

## Women in Islam Series

# The Experience of being a Muslim Woman: Spiritual, Educational, and Social Aspects – Part 1 of 2

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I have titled my talk “The experience of being a Muslim woman.” There are numerous issues that could be discussed under the combined headers of Islam and gender. I will focus my remarks on four key interconnected areas, namely, spirituality, education, veiling, and a woman’s role in the family and in public life. For each of these areas, I will bring in scriptural and legal pronouncements, historical and contemporary examples, and my own personal experience living life as a Muslim woman.

Before venturing into the specifics of my topic, I want to contextualize my presentation with a few general remarks about Islam and Muslims.

Islam—in Arabic “commitment” to the will of God – is a monotheistic religion professed by over 1.5 billion people worldwide. Adherents of Islam, as you know, are called Muslims. They all believe in one creator God, in Muhammad as God’s sixth and final messenger (following the five prior messengers Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus), and they all believe in the Qur’an as the word of God. But beyond these three areas of unity, they diverge hugely in life style and outlook. Hailing from different parts of the world, Muslims come from disparate linguistic, socio-economic, historical, and ethnic backgrounds.

South Asia (esp. Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan) and the Far East (esp. Indonesia and Malaysia) are together home to about 60% (about 900 million) of the world's Muslims. An additional 20% of Muslims are Arabs (living in the Middle East and North Africa). 15% live in sub-Saharan Africa. Europe has 2.4% (about 10 million) and the Americas 0.3% (3.5 million).

As these numbers show, Muslims come from different countries and diverse cultural backgrounds. It is important to remember that the life experience of Muslim women (and Muslim men too) is not a set, monolithic one, but rather, that it differs from place to place, from time to time, and from individual to individual. We need to recognize that there are other factors, in addition to the religious one, that determine the life a Muslim leads. One of the most important of these other factors is local culture, expressed in the practices, customs, traditions, and rituals of a particular place in a particular time.

Like the members of so many of the world's great religions, they have beliefs rooted in the words and practices of a centuries-old faith. But it is a mistake to think of "the Muslim world" a term glibly deployed by many, including the Western media and academy, as a synonym for Islam.

[And now to the specifics of my talk on Muslim women, and the first of the four dimensions of Muslim womanhood, namely:]

## **A Spirituality**

The Holy Book of the Muslims, the Qur'an, puts women on an equal spiritual footing with men. [It is important to define "spirituality" versus "worldly" or "secular", where women have separate roles than men.] In terms of their spirituality, women are addressed as beings with souls, just like men, as beings who have the potential to obtain nearness to God through worship and good deeds, just like men. An example is the following Qur'anic verse, in which believing men and women who perform good deeds are promised entry to paradise:

1. (Qur'an al-Nisa' 4: 124)

وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ شَيْئاً

Whosoever performs good deeds, believers male or female, shall enter paradise

2. (Qur'an Ahzab 33:35)

Another relevant Qur'anic verse is the following more detailed one, in which men and women are simultaneously encouraged to struggle in the path of God:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيراً وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْراً عَظِيماً

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for truthful men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who are humble, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage in God's praise -- for them God has prepared his forgiveness and a great reward.

3. (Qur'an Al Imran 3:195, Asad trans)

فَأَسْتَجِبْ لَهُمْ رُبُّهُمُ أَتَىٰ لَا أُضِيعَ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِّنْكُمْ مِّمَّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ بَعْضُكُمْ مِّنْ بَعْضٍ فَأَلْزَمَ الْكُفْرَانَ وَالْحَرْبَ أَيُّهَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْجَاهِلِيَّةَ الْأُولَىٰ وَالْجَاهِلِيَّةَ الْآخِرَىٰ وَمَن يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ مِنكُمْ فَقَدِ ابْتَدَأَ ظُلْماً فَيُضِلُّهُمُ اللَّهُ وَلَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ الْعَظِيمُ  
وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلِئَلَّامُ يَرْزُقَكُمْ مِنْهُ وَلَسَافِيهُوا إِذَا كَفَرُوا  
وَقَاتِلُوا وَفَتَلُوا لَأَكْفِرَنَّ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَأَدْخِلَنَّهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ثَوَاباً مِّنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الثَّوَابِ

Thus does their Sustainer answer their prayer: "I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman: each of you is an issue of the other. For those who forsake the domain of evil, and are driven from the homelands, and suffer hurt in My cause, and fight for it, and are slain – I shall most certainly efface their bad deeds, and shall most certainly bring them into gardens through which running waters flow, as a reward from God: for with God is the most beautiful of rewards."

Nowhere is it stated that men are 'superior' spiritually to women.

And there are many more similar verses, which address men and women on an equal spiritual footing.<sup>1</sup>

There are women who are praised as holy in the Qur'an, chief among them Mary (in Arabic: Maryam), the mother of Jesus. Mary is honored in Islam as chaste, blessed, as the virgin mother of God's prophet Jesus, as one for whom God performs miracles, as one who is a model for all women. There is a full chapter of the Qur'an devoted to her and named for her.

There are Muslim women who are recognized as spiritual and holy by the entire Muslim community. An example is Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, who is revered as the epitome of womanhood by Muslims, especially by Shi'a Muslims. Another example is Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, a well-known 8<sup>th</sup> century mystic, in whose verses we find some of the most passionate declarations of love for God.

## B Education

Another seminal aspect of the gender debate is the right to education.

A Tradition (Arabic: Hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad equates men and women, making the quest for knowledge compulsory for both: "Seeking knowledge is a mandatory duty for every Muslim man and woman." The Qur'an—without specifying gender—praises people of knowledge and discernment, over and over, and its address is directed to people of intelligence (*ulu-l-albab*); nowhere does it restrict learning to men.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Qur'an Nahl 97: *مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ* / Ghafir 40: *يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ // Hujurat 13: *وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ يُرْزَقُونَ فِيهَا بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ**

Similar to most pre-modern societies, however, the domain of religious scholarship in Muslim lands has historically been defined by men. But examples of learned Muslim women who participated in disseminating knowledge are also found, and they are more numerous than most people assume. Some of the women of the first century of Islam are important sources for nothing less than the transmission of Prophetic Traditions. Zaynab, granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, is said to have eloquently and courageously stood up to the Umayyad tyrant Yazid. A woman named Fatima of Cordoba was the teacher of the celebrated Muslim mystic and philosopher, Ibn al-'Arabi. The eleventh century Yemeni queen al-Hurra al-Malika held a high spiritual rank in the Fatimid religious mission, and she taught advanced classes in the Islamic sciences to both men and women.

In modern times, the issue is no less complicated. Malala Yousufzai has been much in the news in recent months: last year, the 14-year old was shot in the face by a Taliban gunman for her activism and blogging in support of female education in Pakistan. The Taliban, who are ultra-conservative, rigid interpreters of Islamic law based in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, disallow the education of women, among many other misogynist practices.

The lack of adequate women's education is indicative of the problems of Pakistani society more generally, educational and otherwise. The wealthy in the cities have better access to education, both for men and women, but with the smaller towns and rural areas it is a different story.

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This is Pakistan. On the other hand we have the case of Iran, which has a very conservative image in the Western media, but few realize that about 60% of university students in Iran are women.

Speaking anecdotally about some other Muslim countries: one of my students at the University of Chicago who is originally from Dubai was recently hired as professor in the national university of Qatar. Another student, a University of Utah graduate, is currently a professor at Kuwait University.

All the Muslim women that I know from my own largely urban community in India are literate, many have college degrees, several are professionals, doctors, lawyers, and businesswomen. I come from a practicing Muslim family invested fully in education. My parents were determined that their sons and their daughters should have access to the best possible education. I came to the US to pursue a doctoral program at Harvard University, and since graduation, I've taught at Yale University and at the University of Utah, and since 2002, I've been teaching at the University of Chicago. I did my early schooling in Mumbai in Christian missionary establishments. Convent schools in India are reputed to provide quality education, and these institutions which are run by catholic nuns are also considered a safe environment for young girls. In the big cities in India, girls (and boys too) generally attend schools, and some go to college as well. But in sparsely populated rural areas, safety considerations are more pressing, as are considerations of the economic welfare of the family, where children are active in farming and animal husbandry in order that the family might have enough to eat.

After high school in Mumbai, my sister and I travelled to Cairo to study Arabic literature at Ain Shams University. My fellow female students at Ain Shams were from different backgrounds. Some were Cairenes. A few were foreigners. Many had come from rural areas to study in the big city and they lived in the dormitories. Some went on to pursue doctoral degrees and many went into various professions. But among my friends there, one married a very conservative man. Her example highlights how many husbands still exert dominance and unhealthy pressure on their wives. She was bright and vivacious, and had been the star athlete in her high school basketball team. Persuaded by her husband, she took up the full face veil and withdrew to a great extent from society, not engaging with any males

(and in effect most females) outside of her immediate family; she would not even answer the phone, unless following a prearranged sequence of identifying rings, lest the caller should be male; she refused to look through the key hole when the door bell rang, lest her gaze should inadvertently fall upon an unrelated male. To be frank, the end effect of all these barriers is that our friendship, already affected by distance, has been difficult to maintain. I've not been able to keep up my friendship with her because it's just too hard to keep contact. If I'd lived next door, things might be different. But my friend's seclusion severely limits the exchange of ideas and experiences. Perhaps new technologies such as Skype can partly change these kinds of dynamics in the future.

My own experience has shown me the extreme range of attitudes towards women's education among Muslims.

The need of the hour among Muslims generally, both male and female, is education. Many Muslims live in developing countries where levels of literacy are low, even among men. As Muslim societies become more educated, and more exposed to different cultures and ideas, one can hope that it will help cultivate more open-minded and rational societies. I am hopeful that modern technology can go part of the way in achieving these aims, and that in the case of women from more conservative families, or those with fewer means, remote education and working from home will provide some workable options. Universities such as Harvard, MIT, UCLA, and the University of Chicago are beginning to offer on line courses, even degree programs, to worldwide student bodies. In Kashmir, India, where both security and tradition keep women at home, several software companies have set up remote offices where women can program from their home or from local offices. This is not an end solution, but as intermediate steps, they can aid us in getting to the final goal.