

# Commentary

## Let the Islamic World Decide What Their Women Want

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Western society has a history of imposing its own ideas and philosophy on the Islamic world without asking them what they really want. The Western powers failed in democratizing the Islamic countries in the Middle East. Now they want to modernize their women without asking them what do women in the Middle East countries really want. This may hurt the Western countries in the long run.

The fact remains that the majority of Muslim women in the Middle East are happy with their situation in life and they don't welcome the Western idea of women's liberation. Westerners often tend to assess the circumstances of Muslim women in terms of obvious inequities between the status of men and women. They first need to understand the men-women relationships from within the Islamic perspective.

The Muslim women in Afghanistan and many other middle eastern countries accept the fact that God gave men utter authority over women. And they are contented with that. I have watched at least 20 Pakistani dramas where modern and highly educated women willingly accept male dominance over them. The male-dominated code of a culture some Westerners think is oppressive, even barbaric, frames a peaceful, pleasant existence in Muslim society.

Muslim men and women in those countries are very religious and they like to lead their lives as specified in the Quran. The Quran clearly states:

"Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard

their unseen parts because God has guarded them. "

Further, both the Muslim men and women believe that because of their innate qualities and characteristics God has defined different roles and functions for men and women. Their somatic and psychological differences determine the distinct but complementary duties prescribed for each.

According to the Islamic belief, men and women are equal but different:

"Allah has promised to the believers, men, and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss. "Qur'an 9:72

"And the male is not like the female. "Qur'an 3:36

I know a few Muslim women in the U.S. don't wear hijab and veil according to their own will. Those women belong to affluent and liberal Muslim families. Some years ago, a female Muslim colleague at work suddenly started covering her head in the hijab. I asked her the reason and she replied that she was just following her religion. So, it's not always coercion or fear as we assume in the West.

Let me cite certain rights women have in Islam:

"She has the right to work and spend the money she earns as she wishes. She has no obligation to share her money with her husband or any other family members, although she may choose to do so out of goodwill. For instance, Khadija, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad was one of the most successful businesswomen of Mecca and she freely spent from her wealth to support her husband and the cause of Islam.

At the time of marriage, a woman is entitled to a financial gift (dowry) from her husband. This dowry is legally owned by her and cannot be used by anyone else. In the case of divorce, she

has the right to keep whatever she owned before the divorce and anything she personally earned after marriage. The former husband has no right whatsoever to any of her belongings. This ensures a woman's financial security and independence, allowing her to support herself in the case of divorce." (Islamic Society of Greater Lansing)

The Islamic countries are slowly providing more rights to women. In Saudi Arabia, women are now allowed to drive and go out without a male escort. We shouldn't expect them to follow our timetable nor should we rush them to meet our timetable. Here is a history of reform in the Islamic world:

"Before Islam, women were considered shameful, female children were buried alive, prostitution was rampant, divorce was only in the hands of the husband, inheritance was only for the strong, and oppression was widespread. Islam came and abolished these practices. Even now, in "developed countries", women are not granted respect, dignity, and honor, let alone equal pay for equal work. Islam, however, regards women as precious and valuable, not to be disrespected or disgraced. The mistreatment of women in some Middle-Eastern countries or Muslim families are due to cultural factors that some Muslims wrongly follow, not because of Islam. Why would many women around the world willingly enter Islam if it is an oppressive religion?" (Excerpts from Women's Rights in Islam)

Whether the Muslim women in those countries want a Western-style liberation should be left to them alone. Let's not get into imposing our cultural norms on them.