

The Education of Muslim Women

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I am a British Muslim woman who has been involved in education all my life; at present I suppose I am the female equivalent of a *mullah*; I am the Head of Religious Studies at a secondary school for boys (aged 11-16) in the city of Hull. Prior to this, I was Head of Religious Education at a mixed-sex school (for ages 13-18), and before that at a girls-only school. In other words, I have been a teacher all my adult life, choosing what is perhaps the most difficult subject in today's secular society – because in virtually every lesson I have had to 'fight my corner', and have had to take on opposition and resistance from pupils and staff in management positions alike.

To my delight, I have found that the majority of youngsters have actually enjoyed religious education, and many of them have been extremely interested, whether Muslim or otherwise, like young travellers finding water in a desert environment. However, it has all too often been the case that the subject was resisted as being 'a waste of time' in academic and career terms, and therefore intelligent students were frequently channelled away from choosing it into other – more materialistically rewarding – areas of study and all my adult life I have suffered frustration in not being able to do what I really wanted. I have fought, but I have been regularly 'hamstrung'.

All of which has made me very well qualified, I think, to write a few words on the subject of the education of Muslim women.

Women are not the same as men. They have to be stronger, work harder, be more tolerant, more forgiving, more cheerful, more sympathetic. Sometimes they are treated like slaves (usually by those who 'underneath it all' really love them most – their husbands and sons); sometimes they are deprived of all reasonable outlets for self-expression, and sacrifice the whole of their endeavour and effort into loving and caring for the motley assortment of humans *Allāh*, in His infinite wisdom, chose to involve them with. Sometimes we women can choose what our husbands will be like – we rarely get that same satisfaction in choosing our sons! Many of these beloved sons become so spoiled by the available attention and waitress service, that they become absolute 'tartars', and when they marry and become fathers, round we go again. Every woman knows this. Most women put up with it, because in the majority of cases we dearly love our miniature or major 'overlords', and truly want everything for them only for the best – in a way that no other person would.

That is why the Blessed Prophet, who grew to manhood under the care of a Bedouin nursemaid, briefly his own widowed mother, a grandmother, and then presumably a much-loved aunt, gave us the beautiful *ahādīth* about the importance of Muslim men cherishing their womenfolk, mothers, wives and daughters.

In Western society, this attitude of respect for women is now obliged to come to terms with something little known in many Eastern social groups – female acquaintances not within the family group – the fellow school-mate, female student, female colleague or even boss. Having been part of the student scene for so long, and known so many young men (delightful Muslims, if not all destined to become *mullahs* or *pirs*!), it has been quite obvious to me that it also includes coming to terms with the concept of the 'girl-friend' as a person, and not just as a pretty body to be used.

LIBERATED

I have had the privilege of being a 'liberated woman' all my life, and have never had to fight for equality either socially or academically, and so throughout my formative years I never really felt the need to be a 'women's libber'. In later life, however, I divorced my

first husband after a very long marriage (23 years), and am now blessed with a very happy second marriage, to a very devout and delightful Muslim husband. This has brought me tremendous challenges, and great joy; at the same time, it has opened my eyes to other areas of the world (I knew nothing beyond the land of Palestine before), and to some areas of deep concern to me, both as a woman and as a *Muslimah*.

Once married to a Muslim, I instantly became ‘accepted’ by most of the local Muslim community in a way that was denied me before (when I had to struggle into the faith more or less on my own). But I also discovered that there was a certain role model into which I was supposed to fit - and which I patently did *not* fit. For example, I have always found the subject of *hijāb* rather a difficult one, because I travel to work (in an all-male environment) on a motor-bike. I have been known to rev up the high street in *shalwar-qameez* plus crash helmet, but this is an odd assortment, and I don’t think it particularly established my reputation for piety. I cannot help, of course, being English; I cannot help having had a pretty full lifetime behind me. On becoming Muslim, it was accepted that my life had started again – but this is easier said than done.

Some women are naturally quiet, humble, pious, domestic, self-effacing, and so on. I am not. It may, perhaps, be the result of having spent my life virtually in male company that has made me talk, act and think like a man, and to feel totally uncomfortable in an all-female group or society. I can relate to an academic female group for an hour or so; more than that, I cannot do.

I have been devoted to God all my life, and have enjoyed a great deal of travel to various religious shrines of the world – previously Christian, and in the last ten years, Muslim. I have prayed in Al-Quds – in Al-Aqsā Mosque – and the big mosques of Cairo, Lahore, Multan, Istanbul and Amman, gradually learning as I went along. In Jerusalem my prayers were disturbed by men shouting at me because my veil had inadvertently slipped from my arm; in Istanbul I was shouted at because I had innocently sat down to pray in a place reserved for men; in Islamabad I was not allowed in through the glass doors at all (an enormous disappointment) and had to form part of a small motley group of ladies outside. In our local mosque, the *‘Īd* prayers are attended by around a dozen women (male full-house, of course), and funds are now being raised for these few ladies to be ‘fenced off’. I try to attend *fajr* in *Ramadān*, and am the only woman present.

Yet at Al-Ka‘bah, that most holy of places in the sight of God, it is made perfectly clear that men and women are equal and may worship together, and that the ladies may show their faces without expecting the weaker brethren to stare at them or give them any trouble or unsought-for distraction.

I have no qualification whatsoever, of course, to criticise what has happened to (some) women in Islām; nevertheless, I have felt increasingly obliged to raise my voice now – even if what I say is wrong, or comes from an improper understanding of Islām.

AN HONORARY MAN

I came to Islām through reason, through the innate love of God, through witnessing so many good things about Islām. It did not occur to me as strange until later that, when travelling about the Middle East as a visiting ‘scholar and writer’, I was always treated with respect, entertained, fed and blessed with many deep discussions by good Muslim men, many of them ‘high up’ and notable academics, *whose women were never included* in these activities. In short, I was treated as an honorary man, and never found anything odd in this, as it has been my experience throughout life.

Suddenly, on marriage to a Muslim, it was discovered somehow that I was a woman! Subsequently, a horrendous list of things I *ought* to be doing/believing/not doing/not believing very nearly pulled the carpet right out from under my feet. And this is in *no way a criticism of my husband* or his excellent friends; all are virtuous and kind Muslims,

all doing their utmost to follow the path of devotion to *Allāh* as they know and understand it.

It did, however, alert me to the problems of being a Muslim woman that I had not seen before. Which is why I regard education for Muslim women as being absolutely vital.

A woman is more than a man's support team. Certainly, that is one of her functions, and many would say it is her most important function. I agree with that. Many men, whose wives are not very good support teams, must agree with that too. Sadly, no matter how devout and upright, one cannot *force* the correct attitude and behaviour in one's support teams.

The world of education in the West has grappled for a decade or so with the problem of sexism in educational thought and literature. I am a writer. When I write a book, I take enormous care never to use the word 'Man' when I mean 'people' or 'humans'. I have never believed that when God makes His Will clear to people, it is for men only. No honest person, and certainly no honest Muslim, can believe that. If a woman's husband requires her to do something against the principles of Islām, it is her duty to overrule him somehow (with tact, it is hoped).

TYPES OF SCHOOLING

The educational principles of the West (sadly not always fulfilled, but one tries!) require *any* person to be educated to the best possible effect, according to the intelligence, ability, aptitude, etc. *of each individual*, no matter whether male or female. Often this is best achieved in single-sex schools and I think recent research reveals that this old-fashioned notion of keeping young men and women apart while they are studying is not without its justification! This is, however, not the place to argue the merits of single-sex or mixed-sex schools. I have taught in mixed, girls' and boys' schools and personally prefer my current school, which is all boys. (Nevertheless, I have noticed that boys being educated without girls in the class are frequently cruder, more arrogant and bumptious, more ignorant about 'life' and show less respect for women than the boys from the mixed school! There are always pros and cons.)

Girls from a girls-only school are often more lucid, capable of reasoning, more outspoken and more generally clued-up about 'the world' in general with all its problems than those whose education has been distracted by young men. But these young ladies, who have grown up expecting independence, equality, opportunity and so on, are then at a disadvantage when dealing with a society that expects them to 'play the handmaiden' to some man or other. Hence, I do believe, some men are very reluctant to let go of what has been for them a very good thing, a docile, quiet, obedient, domestic help-mate; they do not want to have in 'their' homes a boss, a manager or a high-flying intellectual.

Which is a pity, because *Allāh* in His infinite Wisdom made around 50% of His created humans female of sex and the share-out of brains and talent was roughly equal. Therefore it stands to reason that if men corner all the 'market outlets' for talents, brains, expertise and so on, the corollary must be an awful lot of dissatisfied, frustrated and disgruntled females, with the added danger that they may become resentful and militant and then really upset the apple cart.

None of this can be solved in five minutes. But any Muslim worth his salt realises that there is an enormous volcano brewing up in societies where women's education and welfare is neglected. It is such a tragic waste of resources apart from anything else.

ALLOWING WOMEN THEIR RIGHTS GRANTED BY ALLĀH

The first step must be in the education of Muslim women. In many Eastern societies this has now gone well beyond the first stages, of course, and these countries abound in highly-educated, strong womenfolk who – like their Western sisters – are beginning to

question what God-given right various ‘inferior’ male specimens have to ‘keep them in their place’.

An examination of the scriptures is most salutary. It seems that *Allāh* wishes to remind males of the extra burdens placed on females by their biology – they will always have to menstruate, become pregnant, raise children; He is also well aware that women accept naturally the leadership and protection of a good and worthwhile man, especially so when ‘love’ – that most powerful of all ingredients – is present.

The glory of Islām, as far as a Western woman is concerned, is that it is *not sexist*. The commands and revelations are given to *all* Muslims; their sex does not come into it. This, as everyone knows, was at a time when the West was notorious for mistreating its women and keeping them in subservience. However, has this lesson of equality and equal worth been learned only by the decadent West? A resounding ‘No’ must come from the female Muslims of the world – for Islām is not to be equated with any particular country or culture, even it originated in the desert sands of Arabia.

Islām does not ‘belong’ to any group or country or set of believers. It is the nature of humanity to be frequently limited in vision, embarrassed by failure, eager to please and very often *wrong* in what it believes. Humanity cannot help it; it is *not* God. Like the Jain story of the blind men feeling the elephant, when people discover something of God they discover their own bit, not someone else’s. When they ‘know’ something of God, they may be perfectly ‘right’ in what they know and, at the same time, be ‘wrong’ – because God is way beyond the limits of human understanding. No person can do more than their best. They cannot be compelled to see what they cannot see, even if what they ‘should be’ seeing is perfectly obvious to someone else. Fortunately for us, God knows everything, including this, and that is why our *niyyah* (intention) is often more important than our action.

I do not know the percentage, but Muslim females are probably around 50% of the population of the Muslim world. Therefore they are of vital importance and should take upon themselves the responsibility of being just as good examples of Islāmic life and virtue as their men. If they are held back, I presume that on the Great Day of Judgement, a lot of awkward questions will be asked of the men responsible for denying women their fulfilment.

By education, it should be obvious that for a Muslim there are two types for success in life: there is religious education as a Muslim and there is education in the secular sense. Muslim women must take up the same challenge that faced Western women; no-one will ‘give’ them equality. It cannot be given. It has to be earned. No one can ‘give’ a man authority or superiority, it has to be earned. The same is true for women.

On the Day when all believing men and women will stand alone and their books are opened before them, it is far too late for whining and recriminations. Every human has the duty and the right to take up the *khilāfah* and *do their best* for the world, their society, their family and themselves.

It is not for any human person to take on the role of Judge; there is only One who sees every action and knows every motive. Luckily, *Allāh* is the Most Compassionate and the Most Kind; and if *Allāh* is kinder than I myself, all things will be taken into consideration. And if the female child will then ask for what sin or crime she was not allowed to live, possibly female children who lived longer and grew to adulthood will also have a few questions to ask!

Education for Muslim women is vital. It may mean very basic education – how to keep clean, nurse the family, learn a simple trade, be responsible for one’s household. It may mean accepting the challenge of discovering that *Allāh* has given you a brain ideally suited for becoming an engineer, a nuclear physicist, a poet, a bank manager or a politician. It will not necessarily make the man or woman into a saint. It will not always bring joy and contentment, as every already-educated could tell you. It brings responsibility and challenge.