

Exploring women's rights in the islamic faith

[Sociology](#), [Human Rights](#)



Exploring Women's Rights in the Islamic Faith " People of the world don't look at themselves, and so they blame one another" - A Persian Sufi mystic Maulana Jalal Al-Din Rumi, translated by Camille A. and Kabir Edmund Helminski I have always wondered how different our world would be if every human being actually uses their God (Allah) given gifts of reason, logic, and rationality rather than succumbing to ignorance and bending their will to the popular belief whether it is right or wrong. While it is not impossible to correct people's attitudes or way of thinking, it is also not an easy task as each society is taught to live a certain way of life so we need to constantly educate people to learn, and to encourage them to do their own research before making ignorant judgments. This great word of wisdom from Sufi scholar Rumi is particularly prevalent in the West, where we have become so critical of Islam and their treatment of women through news media and other various outlets that it has been ingrained in our mind to think of Muslim women as suppressed human beings who have no rights and are inferior to men. Furthermore, our society has this notion that all Muslim women are enervated, disrespected, and oppressed but contrary to the popular belief, Islam regards women as equal to men in many aspects. " And they (women) shall have rights similar to the rights against them according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them" (Qur'an 2: 228). As transmitted in Surah Al-Baqara (the cow), it shows that women have a unique place in Islam. Rather than listening or reading via incredible sources, we must not forget to do our own research by going directly to the source text of the religion (Qur'an), its religious text (Hadith) and scholarly books. In my research, I hope to change your outlook on women's right in

the Islamic faith relating to their spiritual, economic, legal, social and political rights. Introduction: I would like to first address this topic by saying, Islam is the second largest religion in the world today with over two billion followers from all around the world and still growing. Hence, why would Islam continue to grow and attract followers from all over the world, both men and women if it doesn't condone equality? In fact, Islam has given women the rights to marry, divorce, rights to inheritance, own property, earn their own living, and right to education since the birth of religion dating back to 7th century A. D. It has only been recently in the West that women are able to achieve all the rights mentioned above. In Islam these rights have always existed but in terms of practice, women were not allowed to take advantage or given the opportunity of these rights due to the conservative male-dominated patriarchal society. Just as it took time for the women in the West, it is taking women in the Islamic world little longer to exercise their rights; however that doesn't mean they don't have their God given rights.

Part I: Spiritual Rights The five pillars of Islamic faith is the backbone to every Muslim's way of life as it is the framework for worship and sign of commitment to Allah. They are as follows, 1. A Muslim must acknowledge that " There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet" 2. A Muslim must pray (Salaat) five times daily facing Mecca: at dawn, at noon, in the midafternoon, at dusk, and after dark. 3. A Muslim must fast for the month of Ramadan; one must refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse from dawn until sunset during entirety of this month. 4. A Muslim must give Zakat to the poor. This donation should be no less than 2.5 percent of one's savings after every twelve months (Hadith Bukhari). 5. A

Muslim must make a pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca. Every adult Muslim who is physically and financially able to do so must make this pilgrimage at least once in his or her lifetime. When Allah commanded these acts of worship to Prophet Muhammad, he stated that both men and women have the same religious duties and responsibilities to the five pillars. In doing these acts, women receive the same rewards as men for their obedience and submitting to the will of God and the same punishment for disobedience. This is evident in Surah Al-'A'raf, " Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward" (Qur'an 33: 35). Both men and women are accountable for the same ethical duties and responsibilities concerning integrity, honor, chastity and respect. In addition, if men or women engage in unethical moral behavior, both genders will receive the same punishment thus allowing for no double standards. Also, the Qur'an clearly defines that both men and women are of the same human spiritual nature, as both have the same souls, brains, and heart. Islamic scholar, Seyyed H. Nasr, in his book *The Heart of Islam Enduring Values for Humanity* states that " Each gender is fully human with an immortal soul, and both sexes share equally in their religious responsibilities and are equal before God's laws (Nasr 188). Having said this, another important concept to note is that according to the Qur'an,

women are not blamed for the downfall of man when Adam and Eve were banished from the heavenly Gardens, nor does it view pregnancy and childbirth as punishments for eating from the forbidden tree. Neither men nor women were at fault for this disobedience unlike in Christianity [1]. They were asked to forgive and thus both were forgiven for their sins (Qur'an 2: 36, 7: 20-24). According to the Qur'an, there is no distinction (their nature) between sexes, which means that both men and women will go to heaven since they are created from the same Nafs (soul).

Part II: Legal Rights in Relation to Marriage & Its Social and Economic Benefits

Another unique dimension to Muslim women in the Islamic faith is the God given legal rights in marriage and education unlike in the Western world where women had to fight for these rights. This feature is unique to Muslim women in that these rights are stated in their holy scripture and is part of God's law. Prior to Islam, women were not regarded highly in society as it was the case with most patriarchal society around the world. The practice of female infanticide was a common tradition among Arab tribes. Arab fathers would get angry and upset if a daughter was born thus resulting in the burying of daughters alive in the sand. The daughters were deemed unworthy, unable to defend the family by fighting or the carrying of weapons, and were not capable of taking care of the family. [2] With the birth of Islam and its eventual growth, this tradition was banned as said in Surah Al-'IsrÄ' (the night journey) " And do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We provide for them and for you. Indeed, their killing is ever a great sin" (Qur'an 17: 31). The Qur'an (Surah At-TakwÄ« r-the overthrowing) prohibited this tradition of murdering female babies: " And when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked; for what

sin she was killed" (Qur'an 81: 8-9). On Judgment day, God will hold them accountable for their sins. [3] Contrary to the popular belief, Muslim women have the freedom to choose their own husband even though their parents or guardians take part in the process of finding a compatible and suitable husband. Muslim women have the right and freedom to accept or reject their fathers or guardians choice of husband. When the Prophet was asked for the hand of his daughter Zahra by a man named Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet said " Several persons have come to me to ask the hand of az-Zahra but by the displeasure of her countenance she has refused them. Now I shall inform her of your request" (Mutahhari III). Islamic law decrees that fathers should listen and confer with mothers concerning their daughters' marriage, as they have a closer and intimate relationship with their daughter. Also the daughter feels more secure when her mother has a say in the marriage contract. In Islam, there is no dating, falling in love, or getting to know one another, no physical relationship before marriage. Nevertheless, when couples do get marry, it is with the consent of both. When a Muslim woman does marry, her possessions and finances are for hers to keep and none of it is given to the husband. Under the Islamic law decree, when a Muslim women marries her significant others, she is entitled to a " Mahr" a dowry at the time of her marriage. The dowry is a gift from the bridegroom to the bride as evident in the chapter (the women) " Give to the woman a dowry, a marital gift" (Qur'an 4: 4). When a Muslim couple has decided on marriage, they must declare that they plan to keep the marriage a permanent one, with no hidden agendas. However, due to human imperfections, not all marriages work out so if a Muslim woman decides to seek divorce, Islam

does recognize divorce as a legal act, but it is highly discouraged as God "created all things in pairs including us" (Qur'an 36: 36, 78: 8). Speaking of marriage, we must remember that Islam considers the woman's role of a mother and a wife to be holy and the most crucial role of the woman as their primary duty is the raising of children and educating them. As said in Quranic verse An-NisÄ' (the women) "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women" (Qur'an 4: 34). While it is their primary duty, this doesn't mean they can't seek employment outside of the house. Muslim women can start working once they have reached adulthood. They can work in any industry deemed appropriate except for jobs that show off their beauty or body. This is not only exclusive to Muslim women as all religion prohibits the promotion of sexuality. To those who do work outside of their house, the work must not interfere with their duties and responsibilities to their husband and children. These duties and responsibilities include providing for their children according to their income, ensuring that they are provided with a decent, respectful, and worthy life for them. The care of children is giving to the mother especially in the early stages of life between the ages of one to fourteen years of age. Islam requires that both parents treat their children fairly regardless of their sex. Parents may not play favoritism to a son or daughter. Both must be treated the same, however, they should pay special attention to their daughters as they have more needs. The Islamic code on dress, beautification, and decoration, talking and going out is the fathers' responsibility, yet he has to ensure that his daughters follow the rules. He is also responsible for her education of Islam religion and law until the day she marries. If a daughter has her own money, her father retains and saves it for

her. According to the Qur'an, daughters are precious to Allah " Do not force the daughters and girls for they are precious and delightful companions" (Ahmed #17411). Women have complete economic independence from their husband as evident in the first Muslim and the Prophet's wife Khadija who engaged in trade and was a successful merchant. I believe many of us in the West are still not aware of the rights to full financial freedom provided by the Islamic law to Muslim women. Islam allows them full control of their finances and to manage their own business contracts, which indicates that women are equal to men as evident in the Quranic verse the women, " And wish not for the things in which Allah has made some of you excel the others. For men there is reward for what they have earned, (and likewise) for women there is reward for what they have earned, and ask Allah of His Bounty. Surely, Allah is Ever All-Knower of everything" (Qur'an 4: 32). If a Muslim woman works, whatever income she earns, that money is strictly for hers to keep. They have no financial responsibilities at all as that is the husband's duty and responsibility. This is so because, according to Islam, the man is the stronger person and gender and is physically more apt to work, as they are not restricted, or inconvenienced with menses, pregnancy, nursing and birthing babies. Allah has made the man the protector and the caretaker of his family and household, and he will be accountable to Allah if he does not.

Furthermore, if a Muslim woman is not married, the financial responsibility falls to the father or brother. As a wife, they have the right to maintenance. This implies that a woman's husband has to provide for her concerning food, clothing, housing and medical treatment according to his income, his situation and conditions. As said in Surah AÅ£-Å¸alÄ¸q (The Divorce), " Let

a man of wealth spend from his wealth, and he whose provision is restricted - let him spend from what Allah has given him. Allah does not charge a soul except [according to] what He has given it" (Qur'an 65: 7). Secondly, a woman has the right to live with her husband honorably, implying that a woman be treated correctly in all aspects of the relationship. In return, the expectation of a wife is to submit and be obedient in everything, with the exception of disobeying Allah. The expectation of a wife is to take care of his finances and his home; she may not allow anyone to enter the home or use her husband's money without his consent. Finally, Islamic law decreed that women have the right to inheritance. " For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much - an obligatory share" (Qur'an 4: 7). This Quranic verse shows that women inherit as well, even though men may inherit more if he is financially responsible for the female relatives of his family. However, the Qur'an specifically states that both men and women are allowed a definite portion of their late parents or close relative's fortune. Obviously, this assures that Muslim women are far more financially secure than their counterpart. Most importantly, the overall reason for marriage in Islam is that men and women can be company to each other, love one another, have children, and live in peace, serenity, and contentment according to the commandments of Allah. This is the reason why Allah created humanity so that we could mate with each other and be his servant. While both men and women have equal rights to each other, however, the right to leadership falls on men. This does not imply that men rule or dictate over women, but means that they are the decision makers in

their marriage and family. Subsequently, as Islam is a fervent believer of marriage, and views marriage as serious. It has set specific rules and regulations regarding the marriage contract. In addition, in Islam, marriage is as a total commitment, a promise that the couple makes to God, which will allow them to win the pleasure of Allah. As said in the Surah An-Na'as (the bee) and Surah Ar-Rom (the Romans) " God has made for you Makes (and Companions) of your own nature, And make for you, out of them, Sons and daughters and grandchildren, And provided for you sustenance Of the best" - (Qur'an 16: 72; in Ali, 675; Barlas). Islam has a special place for mothers of honor and the rights of parents especially the mothers, as she is viewed greater and are positioned above all others except Allah. " And We have enjoined upon man [care] for his parents. His mother carried him, [increasing her] in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents; to Me is the [final] destination" (Qur'an 31: 14). In Islamic tradition, mothers have more privileges than fathers because of all the sufferings she endures from child labor. Also, the aftermath of childbirth, this includes nursing and upbringing of the child. In addition, mothers are entitled to receive more compassion, help, and should be treated fairly. As evident in an early tale in which the Prophet was asked by a youth, " Who is most deserving of my love and care? "Your mother,' replied the Prophet (peace be on him). 'Who next?' the man asked. 'Your mother,' replied the Prophet (peace be on him). 'Who next?' he asked. 'Your mother,' replied the Prophet (peace be on him). 'Who next?' asked the man. 'Your father,' replied the Prophet. (themodernreligion. com). Part III: Education On top of all these right as stated above, another important right

is the right to education. Islam promotes and urges all Muslims to follow and acquire education and knowledge: " The seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Hadith 3: 15). In addition to the Hadith, the Qur'an states that all women are expected and are obligated to educate themselves in both religious and social fields, increase and improve her intelligence, expand her opinions and point of views, develop her talents thus reaching her full potential to the advantage of her society and soul. Although they have these rights as emphasize in the Qur'an and the Hadith, access to these rights have been severed due the conservative male-dominated society in some parts of the Muslim world most notably in Afghanistan ruled Taliban and in Saudi Arabia. It is estimated that over 150, 000 unemployed women in Saudi Arabia are college educated and yet they are unable to find work due to segregation rules. [4] However, one must understand that women have played a very important and historic role as scholars and leaders in education, through the course of history. Starting with the first Muslim and the Prophet's wife Khadija, " who helped nursed Islam through its infancy, through its most difficult, and through its most formative years; it is said that Islam was given shape and design in her home..... it was her home that Angel Gabriel was bringing Revelations from Heaven for ten years".[5] Similarly to Prophet's wife, there were many prominent scholars for example, Sayyidah Nafisah, [6] whose knowledge was occasionally sought by the greatest Islamic scholars of her day and princess Fatima Al-Fihri [7] who established the first degree-granting university in the world, University of Al Karaouine, in Morocco in 859 CE. to Rabi' a [8] of Basra who is credited with the transformation of somber asceticism into genuine love

mysticism (Schimmel 35). Part IV: Political Rights In Dr. Jamal Badawi's essay *The Status of Women in Islam*, he states " Any fair investigation of the teachings of Islam o~ into the history of the Islamic civilizations will surely find a clear evidence of women's equality with man in what we call today political rights" (Badawi). This is evident in the Qur'an: " The men and the women they are supporters of each other" (Qur'an 9: 71). This implies that men and women not only support each other socially but in politics too. Just as in the West, Muslim women have the right to vote. They can take part in public affairs such as law making and may take positions in leadership. Women have the right of being nominated to political office as women have held heads of state position in the Islamic world most notably in Turkey with Tansu Añiller, Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007) in Pakistan and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh. In Islam, the role of a ruler is not only the government as it is much broader than that such as leading the people in prayer, be available 24 hours a day, meetings with foreign dignitaries and lead the country in political crises and war. Therefore, if a woman were in such a role, she would be neglecting her priorities as a wife and mother, because in Islam a women's role is first and foremost being a wife and mother. Also, to fully participate in a parliamentary proceedings, she would have to spend long hours in an atmosphere where there is free mixing and social interaction and this is forbidden in Islam. [9] According to the hadith, the Prophet has made it very clear that " people who hand their rule over to a woman will not be successful (or prosperous)" (Hasan 29). However, this doesn't imply that their opinions are not regarded as they can freely voice their opinion or give advice to the government. For example, during the caliphate of Omar Ibn al-

Khattab, woman argued and proved her point in the presence of people at the mosque leading the caliph to say " A woman is right and Omar is wrong" (Badawi) . Part V: Muslim women in the 21th century and Criticism There are over 500 million women living in Muslim societies and communities today and of those the largest majority live in Asia and Africa. In fact, Indonesia is the largest Muslim nation in the world with over 200 million people. This demonstrates the diversity in Islam as well as breaking the stereotype that Muslims are primarily of Arab or generally of Middle Eastern decent. This modern image of Islam as uncompromising religion is contrary to the historical facts as Islam has demonstrated considerable flexibility in adapting to diverse cultures. [10] " The diversity found in Islamic schools of thought and practices among different Muslim communities confirms that Islam has absorbed the traditions of these historically, culturally, linguistically, and economically distinct communities" (Hoodfar). However, in certain Islamic society such as in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, where it is ultra conservative, these societies have imposed very strict codes of conduct for women such as wearing of the full burqa during the Taliban's ruling and the prohibition of women from driving a car in Saudi Arabia. Due to these policies from few societies in the Islamic world, we in the West have come to signify Muslim women as silenced figures living in a world of submission, typified through their practice of wearing veil. We assume that Muslim women passively accept their miserable lives, because they have no alternative course or means of fighting the system administered by their male masters. What we don't understand is that veil is a part of Islam. Islam is a faith based on the preservation of the family unit and community of faith so men and

women in nature have the duty to preserve the honor and holy nature of their family and the community. For those women who wear the veil, it symbolizes humility and respect for Islamic culture and the divine nature within the culture. At the same time during this period, " many conservative religious leaders, distressed by their increasing exclusion from the formal political arena, have developed an unprecedented agenda for creating a single universal Muslim law and more code — an agenda which is now practicable via mass media. They didn't talk of a village but of an ' Islamic community', whose morals and laws would be dictated and controlled by elite religious leaders and theocrats" (Hoodfar).[11] As a result of this, it has caused severe consequences resulting in inequality for women, as witnessed in few Muslim countries during the last two decades. These communities have struggled to find the right balance between orthodox beliefs that make up the Islamic law and the challenges of modernity and human rights. Regardless of the criticism and to this new Muslim vision, women especially in the West are converting to Islam in masses. In Ismail Patel's book Islam, the choice of thinking Women he states that " In Europe and North America the progress of Islam is well documented in census reports. Moreover, it is reported that out of every ten " new" Muslims, seven are women. Speculation abounds as to why individuals - especially women - accept Islam when they have been bombarded, courtesy of the Western media, with inaccurate and demeaning " information" about the faith. The simple fact remains that when the light of truth shines into the soul, the mind and heart are opened and every aspect of the human being submits to the Creator of the Universe. This transformation suppresses materialistic,

worldly desires, and brings about serenity, contentment, and inner peace" (Patel). Moreover, this reasoning of why women accept Islam even with the negative portrayal in media can be understood in Karin Van Nieuwkerk's book *Women Embracing Islam*. In her book, she outlines why women in Western world embrace Islam. " They believe that American feminism is a distortion of nature and condemn it as degrading to women,' ' Feminism has not liberated women; rather, it has liberated men from responsibility. In the process it has enslaved women. They have become imitators of men, not free to be themselves, always in the process of measuring up to them" (Nieuwkerk 34). This view held by Western woman tells us that despite what we see in the news media, Islam actually empowers women. Today, Islam continues to thrive as one of the major monotheistic religions across cultures because the followers of Islam respect and defend the words and customs laid out in the Qur'an. Part VI: Conclusion In conclusion, the Qur'an states that both men and women are equal in the eyes of Allah. Furthermore, woman's first priority is to her family by being a mother and wife as women is precious in the eye of Allah. Despite this teaching, people in the West have little understanding or are indifferent to Islam, and thus draw their own conclusions concerning the rights of women in Islam. Many of us base our opinion on actions of selected groups, and that I think is unfair as in every culture and religion, there are always going to be few minorities who will go outside the norms of teachings in order to establish their dominance. Therefore, we need to learn how to differentiate culture practices from the true religious teachings, especially in Islam, as it is so diverse.