

Muslim Women

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1 CHANGE

Probably one person in every ten in the world is a Muslim woman. The invisibility of some of them fascinates many who are not Muslim. General Omer Elbashir, leader of Sudan, according to a recent newspaper report (Daily Telegraph, London. Nov. 18. 1991) has just declared that Sudanese women must cover all but the face. In some Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia which has the creed of Islam in its national flag even the face must be covered. One learns to identify one's friend by their shoes and, of course, there are as many fashions for the burqa (Urdu for enveloping veil) and the haik (its Arabic equivalent) as in summer frocks. "My husband loves me so much that he does not want anyone else to see me" said one Muslim woman. However, total veiling is not required everywhere, in fact, Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, banned the veil in his country in 1926. A recent change has occurred in the United Arab Emirates due to the Gulf War. UAE women have enrolled in the national army and have been trained to use M16 assault rifles, machine guns, hand grenades and 9 mm pistols. UAE wants to minimize the number of foreigners in its army and enrol more nationals. With a small indigenous population of less than half a million it seemed necessary to enrol

women. One of the early recruits said: "Saddam Hussein made it happen. If Iraq hadn't invaded Kuwait, I wouldn't be doing this". Before joining the army she was completely veiled when she went outside her home but now she wears camouflage fatigues and headgear adapted to comply with Muslim requirements. (Wall Street Journal, August 8, 1991, p.A1). The women's training academy, at first run by foreign female military officers, is named after Khawla bint al Azwar who fought at the side of the Prophet Muhammed.

2 VEILING

Different Muslim countries have different requirements and different ways of interpreting Islamic law. To understand this one needs to observe that in some countries pre-Islamic customs still prevail endorsed by religious sanctions. This is particularly true in relation to the seclusion and veiling of women. The Qur'an does not require complete veiling: "O Prophet, speak to thy wives and to thy daughters, and to the wives of the Faithful, that they let their veils fall low. Thus will they more easily be known, and they will not be affronted. God is Indulgent, Merciful." (Qur'an surah 33 verse 59- The Confederates). Also we should note the injunction in the Qur'an in surah 24 verses 30 and 31 – Light "...

speak to the believing women that the refrain their eyes, and observe continence; and that they display not their ornaments, except those which are external; and that they throw their veils over their bosoms, and display not their ornaments, except to their husbands or fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons..."

These two quotations imply that women moved outside their home and were not completely secluded. If women could "be known" i.e. recognized they were obviously not totally veiled. They would not have had to "lower their gaze" if they were completely veiled. The feudal ordering of society and the spread of Islam to areas where women were very secluded contributed to the idea that the total seclusion of women is an Islamic concept based on the Qur'an. However, in the matter of "veiling" it appears that women are more restricted in some parts of the Muslim world than Islam at its inception required.

3 LEGALLY EQUAL?

In Pakistan there has been much debate over the last ten years as to whether in a court of law the testimony of one man is equalled by that of two women or one woman. In the end it was left to the discretion of the judge to decide in each case- a solution which pleased neither the fundamentalists nor the liberals. The fundamentalists are still pressing for the repeal of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961. The question of evidence in court stems from one particular Qur'anic verse (surah 2 verse 282). However, Muslims put very high store on the

Traditions or Hadith. Some Hadith raise interesting questions about the position of the women. Aisha, one of Muhammad's wives, was not happy about being categorized with dogs. Bukhari (Vol. 2,135) records that Muhammad said that "Prayer is annulled by a dog, a donkey and a woman (if they pass in front of the praying people). I said, "You have made us (i.e. Women) dogs." Another Muslim tradition holds that "one in every thousand men will go to hell and one out of every thousand women will be found in Paradise". Tradition has fixed the number of obligatory prayers as five to be recited at dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset and between sunset and midnight. Women do not generally take part in the mosque prayers, but pray at home. However, Naulana Kausat Niazi, who was Minister for Religious Affairs in the cabinet of Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan notes in his book "Modern Challenges to Muslim Families", that there are many traditions which sanction the attendance of women in the mosques alongside men. Practices vary much in different parts of the world. In many mosques in the U.S.A. the men sit in the front and the women behind. Naulana Maududi, the founder in 1941 of the Jama'at-i-Islami, a fundamentalist revival movement which started in the Indian subcontinent, states that menstruating women should not engage in ritual prayers. Menstruation is regarded as a major pollution and for this reason among others a woman should not pray in public in a mosque. Without ritual cleanliness prayer is rendered invalid.

4 SPIRITUALLY EQUAL

Which ever of the four main schools of Islamic law a Muslim follows and however many traditions he may know it is the Qur'an to which he will look as the final authority. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that there is not just one Muslim viewpoint just as there is not just one typical Muslim woman – the diversity is great. The Qur'an clearly teaches that spiritually men and women are equal. "Whosoever doeth that which is right, whether male or female, if a believer, him will we surely quicken to a happy life, and recompense them with a reward meet for their best deeds." (Qur'an surah 2 verse 228, The Cow). Men have the responsibility of maintaining and protecting their wives. The Muslim woman's most important role in society is that of being a wife and a mother. Generally a woman inherits half of a man's share of the inheritance, the idea being that the man has a greater economic responsibilities.

5 MONOGAMY?

The secular West has quite a lot to learn from Quranic Islam eg. Looking after elderly parents is implicit in the worship of God (Qur'an surah 6 verse 152). Muslims interpret variously the Quranic verse that a man can have four wives provided he treats them equally (Qur'an surah 4 verse 3). Some claim that no men can treat two or three or four wives equally so that this verse is an argument for monogamy. The main arguments in favour of polygamy are, first, the physiological needs of the man are sexually

more compelling than those of the woman and last to an advanced age; barrenness, illness or long menstruation hinder relationships (Qur'an surah 2 verse 222). Secondly, to guard the husband from adultery and to protect the woman in an immoral society.

6 DIVORCE

While the Qur'an allows divorce, it is considered "the most detestable of permitted things!". Men and women do not generally have equal rights in these matters. Only the man is normally free to send his wife away. It is commonly thought that if the wife had the same possibilities she would be less concerned in preserving her home. The right of asking for a divorce can always be granted to the wife if it has been written into the marriage contract and if the prevailing school of Islamic law permits it. During this century many Muslim countries have passed reform laws giving fuller rights and protection to women and children, so in all Muslim countries men are not legally allowed four wives. In 1959 Tunisia enacted the Code of Personal Status, providing for minimum ages for marriage, abolishing polygamy, providing that no divorce may be pronounced outside a court of law, and giving women the same right of talaq (pronouncement of divorce) as men. Also in 1959 Algeria enacted the Marriage Ordinance prohibiting divorce outside a court of law and permitting alimony to be granted to the divorced wife. In 1961 Pakistan passed the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance restricting divorce and polygamy and providing for inheritance by orphaned grandchildren.

7 REFORM

The total list of reforms is impressive. However, there is the problem of Muslim women (especially if they are illiterate as over 80 % are in Pakistan) of knowing their rights and then of obtaining those rights. A uniform system of birth and marriage registration is needed. In Pakistan marriage registration is required by law but lack of registration carries no penalty and the marriage is still valid. Enactment of the law also depends on a just and strong judiciary.

8 POLITICS

Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen have all granted women the right to vote. Here again illiteracy is a severe handicap in the proper exercise of this right. Oil wealth has changed this in some countries. Before the Gulf War all Kuwaitis went to school and half the university students were women. Saudi Arabia is now providing education for all girls – a contrast to a generation ago when most were illiterate and unthought. Such radical changes will have tremendous effects on society and the position and role of women.

9 WOMEN RULERS

One other debating point about the position of women in Muslim lands is whether a woman can be Head of State or not. In the Pakistani elections for the Presidency in 1964 Miss Fatima Jinnah, sister of the late Quaid-i-Azam Muham-

mad Ali Jinnah founder of Pakistan, was representative and candidate of the Combined Opposition Parties opposing President Muhammad Ayub Khan who was campaigning for popular election. The Ulama (Muslim theologians) made a pronouncement that a woman can be the Head of State in an Islamic state. Maulana Maududi, who had agreed with the pronouncement, later stated as the sixth principle of an Islamic state that a woman could not occupy a position of responsibility. This statement can be interpreted as denying to a woman the right to hold the office of a minister of state or the headship of an institution or even the right to vote. Muslim scholars and lawyers differ widely on the question as to whether a woman can be appointed Head of State. A well-known tradition says: Abu Bakrah reports from the Prophet that he said: “A nation does not prosper which entrusts its affairs to a woman”. Those opposed to a woman being a Head of State or President quote this tradition. There is a good argument in favour of the opposite view as Kausar Niazi points out in his book “Modern Challenges to Muslim Families”. He notes the Ibn Hazm (died 1064 AD) considers that a woman can hold all posts except that of Caliph. She can now be head of a Muslim State as the Caliphate is defunct. When Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988 she has hailed as the first woman head of the government. However, Professor Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, published her book in Paris in 1990 entitled : “Sultanes Oubliees, Femmes Chefs d’Etat En Islam” (forgotten Sultanas, Women Heads

of State in Islam) in which she describes such women who played a prominent role in Islamic history. She refers to Sultanah Raziya who ruled in Delhi after overthrowing her despotic brother Raziya Ad-Din in the thirteenth century. Yemen had several Muslim sovereigns including Malika Urwas who ruled for nearly fifty years in the eleventh century. There were at least four queens in Indonesia in the seventeenth century including Taj al-Alam and Nur al-Alam. Professor Mernissi in her extensive researches has unearthed details of other Muslim queens whose stories she claims have been ignored by most Arab historians. One such queen is Aisha al-Hurra, the mother of the last king of Muslim Granada, Mohamed Abu Abdullah. She ruled the Kingdom of Granada until 1492 when the Moors were finally defeated.

10 FAMILY PLANNING

Muslim governments continue to introduce reforms which they claim are not repugnant to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Overpopulation is a major problem for many Muslim lands, so the question of family planning policies is crucial. The Governments of Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Gambia, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda and Yemen give positive support to family planning programmes and contraceptive services. The 1971 Muslim Conference of Rabat stated: The Conference tended to consider that family planning is for the spouses by mutual agreement and without compulsion, to use

a safe and lawful means to delay or precipitate pregnancy in such a way as to suit their health, social and economic circumstances, within the framework of responsibility towards their children and themselves". In Bangladesh the Ministry of Population Control and Family Planning published in 1977 a series of books and leaflets explaining with Quranic quotations that Islam does not prohibit family planning. A Turkish family planning poster reads as follows: "Family planning does not mean prevention of births! The Holy Koran says 'Have as many children as you can look after'". A Pakistani Family Planning Association poster produced in Urdu and Arabic for World Population Year says "Emphatically too many children bring poverty (Abdullah Ben Abbas)". Abdullah Ben Abbas was said to have been an intimate of Muhammad. He has the reputation of being the greatest authority in the exegesis of the Qur'an.

Despite organised government efforts in many countries Muslim lands still have the highest percentage of population increase a year, sometimes in some countries over 3 %. Ignorance and fear make some slow to adopt family planning techniques. Sometimes one spouse is willing and the other is not. Religious advisors, like pirs in the subcontinent and marabouts in North Africa, are often against such devices which would reduce the number of Muslims. Reinforcing these hindrances to family planning is the great fear of Muslim parents that they will not have enough sons. How often a wife is in distress because she has not produced a child. The wife who produces only girls will also seek religious help as well

as perhaps medical help. If she has a son she will want more sons in case the child dies as he may easily do. So a woman's importance in society in general is estimated by her ability to produce sons. This is an inequality between the sexes which the laws of a country and the efforts of family planning associations can do little about.

11 ABORTION

In Islam the questions of sterilization and abortion have yet to have more study. In 1971 Dr. Hassan Hathout, Chief Medical Officer, Maternity Hospital, Kuwait, delivered a paper at the International Planned Parenthood Association seminar held in Beirut. His subject was "Induced Abortion- a Hazard to Public Health". Dr. Hassan argues that abortion differs from contraception in that it is an assault on life and so can be called a criminal act. The foetus has the right to live but danger to the mother's life or the strong possibility of a deformed baby are grounds on which abortion could be allowed. Whatever the teaching about abortion and the advice of medical, religious or government leaders there is a tremendous demand for legal and illegal abortion. Illegal abortion is widely practised and much harm is done to women and children through medically questionable methods. Pressures of poverty and social morality (in the case of illegitimate births) drive many women to take desperate measures. Then there are always those who exploit them for financial gain. The governments of Bangladesh, Iraq, Jordan, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal,

Sudan, and Turkey permit abortions on medical grounds. Tunisia allows it on social grounds also. In Iran under Ayatollah Khomeine's regime the law legalizing voluntary sterilization and abortion on both medical and social grounds were repealed. At first, the Islamic Revolutionary Government closed all family planning clinics and contraceptives were removed from all pharmacies. After pressure from women the Ministry of Health issued a statement about conditions under which birth control is permissible.

12 COSTUMS AND SUPERSTITIONS

Costums relating to childbirth and child nurture, marriages and deaths reveal the superstition and fear with which many women live especially in the rural areas of developing countries and in cities where rapid urbanization has taken place eg. Dhaka, Cairo, Karachi etc. As a bride settles into life with her husband's family she will often be guarded from evil influences by wearing charms. The Qur'an, carefully wrapped, and put on a special shelf just above the door, is a guard against evil powers coming into the home.

If within a few months there is no sign of pregnancy she will be taken to get advice from the local "midwife" or traditional birth attendant. If this is not effective she will visit the local "holy man" who will chant some verse of the Qur'an and blow it on her or make a special charm for her to wear. As a last resort she will visit a shrine or saint's tomb tying a piece of cloth to a nearby tree after making her prayer to the saint. Fear of the "Evil eye" and of evil spirits or "jinn" add

to her sadness at not having conceived. The childless wife constantly fears that another wife might be brought into the home. If a child is born there is still the fear of illness and death. It is difficult for the uneducated woman to know the difference between a painful but not dangerous illness and a very serious illness which may not be painful. Again she may ask her husband to take her to the shrine. The Sufi saint Ali al-Hujwiri is really the patron saint of Lahore and is known as Data Ganj Bakhsh or “Bestower of Treasures”. Every Thursday afternoon and on Fridays tens of thousands of men and women of all classes go to his shrine – for healing, for blessing and for guidance,

Benazir Bhutto in her autobiography “Daughter of the East” records that before her father’s execution he had urged her “Go to pray at Lal Shahbaz Qalander... I never got there last Eid’. Lal Shabaz Shahbaz Qalander. One of our most famous saints. My grandmother had gone to pray at his shrine when my father became very ill as a baby and nearly died. Would God be able to hear a daughter’s prayer for the same person?”(p,142). SO it is that the educated and uneducated both men and women go to the shrines to pray and seek help. Various reform movements in Islam like the Wahabi movement in Saudi Arabia and the Jama’at-i-Islami in Pakistan teach against this popular Islamic practice of going to the shrines and tombs of saints.

13 CONCLUSION

As we think about Muslim women we realize that there is no stereotype. Also there are fast-

moving outside changes in the world which affect women be they Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu or some other faith or of no faith. Within each faith particularly in Islam and Christianity women are becoming more vocal. The Household of Islam and the Christian Church in its Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Traditions, are trying to come to grips with the role of women in community, in political systems and in the world. Islam and Christianity are united in that they both pay the most honour to the same woman – Mary, the mother of Jesus the Messiah.

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