

“Members, One of Another: Gender Equality and Justice in Islam”

By Riffat Hassan

What I will say may surprise both Muslims who "know" women's place and non-Muslims who "know" what Islam means for women. It is this: I am a Muslim, a theologian, and a women's rights activist, and while I am critical in a number of ways of the life that most Muslim societies offer to women, twenty years of theological study, as well as my own deepest faith, convince me that in real Islam, the Islam of the Qur'an, women and men are equals. Liberating ideas lie at the heart of most enduring faiths, and Islam shares in these. Two themes in particular strike me as being of the highest importance. The first is the fundamental equality of humans before God. The other is religion's revolutionary aim of human liberation. From religion should come freedom to seek understanding of the will of God and life's purpose, and freedom to honor God's creation through self-development and striving toward God's ends.

Unfortunately, most Muslim societies also mirror a fault that has been noted by feminist theologians in cultures shaped by other religions: the gap between rhetoric of equality and the reality of profound inequality between the lives of women and men. While Muslim women continuously hear the refrain that Islam has given women more rights than any other religious tradition, they continue to be subjected to grossly unequal treatment.

Most Muslims -- women and men -- consider it self-evident that men are superior to women. Going further, they justify many manifestations of inequality as inherent in Islam. In fact, women are regarded in a number of contemporary Muslim societies as less than fully human because it is widely believed that in some contexts (such as inheritance or witnessing to contracts), one man is equal to two women. Most Muslim females, learning their culture's assumptions even before they learn language, and denied the opportunity to become educated, also internalize this belief.

The dominant, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have fostered the myth of women's inferiority in several ways. They have used sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (including disputed sayings) to undermine the intent and teachings of the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as the Word of God. They have taken Qur'anic verses out of context and read them literally, ignoring the fact that the Qur'an often uses symbolic language to portray deep truths. And they have failed to account for the overriding ethical values of the Qur'an, which stresses that human beings -- women as well as men -- have been designated to be God's "khalifah" (vicegerent) on earth and to establish a social order characterized by justice and compassion.

A refutation of the whole mosaic of arguments for women's lesser place would fill a book. It might require a second book to explicate, proactively, the Qur'an's vision of women's equality with men and what it might mean in day-to-day life. For now, my hope here is simply to shake false certainties about women in Islam and stimulate additional study for the sake of empowering Muslim women.

The central question is whether, according to normative Islam, women and men are equal or unequal. It is clear to me that, according to the perspective of the Qur'an, women and men are equal, and that women are entitled to an equal opportunity along with men for the actualization of their human potentialities. In fact, because of its protective attitude toward all downtrodden and oppressed classes, the Qur'an is particularly concerned about safeguarding the rights of women, and much Qur'anic legislation is designed to ensure that women are treated with justice in the home and in society.

Islam Seeks Liberation

The Qur'an holds before us a sublime vision of our human potential, our destiny, and our relationship with God. Its vision of human destiny is apparent in the exalted proclamation: "Towards God is thy limit" [Surah 53:An- Najm:42]. With this attitude, the Qur'an seeks to liberate all persons so that we may realize our potential fully. If all Muslims were to pursue the values of the Qur'an, they would create a Paradise of justice and peace on earth.

The means and ends of human liberation are foundational themes of the Qur'an: justice and the duty to strive for it, compassion for all things, the need to strive continuously for the cause of God ("jihad fi sabil Allah"). The most important form of "jihad" for contemporary Muslims is "ijtihad," or the exercise of rational judgment to understand the essential message of the Qur'an and to apply it to particular circumstances. Central to this message is an ethic of responsibility for our lives, for nature, and for the elimination of all inequities and injustices from human society. According to the Qur'an, justice is a precondition for peace: Without justice -- between men and women, as between classes and between nations -- there can be no peace in the world.

Indeed, a large part of the Qur'an's concern is to free human beings from the chains that bind them -- above all, authoritarianism and the blind following of tradition. "Let there be no compulsion in religion," says the Qur'an [Surah 2:Al-Baqarah:256]. God tells the Prophet Muhammad, "We made thee not one to watch over [others'] doings, nor art thou set over them to dispose of their affairs" [Surah 6:Al-An'am:107]. The greatest guarantee of personal freedom lies in the Qur'anic decrees that no one but God can limit human freedom [Surah 42:Ash-Shura:21] and that "Judgment is Allah's alone" [Surah 12:Yusuf:40]. As the eminent jurist Khalid M. Ishaque pointed out, "The Qur'an gives to responsible dissent the status of a fundamental right."⁽¹⁾

Our right to freedom includes the freedom to tell the truth, as one sees it. Without this, other freedoms are a charade and a just society is impossible. According to the Qur'an, truth is one of God's most important attributes, and the Qur'an emphasizes that standing up for the truth is a right and a responsibility that no Muslim may disclaim, no matter how hard the truth may be to tell [Surah 4:An-Nisa':135]. Further, the Qur'an forbids others to harm those who testify to the truth [Surah 2:Al-Baqarah:282].

The right to freedom of thought and expression was exercised by Muslims in the early centuries of Islam and was pivotal in the creation of an Islamic civilization characterized by outstanding achievements in diverse fields of knowledge. The early Muslims celebrated cultural diversity and engaged in rigorous intellectual discussion. Here, it is apt to mention Wilfred Cantwell Smith's comment that, whereas the original Muslims believed in God, modern Muslims believe in Islam.⁽²⁾

Centered in God and self-critical, the original Muslims believed that although God had given them the Qur'an and the Prophet had exemplified its teachings, it was their responsibility to implement its message in the "Islamic" societies that they were creating. These Muslims read the Qur'an as an "open," rather than a "closed," text and strove continually to understand its deeper meaning. This intellectual striving ("ijtihad") -- which Allama Muhammad Iqbal, poet-philosopher of Pakistan, calls "the principle of movement" in history⁽³⁾ -- made the Muslims of the first three centuries dynamic and creative peoples who paved the way for the European Renaissance.

It is a profound tragedy and irony that today's Muslims, in large numbers, regard Islam in monolithic terms and regard the "shari'ah" (the code regulating all aspects of a Muslim's life) as fixed. In much of the contemporary Muslim world, we see the

substitution of traditionalism for the exercise of ijtiḥād -- even a denial of the right of ijtiḥād.

To me, being a Muslim means renewing the cry of the modernists, "Back to the Qur'an and forward with ijtiḥād." In the same vein, it means acting on these words of Iqbal: "The teaching of the Qur'an that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems."⁽⁴⁾ These are useful guidelines today for the liberation of all Muslims, especially women, from traditional authoritarianism.

Human Rights in the Qur'an

The Qur'an strongly guarantees all fundamental human rights, without reserving them to men alone. These rights are so deeply rooted in our humanness that their denial or violation is tantamount to a negation or degradation of that which makes us human. These rights came into existence with us, so that we might actualize our human potential. These rights not only provide us with the opportunity to develop all of our inner resources, but they also hold before us a vision of what God would like us to be, what God deems to be worth striving for. The renunciation of a God-given right would be no more virtuous than the refusal to utilize a God-given talent.

The first and most basic right emphasized by the Qur'an is the right to be regarded in a way that reflects the sanctity and absolute value of each human life. Each person has the right not only to life but also to respect, not by virtue of being a man or a woman, but by virtue of being a human being. "Verily," states the Qur'an, "we have honored every human being" [Surah 17:Al-Isra':70]. Human beings are deemed worthy of esteem because, of all creation, they alone chose to accept the "trust" of freedom of the will (Surah 33:Al-Aḥzab:72). Human beings can exercise freedom of the will because they possess the rational faculty, which is what distinguishes them from all other creatures (Surah 2:Al-Baqarah:30-34). Although human beings can become "the lowest of the low," the Qur'an declares that they have been made "in the best of moulds" (Surah 95:At-Tin:4-6), having the ability to think, to have knowledge of right and wrong, to do the good and to avoid the evil. Thus, on account of the promise which is contained in being human, namely, the potential to be God's vicegerent on earth, the humanness of all human beings is to be respected and considered an end in itself.

Flowing from this primary right is the right to be treated with justice and equity. The Qur'an puts great emphasis on the right to seek justice and the duty to do justice. Justice encompasses both the concept that all are equal and recognition of the need to help equalize those suffering from a deficiency or loss.

Yet justice is not absolute equality of treatment, since human beings are not equal as far as their human potential or their human situation is concerned. While each person's humanness commands respect, the Qur'an also establishes the right to recognition of individual merit. Merit depends not on gender or any other

characteristic, but only on righteousness. Righteousness consists of "just belief" plus "just action," including faith, prayer, wealth-sharing, equitable and compassionate behavior, and patience in the face of hardship or difficulty.

Of importance to women in the Muslim world today is the Qur'anic idea that justice takes into account the unequal conditions of different groups of people. This idea stems from the Qur'anic ideal of community, or "ummah," a word deriving from the root "umm," meaning mother. Like a good mother with her children, the good community cares about the well-being of all its members, offering particular support to the downtrodden, oppressed, and "weak" classes. This includes women, slaves, orphans, the poor and infirm, and minorities.

As discussed earlier, another fundamental right is the right to be free of traditionalism and authoritarianism. Instrumental here is the right to seek knowledge, which the Qur'an emphasizes perhaps more than any other right. Acquiring knowledge is a prerequisite for evaluating the conditions of life and working toward the creation of a just world. Denied knowledge, Muslim women are denied justice.

Additionally, with great implications for the status of Muslim women, human beings possess the right to work, to earn, and to own property. This right is not the monopoly of men. In Islam, everything belongs to God, not to any person, and so every human being has the right to a means of living. Given the Qur'an's recognition of women as persons in their own right and not as adjuncts to men, the right to earn a living is of great importance to women, and the Qur'an entitles both women and men to the fruits of their labors.

Human beings also have the right to develop their aesthetic sensibilities and the right not only to survive but to thrive, to enjoy "the good life." This requires self-actualization or development, which is not possible without social justice. Not only an end in themselves, women's rights are a basic component of social justice and a fundamental aspect of creating a just society, in which all people can actualize their God-given potential.

It is often said that rights entail responsibility, meaning the responsibility not to use rights to justify destructive behavior. Rights also entail another kind of responsibility: the duty not to neglect them. Rights given to us by God ought to be exercised, since everything that God does is for "a just purpose," as pointed out by a number of Qur'anic verses.

In short, as beings in a covenantal relationship with God, we must strive to secure and guard the rights which God has given us and which, therefore, cannot be revoked by any temporal authority.

Sexism Is Not Islam

Given the human rights established by the Qur'an, how is it that Muslim women are among the most voiceless and powerless "minorities" in the world? One answer is

that women's oppression -- including their "protection" -- in the name of Islam is based on pre-Qur'anic, non-Qur'anic theological assumptions and on patriarchal impulses camouflaged in the language of popular piety. It also consists of the simple fear of change.

The belief that women are inferior to men derives, in my judgment, from three fundamental theological assumptions or ideas that have played pivotal roles not only in the Islamic, but also in the Christian and Jewish, tradition. These three assumptions are:

1) God's primary creation is man (Adam), since woman (Eve) is believed to have been created from man's rib and is, therefore, ontologically derivative and secondary. This idea has been the most damaging to women throughout history, for if it is believed that man and woman were created unequal by God, then they cannot become equal essentially, at a subsequent time.

2) Woman (Eve) was the primary agent of "man's Fall," or man's expulsion from paradise. With enormous implications for women's sexuality, this story undergirds the myth of feminine evil. Consequently, women have been regarded as "the devil's gateway" -- a phrase adopted from the early Christian Tertullian -- and treated with hatred, suspicion, and contempt.

3) Woman was created not only from man, but for man. Her existence, therefore, is instrumental and not of fundamental importance.

Common though these assumptions are, a correct reading of Qur'an does not support them. The idea that Eve was created second, and is derivative -- which is found in the creation story in Genesis 2 -- is not found in the Qur'an. In its thirty or so passages about human creation, the Qur'an always speaks of the creation of humanity as a whole ("an-nas," "al-insan," "al-bashar"). The term "adam" (borrowed from Hebrew, in which "adam" derives from "adamah," meaning "earth") occurs twenty-five times in the Qur'an. In twenty-one instances, it refers not to a specific person but to human beings when they reach the stage of moral autonomy and become capable of being God's vicegerents on earth. In the Qur'an, "Adam" represents humanity, not just a male person. It is important to note that there is no "Eve" in the Qur'an.

According to the Qur'an, God created woman and man simultaneously, of like substance, and in like manner. Several verses state that God created man and women from a single life-cell or being. Both man and women have male and female components [Surah 49:Al-Hujurat:13], and both together form the human species. It is a clear teaching of the Qur'an that man and woman are equal in the sight of God, and the Qur'an uses both feminine and masculine terms and imagery to describe the creation of humanity from a single source.

As for the second assumption, the Qur'an does not state that Eve tempted and deceived Adam, causing his "Fall" and expulsion from paradise; as noted, Eve is not even mentioned by name in the Qur'anic text. In Islam, the story of humanity's first act of disobedience is not even the tale of a "Fall." Instead, as Iqbal writes, it shows "man's rise from a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession

of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience."(5) God approved of this development of human will and therefore forgave this first transgression.

Finally, woman was not created to serve the ends of man, nor vice versa: both were created to serve God's purpose. Both are called upon equally to be righteous, and women and men are "members" and "protectors" of each other.

In the face of this truth about the Qur'an, how do Muslims rationalize the commonly held theological misconceptions used to justify women's secondary status? The answer is, largely, through the prevalent norms of Muslim culture, which has incorporated the many sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that make up the Hadith literature, a leading source of Islamic tradition. While the Qur'an has absolute authority as God's Word and is therefore the primary source of Islam, the Hadith literature has been the lens through which the Qur'an has been interpreted through the ages. Reflecting the culture of the seventh- and eighth-century Arab world, the sayings voice the cumulative biases, against women, of the Jewish, Christian, Hellenistic, and pre-Islamic Bedouin Arab traditions.

To take one example, it is through the Hadith literature that the idea of Eve's creation from Adam's rib entered the Muslim world. Throughout Islamic history, certain "ahadith" (the plural of "hadith," a saying) have been used by patriarchal Muslim culture to undermine the aim of the Qur'an to liberate women from the status of chattels and make them free and equal to men.

As important as the Hadith literature is, controversy surrounds every aspect of it, from the authenticity of individual sayings to the literature as a whole. In theory, all Muslim scholars agree that they must reject any hadith that contradicts the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the ahadith invoked to justify women's secondary status not only are retained, but they enjoy overwhelming popularity among Muslims in general.

The belief of most Muslims that the first woman was created from Adam's rib shows that, in practice, the Hadith literature has displaced the teaching of the Qur'an on women's creation. It is no wonder: throughout most of Muslim history, the sources of Islamic tradition have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women.

The challenge for contemporary Muslim theologians who uphold gender equality and justice is to analyze and refute time-honored understandings of certain Qur'anic verses and ahadith that have been used against women. Their task is to reinterpret these texts in the light of the cardinal Islamic belief that God is just and that God's word must reflect God's justice. Indeed, the Qur'an is full of verses affirming the equality of women and men. I defy patriarchy's theologians to reconcile these verses with any bias against women or even relegation of women to a sheltered -- that is, inferior -- status. To wit(6):

Never will I suffer to be lost
The work of any of you,
Be he male or female:

Ye are members, one of another
[Surah 3:Al-'Imran:195]

If any do deeds
of righteousness, --
be they male or female --
And have faith,
They will enter Heaven,
And not the least injustice
Will be done to them.
[Surah 4:An-Nisa':124]

The Believers, men
And women, are protectors,
One of another: they enjoin
What is just, and forbid
What is evil: they observe
Regular prayers, practice
Regular charity, and obey
God and His Apostle.
On them will God pour
His mercy: for God
Is Exalted in power, Wise.
God hath promised to Believers,
Men and women, Gardens
Under which rivers flow,
To swell therein,
And beautiful mansions
In Gardens of everlasting bliss.
But the greatest bliss
Is the Good Pleasure of God:
That is the supreme felicity.
[Surah 9:At-Tawbah:71-72]

Whoever works righteousness,
Man or woman, and has Faith,
Verily, to him will We give
A new Life, a life
That is good and pure, and We
Will bestow on such their reward
According to the best
Of their actions.
[Surah 16:An-Nahl:97]

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
Engage much in God's praise, --
For them has God prepared
Forgiveness and great reward.
[Surah 23:Al-Mu'minum:35]

Men and women are created as equal creatures of a universal, just, and merciful God whose pleasure is that they live, in harmony and in righteousness, together.

Manifestations of Inequality

Denying women the right to interpret the Qur'an and the other sources of Islam, patriarchal authorities have distorted the truth of Islam almost beyond recognition. They have made Islam a means of keeping women in bondage, physically and spiritually. The most gross violation of human rights in Muslim societies is that of the rights of women, who are deprived of the freedom to be fully human.

Female children are discriminated against from the moment of birth. Many girls are married when they are still minors, although marriage in Islam is a contract and presupposes that the contracting parties are both consenting adults. (The phenomenon of child marriages gives special importance to the human right, recognized by the Qur'an, to move freely and to emigrate from oppressive conditions.)

Ironically, while the Qur'an often notes women's rights in marriage, the culture regards a husband as his wife's gateway to heaven or hell. This is not only tragic, but also ironic, as Islam rejects the idea of any intermediary between a believer and the Creator.

While Islam may have abolished female infanticide, "honor killings" of women by their husbands remain common in certain Muslim countries.

Although the Qur'an presents the idea of "no-fault" divorce and speaks of divorce nonjudgmentally, Muslim societies make divorce legally and socially hard on women. One means is the denial to mothers of custody of their children.

Similarly disempowering to women are pseudo-Islamic practices with regard to inheritance. The Qur'an allowed women to inherit wealth and receive similar gifts, but Muslim societies have discouraged gifts to women and favored the circulation of wealth among men.

Modernity has not brought justice to most Muslim women. Since the 1970s, several countries have enacted laws in the name of "Islamization" that reduce women's status,

mathematically, to less than full humanity. Such oppression of women serves to reinforce cultural identity and express rejection of Western corruption. Controlling women is a proxy for controlling sexuality, licentiousness, and the family structure in which patriarchy is invested. Keeping women at home, subservient and dependent, is both means and end.

More intensely than many other societies, Muslim communities tend to divide the world into private (women's) and public (men's) spheres. This structure segregates the sexes. Women must wear veils to make themselves "faceless" in public because women's intrusion into male space might disrupt, if not destroy, the fundamental order of things.

Segregation and enforced veiling -- together, the tradition of the "curtain" -- exemplify both the twisting of Qur'anic ideas and the adoption of pre-Islamic traditions oppressing women. For instance, the purpose of the Qur'anic statements about women's dress and conduct was to enable women to transact business in the public realm, free from sexual harassment or molestation. Zealous and patriarchal Muslims, however, place form over substance. In the name of protecting women's chastity (what about men's chastity?) women are veiled and even confined to their homes -- at the expense of their freedom and ability to engage in gainful work or other activity in the public sphere. This grossly distorts the Qur'anic directive, in which confinement was not the norm for chaste women, but the punishment for unchaste ones.

The pre-Islamic roots of this tradition also give the lie to the argument that secluding women is a Qur'anic ideal. Veiling is part and parcel of discriminatory ideas about women rooted in the Jewish and early Christian traditions. These words of St. Paul are an example:

Christ is the source of every man, man is the source of woman, and God is the source of Christ. For a man to pray or prophesy with his head covered is a sign of disrespect to his source. For a woman, however, it is a sign of disrespect to her source if she prays or prophesies unveiled; she might as well have her hair cut off. If a woman is ashamed to have her hair cut off or shaved, she ought to wear a veil. A man should certainly not cover his head, since he is the image of God and reflects God's glory, but woman is the reflection of man's glory. For man did not come from woman, and man was not created for the sake of woman, but woman was created for the sake of man. [I Corinthians 11:3-9]

Family Planning and Abortion

Control of women centers largely on control of women's bodies. Beliefs that identify women with the body, to the exclusion of the mind and spirit, remain a common feature of many religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Islam is no exception. Moreover, while women are identified with the body, in these traditions they are not seen as "owners" of their own bodies.

To control women's sexuality is a means of controlling their bodies, and to control (or deny) family planning is to govern women's sexuality. This is why the matter of who controls women's bodies -- whether it is men, the church, the state or community, or women themselves -- was a significant underlying issue of the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in 1994, and why it will resurface at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

Women in most Muslim societies have minimal access to reliable means of contraception. This reflects the influence of conservative Muslims who proclaim from public platforms and preach from the pulpits of the mosques that family planning is against Islam. Like the traditions of veiling and confinement, denial of family planning supports male ownership and control of women, both directly and symbolically.

The Qur'an does not directly address contemporary family planning issues -- a silence that in itself indicates neither support nor opposition nor a lack of relevant principles. Instead, the open text of the Qur'an establishes an ethical framework in which it is appropriate to discuss family planning questions. (The Qur'an does include both pronatal verses and verses directed toward population control. Of the three, mutually contradictory ahadith concerning the withdrawal method of contraception, two imply that it is acceptable.)

Given Islam's religious and ethical framework, family planning itself should be seen as a fundamental human right, especially for masses of disadvantaged Muslim women.

Among the principles supporting women's access to family planning services are the equality of women with men, the entitlement to respect for one's humanity, the right to justice and equity, the right to be free of traditionalism and authoritarianism, the right to privacy, the right to gain knowledge and use one's reason, the right to work and earn and own property, the right to move freely, and the right to enjoy life. Family planning helps women and men to secure and exercise these fundamental human rights. The rights to respect and freedom from authoritarianism, suspicion, and slander, in particular, also respond to the belief, still held by some, that contraceptives make it possible for women to engage in licentious behavior without penalty.

Several additional Qur'anic principles support those who choose to use family planning. First, each individual is responsible for his or her actions. Although the Qur'an calls God the sustainer of all creation, it does not absolve individuals or communities of responsibility for their survival and well-being. Rather, it reminds human beings that we are responsible for our deeds -- indeed, for our souls [Surahs 74:Al-Muddaththir:38 and 52:At- Tur:21: "for itself lies every soul in pledge"]. Similarly, the Qur'an notes that reason is what elevates us above other creatures, that righteous belief demands righteous action, and that God asks us to change ourselves as a precondition of changing our conditions. All these ideas support human responsibility where reproduction is concerned.

Finally, the Qur'an does not make a requirement of marriage or childbearing. Nor

does it follow pre-Islamic traditions that sanctify sperm itself as the equal of human life. The quality, or righteousness, of people is more important than their quantity.

A review of Muslim jurisprudence shows that many jurists have considered abortion to be permissible within the first 120 days of pregnancy for a number of reasons. Traditionally, scholars have distinguished between the impermissible abortion of an ensouled fetus and the permissible abortion of a fetus not yet ensouled. There are differences among the authorities as to whether a compelling reason is required for abortion and what constitutes a compelling reason.

Pursuing Justice

The Qur'an not only offers women justice, but requires all Muslims to seek justice, including their own rights. It is not enough merely to appreciate one's rights in theory. Muslims are called upon, in oppressive conditions, to strive to make possible the exercise of the rights given by God.

Male-centered and male-dominated Muslim societies assert, glibly and tirelessly, that Islam has given women more rights than any other religion. Meanwhile, they keep women in physical, mental, and emotional confinement, depriving them of the opportunity to actualize their human potential. A deeply symbolic and pragmatically devastating case in point is that, while literacy rates are low in many Muslim countries, literacy rates of Muslim women -- especially in the rural areas where most of the Muslim people live -- are among the lowest in the world.

It is only because the masses of Muslim women are steeped in poverty and illiteracy that oppressive ideas have been accepted and tolerated for so long. Until recent times, the vast majority of Muslim women have remained wholly or largely unaware of their "Islamic" (in an ideal sense) rights. Even privileged, educated Muslim women -- like women of other religious traditions -- have been denied systematically the opportunity to acquire the critical tools for examining the roots of their tradition and discovering how they became so disadvantaged. Their exclusion disables their response.

The negative ideas about women that prevail in Muslim societies are rooted in certain theological ideas. Until we demolish the theological foundations of Muslim culture's misogynistic and androcentric tendencies, Muslim women will suffer discrimination despite statistical improvements in education, employment, and political rights. Islamic tradition will remain rigidly patriarchal until we break the chains of ignorance in which women are shackled.

Ultimately, it will be up to Muslim women, once educated about Islam and their rights, to articulate in a proactive fashion the meaning of their lives, their selves. Reacting against the Western model of liberation no longer suffices. What is required is a positive formulation of their own goals and objectives, individually and collectively.

Although prevailing conditions seem to be far from desirable, I believe strongly that there is hope for the future. There are indications that an increasing number of Muslims are, in fact, returning to the Qur'an and attempting to apply its teachings to reform Muslim practices. With the efforts of women and human rights activists who are striving to actualize the liberating vision of the Qur'an -- and with the help of God -- more and more Muslim women will become educated and aware. As this happens, they will reject the myths and arguments by which religious hierarchs imprison their bodies, hearts, minds, and souls. Then they will grow into whole human beings, free of guilt and fear, secure in the knowledge that they are equal to men in the sight of God and that, therefore, they must not be unequal to men in any human society.

Notes

1. K.M. Ishaque, "Islamic Law -- Its Ideals and Principles," in A. Gauher, ed., *The Challenge of Islam* (London: The Islamic Council of Europe, 1980), p. 157. [Back to Text](#)
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957). [Back to Text](#)
3. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1962); the quotation here is from Lecture 6, "The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam." [Back to Text](#)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 168. [Back to Text](#)
5. *Ibid.*, p. 85. [Back to Text](#)
6. The translations of the five passages quoted here are from 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, New Revised Edition*, (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1989). [Back to Text](#)

"Members, One of Another: Gender Equality and Justice in Islam," <i>The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics</i> , 1995, www.sacredchoices.org/hassan
