

Does Islam Oppress Women?



Fourteen hundred years ago Islam gave women rights; rights that could not have been imagined by European counterparts. Bold words! Words that have been spoken repeatedly, especially in the last two or three decades by Muslim converts, and Islamic writers, academics and educators across the globe.

Women's rights, responsibilities, and choices have been the subject of books, articles, essays, and lectures. Sadly however, convincing the world that Muslim women are not oppressed by Islam is a message that is just not getting through. Media headlines scream oppression and the words Muslim, women, and oppression seem to have become inextricably linked.

No matter what Muslim women do or say to try to convince the world otherwise, words like hijab, burka, polygamy, and Sharia seem to do little but convince people that Islam oppresses women. Even educated, articulate women fulfilling the modest conditions of hijab can do little to dispel the myths. Women who conduct themselves with decorum and grace and function effortlessly in the modern world have their achievements and successes celebrated. However, if a woman wears a scarf, covers her hair or puts her religion above worldly pursuits she is immediately labelled oppressed. One wonders if this is the case for women of other religious persuasions. Are modest religious women of all faiths labelled oppressed? Alternatively, is it just Islam?

The most visible sign of a Muslim woman's faith is the headscarf or hijab; it is also the garment that leads people to believe that Islam oppresses women. Although Islamic scholars unanimously agree that modest dress and head coverings are obligatory in Islam, for the majority of Muslim women around the world, to cover, or not to cover, is a freely made choice. The women who chose to wear hijab view it as a right, not a burden and many describe wearing hijab as liberation from the need to conform to unrealistic stereotypes and images dictated by the media.

What exactly do Muslim women say about themselves in relation to the issue of oppression? In 2005, a World Gallup Poll^[1] entitled, *What women Want: Listening to the voices of Muslim Woman*, revealed that the majority of women polled, in predominantly Muslim countries resented lack of unity among Muslim nations, violent extremism, and political and economic corruption. The headscarf or hijab, or any garment covering the face and body, often depicted as a tool of oppression was not even mentioned.

The report concluded that “...most women in the Muslim world are well aware that they have the same capabilities and deserve the same fundamental rights as men. Majorities of females in each of the eight countries surveyed said they believe women are able to make their own voting decisions, to work at any job for which they are qualified, and even to serve in the highest levels of government.”

Islam raised the level of women, they were no longer chattels being passed from father to husband. They became equal to men, with rights and responsibilities that take into account the nature of humankind. Unfortunately across the globe, Muslim women are victims of cultural aberrations that have no place in Islam. Powerful individuals and groups claim to be Muslim yet fail to practice the true principles of Islam. Whenever the media reveals unconscionable stories about honour killings, genital mutilation, forced marriage, the punishment of rape victims, women being confined to their homes or women being denied education they are revealing a tale of men and women who are ignorant about the status of women in Islam.

**“O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will, and you should not treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the bridal money you have given them. And live with them honourably. If you dislike them, it may be that you dislike a thing and God brings a great deal of good through it.”
(Quran 4:19)**

The religion of Islam demands that women be treated with respect, honour, and justice. It condemns oppression of any kind. In Islam women, like men, are commanded to believe in God and to worship Him. Women are equal to men in terms of reward in the Hereafter.

“And whoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a true believer in the Oneness of God, such will enter paradise; and not the least injustice, even to the size of a speck on the back of a date stone, will be done to them.” (Quran 4:124)

Women in Islam have the right to own property, to control their own money to buy and sell, and to give gifts and charity. It is not permissible for anyone to take a woman’s wealth without her consent. Islam gave women formal rights of inheritance. Women in Islam have the right to an education; seeking and acquiring knowledge is an obligation on all Muslims, male or female.

Muslim women have the right to accept or refuse marriage proposals as they see fit, and married women are completely free from the obligation of supporting and maintaining the family. Working married women are free to contribute to the household expenses, or not, as they see fit. Women have the right to seek divorce if it becomes necessary.

Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, “A matron should not be given in marriage except after consulting her; and a virgin should not be given in marriage except after her permission.” The people asked, “O God’s messenger! How can we know her permission?” He said, “Her silence (indicates her permission).”^[2]

A woman was given by her father gave her in marriage when she was a matron and she disliked that marriage. So she went to God’s Messenger and he declared that marriage invalid.^[3]

The religion of Islam declares that women are worthy human beings deserving of respect, and the right to be free from oppression. Women have the right to a decent life, without facing aggression or abuse of any kind. They have the right to pursue a life that is pleasing to them within Islamic boundaries. Nobody has the right to force women to be less than they want to be. The true teachings of Islam, declare that women should be held in a position of high regard.

Sadly, it is true that some Muslim women are oppressed, but across the globe, some women are treated badly by some men, of all religious persuasions and ethnicities. It is possible to say that such and such a government oppresses women, or that Muslim men in such and such a country think it is acceptable to beat women, however, it is not correct to say that Islam oppresses women. If women were given their God given rights, as set out in the religion of Islam, the global oppression of women could be trampled into oblivion.

Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, “None but a noble man treats women in an honourable manner. And none but an ignoble treats women disgracefully.”^[4]

Footnotes:

^[1] The Gallup Organization, Princeton, USA. The Gallup World Poll is the largest available source of global public opinion data, providing access to the voices of citizens in more than 130 countries and areas.

^[2] *Saheeh Bukhari*

^[3] *Ibid.*

^[4] *At Tirmidhi*