

Women and Islam

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WOMEN AND ISLAM

“Heaven is under mothers’ feet!” Mohammad said. My father reminded me while we were engaged in our heated roundtable discussion on Islam and women. During the 60s, as a sixteen-year-old girl growing up in Persia, I was proud of our king, the Shah of Iran. He announced that like men, women would cast their votes for our parliament.

“Mohammad, the prophet, was the one who gave women dignity and respect in the seventh century,” my father asserted.

As years went by I experienced that throughout the time all the laws and rules that Mohammad laid down whether by his way of life, or by his instructions in our holy book, the Koran, have been misused based on the whims of our politicians, governing bodies and religious leaders.

The tower of Moslem strength is built on being against discrimination of any kind. The equality between men and women is undeniable. We must see Islam, and its effects on women in a bright light rather than a hopeless one. To understand the Moslem women’s state of affairs, I draw examples from Mohammad’s life, his instruction in the Koran, and my own life as a Moslem woman.

When Mohammad was born in 570 A.D.E., Arabia was a lawless land. In those days, the country of Saudi Arabia consisted of tribes constantly battling each other. They had no unity and no rules governing their society, or their personal lives. Every clan had to abide by its conqueror’s ruling. The man who killed more people and destroyed more shelters of the other tribes was considered the “master” and owned the survivors of the conquered tribes, including their wives and children. There was an extreme lack of spirituality in anyone’s life.

From a young age, Mohammad was singled out in his society; even though parental guidance was absent in his life. His father died when he was an infant and he lost his mother at age six. He then went to live with his uncle. Soon after working for him, Mohammad became famous for his honesty in performing trades among tribes. He obtained the title of “Amin”, a person with high moral standards. When he did several trades for a rich widow, Khadijeh, making some profits for her, she took notice of the young man. In contrast to the culture of Arabia, she sent a marriage proposal to Mohammad. It is said that at the time of their marriage, he was twenty-five, and she was in her thirties – a rare event. While Khadijeh was alive, in contrast to the norm, Mohammad married no other woman; even though polygamy was long practiced in Arabia.

The way Mohammad treated his wife was also unusual for those days. *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, Tariq Ramadan confirms that at age forty when Mohammad received the first Revelation, he was scared and disoriented. The first person he disclosed his feelings to was his wife. She was also the first person who accepted Mohammad as the messenger of God. He looked upon his wife as a friend and partner. It was an action praiseworthy of Mohammad, in treating his wife as an equal.

Furthermore, Ramadan informs us that the prophet dignified his daughters as well. His marriage to Khadijeh produced six children. His four daughters survived. His two sons died at an early age. In spite of not having a son in those days, when the people from poor clans buried their daughters alive, Mohammad’s family life was a community of respect. When one of his daughters married a distant relative in opposition to Mohammad’s faith, he never forced her husband to convert to Islam. He even welcomed them into his house. He was especially close to Fatima, his youngest daughter. When she married Ali, Mohammad’s cousin, they were allowed

to live in Mohammad's house. Ramadan reports that whenever she walked in the room, Mohammad stood up, and waited for her to sit. His selfless actions in the treatment of women are the proof that to him there is no difference between the two genders. Both are created equally by Allah, God. Therefore, discrimination is forbidden in this religion. Mohammad not only practiced an exemplary way of life, but he has directed us how to behave toward women in the Koran.

Some critics of Islam complain that this religion is unfair to women because it says 'yes' to polygamy. In the Koran, Mohammad instructs us as of several rights for Moslem women. It is true that a Moslem man can get married to four wives at the same time. Also, he can have timed-marriages as short as five minutes or as long as a lifetime. But the Koran instructs each man to fully respect the woman whom he wants to get close to. By marrying a woman, he gives dignity to her which was unprecedented before Islam. Previous to Islam, the conqueror of a tribe raped and took women as his slaves and considered them as his property. The Koran says, "Treat your wives equally, whether physically or emotionally." We believe that no human being can divide his emotion equally. Therefore, Mohammad's intention was not promoting polygamy but discouraging it.

When I was growing up in Iran, I never could imagine having brothers and sisters who were living in a separate house, and my father had to divide his time between me and them. I am pleased to know that polygamy never entered my family at least for four generations either from my father or mother's side. But the majority of people turned a blind eye to Mohammad's instruction on polygamy, and it has become a new norm even in today's Moslem societies such as Iran.

Another right for a Moslem woman is to have a choice in whether or not to be wed. The mullah, Moslem priest, must ask the bride for her approval to the marriage before he can officially consider them “husband and wife.” I am still haunted by the memories of some of my friends who were beaten up before saying “yes,” through teary eyes, and with black and blue bodies. Unlike them, for me, marriage was not an option when I graduated from high school, or even college; instead, I had to follow the path of higher education. My father believed that a woman must be able to support herself without a man before thinking about matrimony. Therefore, when I finished my undergraduate degree, I closed my doors to my few suitors and flew away to the free land of America to pursue my education.

Yet another remarkable right for women can be found in the Koran. A Moslem woman has the right to divorce her husband. This rule was an outstanding step toward the Moslem women’s freedom. It is sad that, for a woman, practicing this law is usually impossible because a divorce removes her respect and dignity in any Moslem society such as Iran. Thus, seldom does a woman dare to ask for a divorce – no matter how unhappy or miserable she is in her marriage.

Furthermore, according to the Koran, a Moslem woman is entitled to share the inheritance of her father or husband with her brothers and sons. However, in the seventh century, men were in charge of supporting their families. Thus, a woman’s share was half that of a man. This rule continues to be the practice in most Moslem societies.

I was witness to the life of Moslem women in my family for four generations. Their lives changed drastically, not because of religious discrimination, but because of the political changes. For example, as a child, I saw my great-grandmother cover her hair inside and outside the house. This was in spite of the recent liberation of women and being given a choice whether or not we wanted to cover our heads. I asked her one day the reason for her action. She responded, “My

dear child, I grew up to be an abiding Moslem woman who covers her hair. I do not care about the king's new ruling.”

At the time, I was baffled. Now, I understand that because of the years of domination, some women who were chained to the religious tradition could not and would not take charge of their lives. The door to the cage is open, but the bird does not leave. In reality, the majority of Moslem women are not aware of the fact that Mohammad never instructed any Moslem woman to cover her head.

During the sixties, the train of modernization picked up its speed in Iran. The Shah was determined to take us to the twentieth-first century in a rush. Throughout his time, unlike the rest of the Moslem world, Iranian women achieved the highest level of education equal to men. They were allowed to sign up in any branch of the military. For the first time, we had female doctors, engineers, ministers and judges. More and more, modernization was expanded, and the religion became the underdog of the society. Then, the nation, which was unaware of the true philosophy of Islam, revolted against the king, and changed the regime. The new government turned the clock back to the period even before Mohammad's time. When I returned to my homeland, educated and eager to serve, the current regime was strictly forcing the women to cover their heads. This act was too big of a pill for me to swallow. In our country, for four generations of women, we had a choice whether or not to cover our hair. Thus, I could not and would not live in a land where its government takes away women's individual freedom and forces them to follow a law which was not even a Moslem law.

In order for Moslem women to be able to climb the ladder of success, or be treated equally to men, we have to adhere to Moslem teachings and the way Mohammad treated women. We must not criticize Islam for its lack of respect and dignity for women. Karen Armstrong, a former

British nun, and a scholar of Islam, states, “We cannot and must not judge the religion and its prophet by the drums which [fanatic religious leaders, politicians] and extremists play for us.”

We, the Moslem women in all the Islamic countries must work to become united and demand of our politicians and religious leaders that they follow Mohammad’s instructions. In unity lies our hope to obtain and preserve our individual freedom all over the Moslem world.