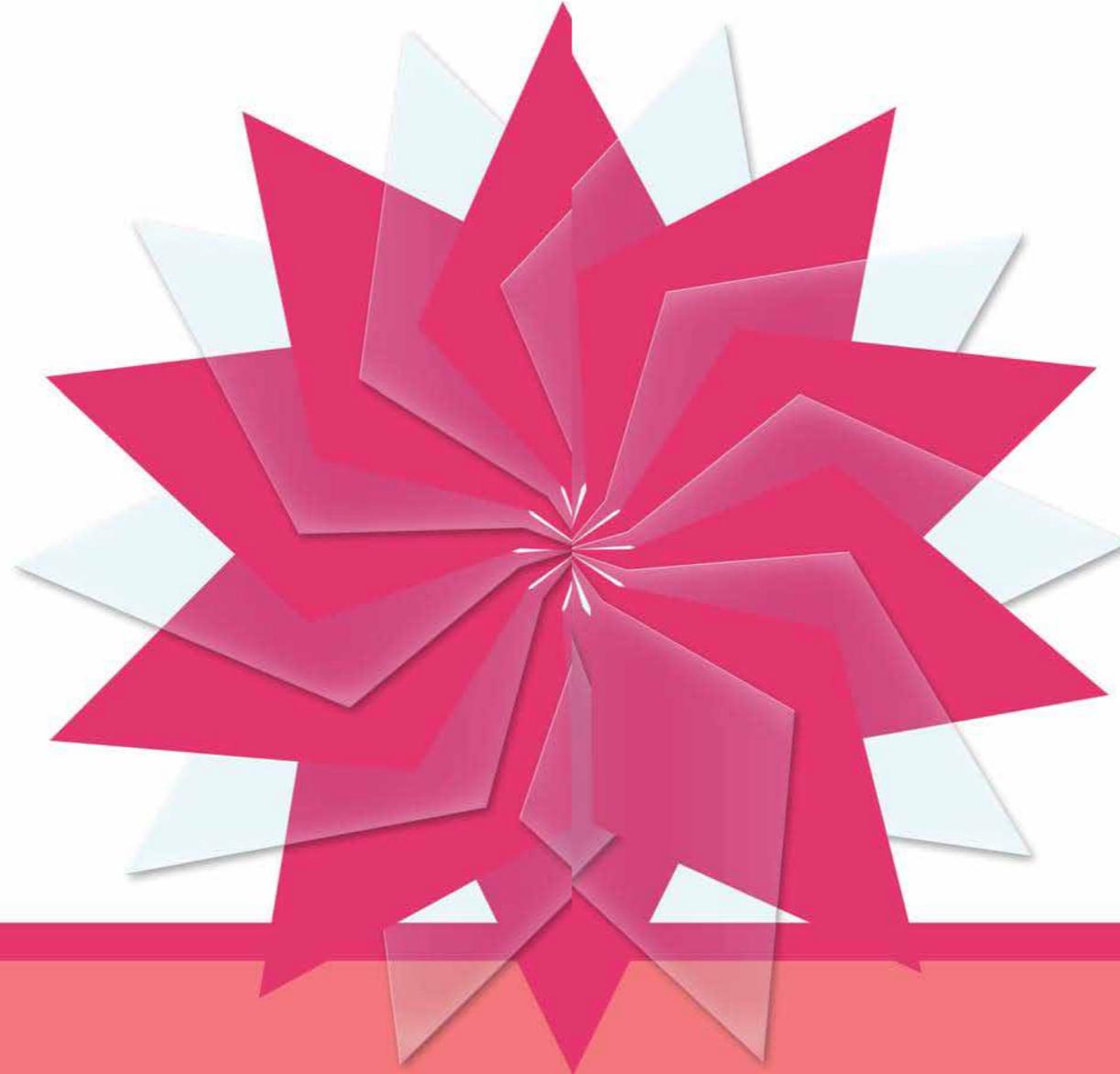




Knowledge Exchange Program



Women in Islam



Higher Committee for program

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Speech by H. H Sheikh Saleh bin Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed Al Al Sheikh, Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wah & Guidance,

General Supervisor of Knowledge Exchange Program

Praise be to Allah and prayers and peace be upon Allah's Prophet, Mohammed bin Abdullah, his family and companions. Calling for Allah, revealing the truth and refusing falsehood are included in the great mission assigned by Allah to Allah's greatest creating i.e. prophets and messengers, may Allah's peace be upon them and their followers. Almighty Allah once said, "And who is better in speech than him who prayeth unto his Lord and doeth right, and saith: Lo! I am of those who surrender (unto Him)" Surat Fussilat, Verse 33. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wah and Guidance is honored by being appointed by the Government of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, may Allah protect him, to fulfill, inter alia, this great mission. In continuance of efforts of the Ministry's Knowledge Program to communicate the followers of all other religions and civilizations and explaining Islamic facts to them, this set of books concerning the subjects of jihad, shari'a, woman, ethics and life in Islam. Due to the importance of such subjects, being the core of several questions and ambiguity, these publications came to handle the misunderstanding of such concepts. I pray to Allah this program will be useful and be one of the means of communication with the followers of all other religions and civilizations to explain the fact of Islam to them without exaggeration or default in order to achieve the understanding based on facts and fair based co – existence.

Finally, I would like to thank the program executive commission presided by **Dr. Abdullah bin Fahd Al Lohaidan** and the Consulting Tribunal for their work of producing these guiding manuals and I pray to Almighty Allah that the reader shall find his desired knowledge since knowledge, if properly grounded, is the base of all good.

"Allah's Peace, Mercy and Blessings be upon you."

**Saleh bin Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed Al Al Sheikh
Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wah and Guidance**

Women in Islam

One of the most misunderstood areas of Islamic life, and one of the most contentious topics of debate between the West and the Muslim world, is the status and perceived treatment of women in Islamic cultures. Are women elevated in one of these cultures, and oppressed in the other? What is the actual status of women in Islam? How are women represented in Islamic holy texts? How are they perceived by Muslim society?

The dominant Western belief is that women are elevated only in the West, continuing to gain rights as time progresses, while women in the Islamic world are still being oppressed. Conversely, the prevalent Muslim belief is that the Islamic system actually provides true freedom for women and men alike, and that women in the West are deceived into an idea of freedom which really doesn't exist.

Histories & Traditions

Before addressing these opposing perspectives, we should first review the historical status of women in both traditions, to provide a context for our comparisons.

We know that the Western tradition sees itself as the intellectual inheritors of the ancient Greeks; many of the intellectual traditions of the West are found to some degree in the writings of early Greek philosophers like Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. These early perspectives were later carried on into the early Christian tradition, particularly that of the Catholic church. The biblical telling of the story of Adam and Eve added a dimension to the earlier ideas of Aristotle, which stated that women were the cause of the downfall of man, and thus all evil in the world must proceed from women. Saint Thomas of Aquinas proposed that women were a trap used by Satan.



These beliefs persisted throughout the Middle Ages, and although the Reformation and subsequent Age of Enlightenment opened the Western world to huge new ideas – the understanding that the earth goes around the sun, rather than the sun revolving around the earth, for instance – yet the writers of the Enlightenment perpetuated the belief that women were not complete human beings. This is the philosophical tradition that the West inherited, and it wasn't until the early 19th century that the first writings appeared by women (and some men) calling for a change in these attitude and providing us with the origins of the feminist movement. As the movement grew, the first struggles were for basic legal rights; at this time women were not able to own property or dispose of their wealth as men did. In fact, even in the United States and Europe, women were not legally allowed to own property until the late 1800s.

The Industrial Revolution created another impetus for this movement, because Western women (particularly in Britain) began to labor in coal mines and factories while being very poorly paid compared to their male coworkers. As a result, one of the first demands of the women's movement was that women working equal hours should earn equal pay. In the early part of the 20th century, the women's movement focused primarily on women's right to vote. It wasn't until the period after World War II when the movement shifted to a wider approach, calling for the emancipation of women not only in terms of legal rights, but also questioning some of the moral restrictions put on women by society, and calling for greater sexual freedoms for women and men alike. This new philosophy essentially contended that many problems women faced were caused by the institution of marriage and the restrictions of the traditional family.

This idea was apparently supported in the 1990's when a prevalent Western philosophy about women's social role became that we should discuss any differences in terms of gender, not sex. The central argument of this philosophy is that there is no inherent difference between male and female, that gender roles are

only caused by the influences of one's environment – therefore a change in environment could allow men to assume the roles of women or women to take on the roles of men, simply by changing one's upbringing or social experiences.

So within the 2,500 year Western tradition we go from the extreme beliefs expressed by the Greeks, where women were denied their essential humanity, to the extreme ideas expressed today, where there is no difference between the sexes beyond those imposed by gender, social climate and environment. In contrast, what is the historic and traditional approach to women as detailed by an Islamic world view? How does Islam look at the issue of women's role in society?

The Qur'an (Islam's holy text, believed to be the recited word of God), contains a chapter known as The Chapter of Women because it discusses laws dealing with women's rights and responsibilities. The chapter begins with the verse "O humanity! Verily We have created you from a single soul, and have made from it its mate, and have made from both of them many people, men and women, and scattered them throughout the earth."

So here is a description of the creation humanity – Adam, then Eve, then men and women, then all human beings across the earth – coming from a single source, a single family, and a single set of parents. Islamic scholarship tells us that these words have a clear message: women and men share equal status, value, humanity.

In the Hadith (the recorded statements of the Prophet Muhammad, which comprise the second holy text of Islam) the Prophet is reported to have said "women are the twin halves of men." The Arabic word shaqaa'iq, which gives us the translation "twin halves", literally means taking something whole and splitting it into two equal parts. The message here is that there is a single humanity, a single es-



sence which is shared by two equal halves of the whole - one half being man and the other, woman. This assertion of equality is often repeated in the Qur'an and the words of the Prophet Mohammad, and an important concept to understand when one reflects on how traditional Western civilization looked at women.

Today it is a given that men and women are equal in their humanity, but this is a concept that is relatively recent in western traditions.

What is the function of humanity? What is the purpose for which human beings exist on earth, and to what ends do they strive? Since Islam is a religion which sees itself as a true revelation from God, as declared in the Qur'an, Muslims believe that human beings have one true purpose: to love and worship God. In fact, God says that He has not created human beings except to worship Him. Therefore the essence of humanity is the same for male and female, and the purpose that they share is the basis of Islamic culture. For 1,400 years the Muslim world has been rooted in, built upon, and supported by these religious beliefs.

Obviously, Western civilization has different roots than Islamic civilization. Take American civilization, for example – American civilization is rooted in the writings of the founding fathers of the nation, in the Declaration of Independence, in the United States Constitution, and the ideals which were outlined therein. It is also rooted in the argument between monarchy and democracy, as developed and designed by the founding fathers. Therefore it seems fair to say that American civilization is rooted in political and ideological thought. It may also have roots extending back to certain Christian ideals, but in its essence it is a society founded upon political and ideological beliefs.

The word “Muslim” is not a racial description, an ethnic category, or a political ideology. Muslim simply means “one who submits”; the word “Islam” means “submitting to the will of God”. Islam is a religion of spiritual submission. Therefore, in the most

important aspect of the Islamic religion, we find that men and women share the same purpose and are expected to have the same responsibilities: both are obligated to testify that there is none worthy of worship but Allah (the Arabic word for God) and Allah alone, and also that Muhammad is His Messenger. This statement constitutes the first and most important “Pillar of Islam.” Men and women are also both obligated to pray five times a day, the second pillar of Islam. They are obligated to fast the month of Ramadan. They are obligated to make pilgrimage to Makkah. And they are obligated to give a certain portion of their resources to charity. These are the five central obligations required of both men and women, who are also obligated to live by the same moral standards, and the same code of conduct. Men and women share these essential responsibilities of Islamic behavior, which distinguish Muslim from non-Muslim; this is significant because it breaks from the tradition of religions that came before.

For instance, fifty years before the birth of the prophet Muhammad (around 500 CE) there was a gathering of bishops in France to discuss whether women had souls or not, and if they do possess souls, what would be their purpose on earth? Was it to worship God? And if they worshipped God, would they go to Heaven? In the end the bishops decided that, yes, women do possess souls – which was a break from previous traditions – but that their purpose was not only to worship God, but also to serve men. In Islam, however, the submission required is not women submitting to men, but men and women together submitting to God. Like French, the Arabic language has two kinds of verbs, one representing the feminine context, the other, masculine; but throughout the Qur'an you will find language that addresses – and therefore acknowledges – both male and female Muslims, in equal terms.

In summary, Islam shows us that women share the same humanity, have the same purpose on this earth, and can expect the same rewards in Paradise, as men. Again, this is a break from previous religious traditions, as well as the political and social understanding prevalent among philosophers before the coming of Islam. In short, from



the beginning Islam afforded rights to women which we may take for granted today.

The Roles of Women and Men

How much do women actually participate in the culture? Given that the culture we're speaking of is essentially Islam itself, the question is really how much do women actually participate in Islamic practice. There are certain acts of worship which are public acts, and there are certain acts of worship which are private. One of the public acts is the pilgrimage, or Hajj, during which both men and women make pilgrimage to Makkah. Another public act of worship is the `Eid prayers, occurring twice a year: once after the pilgrimage and once at the end of Ramadan. Men and women both participate publicly, performing the prayer, paying the alms, actively obeying God and His Messenger.

So this idea of gender – a term which is not used in a biological sense, as we might use the word “sex” in a biological sense to describe male and female – is that the traits that define maleness or femaleness are determined by upbringing, culture, and environment, and that there is no inherent difference in the way men and women think or act. This is an idea that most Muslims would consider extreme. Islam confirms that men and women share in the same essence of humanity, while still confirming that men and women are different. Likewise, male and female have their assigned social and familial roles to play. But can one say that the role of men is inherently good and the role of women is inherently evil? Or that the role of women is inherently good and the role of men is inherently evil? No... they both have important roles, but those roles are different.

Today, this is a central conflict between western thought and Islamic belief. In Islam there is a defined role for men and a defined role for women. Who defines these roles? Their Creator. This is the major philosophical, ideological or theological difference between the two opposing arguments. And while Islam gave these roles to men and women alike, it also gave responsibilities to both. For example, Islam believes that women's skill for

motherhood comes not from cultural tradition or sociological system, but that women are just inherently better at taking care of their offspring, possessing a natural maternal instinct. Muslims believe that the bond between mother and child goes far beyond tradition or societal rules, and is in fact a strength given to them by God. As a result, God has placed greater parental responsibilities upon women than those put on men.

At the same time, the obligations that children have towards their mother in Islam is greater than they have towards any person, including their fathers. So though Islam has defined a role for women which is different than the role of the father, at the same time it gives women honor and respect from their children which is greater than that received by the fathers. The fathers do receive respect and their honor, but it is given to them and according to the degree of their responsibility.

Though men and women are different, they are not in opposition to one another. The idea that there's a struggle between men and women, a “battle of the sexes”, doesn't exist in Islam; rather, they share the same aims, the same purpose of being, the same humanity. They have different roles, but these roles complement one another and are necessary for the success of humanity, in this world and in the hereafter.

Equality in Islam

Despite the unfair stereotype alleging that Muslim males oppress females, Muslim women have always played a critical role in the Muslim community. Early Muslim women served the community through scholarship, teaching, nursing, and other important activities. Far from being oppressed slaves to the men in their lives, these women served God and their community with bravery and wisdom.

Here a few of the equalities that Islam ensures:



- **Equality in Religious Obligations.**

Equal religious duties and rituals are required from both women and men. Testimony of Faith (Shahaadah), Prayer (Salah), Obligatory Charity (Zakah), Fasting (Saum), and Pilgrimage (Hajj) are equally required of both genders. In some cases the requirements are a bit easier on women to alleviate their special cases of hardship. For instance, in consideration of her health and physical condition, menstruating women or a woman in the state of postnatal bleeding and recuperation are absolved from the duty of prayers and fasting. She is required to make up the days of fasting, but not her prayers, as that would be too burdensome.

- **Equality in Education & Intellect.**

With the clear recognition of the physical, physiological, psychological and emotional differences between males and females, Islam emphasizes their intellectual equality. Both men and women are exhorted to seek knowledge, cherish it, preserve it and propagate it to the best of their abilities. Both are credited with their capacity to learn and to gain both knowledge and wisdom. Prophet Mohammad is quoted to have said: **“Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim, male and female.”**

- **Equality in Preservation of Honor and Nobility.**

Women have the same moral obligations and are entitled to the same general rights as men in guarding chastity, integrity and personal honor and respect. No double standards are allowed. For instance, those who falsely accuse a woman of adultery or fornication are publicly punished, just as if a man is slandered.

- **Equality in Financial Dealings and Property Ownership.**

Women are equally qualified and allowed to engage in financial dealings and property ownership. According to Islamic law women can own, buy, sell and undertake any financial transaction without the need for guardianship, and without any restrictions or limitations - a situation unheard of in most societies until modern times.

- **Equality in Expectation of Just Treatment.**

Islam indicates that a man who honors, respects and treats women justly possesses a healthy and righteous personality, whereas a man who mistreats them is an unrighteous and unrespectable man. The Prophet Mohammed said:

“The most complete believer is the best in character, and the best of you is the best to his womenfolk.”

- **Equality in Social Responsibilities.**

Men and women have similar obligations and responsibilities to society. As the Qur'an says:

“The Believers, men and women, are helpers, supporters, friends and protector of one another...”

- **Equality in Sharing of Wealth.**

Men and women have set and determined rights to receive their fair share of wealth, just as they are obliged to give Zakah (obligatory charity) according to the set calcu-



lation. A woman is entitled to her set share of inheritance, a right bestowed in Islam that was unthinkable in other societies at the time. The Qur'an says:

“There is a share for men from what is left by parents and those closely related, and there is a share for women from what is left by parents and those closely related, whether the wealth be small or large.”

When we look at these and other equalities afforded to women by Islam, it becomes clear that the misconceptions and stereotypes attributed to Muslim culture are in need of a closer and more critical look. The fact is, most of the abuses of women that are often highlighted in Western media – practices such as forced marriage, spousal abuse, and restricted movement – directly contradict Islamic law governing family behavior and personal freedom.

The Important Role of Women in Society

Deep consideration of affairs relating to Muslim women's rights, status, and their role in their communities is of utmost importance. Some of the unique qualities and abilities that women possess are the human race's greatest advantages and assets.

Amongst all of her various roles in society, it can be argued that the most vital and unique of them is that she is the very first support system of the child, the precious reproductive engine of humanity through which mankind continues to exist as a race. For a time, woman is literally one with her child; at its first stage of life, inside of his/her mother's womb, a child feeds directly from her nutrients and is physically attached to her body. It is no surprise that in the first stages of external life, a child's strongest bond is with its mother; naturally, he/she responds most to her care and guidance. A poet once said, “A mother is like a school. If you prepare her well, you have prepared a society of nobility.”

What is interesting is that many scholars of the religion of Islam argue that the opposite of this poem can prove true as well; the absolute demise of a society is inevitable if its women are neglected or corrupted. So, while it is undeniable that men are normally physically larger and stronger than women and possess other qualities which women do not, women also have many qualities and extraordinary internal and external abilities which men do not have.

The truth is that men and women are partners, counterparts, and though in some aspects of life they may play the exact same roles and be involved in the same variety of activities, there are roles which are only truly suitable for men and others which are only truly suitable for women. Islam teaches that the man in a family has been charged by His Creator with the responsibility of providing for and sheltering his family, and though a woman may work it is not her responsibility to provide for the family. Her most crucial role is running the affairs of the home and taking care of and nurturing the children. Even though it is acceptable in Islam for her to have assistance with these important responsibilities from relatives and helpers, Islam teaches that it is primarily her responsibility that home and children are well cared for; she has been created with the innate qualities to do so better than anyone else.

Again, Islam does not prohibit women from working outside of the home, but does recognize a woman's unique abilities to care for her children and home.

Women and Work

Muslim women have worked outside of their homes since the very advent of Islam 1,400 years ago; yet Islamic teachings have set conditions and boundaries for a woman to work outside home which are primarily set to protect the honor, respect and chastity of both men and women. The natural attraction between women and men, if ignored and unrestricted, is bound to lead to problems in any society.



Islam teaches that there is no issue with a woman working outside of the home, as long as the boundaries demonstrated in Islamic teachings are upheld. Islam believes that in societies without firm boundaries set between men and women in the workplace, sexual harassment and extramarital relationships find a haven; as a result, Muslim women must not work in an environment which does not protect her and preserve her honor.

Furthermore, societies which have pushed women to work, leaving the home empty or the children to be raised by strangers, suffer more from the ill effects of troubled homes than societies that support, praise and encourage women who tend to their homes and children.

It is the responsibility of the society to arrange a healthy environment for women to work in an atmosphere of respect and honor.

The Marriage Contract

In Islamic law, one requirement for a sound marriage is the total agreement of the woman concerned. The Prophet said:

“A divorcee or a widow must not be wedded unless she is asked, and gives her approval. And a virgin must not be wedded unless she too is consulted.”

If a woman is coerced into accepting an undesired marriage, she is entitled to present her case before a judge to seek annulment. Her father, or if he is not alive, her grandfather, paternal uncle, brother or even her mature son, or the ruler of the State, must act as her guardian, to assure her rights are protected. The guardians' role is to make sure that the groom is sincere and of appropriate standing, and to assure that the bride willfully accepts the contract. All these measures are designed to protect her

rights and support the sanctity of marriage.

To reiterate, within Islam it is the right of a woman to accept or reject any marriage offer of her own free will. The institution of guardianship is specifically designed to protect her interests and insure that no criminal injustice is perpetrated. These support systems are meant to reinforce the sacredness of the marriage contract and the sanctity of the woman's rights in Islam.

Divorce

Islam considers marriage a basis for the Islamic family, since it develops bonds of love and caring and a secure atmosphere for the growth and progress of the human race. This, in turn, produces a sound society. And although the Prophet “The most detestable of all lawful things in the sight of Allah is divorce,” this does not mean that divorce is prohibited. On the contrary, it can sometimes be the best alternative.

Divorce is a right for both women and men if their problems cannot be resolved. Islam advises couples to try to reconcile their differences in the presence of some immediate relatives belonging to both sides. If they are unable to do so, they are instructed to seek counseling through a third party, such as friends or other relatives. If there is still no solution, then they should seek a solution through a judge.

The judge will often advise the couple to be patient and think of the children. However, if the problem remains unsolved, the family life becomes unbearable and the children are affected, then divorce becomes the only alternative, to enable them to have other spouses. When it is inescapable, divorce is neither harmful to men nor to women. First, the couple must seek divorce in an amicable way. They are instructed to separate without hard feelings towards each other. They should keep a minimum of understanding that will secure any children's situation after the divorce.

The “Veil”

The image of the typical Muslim woman wearing a veil, forced to stay home, and forbidden to drive is all too common in most peoples' thoughts. The status of women in Islam is often the target of attacks in the secular media.

The ‘Hijab,’ or Islamic dress code for women, is cited by many as an example of the ‘subjugation’ of women under Islamic law. Too often the image of a covered woman is used to represent what much of the world views as oppression. Her very existence is described in terms that convey ignorance and unhappiness. But in fact this is a gross misconception, often perpetrated by Western media, of the reality lived by Muslim women.

Just think: What does a black ‘Hijab’ veil evoke in your mind? Certainly not the image it is meant to evoke -- religious commitment and peaceful, deep-rooted faith. Veiled women today are either associated with alienation or fundamentalism. They are either looked upon with pity or fear. But where is a woman's will, a woman's choice, really given value. What about a woman's will to surrender to God? Or her choice in protecting her dearest possession, her body?

The Qur'an states: “O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters, and the women of all believers to draw upon them their over-garments, which are most appropriate that they may be recognized, and not molested.”

Islam aims to protect women from being considered sexual objects. It allows women to uncover in front of their husband, close relatives whom she cannot marry, and other women. In front of strangers, it instructs her to conceal everything but her face and hands.

How many times have you seen an educated veiled woman, working and acting normally on television? Very, very rarely. On the other hand, how many times have you seen a veiled woman being hit by her husband, in tears or fighting and rioting along with fundamentalists?

As we contemplate the reasoning behind the Hijab, let us not forget the status of women in societies before the advent of Islam. In the past, women were degraded, abused, and generally used as objects of sexual gratification. There are many examples from history illustrating that the status of women in earlier civilizations was very low, to the extent that they were denied basic human dignity:

- Babylonian Civilization denied women all rights, and if a man murdered a woman he was not married to, instead of him being punished his wife was put to death;
- Greek Civilization, considered the most glorious of all ancient civilizations, considered women to be subhuman and far inferior to men;
- at the zenith of its “glory”, a man in ancient Rome had the right to kill his wife without punishment;
- ancient Egyptians considered women to be evil, a weapon of the devil;
- and in Pre-Islamic Arabia, women were so looked down upon that very often, when a female child was born, she was buried alive.

But when Islam came to Arabia, and eventually to all corners of the world, it uplifted women, asserted their equality, raised their status and granted them their just rights.



Conclusion

What is the true measurement of women's status in Islam? Consider this fact: most of the rights women enjoy around the world, which we take for granted today, were actually promised to them by God some 1,400 years ago.

Organizational Structure

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Shaikh Abdullah ibn Saleh Al Al-shaikh -- Member

Mr / Khalid Almoshoh -- Member

Dr / Zeid Ad-Dkkan -- Member

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Dr / Mohammed Bn Awad Al-Hart