

Gender and Family Issues

What does Islam say about the equality of men and women?

According to Islam, men and women are spiritually equal beings created from a common origin. All of the religious obligations in Islam are incumbent upon both women and men, such as daily worship, fasting, performing the Hajj, etc. God's mercy and forgiveness apply equally to men and women. The following Qur'anic verse illustrates this point:

"For Muslim men and Muslim women,
For believing men and believing women,
For devout men and devout women,
For true men and true women,
For men and women who are patient and constant,
For men and women who humble themselves,
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 much in God's praise,
For them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward."
(Qur'an, 33:35)

As a consequence of physiological, psychological and other distinguishing factors embodied in men and women by the Creator, the rights, responsibilities, and roles of men and women are believed to naturally differ. Muslims believe that God has assigned the responsibility of providing financially for the family to men, and the important responsibility of fostering a God-conscious and righteous family to women. Such roles do not preclude women from having careers and earning income or men from helping to raise a family. Rather they provide a general framework for Muslim society, designed to reinforce the concept of a nuclear family unit.

The guidelines for men and women's roles are also meant to ensure dignified and proper relations between people of the opposite sex. Minimal mixing of the sexes in Muslim societies should not be construed to imply inequality or confinement. Rather, such measures are designed to protect individuals from unsolicited attention, inappropriate sexual attraction, adultery and fornication, and possibly even forms of violence such as rape.

What are the rights of women in Islam?

In the seventh century, a revolution in women's rights occurred due to the message of the Qur'an and its directives for forging a just and righteous society. In pre-Islamic Arabia as

in other places in the world, women were considered little more than chattel, with no independent rights of their own. The Qur'an specifies the natural and inherent rights of women as well as men, and enjoins people to act in line with God's teachings of justice and equity. Some of the rights of women elaborated in the Qur'an and Sunnah include the right to own and inherit property, the right to obtain an education, the right to contract marriage and seek divorce, the right to retain one's family name upon marriage, the right to vote and express opinions on societal affairs, and the right to be supported financially by male relatives (husband, father, brother, etc.).

Such rights were unheard of in the seventh century, yet were implemented to varying degrees in Muslim civilization throughout the last fourteen hundred years. It is also important to recognize that only in the last two centuries have such rights been available to women in Western societies. Clearly, common stereotypes regarding women's rights must be carefully considered, and the current practice of Muslims in various countries and regions must be examined within the context of history and with in light of the sources of Islam in order to ascertain the degree to which Muslim women are able to exercise their rights today. Prevailing cultural factors must also be taken into account.

How do Muslims view marriage and divorce?

Marriage is highly encouraged in Islam, as families are seen as the cornerstone of Muslim society. Men and women are enjoined by the Qur'an and the guidance of Prophet Muhammad to live with mutual love, respect, and affection. For example, a well-known hadith instructs Muslim men that "the best among among you is he who is kindest to his wife."

In Islam, marriage is a relationship based upon a legal contract agreed upon by the persons getting married. The marriage ceremony itself is very simple. A religious scholar, imam or learned person within the community performs the ceremony in the presence of at least two Muslim witnesses. After the bride and groom have signed the marriage contract and a gift for the bride has been agreed upon, the couple may state their vows in front of family and friends. Often, at weddings, the imam gives a short marriage sermon as well. After the marriage bond has been declared, it is customary for the groom and his family to host a walimah (marriage feast) for friends, relatives, and community members.

Divorce is highly discouraged in Islam. While permissible, it is viewed as a last resort after stages of time for reevaluation have passed and all attempts at reconciliation have been made. Both men and women can seek divorce in Islam, and contrary to one popular misconception, men may not instantaneously pronounce a divorce by stating "I divorce thee" three times. After a divorce, a woman must wait for a period of three months, called iddah, before remarrying, in order to ensure that she is not pregnant by her previous husband. While modern DNA technology may render such a practice obsolete by identifying the father of a newly conceived child, the iddah serves the additional purpose of maintaining the dignity of women and the sanctity of marriage.

Are arranged marriages an Islamic tradition?

Islam requires that both the prospective bride and groom must consent to marry each other. Islam does not condone the compelling of individuals to marry. In this sense, arranged marriages are not an Islamic practice. However, in many Muslim cultures, marriages often result when a prospective bride and groom are introduced to each other through relatives or mutual friends, though nothing precludes two eligible people who know each other to decide to marry (this is often the case among older Muslims). Typically, the eligible persons are given an opportunity to talk with each other and gauge their compatibility. If the prospective bride and groom agree to the match, the two families jointly make wedding preparations after formalizing the bond through an engagement ceremony. These types of "introduced" marriages are more "Islamic" than traditional arranged marriages.

There is no specific age at which either men or women must be married. Much depends on factors such as schooling, career, and other life circumstances. However, because marriage is seen as a solidifying force in a Muslim society, Muslims who reach eligible age (typically from early to mid-twenties) are encouraged to get married. Beyond the individual benefit of finding a life-companion, marriage is seen as a protection from illicit sexual behavior.

"Among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Verily in that are signs for people who reflect." (Qur'an, 30:21)

"Women are garments (protective clothing) for men and men are garments for women." (Qur'an, 2:187)

How do Muslims view dating and mixing of the sexes?

Dating as it is commonly understood in western society is not permitted in Islam. For Muslims, physical interaction, an almost inevitable component of dating, is only permissible within the bonds of marriage. While Muslims often find themselves in mixed environments in American society, and may participate in certain coeducational group activities, as a general rule they opt to observe a degree of segregation.

Naturally, the proper and productive functioning of society requires the talents and contributions of all its citizens, male and female. Therefore, Islam provides guidelines for etiquette and behavior in order to enable full participation of men and women while at the same time fostering righteous societies. Some guidelines pertain to appropriate forms of interaction across gender, while others pertain to kinds of clothing men and women should wear in the interest of modesty. By observing such guidelines, women and men are able to interact productively in society, minimizing potential for sexual harassment, uninvited attention, disrespect, or acts of violence fostered by provocative dress or conduct.

How are birth and childhood viewed in Islam?

In accordance with tradition, soon after birth the father of the child whispers the adhan (call to prayer) in the ears of the newborn. This act, signifies that the child has been born into a community centered around prayer and worship of the Creator.

Also in accordance with the tradition, a ritual known as aqiqah is conducted for both male and female newborns among many Muslims. The birth-hair of the newborn is shaved off to signify a new phase of life outside the womb. The aqiqah is usually performed on the seventh day after birth, though it may be done later. In addition, a goat or lamb is typically sacrificed for a feast of thanksgiving. During the feast, family and friends pray that God blesses the child with good health, happiness, and protects her or him from all physical harm and evil influences.

After birth or in early childhood, male children are circumcised in accordance with the Sunnah. The circumcision may be seen as a symbolic act, performed in homage to the great sacrifices to which Prophet Abraham and his son were committed. Circumcision may also reiterate Muslims' view of Islam as a continual message unfolded through history, since the practice is found among Jews, descendants of the followers of the earlier prophet Moses. Circumcision is not obligatory upon adult converts, since it is not a strict requirement of Shari'ah.

In certain regions of the world, female circumcision is a cultural tradition, practiced by a small number of Christians, Muslims and tribal animists. Such practices violate the integrity of human beings and the are contrary to the most basic teachings of Islam, and find no sanction in Islamic Law.

The Qur'an repeatedly reminds readers that "those who know" are not the same as "those who know not," and a hadith of Prophet Muhammad states that seeking knowledge is an obligation for both men and women. Consequently, most Muslim parents tend to be very involved in their children's education. Teachers are highly respected and are seen as allies in cultivating knowledge and in presenting positive role models for students. It is not uncommon to find Muslim parents helping their children learn their lessons, encouraging them to excel, and rewarding them for good grades. Even when children are performing well in their studies, many Muslim parents want to meet with teachers, and if their child is not performing up to standards, parents usually side with educators in trying to encourage students to improve.

Naturally, religious education is very important to Muslims. At an early age, children begin memorizing the short verses of the Qur'an, especially al-Fatihah, the opening chapter. In some Muslim cultures, around the age of four, a Bismillah ceremony is held to signify a child's readiness to begin learning to read the Qur'an in Arabic. This tradition, while not a part of the Sunnah, is very common among Muslims of the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia) and Central Asia. Some time later, when the child has completed his or her

first full reading of the entire Qur'an, an Ameen ceremony is held. The Ameen, like the Bismillah event, is not a religious obligation and is a tradition among some Muslims meant to celebrate a child's reading of the Qur'an.