

Unveiling the Veiled

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Abstract: *A general common misconception about Arab and veiled Muslim women is that they are second-class citizens and deprived of their basic rights. Although the Qur'an introduces several kinds of laws that apply to all humans equally, there are several verses addressing men or women specifically. Some patriarchal misinterpretations of these verses have caused mistreatment and degradation of women in some Arab and Muslim cultures. The media also played a major role in introducing the veiled Muslim woman as oppressed, ignorant, and backward. This article methodologically addresses some of the most common misapprehensions by examining the Qur'anic verses that deal with these misconceptions around the subject of the veiled woman. World peace depends on harmony between our differences. Lack of awareness is the main reason behind labeling veiled women. Consequently, to inform people or to re-direct their attention, this article considers the actual status of Arab Muslim women and presents perspectives about their social context in life. This article is to respond to some of the most common misconceptions regarding Muslim veiled women, as well as to explain why women wear the veil.*

Keywords: *Islam, hijab, veiled woman, polygamy, honor killing.*

I. Introduction

Some popular perceptions are that veiled women are often connected with low literacy, high fertility, and minimal labor participation rates. Additionally, these accusations are always associated with teachings of the Qur'an and the religion of Islam. For these reasons, I started to ask friends and students about how they learn about other cultures. The most common response was "from television." Media, and particularly television, depict women covering their bodies — the veiled woman — as representative of oppression, ignorance, and backwardness. This viewpoint is easily accepted by the public, especially in the absence of Muslim counter perspectives.

It is worth noting that stereotyping works in two ways as it imprisons the users as well as the subjects. Almost all people have made a statement like: Blondes are dumb, Jews are stingy, Blacks are good athletes, or Chinese are smart. It is easier to accept presented information than working and searching to find the truth. All of us do it unconsciously. However, when people become aware of a culture, its characteristics, and the environments nurturing its growth, then wrong ideas and categorizations begin to fade away.

II. Historical Notes

Are Muslim veiled women unique compared to women in other societies and religions around the world? Social scientific scholarship about Arab and Muslim women is limited, but it is growing in number. Changes in Arab women's status are following the same trends as in other developed country. Reading through history reflects that women have been abused in almost all civilizations of the world and afforded little or no rights. For example: in the Ancient Persian Empire, husbands were allowed to sentence their spouses to death; Greeks believed that women were a poisonous tree; Athenians treated women as products that could be sold and bought; Romans considered women to be the property of their fathers and then their husbands; and Chinese thought that husbands could bury their wives alive if they wished and that when husbands died, their families would inherit their wives.

As for religions, Swidler wrote, "in the formative period of Judaism, the status of women was not one of equality with men, but rather, severe inferiority, and that even intense misogyny was not infrequently present" (1976, p. 167). In Judaism, women cannot lead public prayer services, and sexual divisions are required. Husbands are responsible for financial matters while wives handle domestic matters and children. It is almost the same in Islam where women are allowed to work and have a business, but their main priority is the

family. In Catholicism, women are not allowed to be priests. In 1998, the Southern Baptism Convention passed a law requiring wives to obey their husbands. Women in the U.S. were not permitted to have any property rights until the 1960s and 1970s in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi (Causey, 1965). This reflects that women were under continuous male guidance and protection all over the world.

We should not ignore that in most countries, considerable improvements have been made in changing and developing women's statuses with the support of male-dominated legislatures. According to the 2017 United Nations *Human Development Report*, the highest percentages of women participating in senior employment are in Sweden as they represent 39.5%; in Norway women represent 35.4%; and in Poland 38%. As for Arab countries, there are no percentages posted. However, many Arab countries are appointing women to high governmental positions. Almost all Arab countries acknowledge women's rights to vote, be a member of Parliament, and occupy governmental positions (Al-Sabbagh, 2005). It is worth noting that in 1930, Turkey, a Muslim country, gave women the right to vote. This was followed by the right to be elected in 1934. Both rights were granted in Turkey prior to being given in many European countries (*Human Development Report*, 2003, table 27). However, it is hard to differentiate or draw lines between what is shaped by religion and what is based on culture, because the two are entangled together and play a key role in developing social statuses.

This brief history is not to demonize women anywhere at any time, it is only to say, women all over the world, including Muslim women, have their own struggles and confrontations due to cultural norms. The Islamic Golden Age dated from the seventh century to the thirteenth century and included most of Southeast Asia, North Africa, and Spain. As Islam expanded, different interpretations of the Qur'an were developed depending on the culture and traditions of the area. As with any book, some scholars explained and encouraged teachings of the Qur'an while others re-interpreted it according to their own laws and cultures. However, women's rights provided in the Qur'an were not followed or practiced all the time in all areas. Some countries applied these rules while others ignored them completely and followed their own cultural norms. For example, in the nineteenth century, Egyptian women were not given their share of inheritances even though this is an Islamic law. Therefore, women had to go to court and challenge their families to get what was rightfully theirs. In Islam, the best argument to use when calling for women's constitutional rights is to use the Qur'an, which is the holy book of Islam and the prophet's Mohammad's record.

III. The Role of the Media

Media is a business, and its main goal is attracting attention and customers. Therefore, an important aspect is to report drama-filled news and events. For example, there are millions of cars and planes moving every minute but only those involved in accidents are presented in the TV. Similarly, the media focuses on the worst-case scenarios when reporting news relating to veiled women. Most of the information presented by the media about veiled women focus on awful scenarios while at the same time blaming Islam for the presented situation. It is important to keep in mind that a situation from one country, does not represent all Arab Muslim women in the world.

Think about this for a moment: In Hinduism, the third-largest religion in the world, "the custom of Sati or the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands began to be practiced, (which) liberated her from a miserable, hated, unloved, and lonely life in the house of her father-in-law" (Seneviratne & Currie, 2001, p. 205). Yet the media does not address the treatment of Hindu women. Another example is the gender disparities in delivering food and health care in India, which is leading to extreme mortality rates for women (Moghadam, 2003). This is also underdiscussed compared to the conditions faced by Arab Muslim women. Seemingly all the media presents about Arab and Muslim women is that they are oppressed and are not allowed to drive.

According to a study of more than 900 Hollywood films, media critic and professor Jack Shaheen (2003) noted that 95% of the movies dealing with Islam present Muslims in stereotypical ways. Turow and Gans (2002) support this opinion, writing that television and the media in general reach countless numbers of people and therefore have a great effect on societies. They wrote, "Some media scholars argue that entertainment TV's impact can be even more powerful than news in subtly shaping the public's impressions of key societal institutions" (Turow & Gans, 2002, p. 1-2). Women who are not veiled are always assumed to be modern, educated, and open-minded. It seems that the more a woman shows of her body, the more modern and open-minded she becomes.

Hasan, 2012, wrote that in 2007, Gottschalk and Greenberg published the results of a survey of what "names, places, events, ideas, practices, and objects" people associate with "Islam" and "Muslims." Their conclusions revealed:

The names and events they think of tend to be associated with violence (e.g., Osama bin Laden, the 9/11 tragedies, Palestinian suicide bombers), the ideas and practices associated with oppression... and the places limited to the Middle East (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran). When asked about these answers, many Americans respond that, unfortunate as such associations may be, Muslims and Islam feature prominently in many of the world's conflicts and injustices. And this, they often conclude, reflects something inherent about the religion and its associated cultures. (Hasan, 2012, p. 64)

This reflects people's attitudes and opinions gained from the media. Many Westerners believe the reason for Muslim women's deteriorating status is the religion of Islam. For example:

The U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, said in a 2002 speech, "Until the countries of the Middle East unleash the abilities and potential of their women, they will not build a future of hope" (Ottaway, 2004, p. 3). The U.S. First Lady Laura Bush demanded the liberation of women from their Islamic restrictions and limitations (Haddad et al., 2006, p. 3). Then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2010 expressed his opinion that veils oppress women (BBC News, 2010). Therefore, Powell, Bush, and Sarkozy all view the status of Muslim women "as intimately linked to what is often portrayed as the violent nature of (the Islamic) religion and affirmed that the cause of liberating Muslim women from their bondage" (Haddad et al., 2006, p. 3). These statements reflect beliefs connecting Muslim women's inferior status is due to Islamic teachings.

Usually, people accept what is presented to them without thinking that it might be false or that they need to do some research about it. Arabs and Muslims are not a threat, they are only a different culture. Diverse cultures need to enhance and complement one another.

Just as Americans 'know,' that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. They know this not because they identify women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women. (Ahmed, 1992, p. 522).

Yes, oppressed women undoubtedly exist in the entire world and not only in Arab or Muslim countries. However, it is worthy to note that this is not the norm in the Arab or Muslim world and women's situations vary considerably from one country to another. Furthermore, oppressive practices, are not a part of Islam but rather are related to the individual cultural norms of specific countries. For example, the frequency of rape and domestic violence in the U.S. is not related to Christianity, even though it is the predominant religion. The same way of thinking should be applied to the status of veiled women. There are quite a few academic studies arguing the opposite, that in fact, Christianity does lead to greater violence against women based on its patriarchal values and culture of secrecy.

IV. Unconscious Misconceptions

It is important to acknowledge that unintentional assumptions can be as degrading and harmful as intentional ones. Stereotyping begins through comparing Arab women with Western women by using the situation of Western women as the accepted common standard while ridiculing any other situation. Therefore, we need to acknowledge that we make assumptions about the "other." In this situation, the "other" refers to veiled women. Furthermore, we need to appreciate these "others" without forcing them to fit our expectations. Diversity should be our strength and not a division point. The next step is to work on learning from sources that belong to the culture in question. Consequently, it is essential to investigate facts and judge them accordingly. What might be accepted in the Western world — certain dating practices, for example — may not be acceptable to Arabs. This is to say, our judgment should not be built on our own cultural norms and practices.

One more point to add is that verses of the Qur'an are often taken out of perspective and interpreted based on the cultural and social background of the interpreter. Jamal Badawi (2010), vice chairman of the Islamic University, confirmed that in order to obtain a holistic interpretation of the Qur'an, one should study the Qur'an methodologically. This means that an interpreter of the Qur'an should consider the context in which each verse was revealed, the reason for revelation, the time of its revelation, and how the prophet explained it. The Qur'an was revealed over 23 years and changed people's thoughts and culture gradually, not just all at once. Therefore, rules and lifestyles were addressed in steps. For example, forbidding alcohol was addressed in three steps. The first verse says, "They question thee about strong drinks and games of chance. Say: In both is great sin, and (some) utility for men; but the sin of them is greater than their usefulness" (Qur'an, 2:219). This means that alcohol might have some benefits, but its harm is more than its profits. At that time, people started to consume less alcohol than they used to do. A few years later, the second verse was revealed, which says, "O ye who believe! Draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which ye utter" (Qur'an 4:43).

So, people started to drink at night times after they performed the last prayer of the day. Few years later, the final revealed verse on this subject says, "O ye who believe! Strong drinks and games of chance and idols and divining of arrows are only an infamy of Satan's handiwork. Leave it aside in order that ye may succeed" (Qur'an 5:90). This is why drinking alcohol is forbidden in Islam and it is the final rule. No one would say that alcohol is permitted after the last prayer of the day. It is forbidden completely. Therefore, studying the rules methodologically is essential in learning the rules of the Qur'an. Recently, scholars realized this and started to look back into the life of the prophet and introduce more-accurate interpretations. However, people are still connecting cultural practices with Islam due to unconscious unawareness.

Scholars, researchers, and activists working on this topic have several purposes. The first is to expose realities standing in the way of women's development (Offenhauer, 2005). The second is to raise questions that encourage people to think and realize what is really happening, such as why there is no consistency between current and historical situations of women in Arab countries and Islamic references. If popular views of Islam accurately represent the religion, why there are excessive variations of customs and rules in different regions of the same country and from one country to another? Something that is considered an accepted segregation in one country is not necessarily the norm in other countries. For example, until recently, women were not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia and in Afghanistan they are not allowed to go to school. Some countries justify their seclusion strategies as being due to Islamic law, but then the question is: Why do Turkey, Pakistan, Singapore, and Tunisia, for example, as Muslim countries, not apply the same rules?

V. Qur'an and Women

Before Islam, women in the Arabian Peninsula followed the cultural norms of their tribes. Each tribe had its own rules and regulations that were to be followed by all individuals, not just women. Some of these rules were very liberating and emancipating even in comparison with today's customs. Other cultural norms were dogmatic and rigid, such as that poor families would bury newborn girls to limit the effects of poverty.

Before getting into more details about what the Qur'an says about the treatment of women, it is necessary to introduce a few points: The first is that the Qur'an does not present Allah (God) as male or female, and it is common knowledge among Muslims that Allah has no gender. In fact, the Qur'an explicitly forbids calling Allah father or making any visual representation of Him. In the Qur'an, there is a verse that says, "There is nothing like unto Him" (Qur'an 42:11). There is one *surah*, or chapter, dedicated to the Divine Unity of Allah that explains there is nothing like Him, which is *surah* (Qur'an 112). One might ask, however, why the words "He" and "Him" are used when referring to Allah. This usage is because, in Arabic language, words are either feminine or masculine and there is no word for a genderless being. It is simply a linguistic convenience. When the Qur'an refers to Allah as Him, it does not indicate that Allah is masculine.

Another point is regarding the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In the Qur'an, Adam and Eve are both accountable and equally responsible for eating from the tree. In the Qur'an: "O Adam! You and your wife dwell in the garden and enjoy as you (both) wish: but approach not this tree or you (both) run into harm and transgression" (Qur'an 2:35); "But Satan caused them both to stumble therein, and thus brought about the loss of their erstwhile state. And so We said, "Down with you, (both)" (Qur'an 2:36); and

Then Satan began to whisper to them ... he said, "Your Lord only forbade you this tree lest you (both) should become angels or such beings as live forever." And he swore to them (both) that he was their sincere adviser. So by deceit he brought about their fall. (Allah) said: "Get you (both) down with enmity between yourselves." (Qur'an 7:19-27)

The Qur'an has never singled out Eve for blame, as is clear in verses 2:36 and 7:19-27. On the contrary, there are two verses in the Qur'an that reprimand Adam alone, and not Eve, for eating from the forbidden tree. They are: "We (Allah) had already beforehand taken the covenant of Adam, but he forgot: and We found no firm resolve on his part" (Qur'an 20:115) and "Thus did Adam disobey his Lord and allow himself to be seduced (by Satan)" (Qur'an 20:121). This leads to the conclusion that in the Qur'an, Eve is not the reason for the descendant of Adam to earth. Both are equally responsible for their own actions.

Another important point is that women, at the time of the prophet Mohammed, played a main role in developing community in every aspect of life. The prophet Mohammed never prevented women from participating in any discussion or activity. If Allah had not approved of female participation and involvement in communities, the prophet would never have allowed it. During the era of the prophet, women participated actively in the religious, educational, social, and intellectual affairs of their communities. Leila Ahmed (1992) confirmed this, writing, "Women of the prophet's community felt they had a right to comment forthrightly in any topic" (p. 72). For example, according to Hashmi, (2000), Nusaybah bint Kaab, who is considered one of

the first advocates for women's rights, asked the prophet, "Why does Allah address men only in the Qur'an?" referencing the masculine form of communication. Soon after her question, Allah revealed a verse explaining that the Qur'an addresses both men and women, as in the verse:

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).

The verse clarifies that men and women are equal and there is no difference between them. Although the masculine form is used when addressing a group of people in the Arabic language, this is only due to inadequate alternatives in the language. Therefore, Nusaybah wanted to make sure that everyone, including men, knew that the Qur'an and its teachings are addressing both men and women. All people, men, and women, have the same obligations in front of Allah and they will be judged, in the Day of Judgement, by their actions only and not by who they are. Allah will ask all humans, males, and females, about their deeds, then they will be rewarded or punished accordingly. The Qur'an says:

The believers, both men and women they are close unto one another, they (all) enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and are constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and pay heed unto God and His Apostle. It is they upon whom God will bestow His grace: verily, God is almighty, wise. (Qur'an 9: 71)

When the Qur'an was revealed more than 1,400 years ago, it provided women with all their expected social, traditional, and spiritual rights. The Qur'an presents woman as parallel to man and embodies the philosophy that men and women are equal and are created from similar material:

"O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; - reverence Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for Allah ever watches over you." (Qur'an 4:1)

The Qur'an introduces women as one of the pair of husband and wife to convey the equality between the two. In Arabic, the word wife, "zawja," literally means one of a pair. "And God has given you mates of your own kinds and has given you, through your mates, children and children's children, and has provided for you sustenance out of the good things of life" (Qur'an 16:72). Consequently, the woman is her husband's partner. Other verses confirm this equivalency: "We have created you, men and women, tribes and nations so you would get to know each other and to realize that the best among you is the most righteous" (Qur'an 2: 187); "Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you" (Qur'an 49:13); "I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other" (Qur'an 3:195); and "Every soul will be held in pledge for its deeds" (Qur'an 74:38). These verses confirm that our actions are the differentiating factors between humans, not biological sex.

Another law related to gender in the Qur'an is that women should be treated equally to men in terms of work and salaries. Women used to work beside their husbands in the fields, and each man was paid for his work and for his wife's work, so a verse was revealed: "To men are allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn" (Qur'an 4:32). The verse shows that women should own their earnings, the same as men do, and that their salaries belong to them, not to their parents or husbands. This verse announces women's right to work and earn their own money. In other words, the Qur'an liberated women from cruel prejudice. Women were given the rights to manage their own businesses, to keep their financial independence after marriage, and of course to learn and educate themselves.

The stories in the Qur'an refer to men as well as women. An entire chapter in the Qur'an — surah 16 — reports the story of Miriam (Mary), the mother of Jesus. The queen of Sheba, Bilkis, is mentioned as a just ruler in surah 27. The story of Asia, the pharaoh's wife who saved the prophet Moses from being killed as a child is detailed in surah 28. The stories of the prophet Ibrahim's wives and Lot's wife appear in surah 15, and Aziz's wife appears in surah 12. Introducing women and their achievements in the Qur'an reflects an appreciation for women's roles in developing their societies. Moreover, the third-longest surah in the Qur'an is called *Al-Nissa*, meaning: The Women, introduces women's rights and asks men to take care of them and treat them with love and respect.

Additionally, many Muslim women's names are mentioned in Islamic history. Women participated in war by fighting, carrying water, and nursing the wounded. Nusaiba is known as the first nurse in Islam. She was the one that the prophet Mohammed praised in the Battle of Uhud. He commended her bravery, saying, "I did not turn right or left, but that I saw her fighting near me" (Bullock, 2002, p. 7). Another popular fighter after the death of the prophet was Khawla bint al-Azwar, known as the Black Knight (Bullock, 2002, p. 7). Additionally, Ahmed documented that Aisha, the wife of the prophet, also played a major role in public life. She was renowned for her education and intelligence because she knew how to read and write. The companions of the prophet, males and females, used to refer to her as their religious source. She was also known for transmitting 2,210 hadith (sayings of the prophet) and she was an educator, public speaker, and scholar of law (Ahmed, 1992).

Asma Barlas explains that Allah is just and thus, Islam would not discriminate against women. She reports that the Qur'an supports "the radical equality of the sexes" (Barlas, 2002, p. 3). Religious activists and supporters of women's rights are encouraging scholars to read the Qur'an, gather all verses dealing with the same topic, and learn the reasons for revelations to understand verses and find out the accurate rules of the text. Verses or parts of verses of the Qur'an are being taken out of context and people are picking and choosing what matches their own ideas. This is addressed in the Qur'an when Allah describes two kinds of people, saying, "Those who listen to the Word and follow the best (meaning) in it: those are the ones whom Allah has guided, and those are the ones endowed with understanding" (Qur'an 39:18) and "Those who break the Qur'an into parts: Them, by the Lord, We shall question, every one, of what they used to do" (Qur'an 15:91-93). Therefore, there are two groups of people: The first would interpret the Qur'anic rules accurately and follow them, while the second group would take parts of the verses and use them according to their own mindset to fit their own agendas.

VI. Are Muslim Women Oppressed?

A common misconception in the western culture is that Muslim women are oppressed, which is not true. If they are oppressed, why is the cultural norm during visitation that men are to stand up when a woman enters a room? Men stand up to show respect. Other actions of showing respect that are part of Arab culture are: Men are not permitted to stare at, touch, or stand very close to a woman who is not their relative, and it is not the norm to ask a man about his female relatives. Another cultural norm is that for Arabs, it is rude to be walking with a female relative such as a wife, mother, sister, or aunt and let her carry the shopping bags or boxes. Men are supposed to carry things, not women. Male children are taught at an early age to help their female relatives and take care of them.

One more Arab cultural norm that comes from Islamic teaching is that mothers deserve a great amount of respect. The prophet Mohammed said, "Heaven is underneath the feet of mothers" (Sunan Ibn Majah # 2771). This hadith is used by all as a reference to encourage men to be kind and supportive to their mothers. Men should listen to what their mothers are saying without interrupting or showing any disrespect, do what she asks, and bring her what she wants. Children's first obligation is to their mothers when she grows old and cannot take care of herself. The prophet said, "Allah has forbidden for you, (1) to be undutiful to your mothers, (2) to bury your daughters alive" (Al-Bukhari, Volume 3, Book 41, Hadith 591). Additionally, pregnant mother usually attracts a lot of attention and care from their family members and community in general. Family members, neighbors, and friends typically all work hard to ensure that pregnant woman receive all the nutrition they need, offer them advice of what to do and not to do during pregnancy, provide help as much as possible, and support them after their babies are born.

Looking through the recent developments in the Arab world, one would notice that there is a gradual change happening. This progress does not attract the media the same way conflicts, revolutions, or struggles do. The Gender Gap Index reported that "women in Jordan, Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Morocco were on par with, or outperformed, their male counterparts in literacy and educational enrollment rates" (Salti, 2013, paragraph 2). Entrepreneurial spirit is spreading among Arab women. Technology played a role in making this change. For example, in 2013, for a competition designed by INJAZ in Doha, Qatar, a group of teenage girls from Yemen developed a solar-power system to help their country deal with electricity deficiencies because they were tired of living in the dark. The product was much more sophisticated than what was expected of high school students, and they won the first prize (Syed, 2013). Additionally, and according to UNICEF, girls in Gaza, developed a library to encourage reading and provide entertainment. They wanted to be part of the new world, so they collected donations. "In an empty classroom, they built shelves from wooden boxes and seats from old tires. Then they asked several NGOs for donations and received 500 books. Early this year, their library was born." (Abu Suleiman, 2017)

Thus, I will conclude this section by asking the same question I started with: Are the veiled Muslim women really oppressed?

VII. The "Veil"

The meaning, use, and style of the word "veil" varies in Muslim societies. There is no definition for veiling in the Qur'an. "Hijab" is a word used to refer to head coverings. Hijab varies completely from one country to another, one area to another, and even one family to another. The Qur'an does not present a color, style, or definition, but does provide some regulations. The most important rules are it should be modest, loose, and opaque. It also should not reveal the figure. Ahmed explained that "the practice of veiling among women was prevalent in Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Assyrian communities before Muhammad started requiring his wives to 'take the veil'" (1992, p. 55). This explains that hijab existed before Islam, and it is a common practice. Look at the nuns how they are dressed and all the statues of Virgin Mary represent her wearing long loose dress covering her head.

The Qur'an explains that Allah created men and women physically different: "Our Lord is He Who has endowed everything with its appropriate faculties and then guided it to their proper use" (Qur'an 20:51) and "God has fashioned mankind according to the nature designed by Him, there is no altering the creation of Allah" (Qur'an 30:31). Yes, Allah ordered women to cover their bodies, saying, "O The prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves (part) of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah forgiving and merciful" (Qur'an 33:59). The verse explains that the main reason for asking women to dress modestly is to avoid ill treatment and to provide protection for women outside the family environment. Thus, the main reason for veiling is to protect women.

It is important to note that there is a difference between women's behavior outlined in the Qur'an and in cultural practices. In some countries, there are very strict rules regarding women's dress, while in others, there are no rules at all. Therefore, we see many differences of women's dress and hijab across the Muslim world. Isolation of women was uncommon at the time of the prophet Mohammed because women were accustomed to going to the mosque to attend prayers, participate in educational sessions as learners and teachers, take part in political discussions, fight alongside men in wars, and work in the field of medicine. Wearing hijab did not stop women from participating in these activities. Female seclusion reflects only cultural and personal influences. Some families, regions or countries would give veiled women freedom to finish higher education, go to work, communicate with society, and help in developing their community while others would prevent them from any activity. It is the culture not the Qur'an that decides how to treat women.

Moreover, it is important to know what women feel about wearing hijab. Ali (2012) stated that women wearing hijab have explained their reasoning as:

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. (p. 2)

It is rare for people to ask women about their feelings toward wearing hijab instead of simply judging and concluding that they are mistreated or forced to wear it. Women wear different colors and different styles according to their preferences. Muslims believe that the main reason for wearing a hijab is announcing her Muslim identity.

People often ask questions about why there is hijab for women while there are no rules for how men should be dressed. The Qur'an mentions hijab for men first and then for women: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do" (Qur'an 24:30). This is to say, men too must lower their gaze and dress modestly. Men are commanded not to stare at women, as well as to be covered from below the chest down to the knees in front of women. Both men and women are required to uphold chastity.

VIII. Polygamy

Before Islam, men Arabs and non-Arabs, used to marry as many wives as they wished with no restrictions. Jamal Badawi (1998) explained in "Polygamy in Islamic Law" that Western literature and media discuss polygamy as if it is an Islamic custom or exists only in Islam. "No text in the Qur'an or Sunna explicitly specifies either monogamy or polygamy as the norm, although demographic data indicate strongly that monogamy is the norm and polygamy the exception" (Badawi, 1998, p. 35). Islam regulated and restricted

polygamy but did not prohibit it. Furthermore, it is well known that Judaism, Christianity, and other religions approve polygamy.

As for the Qur'an, out of more than 6,600 verses, only two verses explicitly address polygamy. The first says, "If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one" (Qur'an 4:3). As explained earlier, to understand any verse, it is important to read it in its historical context and reason for revelation. During the Battle of Uhud, many Muslim men were killed, leaving their wives and many orphans with no support. Therefore, verse 4:3 was revealed. Allowing men to take on widows or additional wives provided a social and economic solution to support the widows and orphans of the community. Badawi explained that in verse 4:3 "it is also evident that the general rule in Islam is monogamy and not polygamy" (2010, p. 7). Although this verse allows polygamy, it limits the number of permitted wives and requires justice among the wives. Treating all wives, the same and being just is an obligation. Husbands are required to provide food, clothes, housing, and kind treatment. If a man is not able to provide the same for all, the Qur'an says, "Then (marry) only one" (Qur'an 4:3). It is important to note that the verse begins with "not be able to deal justly with the orphans," which clarifies that the main reason for permitting polygamy is to do justice for orphans and widows. The second verse is in the same chapter. It says, "You are never able to be fair and just between women even if it is your ardent desire" (Qur'an 4:129). It explains human nature, saying that if a man chooses to have more than one wife, he can never treat them equally. Therefore, it is better if he stays with just one wife.

Some additional details must be considered regarding polygamy. Badawi explained that both husbands and wives have choices; no one forces them to do anything they do not want to do. First, a man may choose not to marry another wife. A future second wife may refuse to marry a man who already has a wife if she does not want to be part of a polygamous relationship. A wife may state in her marriage agreement that her prospective husband shall not practice polygamy. When this is accepted, it will be compulsory on the husband not to marry another wife. If the husband breaks this agreement, the wife has the right to ask for a divorce (Badawi, 2010, p. 7).

Aziza Al-Hibri, a professor of law at the University of Richmond, explained that in reading the two previous verses, it is illogical to assume that the Qur'an is giving permission to a man to practice polygamy:

- (a) If you can be just and fair among women, then you can marry up to four wives.
 - (b) If you cannot be just and fair among women, then you may marry only one.
 - (c) You cannot be just and fair among women.
- (b) and (c) are of the logical form: If p then q; i.e., you may marry only one wife. (Al-Hibri, 1982, p. 216)

The misconception that Muslim men routinely practice polygamy is unfounded. Most Muslim men are married to one wife only. Although there will always be debate about its validity and place among Muslims, the intended purpose of permitting polygamy is a solution for social problems and is not to oppress women.

IX. Honor Killing

Various anthropologists and sociologists have explained that there are two types of cultures: the individualist guilt-culture, as in American and Northern European societies in general, and the collectivist shame-culture, as in most other parts of the world (Benedict, 1946). In individualist cultures, a person is guided by their internal locus of control and the individual is brought up to feel guilt for their own actions and not for others'. In collective cultures, it is important to maintain good relations with other members of the society. Therefore, a person is brought up to try to please others and work up to their expectations because they do not want to insult or annoy family members and society. Arabs are very proud of their origins and family histories. Any mistake done by one family member would affect the whole family's reputation. This is why Arabs and Muslims have sex separation and limited communication between sexes, especially with people who are not family members. Male fathers, brothers, and cousins usually take good care of their female family members because they affect their own honor. Thus, there is a concentration on virginity and chastity for both males and females, but more for females.

The term honor killing refers to a person "who discovers his wife, or one of his female relatives, committing adultery with another person, and kills, injures or harms one or both of them" (Sonbol, 2003, p. 193). Usually, women are the victims of honor killings; however, men may be targeted for their behavior, too. A

woman might be abused or murdered because she failed to follow the norms of her family's culture, which reflects on all her family members. The question that first comes to mind is: Does Islam approve honor killing? The Qur'an states very clearly that no one is permitted to murder anyone: "If anyone slays a human being-unless it be (in punishment) for murder or for spreading corruption on earth-it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind" (Qur'an 5:32). Allah clearly forbids killing and there is nothing in the Qur'an addressing honor killing. Therefore, it is not an Islamic religious practice.

People who practice honor killing clearly are not following the teachings of the Qur'an. Terman wrote: "My own research has compiled instances of honor killings among Muslims, Christians, Jews, Yezidis, Druze, Sikhs, Hindus, and nonbelievers. For several reasons, however, there is a commonly held belief among those in Europe and North America that honor killing is a strictly Muslim phenomenon" (2010, p. 12). In 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice commissioned research that concluded that "an estimated 23 to 27 honor killings occur in the U.S. per year, 13 in the Netherlands and 10 to 12 in the U.K" (Helba et al., 2015). Other scholars reported that controlling women, shame, and honor as communal motivations in family killings are not limited to Muslims or Arabs and exist in both Western and South Asian societies, as well (Shier & Shor, 2016). Thus, honor killing is not an Islamic practice. Additionally, according to the 2009 United Nations Human Development Report, about 5,000 women are killed annually in crimes related to honor. These crimes are related to many cultures, societies, and faiths while having nothing to do with Islam in particular. Relating these crimes to Islam means ignoring the non-Muslim victims who outnumber the number of Muslim victims. "Honor violence has been reported in Canada, Great Britain, United States, Sweden, Germany, France, Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Gaza, West Bank, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran" (Mayell, 2002, p. 3). Honor killing is extreme domestic violence that should be addressed and stopped immediately.

To conclude this section, Islam gives women many rights and asks people to respect and take care of them. Allah states very clearly in the Qur'an that men and women are equal and should be treated as such. He directs His followers to give women their rights, requires men to take care of their mothers and other single females in their families, and gives reasons and explanations for all these requirements.

X. Conclusion

According to Weeramantry (1997), in Islam, the concept of women's rights is one of the 30 ideas that played a role in developing European human rights laws:

Islamic writings on each of these topics have concepts that are surprisingly modern and in the case of some of them, these ideas percolated through to the European world by various routes of entry including the intellectual traffic that took place during the Crusades, the radiating of knowledge to Europe from Islamic Spain, and the entry from Sicily to the great Italian schools of Salerno, Otranto, Rossano and Monte Cassino. (p. 130)

The Qur'an guarantees women several rights, including sovereign personhood, education, property ownership, employment, equal payment, acceptance or refusal of marriage and divorce, political representation, and inheritance, among others. Wadud (2002) confirmed this, writing:

Islam brought radical changes regarding women and society, despite the deeply entrenched patriarchy of seventh-century Arabia. The Qur'an provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. It prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanors.

To try to help Arab and Muslim women by condescending to them about Islamic laws and values is considered disrespectful, disruptive, and fruitless. The right way to try to help Arab and Muslim women is to use a more logical and sophisticated look at the teachings of the Qur'an. If women are stoned to death in certain areas, then this is part of their culture, and has nothing to do with Islam. Actions of oppression and torture should be condemned and should not be accepted at all, but at the same time, we cannot blame the religion or say all Muslim and Arab countries are the same. No one can say that Turkey is the same as Oman, Iran is the same as Indonesia, or Pakistan is the same as Morocco. In other words, we cannot paint all pictures with the same color.

It is also clear that any low status of women in some Arab and Muslim countries cannot be connected to any religious matters. Islamic laws and teachings are blended with ethnic and traditional cultural customs and communities have developed their own cultural rules. However, since the 1990s, Muslim women have achieved

legal, economic, and political improvements. In almost all Arab countries, changing and developing women's status is embraced and encouraged. One example is the Yemeni Tawakkul Karman. She worked very hard with her community to improve women's safety and enhance their rights. She was a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. Another example is the scientist Dr. Ansam Sawalha, who established a science camp called "Go Girls" in the Palestinian Territories to provide educational scholarships and opportunities to girls and women in the occupied territory of Palestine.

It is useful to look at different examples of women in different Arab countries to learn about the impact of culture. This variety of examples confirms that religion is not the reason behind patriarchal practices. Moghadam (2003) writes that Islam is "no more or less patriarchal than other major religions, and the other two Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity, all of which share the view of woman as wife and mother" (p. 5).

We need more awareness and knowledge of Islamic teachings. For example, a meeting was arranged in Amman, Jordan in 1999 between the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to discuss and compare women's rights in Islam and CEDAW legislations. Their conclusion was "not many of the provisions subject to reservations were in contradiction with Islamic legislation, and thus called for a review of these reservations and for an elucidation as to the reasons for their invocation" (*Report of the round table workshop*, 1999). The Arab world is witnessing reforms. For example, in Morocco and Egypt, family laws have been changed to give women more rights by using Islamic laws as the main reference and reason for the modification. Additionally, in Yemen in 2003 and 2004, the Women's Forum for Research and Training (WFRT) with the support of the German government began a project to raise women's cognizance and awareness of their rights in Islam and train them to realize the Qur'anic verses and hadith. The participants were selected from divergent backgrounds as teachers, lawyers, journalists, and human rights advocates who were well acquainted with the Qur'an and hadith. In short, the status of veiled women in the Arab world has nothing to do with the teachings of the Qur'an because the Qur'an treats women as equal to men. Any unequal treatment is due to cultural customs outside of religious teachings.

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