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## Women's Position

I've always been fascinated by the concept of culture and the way it affects us humans. After stumbling around in my first two years as an undergraduate, I finally decided I'd study something that I really enjoyed. I chose anthropology – which includes the study of culture. It was not a great choice for a career that will support you, but one that has given me a bit more understanding of myself and the many friends I have from different cultures.

Though I was interested in different cultures, I never guessed that I would come to have friends from all over the world. It happened in a most unexpected manner.

Before I sailed with friends in their schooner from southern California through the Panama Canal to the Virgin Islands, I had been reading the Quran for a year or two. During that trip we sailed about 500 miles off the coast of Mexico because we had heard horror stories about pirates taking over boats and appropriating them for their drug trafficking.

That far off shore we encountered some pretty heavy weather, and it was in one of those storms that I became Muslim! (This is the storm described in the Prologue.) That night while I shared the second watch, I made the commitment to do more than just read the Quran. I had to try and become a Muslim, in spite of all the scary things I thought I knew about Islam. The Quran certainly felt right, maybe the rest would follow.

That was in December 1976, and I have never regretted my decision. I've been a practicing Muslim ever since – or rather ever since I learned the practices. It has changed my life more wonderfully than I could ever have imagined.

## 2 | *Heart's Surprise*

As described in the Prologue, when I got back to the States, several months later, I contacted the only Muslim I knew who was actively involved in the religion. Soon I was caught up in a new world, making friends with people from very diverse cultures and coming to use far more of my anthropology than I had ever dreamed of doing. My interest in culture was certainly paying off.

I am not a scholar of Islam, nor an anthropologist. I do believe, however, that my many years as a Muslim, and my contacts with such diverse cultures give me some interesting insights to share.

I have found that often when the practice of some Muslims does not mesh with my understanding of the Quran, the issue is one of culture.

What is culture? Good question. Many volumes have attempted to define it.

Stated in a simplistic way, I see it as all of the things that make a group of people similar to each other, and distinct from other groups. It encompasses the manner in which we speak, the words we use, the foods we eat, the stories we were told and will tell our children. It affects the way we see ourselves and others, the way we view life and death, even the colors we paint our houses! It comprises a million things that we unthinkingly accept as part of who we are.

The personal distance we surround ourselves with is yet another result of our culture. Have you ever found yourself backing away as someone you are talking to keeps pushing your space? Or perhaps you have been the space pusher. You have just come face to face with differences in culture.

A few years ago, I spent some sadly sleepless nights with a wonderful friend from Egypt. She had grown up in a small village, comfortably surrounded by the sounds of people and animals. She could not sleep without such noise, so always had the television or radio playing. I, on the other hand, grew up in a culture where the ideal is to have your own quiet bedroom, away from all noise and commotion.

We laughed when we talked about it later. However, I still find myself having to take a deep breath and count to ten when someone playing really loud music drives up to my quiet picnic spot. Although I have some understanding, I am still bound by my culture, where loud music in a peaceful place is upsetting.

These cultural differences carry over into religion too. It is very human to accept that people eat food very different from what we enjoy, listen to music that puts our nerves on edge, and then still expect them to have the same spiritual reality we do. This is very human, but very unrealistic. In many ways our spiritual reality is at the core of our culture, and thus at the core of ourselves. How can we expect it to be the same for everyone?

So, before I first started reading the Quran, I thought I knew all about Islam—and it was very demeaning to women. Naturally, I assumed that the Quran would bear this out.

I was in for quite a surprise! According to the Quran, men and women are *equal*.

However, I couldn't see that clearly at first.

In the introduction I mentioned that a friend gave me a Quran that she did not want her dog to chew anymore. It was Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation, the 1968 edition. I had read the Christian Bible, the Torah and some of the Bhagavad-Gita. I decided that I really should read the Quran, though I was quite convinced that it was not for me.

It was a footnote in that Yusuf Ali translation that first piqued my interest, and started the learning process that culminated on that stormy night with my decision to become Muslim. When I first read the translation of verse 3:195, nothing jumped out at me:

*And their Lord hath accepted  
Of them, and answered them:  
"Never will I suffer to be lost  
The work of any of you,*

*Be he male or female:  
Ye are members, one of another:  
Those who have left their homes,  
Or been driven out therefrom,  
Or suffered harm in My Cause,  
Or fought or been slain, –  
Verily, I will blot out  
From them their iniquities,  
And admit them into Gardens  
With rivers flowing beneath; –  
A reward from the Presence  
Of God, and from His Presence  
Is the best of rewards.”  
(The Holy Quran III:195 [3:195])*

However, his footnote for this passage astonished me:

In Islam the equal status of the sexes is not only recognised but insisted on. If sex distinction, which is a distinction in nature, does not count in spiritual matters, still less of course would count artificial distinctions, such as rank, wealth, position, race, colour, birth, etc.

How could Yusuf Ali be saying that Islam insists on the equal status of men and women? This was totally unexpected. Women are subservient in Islam, right? Of course I was right! Every report in the media, every book I had ever read, told me so.

Perhaps he was incorrect. Maybe his translation was biased. Looking at other translations for Chapter 3 Verse 195, I did not see any other indication of this equal status. It wasn't until years later that I read Rashad Khalifa's translation. I quote here from the 1992 edition:

*Their Lord responded to them:  
“I never fail to reward any worker among you  
for any work you do, be you male or female –  
you are equal to one another....”  
(Quran: The Final Testament 3:195)*

There it was at last, in black and white. Men and women are equal in Islam!

But why didn't the other translations say so?

Looking again at other translations, the wording is not straight forward, but the same meaning is implied. All of the others I have seen are similar to Yusuf Ali's "*Ye are members, one of another.*" What does that mean but that you are essentially the same, equal?

However, if you are coming from a cultural background where the equality of the sexes is not accepted, you may not catch that meaning. I was coming from a background that accepts equality between the sexes, and still had not caught it!

Perhaps there is a clue here. I was already sure that Islam was unfair to women. There is plenty of evidence to show that we tend to see what we expect to be there. This is probably the biggest blind spot for all of us. I had set myself up not to see the equality of men and women in the Quran. Perhaps most translators of the Quran have also.

Rashad Khalifa's translation of the remainder of the verse strengthened my understanding:

*...Thus, those who immigrate,  
and get evicted from their homes,  
and are persecuted because of Me,  
and fight and get killed,  
I will surely remit their sins and admit them  
into gardens with flowing streams."  
Such is the reward from God.  
God possesses the ultimate reward.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 3:195)*

Not only are women absolutely equal to men, but they too can work in the cause of God. Women can immigrate, be persecuted, fight and die for God.

I would like to highlight that these verses not only indicate that men and women are equal, but also that they can equally strive in God's cause. To me it follows that they must have the means to do so.

The picture from these verses is not of women hidden away in the women's quarters, or harem, concerned only with the "matters of women," but of women actively involved in the society. They are women who are fighting, immigrating, and being persecuted. Those are things that can only happen to women who are out on the front lines, so to speak.

These verses are not the only place where God tells us that righteous believers are equal, regardless of their sex. Reading further in the Quran, this equality is stated again:

*If any do deeds  
Of righteousness, –  
Be they male or female –  
And have faith,  
They will enter Heaven,  
And not the least injustice  
Will be done to them.  
(The Holy Quran IV:124 [4:124])*

Thus, the reward for believers who lead a righteous life is Paradise, no matter whether they are male or female.

Before we go any further, let me say just a quick word about the translations I am using. I often use A. Yusuf Ali's 1968 edition (my dog-chewed Quran). Yusuf Ali is one of the most widely used translations, and when I became Muslim was generally thought to be the best. You can tell when I have used that translation because the reference at the end of the verse reads "*The Holy Quran,*" which is the title Yusuf Ali gave his translation. Then it gives the verse reference, first with the Roman numerals he used, followed by the reference translated to Arabic numerals in brackets.

The other translation I use is Dr. Rashad Khalifa's 1992 edition. Though this is not as well known, I find it to be especially clear and easy for native English readers. For my personal reading, this is the version that I use. Rashad Khalifa chose to use "*Quran: The Final Testament*" as the title for his translation. So where I am quoting his translation, you will see that title and the verse reference.

If you do not have a Quran handy and you wish to look at one of the references that are given where the verse is not actually quoted, you can find it in Appendix 3. This has those verses taken from Rashad Khalifa's translation, *Quran: The Final Testament*. Because some people have difficulty understanding Yusuf Ali's translation, I have also repeated all of the verses quoted from his translation, *The Holy Quran*, there using Rashad Khalifa's translation.

Now, back to the issue of the equality of men and women. This equality is again declared in verse 16:97:

*Anyone who works righteousness,  
male or female, while believing,  
we will surely grant them a happy life in this world,  
and we will surely pay them their full recompense  
(on the Day of Judgment) for their righteous works.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 16:97)*

For the righteous believers there is happiness in this world as well as in the hereafter. It does not matter whether these believers are male or female. In my view, we can be truly happy only if we are not oppressed, nor oppressing others. Oppression hurts both the oppressed and the oppressors.

Here again, one more time, this equality between the sexes is made clear:

*"He that works evil  
Will not be requited  
But by the like thereof:  
And he that works  
A righteous deed – whether  
Man or woman – and is  
A Believer – such will enter  
The Garden (of Bliss): therein  
Will they have abundance  
Without measure.  
(The Holy Quran XL:40 [40:40])*

God makes it clear many times, that men and women are equal and their rewards for belief and leading a righteous life are also equal.

So far we have looked at the way that righteous men and women are equal. However, society is not just made up of righteous people. It follows that men and women are equal in unrighteousness also. Personal experience shows this to be true. All of us have known unrighteous women, as well as unrighteous men. And here is the Quranic proof:

*The thief, male or female,  
you shall mark their hands  
as a punishment for their crime,  
and to serve as an example from God.  
God is Almighty, Most Wise.  
If one repents after committing this crime,  
and reforms, God redeems him.  
God is Forgiver, Most Merciful.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 5:38-39)*

This example not only shows a sad equality between the sexes, but also shows again the way in which culture affects the way we look at God's commandments. It has long been understood in the Muslim world that the thief's hand should be cut off. This severe punishment comes from a cultural understanding that the word in verse 5:38 translated as "to mark" the hand (I am told it means "to cut") means "to cut off." However verse 39 shows that if the thief repents and reforms, God redeems him or her. If the hand is gone, where is the redemption? That person is forever crippled.

Further support for this understanding comes from the Quran's telling of the story of Joseph (known in the Bible as the owner of the coat of many colors). In the verses describing the women who "cut" their hands when they saw Joseph, the Arabic word is the same (see the Quran 12:31). Clearly the women could not have cut off their hands when startled by the beauty of this young man. It only makes sense that they cut or nicked their hands.



Verses on adultery are another example both of women's equality, and the affect of culture on the understanding of the scripture. When I was first learning about Islam, I was horrified to learn that the traditional punishment for adultery is stoning to death. I accepted that adultery is a serious offense, but to put people to death seemed barbaric! What a relief it was to discover the following verses in the Quran:

*The adulteress and the adulterer  
you shall whip each of them a hundred lashes.  
Do not be swayed by pity  
from carrying out God's law,  
if you truly believe in God and the Last Day.  
And let a group of believers witness their penalty.  
The adulterer will end up marrying an adulteress  
or an idol worshiper,  
and the adulteress will end up marrying  
an adulterer or an idol worshiper.  
This is prohibited for the believers.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 24:2-3)*

Though the traditional punishment for adultery is death, clearly from these verses even the lashing cannot be severe, but rather must be symbolic and non-maiming. This must be so if the offenders will end up marrying others guilty of adultery, or idol worshipers. You cannot marry if you are dead or badly maimed!

Also, I believe that the next verse indicates that if the offending couple repents and changes their ways, they should be left alone:

*The couple who commits adultery  
shall be punished.  
If they repent and reform,  
you shall leave them alone.  
God is Redeemer, Most Merciful.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 4:16)*

To most English speakers, adultery is committed by married people, and fornication by the unmarried. The Quran does not make that distinction. Any sexual relations outside of your own marriage are adultery, whether you are married or not.

However, I've heard a traditional argument that these verses (24:2-3) only apply to single men and women who have sexual relations without being married. This traditional belief is that adultery committed by married people is punishable by death, though this punishment is never mentioned in the Quran.

I can perhaps see that 24:2-3 might refer only to the unmarried if I look just at those verses. However, verse 4:25 describes marrying a slave woman, and proves that death can never be the punishment for adultery:

*If any of you have not  
The means wherewith  
To wed free believing women,  
They may wed believing  
Girls from among those  
Whom your right hands possess:  
And God hath full knowledge  
About your Faith.  
Ye are one from another:  
Wed them with the leave  
Of their owners, and give them  
Their dowers, according to what  
Is reasonable: they should be  
Chaste, not lustful, nor taking  
Paramours: when they  
Are taken in wedlock,  
If they fall into shame,  
Their punishment is half  
That for free women....  
(The Holy Quran IV:25 [4:25])*

It is not possible to half kill someone. But you can give them half the number of lashes you would give an adulterer or adulteress who has always been free.

This verse brings up another issue that always confused me about Islam: slavery. Let me digress just a moment and discuss this issue, because it is so important. After careful reading of the Quran, I realize the Quran gives reason after reason to free slaves. In addition, the Quran makes it clear that in God's eyes it is a person's righteousness, not their status in society that gives them value.

At the time of the Quran's revelation, slavery was an integral part of the way of life. Rather than outlawing it directly, and causing great upheaval in the society, the Quran sets out a model for a society where slavery gradually dies out. As, thankfully, it has in most of the world.

Back to the topic of women's position. We have seen verses showing the negative ways in which men and women are equal. These negative aspects of the equality again highlight the fact that in the Quran women are not hidden away. They are actively engaged in the society. How else can a woman become a thief or an adulteress?

In spite of what I thought I knew about Islam and Muslim society, it became clear that I was wrong in many ways. There are areas where Islam, as traditionally practiced, is unfair to women. But it is crystal clear that those practices are not from the Quran. As in all religions, the practice does not always match the revelation from God. In fact, we will see that the practices often go against the principles of the Quran.

The Quran was (and still is) an emancipating document for women!

I am eternally thankful that my friend's dog had chewed a copy of Yusuf Ali, and not another translation that missed the equality issue. I might never have gone any further with the Quran.



*I want to give you input from other sources on the issues in my chapters. At the end of several chapters you will find writings from other people.*

*It has been helpful to me to come to know other women who had difficulties with the cultural understandings of traditional Islam. Here are the reactions of a sister from India:*

### A Muslim Experience

All my life I grew up with a multitude of traditions that controlled and dictated my every action. The “Muslim culture,” doctrines and traditions, are followed by the community, unquestioningly. Being on the “inside” you accept them first as a child and then as an adult. You question occasionally, but by and large you accept since you see everybody else around you taking it as normal.

It never occurred to me to question some of the traditions. For example, the fasting, the purdah system (veiling), that a woman cannot pray while having a period, segregation of the females from males. But I deeply resented several other customs like polygamy, male superiority, inequality of the sexes, inhuman treatment of people whose offenses were minor. Because I “belonged” to it, I defended it while I was young, but as I grew older, I distanced myself from the culture. My father was very broad-minded and took it in the right perspective, giving me permission to pursue a medical profession. As time went by, I stopped practicing “Islam” completely, as I felt ashamed of being “Muslim” and having no answers to the plethora of questions that I had.

Time and time again throughout my youth and adulthood, I would question, and be unhappy and dissatisfied.

The “mullah’s” [*religious leaders*] made the situation worse. They made me feel that for me to even question was wrong. It

showed me as a disobedient rebel in their eyes and they would blame it on my parents, attributed to an insufficient, deficient upbringing. This would increase the turmoil in my mind and I would dislike myself, becoming fearful of God and Hell, and pray feverishly for several days. The fear would then subside, the questions would return, and I would revert to my old status of not practicing anything at all.

I repeated this cycle many times over.

— *Shari, India*

