



WOMEN'S MOSQUE
OF CANADA

Advice for Women

Gender Equality & Islam



Advice for Women

Introduction

Gender Equality is part and parcel of what we believe to be our faith. Islam came to Arabia to liberate women, to give them choice, to acknowledge that they are no longer considered to be property and are human beings. Giving them access inheritance, choice in selecting their partners, rights in marriage and allowing them to play an active role in society. Yet despite this history of ours, we still find that women in our community are being treated disrespectfully and being told that they are “lesser than” the men. That Gender equality doesn't exist and that women have to be beholden to their husbands in order to have a good afterlife.

Is this what the Quran says? Is this what Allah SWT wants? For women to be treated with dishonour and disrespect?

1. Equal in the Sight of God

If men and women are equal in the sight of Allah SWT and we are told that our primary purpose in life is to serve Allah SWT and seek Allah's pleasure, then the above statements being taught to women is not correct.

Let us first look at the verses that speak to what individually our role is as Muslims to Allah SWT:

Surah Al-Azhab – The Combined Forces [33:35]

33:35 For Muslim men and women, - for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, - for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.

In this verse we realize that men and women are equal. In fact this verse was explicitly revealed after one of the Sahabiyat (female companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)), Nusayab bint Kaab (an Ansaar) questioned the prophet PBUH about why the Quran always spoke to only the men and not the women. In this verse we understand that Allah SWT is always speaking to humankind, and in being explicit is emphasizing the obligation to ensure that both men and women are to be of service and have the right to worship and surrender themselves to God.

2. Addressing the issue of “Power over” women

Next let us look at where the misunderstanding of gender indifference comes from? This inequality that has commonly been used to justify violence, domestic and in even sexual violence against women in the homes. This verse also being frequently used to justify oppressive practices against women, limiting their ability to leave their homes and be active members of society.

The commonly misunderstood verse is Surah Nisaa (The Women) – Chapter 4, Verse 34.

The following are two translations of the same verse, first translated by Maulana Yusuf Ali (a common translation) that many are familiar with, and next the translation has been done by Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar, a woman scholar, who translated the same verse which resulted in a very different meaning. One that honours women and maintains their self respect and their equality.

Version #1: Surah Nisaa (Yusuf Ali)–[4:34]

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).

Version #2: Surah Nisaa (Laleh Bakhtiar) [4:34]

Men are supporters of wives because God gave some of them an advantage over others and because they spent of their wealth. So the females, ones in accord with morality are the females, ones who are morally obligated and the females, ones who guard the unseen of what God kept safe. And those females whose resistance you fear, then admonish them (f) and abandon them (f) in their sleeping places and go away from them (f). Then if they (f) obeyed you, then look not for any way against them (f). Truly, God had been Lofty, Great.

Being a good wife, good mother or good daughter, is a choice we make as women. We choose to allow our nurturing nature and care and compassion support our family and the members within it. But to be told that we must and that we have no choice but to be this way in order to fulfill our obligation to God, that's the challenge. When you focus on the fear of being wrong, or making mistakes, it simply adds to creating a more stressful family environment for everyone.

Additionally, what we give out is what we must receive. Reciprocation is essential in all aspects of our relationships. If we give out respect, than we must receive it. If we give affection, than we must receive that as well.

3. Clarifying Divorce Permissibility & Process

Islam gives women and men the right to divorce and many have used this as a way to assert themselves and demand their right. But men tend to use this as a tool to threaten women and to constantly tell them that if they don't "live up to their standards" then they will divorce them. This idea of a 3second triple talaq divorce is clearly unacceptable and is explicitly mentioned in the Quran as not being from the tradition. Divorces are not meant to be rushed. There is a process, a timing for divorce to ensure that no one is acting in haste. And those who do have to deal with the consequences of their actions.

We see this in Chapter 2 – Surah Baqarah The Cow, Verses 227-232

Surah Baqarah – The Cow - [2:227-232]

227 But if their intention is firm for divorce, Allah heareth and knoweth all things.

228 Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what Allah Hath created in their wombs, if they have faith in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period, if they wish for reconciliation. And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.

229 A divorce is only permissible twice: after that, the parties should either hold Together on equitable terms, or separate with kindness. It is not lawful for you, (Men), to take back any of your gifts (from your wives), except when both parties fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allah. If ye (judges) do indeed fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allah, there is no blame on either of them if she give something for her freedom. These are the limits ordained by Allah; so do not transgress them if any do transgress the limits ordained by Allah, such persons wrong (Themselves as well as others).

230 So if a husband divorces his wife (irrevocably), He cannot, after that, re-marry her until after she has married another husband and He has divorced her. In that case there is no blame on either of them if they reunite, provided they feel that they can keep the limits ordained by Allah. Such are the limits ordained by Allah, which He makes plain to those who understand.

231 When ye divorce women, and they fulfil the term of their ('Iddat), either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them, (or) to take undue advantage; if any one does that; He wrongs his own soul. Do not treat Allah's Signs as a jest, but solemnly rehearse Allah's favours on you, and the fact that He sent down to you the Book and Wisdom, for your instruction. And fear Allah, and know that Allah is well acquainted with all things.

232 The mothers shall give such to their offspring for two whole years, if the father desires to complete the term. But he shall bear the cost of their food and clothing on equitable terms. No soul shall have a burden laid on it greater than it can bear. No mother shall be Treated unfairly on account of her child. Nor father on account of his child, an heir shall be chargeable in the same way. If they both decide on weaning, by mutual consent, and after due consultation, there is no blame on them. If ye decide on a foster-mother for your offspring, there is no blame on you, provided ye pay (the mother) what ye offered, on equitable terms. But fear Allah and know that Allah sees well what ye do.

In 2:230 we also see the reference made to Halala, the act of marrying a third person to be able to return to your first husband in the event that he has made an act of haste to divorce her. This act is completely unacceptable in our tradition. By no means does verse 230 say in anyway that a woman should marry another man for one night, consummate the marriage and return to her husband. This is rape for the woman and there is no justification for her to be subjected to something of this nature on the account of a irresponsible and irrational husband.

In looking at many of these translations and how they are actively being used to keep women suppressed and oppressed is a clear indication that misogyny has seeped into the faith. We live in a patriarchal society and as a result women are not being honoured in the ways that they should be. It is our goal, our duty to demand that we be treated as equals both inside the faith and outside of it in society at large. This imbalance in power is what is causing most of the world's problems today. The day we realize that this imbalance needs to end, we will see a shift in the world.

4. Accessing Sacred Knowledge & Sacred Spaces

No where in the Quran does it state that women are prevented from accessing sacred knowledge and attending mosques. We know that women were learning directly from the Prophet PBUH and that women played a vital role in ensuring that the traditions (Hadith) of the Prophet PBUH were preserved and passed onto the next generations beyond his life. We also know that some of the first people to embrace Islam were women, starting with the prophet's wife Khadijah Bint Khulwaid. In addition, there are examples of women we are aware of many examples of women leading other women in prayer and addressing them in congregations to learn the holy scriptures. In fact, Aisha bint Abu Bakr was the resident scholar of the community and was the go to person for validation of Hadith/Traditions after the Prophet's death.

So how is it then that we turn around and say that women are discouraged from attending the mosques or learning the sacred scriptures?

While some women do learn the information, it's often difficult to access because many of the teachers are men, and because women don't have the same access to our sacred spaces. These barriers prevent us from accessing the knowledge that further deepens our relationship with our Creator, our Lord, Allah SWT.

Therefore it is our responsibility to ensure that we can access these sacred spaces, that we can learn the faith and that we can be teachers and holders of sacred knowledge.

In summary

Our obedience and our purpose in life is to seek the pleasure of Allah SWT alone. If any relationship distances you from your Lord, then that needs to be looked at.

Our life is ours to live and our accountability is to Allah SWT alone. We must not live in fear any longer.

We need to focus on the love of our Lord and continue to focus on building and deepening our relationship with Allah SWT.

Closing Prayer

May Allah SWT continue to give us the courage and the strength to advocate for our rights towards gender equality.

May Allah SWT open the hearts of people in our community so that they can learn to honour women and all of who we are.