

## 2 Women's Position

Culture and the way it affects humans always fascinated me. After stumbling around in my first two undergraduate years, I decided to study something I enjoyed. I chose anthropology—which includes the study of culture. Though not a great choice for a career to support you, it provided me with more understanding of myself and the many people from different parts of the world I would soon meet.

I read the Quran for a year or two before I sailed with friends in their schooner from southern California through the Panama Canal to the U.S. Virgin Islands. During that trip, we sailed about 500 miles off the coast of Mexico because we kept hearing horror stories about pirates taking over boats and appropriating them for running drugs.

That far offshore we encountered some pretty heavy weather and in one of the storms, I decided I needed to become a Muslim. (This is the storm described in the last chapter.) That night at the end of 1976, while I shared the second watch, I made the commitment to do more than just read the Quran. I had to try practicing Islam, despite all the scary things I thought I knew about it. The Quran felt right, maybe the rest would follow.

I have never regretted my decision. I've been a practicing Muslim ever since I learned the practices. It changed my life more wonderfully than I could have imagined.

As I described in Chapter 1, when I got back to the States several months after that fateful storm I contacted the only Muslim I knew who actively practiced Islam. Soon a new world caught me up. New friends from very diverse cultures allowed me to use far more of my anthropology than I ever expected. My interest in culture now paid off.

I am not a scholar of Islam or an anthropologist. I do believe however my many years as a Muslim and my contacts with many diverse cultures give me some insights to share.

Often when the practices of some Muslims do not mesh with my understanding of the Quran the issue results from culture.

How do you define culture? Good question. Many volumes have attempted to define it.

Stated in a simple way, I see it as all the things that make a group of people similar to each other and different from other groups. It includes the manner in which we speak, the words we use, the foods we eat, the stories we heard from our elders and will tell our children. It affects the way we see ourselves and others, the way we view life and death, even the colors we paint our houses. It is a million things we accept as part of our identity without thinking about them.

The personal distance we surround ourselves with gives yet another example of culture. Have you ever found yourself backing away when your listener keeps pushing your space? Or perhaps you have been the space pusher. You have just come face to face with differences in culture.

Many years ago I spent some sleepless nights with a wonderful friend from Egypt. She grew up in a small village surrounded by the sounds of people and animals. She could not sleep without noise, so always had the television or radio playing. I on the other hand grew up in a culture where an ideal bedroom meant to have your own quiet refuge, away from all noise and commotion. We laughed when we talked about it later.

In spite of my experiences with other cultures I still find myself taking a deep breath and trying to calm my temper when someone playing loud music drives up to my quiet picnic spot. Although I understand some of that culture, I am still bound by my own culture. So loud music in a peaceful place upsets me.

These cultural differences carry over into religion also. We often accept people eat food very different from what we enjoy and listen to music that puts our nerves on edge but then still expect them to live with the same spiritual reality we do. While very human, this reaction ignores reality. At the core of our culture and thus at the core of ourselves, our spiritual understanding defines us. So why do we expect it to look the same for everyone?

Before I first started reading the Quran I thought I knew all about Islam—and it demeaned women. I assumed the Quran would bear this out.

It surprised me to find in the Quran that God made men and women *equal*.

However I couldn't see this at first.

In the last chapter I mentioned the Quran Saida gave me. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated it. I had read the Christian Bible, the Torah and some of the Bhagavad-Gita. I decided I really should read the Quran, though convinced I would not find much of value there.

Like many Westerners I saw Islam as one belief system, with all Muslims following the same understanding. I did not realize, as much variety of understanding exists among Muslims as among followers of any other major religion.

What I always assumed was the only form of Islam did not attract me at all. A footnote in that Yusuf Ali translation awoke my interest and started my learning process, ending on the stormy night I decided to become Muslim. When I first read his translation of Verse 3:195 nothing stood out to me. The verse refers to believers in God who pray to Him for forgiveness and mercy:

*And their Lord hath accepted Of them, and answered them: / "Never will I suffer to be lost The work of any of you, Be he male or female: / Ye are members, one of another....*

*(The Holy Quran III:195 [3:195])*

However his footnote for this passage astonished me:

In Islam the equal status of the sexes is not only recognised but insisted on. If sex distinction, which is a distinction in nature, does not count in spiritual matters, still less of course would count artificial distinctions, such as rank, wealth, position, race, colour, birth, etc.

How could Yusuf Ali say Islam insists on the equal status of men and women? I never expected this. Islam makes women subservient, right? Every report in the media, every book I ever read told me so. (Please remember this was in the 1970s.)

Perhaps he made an error or somehow the translation became biased. Looking at other translations for this verse I did not see any other indication of this equal status.

Not until years later when I read Rashad Khalifa's translation of the verse, did I understand its full impact for the equality of men and women:

*Their Lord responded to them: "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female—you are equal to one another...."*  
(*Quran: The Final Testament 3:195*)

Finally, in print: God made men and women *equal* in Islam.

But why didn't other translations say so? Looking again at them, the wording does not say it straight out but they imply the same meaning. All the others I have seen resemble Yusuf Ali's "*Ye are members, one of another*". What does that mean but, "God made you all the same—or equal"?

However if your cultural background does not accept that equality, you may not catch the meaning. My background accepts equality between the sexes (at least it says it does), and I still did not catch it.

Perhaps this gives a clue. I expected unfairness towards women in Islam. Plenty of evidence exists to show we tend to see what we expect. This creates the biggest blind spot for all humans. I set myself up not to see the equality of men and women in the Quran. Perhaps most translators did the same.

Rashad Khalifa's translation of the remainder of the verse strengthened my understanding:

*...Thus, those who immigrate, and get evicted from their homes, and are persecuted because of Me, and fight and get killed, I will surely remit their sins and admit them into gardens with flowing streams...."*  
(*Quran: The Final Testament 3:195*)

Not only did God create women equal to men but they too can work in His cause. Women can immigrate, be persecuted, fight and die for God.

I want to highlight that since these verses indicate both men and women can strive in God's cause, it follows they must possess the means to do so. The picture given by these verses does not show women hidden away in the women's quarters (or harem) separated from the society of men and concerned only with the "matters of women". These women take an active part in the society. They fight, immigrate, and face persecution. Those things can only happen to women who put themselves out on the front lines, so to speak.

God tells us in other verses He created all righteous believers equal, regardless of their gender. Reading further in the Quran, we find this stated again:

*As for those who lead a righteous life, male or female, while believing, they enter Paradise; without the slightest injustice.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 4:124)*

Thus God rewards believers who lead a righteous life with Paradise no matter what their gender.

Verse 16:97 again declares gender equality:

*Anyone who works righteousness, male or female, while believing, we will surely grant them a happy life in this world, and we will surely pay them their full recompense (on the Day of Judgment) for their righteous works.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 16:97)*

Righteous believers receive happiness in this world and in the hereafter. Their gender does not matter. In my view true happiness exists only if oppression does not. Oppression hurts both the oppressed and the oppressors.

Verse 40:40 tells us the same thing. God equally rewards humans for their good works and lets us know if we sin we are “*required for just that*”.

This equality between men and women existed in the early days of Islam. The following verse gives an interesting example of the way the prophet Muhammad, through whom God revealed the Quran, dealt with women as equals. In Chapter 58 entitled “The Debate” we find a woman debated with him:

*God has heard the woman who debated with you about her husband, and complained to God. God heard everything the two of you discussed. God is Hearer, Seer.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 58:1)*

In many societies one does not debate and discuss with someone whom you think of as inferior, instead you dictate to or inform them. Clearly women had a much higher standing in the society of the prophet Muhammad than they have now in many Muslim societies claiming to follow him. Can you imagine a woman debating with a leader of ISIS or the Taliban?

The New Testament gives us similar examples of Jesus debating with women. Probably the best known of these occurred in his debate with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:7-42.

Another shorter example of this debating appears below:

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.... He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.*

*(Matthew 15:21-28 - New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1952)*

God makes it clear many times in the Quran men and women have equal status and they will have equal rewards for their belief and righteous life. The Bible does not state their equality as clearly, though Jesus certainly dealt equitably with all regardless of their gender. But this equality may not have always carried over into the early church. From several of his writings, including the following passage, many have come to the conclusion Paul did not see women as equals to men:

*Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.... Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. (1 Corinthians 11: 8 -12 - New Revised Standard Version Bible)*

On the other hand, in the following letter to the Galatians Paul clearly declares the equality of all Christians:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28 - New Revised Standard Version Bible)*

This may seem confusing but not if we remember Paul's letters addressed specific issues in the early Christian communities. We do not have the background for these letters and hear only one side of the conversation. Also, Paul spoke to an audience that thought of women as basically property of their husbands.

A similar conflicting message shows up in Paul's writings on women teaching. In the following passage he clearly accepts and honors Priscilla and her husband Aquila.

*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. (Romans 16:3-4 - New Revised Standard Version Bible)*

Significantly, Acts shows both Aquila and Priscilla taught:

*Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures.... He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. (Acts 18:24-26 - New Revised Standard Version Bible)*

Keeping these verses in mind, let's look at this next passage from Paul's letters to Timothy. It indicates women may not teach and may explain what seems a negative attitude toward women:

*A woman must learn in silence and be completely submissive. I do not permit a woman to act as teacher, or in any way to have authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was created First, Eve afterward; moreover, it was not Adam who was deceived but the woman. It was she who was led astray and fell into sin. (1 Timothy 2:11-14 - The New American Bible, 1970)*

As Paul indicates, some understand from the Bible Eve caused the fall of mankind from the Garden of Eden. Thus the blame falls on women. On the other hand while Satan deceived Eve, Paul says in Romans 5:19 Adam was not deceived, but disobedient:

*For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.*  
(Romans 5:19 - New Revised Standard Version Bible)

In this way Paul clarifies both Adam and Eve shared the guilt. The Quran also says both Adam and Eve share in the guilt and Satan duped them both. (Please see the Quran 2:34-36, 7:19-22 and 7:27.) One more Quranic passage exists where Satan tempted Adam rather than Eve:

*We then said, "O Adam, this is an enemy of you and your wife. Do not let him evict you from Paradise.... But the devil whispered to him, saying, "O Adam, let me show you the tree of eternity and unending kingship." They ate from it.... Adam thus disobeyed his Lord, and fell.*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 20:117-121)

It really does not matter whether Satan tempted Adam or Eve. Both disobeyed God and both bore the responsibility for their sin. The Quran does not blame Eve over Adam. (If you look at the whole picture I do not believe the Bible does either.) So we have another example of the way the Quran treats men and women as equals.

We have seen the Quran treats the righteous as equals. However society has more than just righteous people. It follows men and women share equally in unrighteousness. All of us have known unrighteous women as well as unrighteous men. The Quran shows the same:

*The thief, male or female, you shall mark their hands as a punishment for their crime.... If one repents after committing this crime, and reforms, God redeems him....*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 5:38-39)

This example shows the equality between the genders by giving the same punishment for thievery to both men and women. It also shows how culture affects the way we look at God's commandments. Much of the Muslim world believes the thief's hand should be cut off. This severe punishment comes from a source other than Quran. Rashad Khalifa translated the Arabic word which most translators render as "to cut" in Verse 5:38 as "to mark" the hand by nicking or slightly cutting it. Many traditional Muslims understand the word to mean, "to cut off". However 5:39 shows if the thief repents and reforms God redeems him or her. But if the hand has been cut off it cannot be restored later, which seems contrary to God's mercy. It does not seem reasonable that anyone should cripple them for life by removing their hand, especially since they may repent and reform. Marking the hand makes much more sense.

Further support for this understanding comes from the Quranic version of the story of Joseph—known in the Bible as the owner of the coat of many colors. In the verses describing the women who "cut" their hands when they saw Joseph (12:31), the Arabic uses the same word as above in 5:38. Clearly the women did not cut off their hands when startled by the beauty of this young man. It only makes sense they cut or nicked their hands.

Verses shown below on adultery give another example of women's equality to men because the punishment for both is the same. They also show the impact of culture on the understanding of the scripture. As I first began learning about Islam it horrified me to learn some traditional Muslims punish adultery by stoning to death. What a relief to then discover the following verses in the Quran:

*The adulteress and the adulterer you shall whip each of them a hundred lashes. Do not be swayed by pity from carrying out God's law.... The adulterer will end up marrying an adulteress or an idol worshiper, and the adulteress will end up marrying an adulterer or an idol worshiper. This is prohibited for the believers.*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 24:2-3)

Rashad Khalifa's footnote further clarifies these verses:

\*24:2 Social pressure, i.e., public witnessing of the penalty, is the basic punishment (see also 5:38). The lashes shall be symbolic, not severe.

From these verses, the footnote, knowing how merciful God is, and verses 26:130-31 the lashing should not be severe to the point of seriously maiming. This must be so if the offenders will end up marrying others guilty of adultery or idol worshipers. You cannot marry if you have been killed or badly maimed.

This next verse indicates if the offending couple repents and changes their ways, no one should punish them:

*The couple who commits adultery shall be punished. If they repent and reform, you shall leave them alone....*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 4:16)

Contrasting these verses with the penalties given in earlier scripture gives some context for them. In Leviticus 20:10-12 committing adultery with a married woman brings death for both parties. For a virgin non-betrothed woman, Exodus 22:16-17 says the man must pay the marriage price to her father. If the father will allow it, he must marry her. Thus for a married woman the Biblical punishment becomes much greater than the Quranic one, while for a single woman it might be considered less.

Jesus's teaching when the Pharisees brought the adulteress before him and questioned him reminds me of the Quranic verses just quoted:

*When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."*  
(John 8:7 - New Revised Standard Version Bible)

When all of her condemners had left without throwing stones Jesus told her to go on her way and not to sin again.

In all editions of the Bible I am familiar with, married people commit adultery while the unmarried commit fornication. The Quran does not make that distinction. If you have any sexual relations outside of your own marriage you commit adultery. It does not matter if you are a swinging single with multiple partners or an unfaithful spouse; the Quran calls it all adultery. Verses 24:4-5 demonstrate this for the married, and Verses 24:6-9 deal with a husband who accuses his wife of adultery and her response.

I've heard a traditional argument that Quran's Verses 24:2-3 (quoted above) only apply to single men and women who have sexual relations without being married. This traditional belief states adultery committed by married people brings death, as in the Torah and Old Testament, but the Quran never mentions this punishment. Given the severity of punishing by death certainly God would not have left it out of His last scripture to humanity.

I can see 24:2-3 might refer only to the unmarried if I look just at those verses. However, Verse 4:25 describes that those without money to pay a dowry can marry slave women and proves death can never be the punishment for adultery:

*They may wed believing  
Girls from among those [slaves]  
Wed them with the leave  
Of their owners...  
If they fall into shame,  
Their punishment is **half**  
That for free women....  
(The Holy Quran IV:25 [4:25] - emphasis added)*

No one can half kill someone. But you can give them half the number of lashes you would give someone who has always been free and committed adultery.

This verse brings up an issue that confused me about Islam: slavery. Let me digress just a moment and discuss this because of its importance. After careful reading of the Quran I realize God gives many reasons to free slaves. Quran also clarifies that in God's eyes a person's righteousness, not their status in society, gives them value.

At the time of the Quran's revelation, slavery played an integral part in society. Rather than outlawing it directly and causing great upheaval in the society, the Quran sets out a model where slavery dies out over time—as it has in most of the world.

Now let's return to the topic of women's position. We have now seen verses showing the equality between men and women in their responsibilities as well as freedoms. With freedoms comes the responsibility to use those freedoms wisely. These aspects of human nature again highlight the fact in the Quran women interact as an active part of society. How else can a woman become a thief or an adulteress?

Also, the body is just a "garment" of the soul. The soul is the only thing that matters. Race, weight, age, etc. are totally immaterial to God, as the following indicates:

*O people, we created you from the same male and female, and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes, that you may recognize one another. The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous. God is Omniscient, Cognizant.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 49:13)*

I would like to make one more crucial point: the Arabic language, like Spanish and many other languages, gives each noun a gender. However as Rashad Khalifa indicates in his Appendix 4, this does not necessarily imply the male or female gender:

Another possible reason for choosing Arabic [for the revelation of the Quran] is that "He" and "She" do not necessarily imply natural gender. Thus, when God is referred



to as “He,” this does not imply gender at all. God be glorified; He is neither male, nor female. The usage of “He” to refer to God in the English language, for example, has contributed to a false image of God...  
(Quran: The Final Testament, p.417-8.)

To those of you who find the reference to God as “He” disturbing I apologize. I want to stress *God has no need for a gender*. I find it very awkward to avoid a pronoun for God. Changing the pronoun to “She” does not solve the problem. I use the convention of referring to God as “He” and ask the reader to recognize it simply as a convention.

In spite of what I thought I knew about Islam and Muslim society, it became clear Quran never treats women unequally. Areas exist where Islam as traditionally practiced becomes unfair to them. But you cannot find those practices in the Quran. As in all religions, the practice does not always match the revelation from God. We will see the practices often go against the principles of the Quran.

The Quran is an emancipating document for women!

I am very thankful my friend’s dog chewed a copy of Yusuf Ali and not another translation that missed the equality issue. I might never have gone any further with the Quran.

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*I want to give you input from other sources on the issues discussed in this book. At the end of each chapter, you will find writings from other Muslim women and then a final word from me.*

*It has helped me to come to know other women who also had difficulties with traditional Islam. Here a sister from India gives her reactions.*

### **A Muslim Experience**

All my life I grew up with a multitude of traditions that controlled and dictated my every action. The community follows the “Muslim culture,” doctrines and traditions, unquestioningly. Being on the “inside” you accept them first as a child and then as an adult. You question occasionally, but by and large you accept since you see everybody else around you taking it as normal.

It never occurred to me to question some of the traditions. For example, the fasting, the purdah system (veiling), that a woman cannot pray while having a period, segregation of the females from males. But I deeply resented several other customs like polygamy, male superiority, inequality of the sexes, inhuman treatment of people whose offenses were minor. Because I “belonged” to it, I defended it while I was young, but as I grew older, I distanced myself from the culture. My father was very broad-minded and took it in the right perspective, giving me permission to pursue a medical profession. As time went by, I stopped practicing “Islam” completely, as I felt ashamed of being “Muslim” and having no answers to the plethora of questions that I had.

Time and time again throughout my youth and adulthood, I would question, and be unhappy and dissatisfied.

The “mullah’s” [religious leaders] made the situation worse. They made me feel that for me to even question was wrong. It showed me as a disobedient rebel in their eyes and they would blame it on my parents, attributed to an insufficient, deficient upbringing. This would increase the turmoil in my mind and I would dislike myself, becoming fearful of God and Hell, and pray feverishly for several days. The fear would then subside, the questions would return, and I would revert to my old status of not practicing anything at all.

I repeated this cycle many times over.

—*Shari, India & U.S.A.*

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*Like Shari and myself, the following sister took a bit of time to find her way as a Muslim.*

### **Becoming Muslim**

There’s a phrase in the Quran that appears several times: “Out of darkness into the light.” The interesting thing is that you don’t know you’re in darkness until you come out of it and look back. I didn’t feel in darkness. I had a good upbringing, a good education, a good life—I thought.

But darkness shows up in lots of ways. Periods of sadness, depression, loneliness. It wasn’t debilitating. I could carry on, do my job, engage with friends. I could chalk it up to the craziness of being young, teen-age angst. Everybody goes through it, right? But I didn’t find any relief from it in the Christianity I’d been raised in. The answers just didn’t seem to be there.

Finding true Islam (Submission to God) and pursuing it as my lifestyle suddenly changed everything. I was happier much more often. Loneliness went away as my circle of Muslim friends grew. What was there to be depressed about? It truly was God’s light.

I was a little scared about “becoming” Muslim, about the daunting practices, but I soon recognized the happier, genuine person I was becoming. I saw the light, as they say. And that expression, out of darkness into the light, took on great meaning.

I can only thank God that He gave me the guidance and the determination to follow that light out of the darkness.

—*Anonymous, U.S.A.*

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Women everywhere and in all periods of history faced, now face, and will face many of the same things in their lives. Though our technology has changed drastically from the early days of Islam, our hearts and basic needs have not. Each of us deals with the same range of emotions, the same basic trials and tribulations, and we all have the same joyous reactions to the positive happenings in life.

I take comfort in that unity with all other women. If my sisters of the past got through their lives and my sisters of the present are working through their issues I know that I can too.

We act as models for each other and in doing that we muddle through whatever we face together with the help of our Creator, whatever we call that wondrous entity. As we build our lives we are also setting up our own modeling for women of the future. And so human history builds on itself.

To me, it only makes sense to work for as much positive growth as possible. Just as Abraham did:

*“Let the example I set for the future generations be a good one.”*  
(*Quran: The Final Testament 26:84*)