

## In Society

In most cultures of the world, the position of women is not quite equal to that of men. Thus, in almost all groups of people it is possible to find “bulls of inequity” that affect women.

In many Muslim communities, there are lots of inequities and lots of contradictions. To be truthful, I cannot even imagine what it must be like to live as a woman in such a society. For me, the emotional conflict such circumstances would create would be terrible.

One of the best areas to demonstrate both the inequities and the contradictions is that of politics. In some Muslim countries, like Turkey, women’s rights have been a major political issue for many years. In fact, women were given the right to vote in Turkey years before they had it in France. Yet the position of women in Turkey before the revolution of 1908 was as bad or worse than anywhere else in the Muslim world. In fact, the Ottoman Turks were probably the first to confine women in harems and initiate severe veiling. The history of the harems of Turkish sultans is hair-raising—it was the virtual enslavement of scores of “chosen” women for the personal pleasure of one man.

Modern Turkey is among the vanguard of Muslim nations in striving for women’s equal rights. On the other hand, in much of the Muslim world women are seen as possessing characteristics which make them unfit for rational, intellectual pursuits, like voting.

Given this climate, one would not expect to find women elected to national leadership in Muslim countries. Yet from 1988 to 1990, and again from 1993 to 1996 Benazir Bhutto served as Pakistan’s prime minister. In the early 1990’s, Begum Khaleda Zia was elected as the first woman prime minister of Bangladesh. Then, in June of 1993, Turkey elected Tansu Ciller as the first

woman to lead that country. All of this in an era where many Western countries, including the United States, have not yet elected a woman even to the vice-presidency, or its equivalent!!!

It is noteworthy that one of the Muslim political “hot spots” of our own time, Indonesia, has a woman president. Megawati Sukarnoputri was initially elected to the vice-presidency, in spite of a resurgence of Muslim fundamentalism in that country. When the fundamentalist president was removed from office because he was not up to the job, she became president.

It seems most ironic that women national leaders should be acceptable in societies I have always “known” to be unfair to women, and unacceptable in my own “fair” society. I believe that once again I am staring my old friend culture in the face. I am having to face my own cultural prejudice, my own tendency to assume that my culture is the best, the most fair in all ways.

These Muslim women rulers certainly demonstrate the falsehood of the *Hadiths* that say any nation led by a woman will fail. More importantly, we know from the Quran that there is no problem with a woman leading a country. In fact, God gives us an example of a woman ruler in the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (or “Saba,” as Yusuf Ali writes it):

*But the Hoopoe tarried not  
Far: he (came up and) said:  
“I have compassed (territory)  
Which thou hast not compassed,  
And I have come to thee  
From Saba with tidings true.  
“I found (there) a woman  
Ruling over them and provided  
With every requisite; and she  
Has a magnificent throne.  
(The Holy Quran XXVII:22-23 [27:22-23])*

The people of Sheba were rich and prosperous and their queen was a wise leader. Her wisdom is demonstrated by her response to a letter sent by Solomon:

*(The Queen) said: "Ye chiefs!  
Here is – delivered to me –  
A letter worthy of respect.  
"It is from Solomon, and is  
(As follows): 'In the name  
Of God, Most Gracious,  
Most Merciful:  
" 'Be ye not arrogant  
Against me, but come  
To me in submission  
(To the true Religion).' "*  
*She said: "Ye chiefs!  
Advise me in (this)  
My affair: no affair  
Have I decided  
Except in your presence."  
They said: "We are endued  
With strength, and given  
To vehement war:  
But the command is  
With thee; so consider  
What thou wilt command."  
She said, "Kings, when they  
Enter a country, despoil it,  
And make the noblest  
Of its people its meanest  
Thus do they behave.  
"But I am going to send  
Him a present, and (wait)  
To see with what (answer)  
Return (my) ambassadors."  
(The Holy Quran XXVII:29-35 [27:29-35])*

These verses show a leader who clearly valued her advisors, yet had the wisdom to take her own council. Rather than respond aggressively and almost certainly provoke a military response, she decided to see how Solomon responded to her gift. In doing

so, she not only avoided conflict but also opened the way to her own guidance.

While the Queen of Sheba is the only woman leader mentioned in the Quran, she is an excellent example for any leader. The Quran thus makes it clear that women can lead.

Does the Quran deal with the issue of women voting? Yes, I think so because one of the traits of the believers is that they decide their affairs after consultation among themselves. This verse is among a series that describe the believers:

*Those who hearken  
To their Lord, and establish  
Regular prayer; who (conduct)  
Their affairs by mutual Consultation;  
Who spend out of what  
We bestow on them  
For Sustenance;  
(The Holy Quran XLII:38 [42:38])*

Clearly the verse does not refer to just men – as we women are equally required to observe the prayer and charity.

In today's society conducting the group's affairs "*by mutual Consultation*" can only be readily achieved in a democratic process where all mature members of the society have an equal input into the decision making – an equal vote.

Thus, all indications from the Quran are that women should have equal political rights, both in leadership and in selecting that leadership.



In some Muslim countries, notably Iran, even when women have the right to vote, they are not allowed to participate in the justice system. They cannot serve on juries, nor can they practice law or hold the position of judge. Given the traditional Muslim view that women are too emotional for rational pursuits, such a stance is at least comprehensible, though incorrect.

Very often this position is defended by a verse from the Quran that we have already examined. Here are the salient parts again:

*O you who believe, when you transact  
a loan for any period, you shall write it down.  
An impartial scribe shall do the writing....  
Two men shall serve as witnesses;  
if not two men, then a man and two women  
whose testimony is acceptable to all.  
Thus, if one woman becomes biased,  
the other will remind her....  
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:282)*

We have already discussed this verse in reference to witnessing. It discusses financial transactions, the only situation where two women substitute for one man. As we saw earlier, in all other situations of witnessing women and men are equal. With that in mind, I can only conclude that women are totally capable of the discerning thought required for witnessing, or any other legal activity.

Finally, we may look to the Queen of Sheba again as the Quranic example. As the ruler of her people, she must have frequently been cast in the role of a judge.



There is one other area of inequity and contradiction that I would like to discuss: the area of employment. In some parts of the Muslim world women can seek employment in any field they choose (though some fields are still more acceptable than others, especially medicine and education). In other Muslim countries, women cannot work outside of the home at all without the written consent of their husbands, and then only in situations where they will not encounter men to whom they are not related.

Ironically, industrialization and increased wealth has made life more confining for many women. In earlier times women

had important roles to play as shepherdesses, weavers, etc. Those roles are now diminished.

In another ironic twist, women who have had to fight for their survival, like the women of Palestine, have greater freedoms, and a wider range of employment opportunities. There are many reasons for this. Often, the structure of the extended family has been so disrupted that there are no related men in the area to play the traditional roles. Women must then take them on. In other cases, everyone in the family recognizes that the only way for the society to survive is for everyone to get an education, including women. This attitude has opened many doors for women that had been historically shut.

When I made the Hajj pilgrimage, I became acquainted with a number of extremely intelligent and capable Palestinian women. Actually, I met wonderful women from all over the world, but the resourcefulness and ability of the women from Palestine especially struck me. Most of these women had been forced to find their own way in the world, and had done a magnificent job of it.

As a final irony, traditionalists use a Quranic verse to argue against women working. It is another verse that we have previously discussed. Here I quote only the first portion, since it is the portion dealing with our present subject:

*The men are made responsible for the women,  
and God has endowed them  
with certain qualities, and made them  
the bread earners....*

*(Quran: The Final Testament 4:34)*

The traditionalist argument is that since the men are the bread earners, women should not work outside of the home. However the Quran does *not* specify that, and in fact provides examples of women working outside of the home. These examples come from the story of Moses. The first is the example of his future wife and her sister watering their father's sheep, a job that was normally done by men. The second example is that of

Moses' mother. She was employed by Pharaoh's household as a wet-nurse for her own son.

I believe the above verse simply says that the man provides the living expenses for the family. There are other verses in the Quran that make it clear that any believer can work for gain:

*O ye who believe!  
Give of the good things  
Which ye have (honourably) earned,  
And of the fruits of the earth  
Which We have produced  
For you, and do not even aim  
At getting anything  
Which is bad, in order that  
Out of it ye may give away  
Something, when you yourselves  
Would not receive it  
Except with closed eyes.  
And know that God  
Is Free of all wants,  
And Worthy of all praise.  
(The Holy Quran II:267 [2:267])*

Note that this verse is addressed to the believers, not just the believing men. All believers must give to charity from the good things they earn.

Here is just one more example of a verse that indicates women can be employed:

*Proclaim: "If your parents, your children,  
your siblings, your spouses, your family,  
the money you have earned,  
a business you worry about,  
and the homes your cherish  
are more beloved to you than  
God and His messenger,  
and the striving in His cause,  
then just wait until God brings His judgment."*

*God does not guide the wicked people.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 9:24)*

The last sentence of this verse makes it very clear that the whole verse is addressed to all people, both men and women. Thus, both may have money they have earned and businesses about which they worry.

It only makes sense to me that there is no Quranic restriction on women working outside of the home. However, I also believe that it is important to recognize that homemakers are performing work that is at least as valuable as that of women who are employed outside of the home. Sadly, in the West this is often not recognized. I have known women who felt judged because they chose to focus their efforts on their families rather than working outside of the home. Friends and family saw them unwilling to help their husbands with the economic burden of a family.

In this chapter we have seen that from a Quranic view women can rule, can vote, can participate fully in the judicial system and can be employed outside of the home. In all of these areas there is great confusion about women's roles in Muslim society. It is indeed a blessing that there is no confusion about their roles in the Quran.



*The following story beautifully demonstrates the way that following the Quran alone answers the issues of women's rights in society. This wonderful sister comes from a very different background from my own, but for both of us the principle of God alone as found in the Quran was a lifeline.*

### The Quran – The Answer

What was Islam for me growing up as a child? It was what I learned from my family and school. My parents were spiritual. They followed the basic tenants of Islam with perseverance. Their way of life reflected tolerance, appreciation, and love. Com-



passion and forgiveness were synonymous with their name. They were respectful with each other. Islamic religious study was a part of our school curriculum. From all these lessons, one was the strongest, the one about mandatory acts and commendable acts in Islam. The first specifies that there are obligatory and forbidden acts to obey because they are from the Quran. The second is about exemplary conducts of the prophet, in what he said and approved. I went for what were easy classes in school because I was afraid that the teaching about the prophet would add more burdens, and require much to memorize. Prayer, *Zakat* (charity), fasting, Hajj (Pilgrimage), and a belief in God and the hereafter are all that are mandatory. My decision was made. I would follow what was mandatory.

I was outgoing and curious, with a free spirit. This presented me with a problem, as we reached the age of adolescence, because I began to realize that there existed a double standard for what was expected from boys and girls. My brothers and cousins refused to take us with them to the beach. We were close to each other. I loved outdoor games. This situation made us girls very sad. Our parents did not support the boys' attitude. They would promise us a day or two at the beach with them or with our uncles. My father started to take us to our sports activities and dance classes. The boys refused to be seen with us in the street and started to complain about our activities.

The years that followed taught me more about the social problems for women in my country. The injustice towards women was done under the guise of divine law. My hunger for freedom made me decide against marriage unless I would have the right to divorce if I needed to. The family was supportive and girls had a life with respect in my family. I participated in organized trips inside and outside my country. By age 23, I met my husband. He agreed to raise our children to be Muslim if we had any. The decision was painful, leaving my family, but eventually I had the courage to follow my husband to his home.

As soon as I arrived in the United States I started to inquire where there was a Mosque. I contacted a few families who gathered every Sunday in someone's home. We studied the Quran and discussed various topics prepared by volunteers. Nine years later, a mosque was built in my community. The group started to expand, and the organization started to change. Within the perimeter of the mosque a demand of unity was made. After many debates and conflicts, Saudi Arabia's system was established by Arab students attending a local university. Every Sunday, the lecture was about women. After so many lectures I began to understand that it was intimidation. They were blaming us (women) for all the ills of society. Our voices should not be heard, our footsteps were to be unheard, we needed to cover ourselves completely. These lectures were challenged with my questions. I never got straight and reasonable answers. I needed answers for my kids, especially my daughter. I couldn't concede to a life that conflicted with my husband's values. Neither my parents nor my country imposed those strict rules! A campaign had started in the local Mosque, which was directed only towards women. Men, who came from time to time to the mosque by van, started to approach women and young women who did not have the right head cover. These same men constructed a physical barrier in the prayer room to physically separate the men from the women. Families who opposed the barrier conceded to the demands of the Saudi Arabian students in the name of unity for the Islamic community. An atmosphere of complete obedience replaced the days of open discussions.

The youth became their next target. My daughter was 12 years old then. She would tell me about the lessons and the teachers. They were encouraging the youth to get married by sixteen for boys and younger for girls! Every lecture was to indoctrinate the people to listen and obey an invisible religious dictatorship. Some parents liked what they heard, because they were experiencing problems with their adolescent children. Others brushed it aside as a weak "*hadith*." This mosque was the place to come and experience the police state they had left behind in their native country. They desired to isolate their children from

the society they were blaming for their problems. They believed that America was teaching their children disrespect for the parents and their values. When I wrote an article saying that segregation of the sexes does not guarantee righteousness and that the consideration of feelings of all human beings is a matter of great respect and attention, we started to have lectures about the ills of the American society. They still had no answers to my questions. I withdrew my presence from the mosque because it wasn't what I was searching for. My children needed to mature with their family values and not with double standards.

A few months later I was told that a scholar in religion would be visiting our mosque. He was a great teacher from Syria. He talked about slavery. It was good, except when he said, "The captured women in war become the property of the conquering army. If they get pregnant they gain their freedom." This was supposed to alleviate prostitution! I have heard crazy stories before, but this one is very ugly. My friend sitting next to me replied that she would never be free since she cannot have children. I truly was amazed at how the audience, with many educated people including doctors, was silent. At that time Iraq and Iran were at war. It is hard to believe that innocent women were subjected to aggression against their will. I objected to this teaching and said that it was against human dignity and an abuse of women.

After the lecture the audience was to take advantage of this important gift and ask the scholar questions. A question came about the head cover. He was delighted to let us know that when he went the day before for a drive to see the town they saw a woman who had a car problem. They were able to help her. However, without her head cover they would not have been able to know if she was a Muslim! I discussed this issue with the scholar who was trying to stick to the importance of hiding the hair; that did not convince me. I would cover my hair if I had a bad hair do. Finally I had the courage to ask the question that I feared myself. "If the woman shaves her hair so she does not use a hair cover ...." Just at that moment the call for prayer started. As is the custom, the people stood up and walked silent-

ly to the prayer room. During the prayer I started to cry because I was so lost and perplexed. My heart could not believe this nonsense. At that moment I made my decision to stay at home and teach my children Islam.

My husband continued to go to the Mosque because he had a position with the Mosque Board. One day, on our way back from shopping he stopped at the post office to pick up the mosque mail. He handed it to me. The first paper on top was a newsletter with a headline NOT SUNNI NOT SHIA, JUST MUSLIM. Well that got my attention! I was so happy to read something that made sense to me. Six months later I decided to write to the editor of the newsletter. This is when I was introduced to the concept of following the Quran alone.

I am still bathing in this blessing and pray that God keeps showering me with the understanding of the Quran. Yes, in the Quran I found the reason why I couldn't relate to *hadith*. I needed to be free to worship God, as He should be worshiped, alone. I did not need to change my appearance. All I needed was the Quran. I don't need to make a statement of my religion or my culture. My worry is to please God and to be a righteous person. Praise be to God who allowed me to pursue the path of enlightenment. He saved me from myself and the ignorant ones. God is the Greatest. The pieces of this puzzle do fit right. There is no contradiction. May God continue to shower me and my family with His grace. He made my children Submitters, what a gift. I feel free!

– *Naima, Morocco*

[*Editor's note:* The newsletter that Naima read is the *Submitter's Perspective*. It is published by Masjid Tucson, PO Box 43476, Tucson, AZ 85733-3476, USA.]