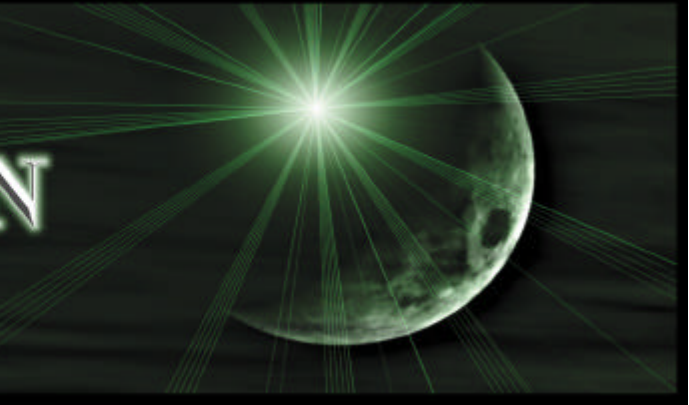


YOUNG EUROPEAN MUSLIM



From the Editorial Team . . .

Assalamu-Alaikum and Greetings!

Welcome to the tenth issue of the Young European Muslim Newsletter (YEM). We are a team of young people from the North of England whose ages range from 13 to 19. This newsletter is intended, not specifically for Young European Muslims, but for everyone throughout the world. We work together on a regular basis to design and produce quarterly newsletters on 'Muslim issues' such as Islamophobia and Islamic festivals. We constantly seek feedback from our readers concerning the contents of this newsletter - Were there any parts you particularly enjoyed? Can we make any improvements? Any form of feedback would be highly welcome.

Introduction

This newsletter is based on the "Family" with special attention to women in Islamic society. Their rights, their duties, their privileges and also the way the world perceives them. We will also be discussing, marriage, children, equality and parental roles in Islam.

In recent times there has been a lot of media interest regarding women in Islam. This reached epic proportions during the war in Afghanistan during which, public figures including Cherie Blair and Laura Bush very openly criticised the wearing of the burq'a and how they perceived it as oppressive. (*The Guardian 20/08/2002*).

In this newsletter we will try to address many misconceptions regarding the role of women in Islam. Independent, educated muslim women, very seldom have the opportunity to explain why they choose to wear either the hijab or burq'a.

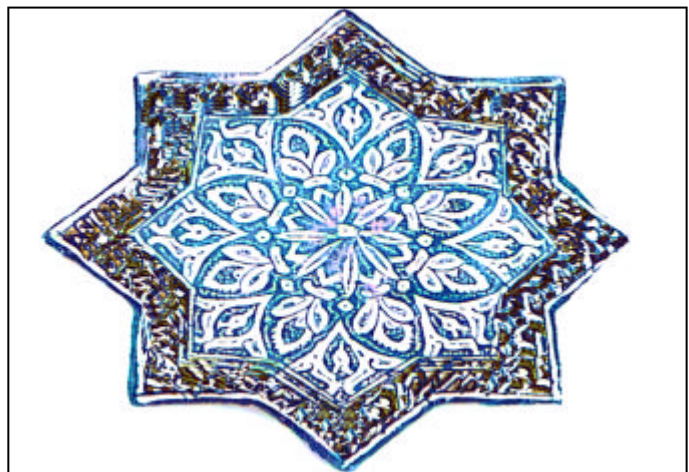
Status of Women in Islam

The pagan society of pre-Islamic Arabia had an irrational prejudice against their female children whom they used to bury alive!!! Women were made to dance naked in the vicinity of the Holy Kaa'ba during the annual fairs, and were treated as mere property and objects of sexual pleasure. Women could possess no rights or position in their society whatsoever. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him - PBUH) was totally opposed to this practice. He taught them that supporting their female children would become a screen for them against Hell-fire.

This teaching is also narrated by the Prophet's wife A'isha (PBUH). She explained that one day a woman came to her house with her two daughters. She asked for charity

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but 'A'isha could not find anything except a date, which she gave to her. The woman divided it between her two daughters and did not eat anything herself. Then she got up and left. When the Prophet (PBUH) came to the house, 'A'isha told him about what had happened and he explained that when the woman was brought to account about her two daughters they would act as a screen for her from the fires of Hell.



Mothers command great respect in Islam. The Holy Qur'an speaks of the rights of the mother in a number of verses. It stipulates Muslims show respect to their mothers and serve them well even if they are non-Muslims. The Prophet (PBUH) states emphatically that the rights of the mother are paramount.

Abu Hurairah reported that a man came to the Prophet (PBUH) and asked: "O Messenger of Allah, who is the person who has the greatest right on me with regards to kindness and attention?" He replied, "Your mother." "Then who?" He replied, "Your mother." "Then who?" He replied, "Your mother." "Then who?" The Prophet (PBUH) finally replied, "Your father".

Equality

In Islam there is absolutely no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to their creator is concerned. Both are promised the same reward for good conduct and the same punishment for evil conduct as the Qur'an clearly states in *surah (2:226)*.

Within Islam, a woman is a completely independent personality. She is entitled to inherit in her position as a mother, a wife, a sister and as a daughter. She has complete liberty to choose her husband. The Prophet's followers

accepted this teaching and brought about a revolution in their social attitude towards women. They no longer considered women as mere objects, but as an integral part of society.

For the first time women were given the right to have a share in inheritance. In the new social climate, women rediscovered themselves and became highly active members of society rendering useful service during the wars, which the pagan Arabs forced on the emerging Muslim *umma* (community). They carried provisions for the soldiers, nursed them, and even fought alongside them if it was necessary. It became an everyday sight to see women helping their husbands in the fields and undertaking trade and business ventures.

Widowhood

One of the worst calamities for a woman is when her husband passes away and, as a widow, the responsibility of maintaining the children falls completely upon her.

The Prophet (PBUH) upheld the cause of widows. Most of his wives were widows. In an age when widows were rarely permitted to remarry, the Prophet (PBUH) encouraged his followers to marry them. He was always ready to help widows and exhorted his followers to do the same. Abu Hurairah reported that the Prophet said: "One who makes efforts to help the widow or a poor person is like a *mujahid* (warrior) in the path of Allah, or like one who stands up for prayers in the night and fasts in the day."



Woman Equal to Man

The *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) regards women as the spiritual and intellectual equal of men. The main distinction it makes between them is in the physical realm, based upon the just principle of fair division of labour. It allots the more strenuous work to the man and makes him responsible for the maintenance of the family. It allots the work of managing the home and the upbringing and training of children to the woman. It is this work which has the greatest importance in the task of building a healthy and prosperous society.

It is a fact, that sound management within the domestic field is impossible without a unified policy. For this reason the *Shari'ah* requires a man, as head of the family, to consult with his family and then to have the final say in decisions concerning it. Nevertheless, he must not abuse this right, or intentionally cause any grievance to his wife.

Any transgression of this principle involves losing the favour of Allah. This is because his wife is not his subordinate but she is, to use the words of the Prophet (PBUH), 'the queen of her house', and this is the position a true believer is expected to give his wife.

Hijab - Suppression or Liberation ?

Why do Muslim women have to cover their heads? This question is one which is asked by Muslim and non-Muslim alike. For many women wearing the hijab is vitally important. The answer to the question is very simple. Muslim women observe Hijab (*covering the head and the body*) because Allah has told them to do so in the Holy Qur'an (33-59).

Other reasons include the requirement of modesty in both men and women. Both will then be evaluated for intelligence and skills instead of looks and sexuality. An Iranian school girl is quoted as saying, "We want to stop men from treating us like sex objects, as they have always done. We want them to ignore our appearance and to be attentive to our personalities and mind. We want them to take us seriously and treat us as equals and not just chase us around for our bodies and physical looks."

Muslim women who cover their heads are making a statement about their identity. Many Muslim women who cover themselves are filled with dignity and self esteem; they are pleased to be identified as Muslim women. As chaste, modest women, they do not want their sexuality to enter into interactions with men even in the smallest degree. The wives of the Prophet (PBUH) were required to cover their faces so that men would not think of them in sexual terms since they were the "Mothers of the Believers".

There are a few stipulations concerning the Muslim woman's dress code. Firstly her clothing must be loose enough so as not to distinguish the shape of the woman's body. It is encouraged to hide the shape of the body and to wear a cloak over other clothes. Thickness is also required. The clothing must be thick enough so as not to show the colour of the skin it covers or the shape of the body. The clothing should not attract men's attention. It should not be shiny and flashy so that everyone notices the dress and the woman. Hijab is not merely a covering dress but more importantly, it is behaviour, manners, speech and appearance in public. Dress is only one facet of the total being. Therefore the term "Hijab" possesses a much wider connotation.

Often forgotten is the fact that modern Western dress is a new invention. Looking at the clothing of women in the West, as recently as eighty years ago, we see clothing similar to hijab. These active and hard-working women of the West were not inhibited by their clothing which consisted of long, full dresses and various types of headcovering. Similarly Muslim women who wear the hijab do not find it impractical or interfering with their activities in any walk of life.

In addition, the rule of modesty is equally applicable to men and women. A bold stare by a man at a woman is a breach of correct behaviour. The rule is meant not only to

guard women, but is also meant to guard the spiritual good of men. Looking at the sexual anarchy that prevails in many parts of the world, which Islam came to check; the need for modesty both in men and women is abundantly clear.

The basic requirement of the Muslim woman's dress code also applies to the Muslim man's clothing with the difference being mainly in degree. Modesty requires that the area between the navel and the knee be covered in front of all people. The clothing of men should not be like the dress of women, nor should it be tight or provocative. A Muslim should dress to show his identity as a Muslim. Men are not allowed to wear gold or silk. However, both are allowed for women.

For both men and women, clothing requirements are not meant to be a restriction but rather a way in which society will function in a respectable manner.

The Veil or Burq'a/ Niqab/ Hijab

Let us shed some light on what is supposedly considered in the West as the greatest symbol of women's oppression and servitude, the veil. This form of head covering is also concerns women in Judaism and Christianity.

According to Rabbi Dr. Menachem M. Brayer (Professor of Biblical Literature at Yeshiva University, Bronx, NY, USA) in his book, *"The Jewish woman in Rabbinic literature"*, it was the custom of Jewish women to go out in public with a head covering which, sometimes, even covered the whole face leaving only one eye free. He quotes some famous ancient Rabbis saying, "It is not like the daughters of Israel to walk out with heads uncovered" and *"Cursed be the man who lets the hair of his wife be seen....a woman who exposes her hair for self-adornment brings poverty."* Rabbinic law forbids the recitation of blessings or prayers in the presence of a bareheaded married woman since uncovering the woman's hair is considered "nudity"! Dr. Brayer also explains that veil of the Jewish woman was not always considered a sign of modesty. Sometimes, the veil symbolised a state of distinction and luxury rather than modesty. The veil personified the dignity and superiority of noble women. It also represented a woman's inaccessibility as a sanctified possession of her husband.

Moving onto Christianity it is well known that Catholic Nuns have been covering their heads for hundreds of years. What's more, in the New Testament, St. Paul made some very interesting statements about the veil: *"And every woman who prays with her head uncovered dishonours her head - it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head"*. (1 Corinthians 11:3-10). Furthermore St. Tertullian in his famous treatise 'On the Veiling of Virgins' wrote, *"Young women, you wear your veils out on the streets, so you should wear them in the church, you wear them when you are among strangers, then wear them among your brothers..."*

Among the Canonnic laws of the Catholic church today, there is a law that requires women to cover their heads in church. Some Christian denominations, such as the Amish and the Mennonites for example, keep their women veiled to the present day. The reason for the veil, as offered by their Church leaders, is that *"The head covering is a symbol of woman's subjection to the man and to God"*, which is the same logic introduced by St. Paul in the New Testament.

From all this evidence, it is obvious that Islam did not invent the head cover. However, Islam did endorse it. The Qur'an urges the believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty and then urges the believing women to extend their head covers to cover the neck



and the bosom (24:30,31). The Qur'an is very clear that the veil is essential for modesty (33:59). Modesty is prescribed to protect women from molestation or put simply, modesty is protection.

The Islamic veil, unlike the veil of Christianity, is not a sign of man's authority over woman nor is it a sign of woman's subjugation to man. Furthermore unlike the veil in the Jewish tradition, the Islamic veil is not a sign of luxury and distinction of some noble married women. The Islamic veil is only a sign of modesty with the purpose of protecting women, all women. The Islamic philosophy is that it is always better to be safe than sorry.

Marriage in Islam

Allah has created men and women as company for one another, and so that they can procreate and live in peace and tranquillity, according to the commandments of Allah and the directions of His Messenger.

The verses (30:21) and (16:72) of the Holy Qur'an clearly state that Islam considers marriage as one of the most virtuous and approved institutions. This in complete contrast to other religions e.g. Christianity, Buddhism, which consider celibacy as the greatest virtue and a means of salvation. The Prophet (PBUH) ordained, *"O you young men! Whoever is able to marry should marry, for that will help*

Continued on page 4.....

you lower you gaze and guard you modesty, and he who cannot marry, should fast. (Al-Bukhari). Modesty was regarded as a great virtue by the Prophet. He said, "Modesty is part of faith" (Al-Bukhari). The importance of marriage receives its greatest emphasis from the following hadith of the Prophet: "Marriage is my sunnah (practice). Whoever turns away from my practice is not completely associated with me."

The Holy Qur'an is the foundation of all Islamic laws, including laws concerning the family, marriage and divorce. The family is the nucleus of an Islamic society in accordance with the three Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism). All the main monotheistic faiths believe marriage is the only way to bring families into existence. For this reason the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) insisted upon his followers to enter into marriage. The *Shari'ah* prescribes rules to regulate the functioning of the family so that spouses can live together in security and tranquillity. Marriage in Islam has aspects of both *'ibadah* (devotional worship) of Allah and *mu'amalah* (social transactions).

In its *mu'amalah* aspect, marriage legalises the human biological instinct to fulfil ones physical needs and to procreate children. The *Shari'ah* has prescribed detailed rules in order to ensure that this is achieved in a responsible manner. This is reinforced by a whole framework of legally enforceable rights and duties not only for the spouses but also for their offspring.

Children

Children are looked after by both parents. According to Islamic jurisprudence, the woman has no other obligation other than to give birth to the child. *Shari'ah* law states that the husband will have to provide a milk nurse if his wife is unwilling to breast feed the infant. Usually this does not occur and the mother will, through love, wish to nurture her own child. This ruling includes any kind of work including housework, although most women are happy to do the housework because of the pride they feel for their home and for their husbands comforts.

The composition of a child's heart is such that it can accept the influences of both the good and the bad, the righteous and the evil. Therefore, it is the responsibility of both parents to incline the heart of the child towards good. Some of the greatest scholars, including Imam Ghazali (d-505 AH/1111CE), urge us, through their teachings, to incline the child towards good, otherwise the child will automatically get inclined towards evil, due to the parents' negligence.

Equality and the Law

Islam gives women the right to equality. Under *Shari'ah* law, she is regarded as an individual legal person and not just a mere adjunct of her husband. This right however carries with it responsibilities. If the woman commits a civil or criminal offense, the Qur'an tells us that her punish-

ment is no more or no less than that of a man. On the other hand she is entitled to the same compensation as a man if she is wronged or harmed; indeed if her chastity or honour is questioned by a man and no evidence is brought by him, the man is punishable. She may participate in the social and political affairs of her community and may even participate in active defence of her homeland and faith - although she is exempted from the obligation to fight.

It is interesting to note that western women only won the right to vote during the beginning of this century; in contrast, Muslim women have had this right from the earliest years of Islam and have regularly participated in the political process. Women can be representatives in *Shura* (parliament) and may hold ministerial posts in the areas which they are expert. Women may also be judges according to certain schools of Islamic thought. Muslim women have the rights and qualities which have come from a Just Allah, it was not necessary for women to fight for these natural rights and overturn the basic balance of order, with which the universe and human society has been created.

A Concluding Note...

Islam should be viewed as a religion that has immensely improved the status of women and has granted them many rights that the modern world has recognised only this century. Islam still has so much to offer today's woman: dignity, respect, and protection in all aspects and all stages of her life from birth until death in addition to the recognition, the balance, and means for the fulfilment of all her spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional needs. No wonder most of those who choose to become Muslims in a country like Britain are women. In the U.S. women converts to Islam outnumber male converts 4 to 1 (*The Times*, Nov. 18, 1993). Ambassador Herman Eilts, in a testimony in front of the committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives of the United States Congress on June 24th, 1985, said, "The Muslim community of the globe today is in the neighbourhood of one billion. That is an impressive figure. But what to me is equally impressive is that Islam today is the fastest growing monotheistic religion. This is something we have to take into account. Something is right about Islam. It is attracting a good many people."

A final word from the Editorial Team

The Editorial Team would like to thank all the young people who have contributed to this issue of the Young European Muslim Newsletter. They are :

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