

Women in Islam Series

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

Shz. Dr. Tahera baisesha, Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah), March 20 2013

Continued from Part 1 of 2 published on Fatemidawat.com in January 2015

C Veiling

The Quran prescribes modest dress for men and women: [Nur 24:30-31]: “Tell believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is aware of what they do. And tell believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or ...”¹

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ذَلِكَ أَزْكَى لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾ وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُجُوبِهِنَّ ۚ ...

Islamic law, based on this verse and on traditions ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad, prescribes modest dress for men and women. For men, according to most Muslim law schools, they must cover

¹ ... husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed.

² ... وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوْ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَى عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

the section between the belly button and the knees. In most Muslim countries, modest dress for men is interpreted as loose fitting long trousers, and a long shirt.

For women, interpretations of what constitutes modest attire are more varied. Muslim women's attire is influenced by local culture, as well as the legal school in Islam to which they belong. Broadly, three interpretations are followed (and the proponents of each view present their own legal reasoning and scriptural backing): 1. Niqab=full veiling including face (which is notorious in the west as the "burqa," and this is practiced by a small minority of Muslim women); 2. A head scarf + long sleeved blouse, with long skirt or long pants (more common), 3. No head scarf, but long sleeved blouse, with long skirt or long pants (also common). The rule is to be veiled when not with blood relatives. The full face veil is often worn by women who are disengaged from the public sphere, but this is not always true. I have seen several times at the airport in Qatar, full burqa wearing women working the immigration and security desks. Physical contact between the sexes is disallowed, and many women interpret this to include a preference against cross-gender hand shaking. Thus, the main issue is modesty, and there are different interpretations as to what constitutes modest attire and behaviour.

The burqa has recently been banned in three European countries: France, Belgium, and Italy. Other nations such as Spain, Holland, and Britain show significant support for a ban. Even the wearing of a headscarf is restricted by law in certain cases. Although this is not (yet) a focus of debate in the US, it raises issues that can easily be transferred to US cases, such as laws banning "Sharia law" or proposals to forbid mosque construction. Arguments made regarding the banning of the burqa, may be adapted to other cases.

In her recent book titled *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (pp. 105-122), the eminent University of Chicago law professor Martha Nussbaum lists

five arguments that are usually made in the West against the practice of veiling and she discusses each of these issues in some detail. I will summarize her assessment in a few words:

The first argument is that the burqa compromises security, as public safety requires that people show their face when appearing in public spaces. A second, closely related argument is that it impedes transparency and civic friendship. Nussbaum argues that the problem with the security and transparency argument is that they are applied inconsistently. In the winter months in Chicago, for example, and in Provo too, it can get very cold, and most people walk the streets hats pulled down over ears and brow, scarves wound tightly around noses and mouths, but no problem of security and transparency is perceived. Many trusted professionals such as surgeons, dentists, and football players cover their faces all year round. What inspires fear and mistrust is not covering per se, but Muslim covering. There is a widespread view that in the war against terror, it is legitimate to suspect women wearing a burqa. Nussbaum says that if she were a terrorist in the US, and if she were not stupid, the last thing she would do would be to wear such an attention-drawing garb.

Another frequent argument made against veiling is that the veil is per se unhealthy, because it is hot and uncomfortable. This is in my opinion a silly argument, because clothing that covers the body can be comfortable or uncomfortable depending on the fabric, and depending on how tight or loose it is. I wear a head scarf and a full body covering, and find that these loose cotton garments are supremely comfortable, summer and winter, allowing free air flow, protecting from the dust, and also from the sun. In contrast, women in modern societies are allowed and even encouraged to wear high-heeled shoes that pose the risk of tendon shortening and chronic back problems, but no-one is talking about banning them.

Yet another prominent anti-burqa argument is that it is a sign of male domination and a result of coercion,³ and it leads to the objectification of women.⁴ Many Muslims—including Muslim women who veil—would say the opposite is true, that by covering their bodies Muslim women are insulated to a certain degree from such objectification. Nussbaum lists symbols of male supremacy in modern Western societies—that treat women as objects, among them sex magazines, pornography, nude photos, tight jeans, revealing clothing, and many forms of plastic surgery; feminists think that these things are a way of robbing women of both agency and individuality, reducing them to objects and commodities. But no-one is planning to ban any of these things. The controversy in France over Islamic dress really reduces to a dogmatic insistence on a French way of being a woman, in which sexuality is casually displayed as a form of individual initiative and person self-expression. This understanding of female sexuality is taken to be “modern” and anything else is taken to be archaic, subversive, and threatening. This way of thinking is profoundly flawed, because it lacks genuine respect and curiosity. It gives latitude to the familiar but refuses the unfamiliar, a similar concern, a similar liberty.

D Women’s roles in the family and in public life

Islamic law, the Shari’a, addresses this issue in terms of the complementary nature of the roles played by a man and a woman within a family. The husband’s primary responsibility is to provide for his family. The wife’s primary responsibility is to nurture her family. The Islamic scriptures do not restrict the husband from cooking and taking care of his children, just as they do not restrict the wife from working and earning. However, this role is considered secondary to his or her primary role, which is that of provider and nurturer respectively. Motherhood is raised to a sacred level, in the prophetic hadith

³ Do the arguers believe—says Nussbaum—that domestic violence is a peculiarly Muslim problem?

⁴ President Sarkozy said “The burqa is not a sign of religion, it is a sign of subservience. Nussbaum comments: People who make this argument typically don’t know a whole lot about Islam.

“Paradise lies beneath your mother’s feet” (*al-jannatu tahta aqdami l-ummahat*). There are no comparable hadith for men, and this hadith emphasizes the nurturing role of the mother, her pivotal role in raising her children as good human beings.

Moreover, the Islamic scriptures guarantee women a measure of financial independence, by giving women the right to inherit and own property independent of the control of father or husband or brother. In comparison, it was not until at least ten centuries later that women were given the right to own property in most parts of Europe. The Prophet’s first wife, Khadija, was a wealthy businesswoman. She first came into contact with her future husband when she employed him to carry her goods and trade them in Palestine.

Through the centuries and in the contemporary world, many Muslim women have benefitted from this legislation. However, the financial independence guaranteed women by Islamic scripture has not always been forthcoming in Muslim societies. In many tribal societies in North Africa for example, women’s inheritance is severely curtailed by legal shenanigans couched as customary law, in order to ensure that property does not go out of the patriarch’s control. In certain Muslim denominations in Lebanon, the larger share of the property of a deceased man or woman who has female but not male offspring is claimed by the brothers of the deceased, leaving only a very nominal amount for the daughters. Many of these negative examples are manifestations of the patriarchal outlook of the society that fostered them, and have no sound basis in Islamic law.

Islamic law (Arabic: Shari’a law) is a very complex issue, and that is the subject for a whole other presentation. But a few words are called for here: Although all Muslims believe in theory that they must follow the Quran and the example of the prophet, they disagree vehemently among themselves as to the interpretation of particular Quranic verses, and the authenticity of specific prophetic traditions. Muslim reformists and feminists are calling for a reinterpretation of the original sources. But even among those

who do not call themselves reformists or feminists, there is a vast difference of opinion on almost any subject pertaining to Islamic law; and one can find in the law books rules which argue on every conceivable side of an issue. Islamic law, like Muslims, is not a monolith.

There are countries in the Muslim world where women are not treated liberally, for example, in Afghanistan, few women have a right to education, and in Saudi Arabia women may not drive cars. On the other hand, there are countries like Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan (3 of the most populous Muslim countries), where women have been democratically elected as heads of state.

Concluding Remarks: What Muslims need to do for themselves, and what others—and you—can do to help:

All the issues that I've talked about today—spirituality, education, veiling, and women's roles in the family and in public—are highly complex, and much more could be said on each of them. And there are many more issues that I've not had time to touch on. But before I end, I would like to offer a few concluding remarks on what Muslims need to do to empower their women, and what the United States—and you individually—can do to help.

It is important for Muslims to recognize that there *are* problems in Muslim societies with regard to women's rights. There are similar problems in other societies too, but it is important for Muslims to take responsibility. Muslims living in the Far East, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the West, all need to look within their own communities, to address issues of deficiency, in sublime areas such as human dignity and spiritual egalitarianism, as well as mundane areas, such as education, safety and property rights. In many cases, answers can be found within their own religious and cultural traditions. But the Prophet Muhammad's directive was to seek wisdom, "even from as far away as China," and

Muslims should not hold back from adopting beneficial progressive ideas, no matter where they come from.

There is also no doubt that others can do their share. The United States through its Agency for International Development and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide funding for humanitarian aid and schools, especially for women's education; however these funds are being curtailed. The need of the hour is education. Many problems can be mitigated by promoting education, law and order, and economic prosperity in the less advantaged areas of the world, including those with large Muslim populations.

Moreover, each of you individually can help to empower Muslim women, you yourselves can reach out to the Muslim community in the US and elsewhere in the world, wherever your business and travel and mission work takes you.

The West needs to engage with Muslims on a positive basis, to stop denigrating customs such as veiling, to stop blocking the building of Muslim houses of worship. To quote Martha Nussbaum again, although Americans and Europeans pride themselves on their enlightened attitudes of religious tolerance and understanding, there are many reasons to doubt this complacent self assessment. Citing the examples of the persecution faced by Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses (among others), she says our situation calls for critical self examination, as we try to uncover the roots of ugly fears and suspicions that currently disfigure all Western societies. She proposes a three-pronged approach [and I will end with this quote]: Professor Nussbaum advocates:

- Political principles expressing equal respect for all citizens, and an understanding of what these principles entail for today's confrontations with religious difference (These principles are already inherent she says in the political traditions of both Europe and, especially, the United States)
- Rigorous critical thinking that ferrets out and criticizes inconsistencies, particularly those that take the form of making an exception for oneself, noting the "mote" in someone else's eye while failing to note the large plank in one's own eye.
- And most important thing to strive for: a systematic cultivation of the "inner eye," the imaginative capacity that makes it possible for us to see how the world looks from the point of view of a person different in religion or ethnicity.

By being here today to learn about a different culture, you have surely participated in cultivating your "inner eye". I thank you for coming.