are better placed and better equipped to lay the role of leadership in the family than women. It is in the interest of the family that both the members should be assigned that job for which each is the better fitted." Neither of these phrases can, in any way, be viewed as equal to the genders. It also appears that men are not allowed to "burden" their wives with household decisions. "In spite of the higher degree of the man over the woman," Thabit writes, "the man does not have the power to burden his wife for the sake of imposing his decisions." Thabit also points out how kind it is of Islam to let a woman have the right to choose her husband and, if necessary, decide to get a divorce. This is not a right that needs to be granted by the religion of the country; this is a way of life that should be inherent to every woman.

Although a Muslim woman may inherit money and goods from her father, husband, or children, a man inherits double what the woman does. The reasoning Thabit gives for this grave misfortune is that it is the responsibility in Islamic cultures for the man to be the financial provider for the family. This is not equality. Being the sole financial provider for a family is no easy task, but many women in the United States contribute at least half of their family's income and some women are the sole caretakers of their family's financial, emotional, and physical needs.

There are several conflicting ideas in Thabit's article. For example, fourteen centuries ago, Islamic society decided that men and women alike must be true and faithful servants of Allah. Assuming they meet this criterion, Allah will reward both men and women. By placing men and women together in the praise of Allah, Islam is truly trying to attain equality. However in this same article, Thabit points out that the women who lived during Muhammad's life taught other women how to become "great wives, mothers, and powerful planners in the house." This suggests

that women are good as household workers, not in professions in which men dominate: "... a woman is encouraged just as the man is to seek education, and reach the highest levels of scholarship and success possible." Assuming the highest level of scholarship is caring for the household, the previous statement seems true.

Although there is nothing to this effect in the Qur'an, women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to travel without male accompaniment. A receptionist in a Saudi Arabian hotel told Brooks that women did not travel alone because "there is no reason for it. Unless she is a prostitute." This statement represents Islamic belief that women who are independent are immoral and illegal. The Qur'an never desired to place restrictions on women, nor did it desire that women cover their faces upon leaving the house. In fact, all the Qur'an states about the dress code of women is that they dress in a dignified manner and not display their sexuality.

The Qur'an makes it clear that women are humans and complete persons in their own right. Women are not to be treated as extensions of their fathers, husbands, or brothers. Women are also to be treated as whole individuals whether or not they have children. Equality between the sexes is shown in another passage about marriage and relationships. Passage 24:26 of the Qur'an states, "Bad women are for bad men and bad men are for bad women. Good women are for good men and good men are for good women" ([www.hti.umich.edu](http://www.hti.umich.edu), 1997). This passage promotes equality and points out that both men and women can be both good and bad.

However, another passage about marriages indicates an inequality. The passage, 4:4, is as follows: "And give women their dowries as a free gift, but if they of themselves be pleased to give up to you a portion of it, then eat it with enjoyment and with wholesome result" ([www.hti.umich.edu](http://www.hti.umich.edu), 1997). Although this statement appears to be beneficial to women since they receive a dowry, it is an inequality and is therefore not beneficial. The statement is especially not beneficial when one reads an interpretation of the dowry as given by an Islamic scholar, "The dowry is given in exchange for the woman's sexual organs" ([debate.domini.org](http://debate.domini.org), 1997). Another reason the dowry is not beneficial to women is that often times the marriage is arranged by the bride's father. If this is the case, the dowry is given to the family rather than the bride herself. This brings back notions of a woman being sold to her new husband (Esposito, 1991).

The dowry only comes after a marriage is agreed upon, either by the woman and the man or by the woman's father and the man. Often times, the hard part is

deciding to marry. An 18year old student that Brooks (1995) met said, "Marriage for us is a complete risk. A husband has so much power over you that you have to be mad to marry someone you don't know perfectly. But under the system we have here, it's impossible to get to know a boy perfectly. You can't go out with him, you can't spend time alone with him." This statement reflects a young Iranian student's apprehension about marriage. However, she is in something of a tough situation since she cannot get to know a man without marrying him, yet she does not want to marry a man she hardly knows.

One way around this conflict is to have an arranged marriage. Another woman Brooks (1995) met, Basilah, had an arranged marriage at age 21. Her father told Basilah that she had been proposed to and asked her if she wanted to meet him. Basilah told her father that she trusted his judgement and agreed to the marriage. Her reasoning for implicitly trusting her father was that no one cared about her happiness as much as he did. Now that her father arranged the marriage, Basilah said she would "think a thousand times before I say, 'Can I have a divorce?'" Basilah views her marriage as not only between two people but between two entire families.

The *Saudi Gazette* printed an article by the religious commentator in 1993 which stated the Islamic dominance of the man over the woman in the family. The commentator wrote, "Leadership in the family is given to the husband. For a wife to demand complete and full equality with her husband will result in having two masters in the family and this does not exist in Islam. To refuse to go with her husband when he calls her to bed is a grave mistake. Leaving the house excessively is a bad habit for a woman. She should also not leave the house if her husband objects to her doing so" (Brooks, 1995). The previous phrases illustrate the views of many modern men in Islam.

Perhaps a prime example of using the Qur'an's teachings to promote male dominance can be found in the brochure entitled "The Place of Women in Pure Islam" by M. Rafiqul-Haqq and P. Newton (debate.domini.org, 1997). This on-line brochure has chapters entitled "Men's Superiority Women's Deficiencies," "Husband's Rights. What is a Woman?," and "Man's Prerogatives."

Under the topic of "Women's Deficiencies," the headings are, "Women are Deficient in Intelligence and Religion Women are Deficient in Gratitude," and "Women are Deficient as Witnesses." If women are thought to be deficient in so many ways, equality is certainly not close to being reached in Islam. Apparently, a major right of the husband is that his desires must be met at once. The following

quotation epitomizes this thought: "The messenger of Allah said: Whenever a man calls his wife to his bed and she refuses, and then he passes the night in an angry mood, the angels curse her till she gets up at dawn." Another key headline in this brochure, under the "Husband's Rights" section, is "Obedience to the Husband is the Key to Paradise."

Under the heading "What is a Woman?," the first words appear in all capital letters: THE WOMAN IS A TOY. This section cites several instances of Islamic leaders mentioning woman as a toy, only needed to satisfy the whims of men. In one such example, 'Aniru Bin al-'Aas said, "Women are toys, so choose." Nowhere in the Qur'an does it say that a woman is a toy and the men may choose the women as they please. This brochure shows how one strewn of thought can influence an entire religion and the perceptions of this religion by others. Based on the isolated comments made in this brochure and others like it, many people worldwide have come to the conclusion that Islamic women are mistreated. If everyone did believe in these comments and lived their lives by them, then Islamic women really would be mistreated; however, it is not every Muslim who believes these statements and not every Islamic culture has rules in regards with them.

In relation to polygamy, Esposito (1991) brings up the point that multiple wives are thought to be beneficial to women. Since the Prophet Muhammad loved many women, it is obligatory that all Muslim men do the same thing, so as to follow the Prophet. Muslims believe polygamy strengthens women's status because many men die in war. When there are multiple wives, all of the women have caretakers after the husband's death. The law in Islam requires the co-wives be treated equally and receive separate housing and maintenance.

In legal manners, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's. The reasoning behind this is that men have more experience in society and can therefore understand legal manners more accurately (Esposito, 1991). If one woman is legally equal to one-half of a man, there is no equality.

A gross misuse of the Qur'an is evident in regards to obedience. Although the Qur'an mentions the rights of women and their right to be treated equally, Islamic regulations have been enacted that refer to obedience to the men of the house. A woman must attain her husband's permission to leave the house. If she does not, he could request police assistance in having her forcibly returned. He may then confine her until she returns to an obedient state (Esposito, 1991).

The benefits of marriage, as stated by Islamic authority Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī, are having children, protecting one's religion and limiting appetite, being intimate with women, having someone to take care of the affairs of the house, and training oneself in good character traits (Murata, 1992). These benefits are aimed only at the husband in the marriage.

In a book set on trying to explain gender roles and the equality of women in Islam, Murata (1992) writes, “[Women] have the advantage of a kind of natural servanthood.” This phrase is outrageous. Although the aim of the sentence was intended to point out the ease with which women could subject themselves to Allah, it is very anti-woman. No one should have, nor be told they have, an innate servanthood. Nor should anyone be told they have “relative weakness and [an] incapacity in the outward domain.” That was also written in Murata's 1992 book.

Ibn al-‘Arabī, another Muslim thinker, used the Christian myth of Adam and Eve to demonstrate men's dominance. He writes, “Eve came from the rib because ribs are bent. Thereby she may bend toward her children and her spouse. The bending of the man toward the woman is his bending toward his own self, since she is a part of him. The bending of the woman toward the man is because she is created from the rib, and within the rib are bending and inclination” (Murata, 1992). This interpretation indicates that Muslim thinkers are now reaching out to misinterpret other religions' sacred texts. Apparently dominating women solely on the basis of the Qur'an was not enough. However, it would be difficult for one to use the first humans in the Qur'an as a basis for male dominance. In a sermon, Dr. Sherif Abdel Azeem said, “The Qur'an, contrary to the Bible, places equal blame on both Adam and Eve for their mistake. Nowhere in the Qur'an can one find even the slightest hint that Eve tempted Adam to eat from the tree or even that she had eaten before him. Eve in the Qur'an is no temptress, no seducer, and no deceiver. Moreover, Eve is not to be blamed for the pains of childbearing. God, according to the Qur'an, punishes no one for another's faults. Both Adam and Eve committed a sin and then asked God for forgiveness and He forgave them both.” This is not to say that Dr. Azeem believed present-day Islam is gender equal. At the beginning of his sermon, he stated, “. . . my concern is, mainly, the position of women in the three religions [Islam, Christianity, Judaism] as it appears in their original sources, not as practiced by their millions of followers in the world today. Therefore, most of the evidence cited comes from the Qur'an [and] the sayings of Prophet Muhammad. . .” At the end of his lecture, Dr. Azeem said, “Almost all Muslim societies have, to one degree or another, deviated from the ideals of Islam with respect to the status of women” (www.uidaho.edu, 1997).

Muhammad advocated freedom in sexuality. He once said, "Three things of this world of yours were made lovable to me: women, perfume—while the coolness of my eye was placed in the ritual prayer." Within a marriage, men and women are encouraged to engage in sexual behavior, even when procreation is not the goal. Ibn al- 'Arabī believed that intercourse so overwhelms the human in pleasure that he or she gains "a foretaste of the bliss of the paradisaal relationship with God" (Murata, 1992). The Qur'an states, "Your wives are your tillage. Go in therefore unto your tillage in what manner soever ye will." Many scholars take this phrase to mean that all types of sexual interactions, within a marriage, are suitable. It is discouraged, however, to make love standing up or facing Mecca (Brooks, 1995).

Although sexual freedom is granted in a marriage, Muhammad also said, "The one who touches the hand of a woman without having a lawful relationship with her, will have an ember placed on his palm on the Day of Judgement" (www.d.umn.edu, 1997). In order to avoid having these embers placed on his palm, a man has a few options. When Brooks (1995) was living as a Muslim woman, she had a request from a strange man. He said, "*Honim sigheh mishi?*" This was translated by Brooks' friend to mean, "Does the lady want a temporary marriage with me?" This temporary marriage, or *sigheh*, is used by Shiites for a marriage that can last from a few minutes to 99 years. In this agreement, the man usually pays the woman a certain amount of money in exchange for the marriage. "The usual motive," writes Brooks, "is sex." This is not, however, prostitution because the future couple has to go before a cleric to record the marriage. Any children born in this union are legitimate, at least in Iran. Before the union is made official by a cleric, the couple decides how long they will be married, how much time they will spend together, how much money will be involved, and what services - either sexual in nature or not are involved. The temporary marriages are also beneficial if a Muslim man wants to marry a non-Muslim woman. Since Shiites demand conversion from all non-Muslim women, a permanent marriage is not valid if the woman has not yet converted. In order to avoid delay of the marriage process, the couple may attain a *sigheh*.

Another way to engage in sexual behaviour without marriage is to die. For Muslim males, the afterlife is described in the Qur'an as a kind of "heavenly whorehouse." In a beautiful garden with perfect weather, men are entertained by gorgeous women with "complexions like rubies and pearls." These women are unable to notice any other man and no other man "will have deflowered" them (Brooks, 1995). Women's virginity at the time of marriage is an important aspect in Islam. One woman in Islam had a reputable plastic surgeon reconstruct her hymen

so that her future husband would not have the shame of having shared his wife with another man. The young woman left, frightened, for her honeymoon. One week later, the couple returned, smiling. "She had passed the test of virginity" (Minai, 1981). Undergoing surgery in order to fake virginity may seem ludicrous to a Westerner, but apparently it is the way of life for many Muslim women. Having to go through this takes away women's basic right of sexuality. A woman in Islam is not permitted to engage in premarital sex, although the men, generally, are.

Although there are a few ways for men to get around the unlawfulness of premarital sex, women have few such options. In fact, if a woman does decide to engage in an affair, her father or brother may resort to "honour killings." In this ritual, a woman who has committed an affair is killed by her father or brother. Each year about 40 Palestinian women are killed in honour killings. The reason the men do this is to protect the shame of the woman's relatives. A common method for this type of killing is burning. This way the death can be legally thought of as an accident. The killer often becomes a kind of local hero, since he has done what was necessary to protect his family's name. Brooks (1995) met a woman named Tamain who was, at the time, having an affair with a young Palestinian doctor. In regards to the honour killings, Tamain says, "My father died when I was nine years old. Lucky for me. If he was here, maybe I would have been killed many years ago." This statement shows the acceptance of Muslim women in regard to their fate.

Lesbians in Islam draw harsh punishment. If the two women are single, they each receive one hundred lashes for their "crime." Married women who engage in lesbian activity may be stoned. Stoning women is no easy task, as the size of the stones is carefully regulated. The woman is buried up to her chest with neither boulders nor pebbles. The reason for this is so that death is neither quick nor prolonged. Although these punishments are horrid, homosexual men face a bigger punishment. If the men are married, they may be either burned to death or thrown from a height. If the men are unmarried, the punishment depends on the role each of the men took. The sodomizer is lashed one hundred times, whereas the sodomized man is executed. The reason for the difference in punishment is that Muslims loathe the idea of a man taking the feminine role of the penetrated partner (Brooks, 1995).

Genital mutilation for females is another common Muslim practice. Brooks (1995) gives a description of a woman who, now 40, underwent this procedure at age eight: "... she had been held down while her clitoris was scraped away with an

unclean knife and the raw flesh sealed with inch-long acacia thorns. On her wedding night, her husband had to use his dagger to slice his way into the jagged cicatrix that had become her genitals." Due to this practice and other unsafe procedures, one in five births end in the mother's death. If one of these children is a female, she will grow up and have the same clitoridectomy her mother faced. In addition to removing the clitoris, many women undergo a procedure that cuts the labia and seals the wound so tightly that only a small opening remains for urination and menstruation. If this girl does not bleed to death, she will most likely die from a resulting infection, inflammation of the pelvic tissue, or in childbirth (Brooks, 1995). In an area where one out of five women dies in childbirth noting the birth rate is applicable. The birth rate in Islamic countries is around 3.3% per year. This means that out of 11000 women of childbearing age, 838 children will be born in just five years. This is in spite of the fact that Islam does not reject birth control. There are no passages in the Qur'an in favour of or against birth control (Minces, 1980). As in Western countries, it is often the more educated, higher-class people who use reliable birth control.

Brooks met a woman by the name of Aset, who had this procedure performed on her when she was about seven years old. Up to the age of 27, Aset believed she had been blessed to have her clitoris removed. She believed the clitoridectomy was essential to a woman's overall well-being and beauty. Her mother and her mother before her had clitoridectomies and told Aset it was right and that without it, a woman would end up a prostitute since she would not be able to control herself. Although she had the procedure, Aset still ended up a prostitute. Since she was incredibly beautiful, the Ethiopian army had forced Aset to work as a domestic servant who occasionally served as a prostitute to the soldiers. When the army was captured by the Eritreans the soldiers offered Aset the chance to become a birthing attendant. At age 28, Aset was teaching all of her patients about the dangers of clitoridectomies. She teaches women to read the Qur'an so that they can see the lack of information regarding genital mutilation. Her job is not an easy one, as many women are set on having this procedure performed on their daughters (Brooks, 1995). Age-old traditions are hard to break, as too many Muslim women now know.

### *Conclusion*

Islam may pride itself on living up to the standards of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's life, but there is still one aspect where Islam falls short: in its treatment of women. Although certain passages in the Qur'an are aimed at preventing such

behaviour, modern day women in Islam are still being treated as the lesser half of the human race. Women are required to abide by a traditional dress code in some countries, treated as the submissive partner in marriages, not allowed to make household decisions, given one half the inheritance that her brothers receive, taught how to become great wives and mothers instead of scientists and politicians, not allowed to travel alone in Saudi Arabia, thought of as one-half of a man in legal matters, used as toys and housekeepers, told to be obedient to their husbands, required to be virgins at the time of marriage, and physically abused as young girls by having their clitorises removed.

In this essay, I have attempted to expand on these ideas to show where Islam falls short of the Qur'an's expectations. Further research needs to be done looking into the future of women in Islam; that topic, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. Research could also be done that looks into the causes of the poor treatment of women. Questions to be answered include, why does present-day Islam vary from its sacred text? How do devout Muslim men feel about disregarding the Qur'an in regards to gender equality? How do Muslims justify their treatment of women when equality is so blatantly advocated in the Qur'an? These questions, when answered, could provide valuable insight into the role of women in Islam.

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