

22 In Society

In most cultures of the world, the position of women does not equal that of men. Almost all groups of people have inequities affecting women.

Muslim communities often harbor many issues of inequality and contradictions especially in relation to women. I cannot imagine how it would feel to live in such a society. Such circumstances would leave me in terrible emotional conflict.

Politics provides one of the best areas to demonstrate both the inequities and the contradictions. In some Muslim countries, like Turkey, women's rights have been a major political issue for many years. In fact, women were given the right to vote in Turkey years before they had it in France. Yet the position of women in Turkey before the revolution of 1908 was as bad or worse than anywhere else in the Muslim world. The Ottoman Turks probably initiated the confinement of women in harems and also severe veiling. The history of the harems of Turkish sultans should horrify everyone. It caused the virtual enslavement of scores of "chosen" women for the personal pleasure of one man. Yet modern Turkey has been among the vanguard of Muslim nations in striving for women's rights. However, recent political events have Turkish women's rights activists concerned. Things may change in that country, perhaps drastically, putting more power affecting women's issues back into the hands of conservative traditionalists.

Much of the Muslim world sees women as possessing characteristics that make them unfit for rational, intellectual pursuits, like voting.

Given this climate, one would not expect to find women elected to national leadership in Muslim countries. Yet from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996 Benazir Bhutto served as Pakistan's Prime Minister. In the early 1990s, Bangladesh elected Begum Khaleda Zia as the first woman Prime Minister. Then in June of 1993 Turkey elected Tansu Ciller as the first woman to lead that country. All of this in an era where many Western countries, including the United States, still had not elected a woman even to the Vice-presidency, or its equivalent.

One of the Muslim political hot spots at the time of the publication of the first edition of this book, Indonesia, had a woman President. The people initially elected Megawati Sukarnoputri to the vice-presidency, in spite of a resurgence of Muslim fundamentalism there in that time period. With the removal of the fundamentalist President from office, because he was not up to the job, she became President and served through most of 2004.

In the years since the publication of our first edition, there have been six additional Muslim women elected to lead their nations. Admittedly half of these rulers held office for short terms, but Atifete Jahjaga became President of Kosovo from 2011 to 2016, Mauritius elected Ameenah Gurib as President from 2015 to 2018, and most recently Singapore elected Halimah Yacob as President in 2017.

It seems ironic that women national leaders should have been acceptable for many years in societies I have always thought of as unfair to women while unacceptable in my

own supposedly fair society. Once again culture caught me. I must face my cultural prejudice—my tendency to assume my culture is the best, the fairest in all ways. However, in the United States 2020 national election Kamala Harris won the position of Vice-president with Joseph Biden’s victory in the presidential race.

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The Muslim women rulers certainly show the falsehood of the Hadiths that say any nation led by a woman will fail. More importantly, we know from the Quran no problem exists with a woman leading a country. God gives us an example of a woman ruler in the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Here the Hoopoe bird speaks to Solomon:

.... *“I brought to you from Sheba, some important information. I found a woman ruling them, who is blessed with everything, and possesses a tremendous palace.”*
(Quran: The Final Testament 27:22-23)

The Queen of Sheba led her prosperous people wisely. Her response to a letter sent by Solomon demonstrates her wisdom. The following verses start after she read the letter:

She said, “O my advisers, I have received an honorable letter. It is from Solomon, and it is, ‘In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.’

“Proclaiming: ‘Do not be arrogant; come to me as submitters.’”

She said, “O my advisers, counsel me in this matter. I am not deciding anything until you advise me.”

They said, “We possess the power, we possess the fighting skills, and the ultimate command is in your hand. You decide what to do.”

She said, “The kings corrupt any land they invade, and subjugate its dignified people. This is what they usually do. I am sending a gift to them; let us see what the messengers come back with.”

(Quran: The Final Testament 27:29-35)

This passage shows a leader who clearly values her advisors yet has the wisdom to take her own counsel. Rather than respond aggressively and almost certainly provoke a military response she decides to see how Solomon responds to her gift. In doing so she not only avoids conflict but also opens the way to her own guidance.

While the Quran does not mention any other women leaders, the Queen of Sheba provides an excellent example for any leader. The Quran thus shows us women can lead.

Does the Quran deal with the issue of women voting? Yes, because making decisions after consultation among themselves, demonstrates one of the traits of the believers:

They respond to their Lord by observing the Contact Prayers (Salat). Their affairs are decided after due consultation among themselves...
(Quran: The Final Testament 42:38)

Clearly, the verse does not refer to just men. God also requires women to observe prayer, charity, fasting, consultation, etc.

In today's society conducting a group's affairs "*after due consultation among themselves*" can only be achieved in a democratic process where all mature members of the society have equal input into the decision-making—an equal vote.

In this way, I think the Quran shows women should have equal political rights both in leadership and in selecting that leadership.

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In some Muslim countries, notably Iran, even when women have the right to vote they cannot participate in the judicial system. They cannot serve on juries nor can they practice law or hold the position of a judge. The traditional Muslim view that women become too emotional for rational pursuits makes this at least comprehensible, but Sheba's example proves it wrong.

Often traditional Muslims defend this position using a verse we have already examined. Let me give the salient parts again:

O you who believe, when you transact a loan for any period, you shall write it down.... Two men shall serve as witnesses; if not two men, then a man and two women whose testimony is acceptable to all. Thus, if one woman becomes biased, the other will remind her....

(Quran: The Final Testament 2:282)

We discussed this verse in reference to witnessing in Chapter 11. It refers to financial transactions, the *only* situation where two women substitute for one man. In all other situations of witnessing, women and men remain equal. Thus the Quran sees women as totally capable of the discerning thought required for witnessing or any other legal activity.

The Queen of Sheba again gives the Quranic example. As the ruler of her people she must have frequently been cast in the role of a judge.

In the Old Testament we have another clear example. The Book of Judges speaks of Deborah who led Israel and judged for them:

Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. / She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah... and the Israelites would come to her for decisions.

(Judges 4:4-5 - Tanakh: A New Translation...)

On a positive note, in September of 2017 Jordan saw its first appointment of a female Supreme Court judge, the highest level in the Jordanian justice system. And in the spring of 2019, Malaysia appointed its first female top judge.

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The area of employment also shows examples of injustice toward women. In some parts of the Muslim world women can seek employment in any field they choose (though some fields are still more acceptable than others, especially medicine and education). In other Muslim countries women cannot work outside of the home at all without the written consent of their husbands and then only in situations where they will not encounter men unrelated to them.

Ironically, industrialization and increased wealth made life more confining for many women. In earlier times, women played important roles as shepherdesses, weavers, among other jobs. Modern technology greatly diminished or took over those roles.

In another ironic twist, women who had to fight for their survival, like the women of Palestine and now Syria, often have greater freedoms and a wider range of employment opportunities. Many reasons exist for this. Sometimes the structure of the extended family became so disrupted because of the killing of its men that no related men live in the area to fill traditional roles. Women must take them on. Sometimes the family recognizes that for the society to survive everyone must get an education including women. This attitude opened many doors for women, which historically remained shut.

When I made the Hajj pilgrimage, I met wonderful women from all over the world, but the resourcefulness and ability of the women from Palestine especially struck me. Forced to find their own way in the world, they did a magnificent job of it.

As a final irony, traditionalists use a Quranic verse to argue against women working. Since we looked at the verse in Chapter 6, I quote only the portion dealing with employment:

The men are made responsible for the women, and God has endowed them with certain qualities, and made them the bread earners....
(*Quran: The Final Testament 4:34*)

They argue since God makes men the bread earners, women should not work outside of the home. However the Quran does not specify this and in fact, provides examples of women working outside of the home. These examples come from the story of Moses. His future wife and her sister took care of their father's flocks. They had to wait until all of the male shepherds finished watering their flocks before they could water theirs. Moses watered for them and eventually became part of the family (28:23-28). Moses' own mother provides the second example. She became her own son's wet-nurse when according to the Bible, Pharaoh's wife hired her (Exodus 2:7).

To me Verse 4:34 simply says the man provides the living expenses for the family. Other verses in the Quran show any believer can work for gain:

O you who believe, you shall give to charity from the good things you earn, and from what we have produced for you from the earth....
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:267)

This verse addresses believers not just the believing men. All believers must give to charity from the good things they earn.

The following provides another example:

Proclaim: "If your parents, your children, your siblings, your spouses, your family, the money you have earned, a business you worry about, and the homes you cherish are more beloved to you than God and His messenger, and the striving in His cause, then just wait until God brings His judgment...."
(Quran: The Final Testament 9:24)

This verse addresses all people, both men and women. Both can have money they have earned and businesses they worry about.

It only makes sense that God does not restrict women from working outside of the home. However homemakers perform work at least as valuable as that of women employed outside of the home. In the West we often no longer recognize this. I know women who felt judged because they chose to focus their efforts on their families rather than working a job outside of the home. Friends and family saw them as unwilling to help their husbands with the economic burden of a family.

In the years since I first wrote on this subject, definite progress has taken place for women in a number of Muslim countries in both the public and private sectors. Still, many Muslim and non-Muslim countries need improvement in this area.

In this chapter we saw women can rule, vote, participate fully in the judicial system, and work outside of the home according to the Quran. In much of the Muslim world, great confusion still exists about women's roles because many if not most Muslims don't follow the Quran in this and other arenas.

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The following story beautifully demonstrates the way following the Quran alone addresses the issues of women's rights in society. This wonderful sister comes from a very different background from my own, but for both of us the principle of worshiping God alone and following only His commands as found in the Quran provided a lifeline.

The Quran – The Answer

What was Islam for me growing up as a child? It was what I learned from my family and school. My parents were spiritual. They followed the basic tenants of Islam with perseverance. Their way of life reflected tolerance, appreciation, and love. Compassion and forgiveness were synonymous with their name. They were respectful with each other. Islamic religious study was a part of our school curriculum. From all these lessons, one was the strongest, the one about mandatory acts and commendable acts in Islam. The first specifies that there are obligatory and forbidden acts to obey because

they are from the Quran. The second is about exemplary conducts of the prophet, in what he said and approved. I went for what were easy classes in school because I was afraid that the teaching about the prophet would add more burdens, and require much to memorize. Prayer, *Zakat* (charity), fasting, Hajj (Pilgrimage), and a belief in God and the hereafter are all that are mandatory. My decision was made. I would follow what was mandatory.

I was outgoing and curious, with a free spirit. This presented me with a problem, as we reached the age of adolescence, because I began to realize that there existed a double standard for what was expected from boys and girls. My brothers and cousins refused to take us with them to the beach. We were close to each other. I loved outdoor games. This situation made us girls very sad. Our parents did not support the boys' attitude. They would promise us a day or two at the beach with them or with our uncles. My father started to take us to our sports activities and dance classes. The boys refused to be seen with us in the street and started to complain about our activities.

The years that followed taught me more about the social problems for women in my country. The injustice towards women was done under the guise of divine law. My hunger for freedom made me decide against marriage unless I would have the right to divorce if I needed to. The family was supportive and girls had a life with respect in my family. I participated in organized trips inside and outside my country. By age 23, I met my husband. He agreed to raise our children to be Muslim if we had any. The decision was painful, leaving my family, but eventually I had the courage to follow my husband to his home.

As soon as I arrived in the United States I started to inquire where there was a Mosque. I contacted a few families who gathered every Sunday in someone's home. We studied the Quran and discussed various topics prepared by volunteers. Nine years later, a mosque was built in my community. The group started to expand, and the organization started to change. Within the perimeter of the mosque a demand of unity was made. After many debates and conflicts, Saudi Arabia's system was established by Arab students attending a local university. Every Sunday, the lecture was about women. After so many lectures I began to understand that it was intimidation. They were blaming us (women) for all the ills of society. Our voices should not be heard, our footsteps were to be unheard, we needed to cover ourselves completely. These lectures were challenged with my questions. I never got straight and reasonable answers. I needed answers for my kids, especially my daughter. I couldn't concede to a life that conflicted with my husband's values. Neither my parents nor my country imposed those strict rules! A campaign had started in the local Mosque, which was directed only towards women. Men, who came from time to time to the mosque by van, started to approach women and young women who did not have the right head cover. These same men constructed a physical barrier in the prayer room to physically separate the men from the women. Families who opposed the barrier conceded to the demands of the Saudi Arabian students in the name of unity for the Islamic community. An atmosphere of complete obedience replaced the days of open discussions.

The youth became their next target. My daughter was 12 years old then. She would tell me about the lessons and the teachers. They were encouraging the youth to get married by sixteen for boys and younger for girls! Every lecture was to indoctrinate the

people to listen and obey an invisible religious dictatorship. Some parents liked what they heard, because they were experiencing problems with their adolescent children. Others brushed it aside as a weak "*hadith*." This mosque was the place to come and experience the police state they had left behind in their native country. They desired to isolate their children from the society they were blaming for their problems. They believed that America was teaching their children disrespect for the parents and their values. When I wrote an article saying that segregation of the sexes does not guarantee righteousness and that the consideration of feelings of all human beings is a matter of great respect and attention, we started to have lectures about the ills of the American society. They still had no answers to my questions. I withdrew my presence from the mosque because it wasn't what I was searching for. My children needed to mature with their family values and not with double standards.

A few months later I was told that a scholar in religion would be visiting our mosque. He was a great teacher from Syria. He talked about slavery. It was good, except when he said, "The captured women in war become the property of the conquering army. If they get pregnant they gain their freedom." This was supposed to alleviate prostitution! I have heard crazy stories before, but this one is very ugly. My friend sitting next to me replied that she would never be free since she cannot have children. I truly was amazed at how the audience, with many educated people including doctors, was silent. At that time Iraq and Iran were at war. It is hard to believe that innocent women were subjected to aggression against their will. I objected to this teaching and said that it was against human dignity and an abuse of women.

After the lecture the audience was to take advantage of this important gift and ask the scholar questions. A question came about the head cover. He was delighted to let us know that when he went the day before for a drive to see the town they saw a woman who had a car problem. They were able to help her. However, without her head cover they would not have been able to know if she was a Muslim! I discussed this issue with the scholar who was trying to stick to the importance of hiding the hair; that did not convince me. I would cover my hair if I had a bad hair do. Finally I had the courage to ask the question that I feared myself. "If the woman shaves her hair so she does not use a hair cover" Just at that moment the call for prayer started. As is the custom, the people stood up and walked silently to the prayer room. During the prayer I started to cry because I was so lost and perplexed. My heart could not believe this nonsense. At that moment I made my decision to stay at home and teach my children Islam.

My husband continued to go to the Mosque because he had a position with the Mosque Board. One day, on our way back from shopping he stopped at the post office to pick up the mosque mail. He handed it to me. The first paper on top was a newsletter with a headline NOT SUNNI NOT SHIA, JUST MUSLIM. Well that got my attention! I was so happy to read something that made sense to me. Six months later I decided to write to

the editor of the newsletter.¹ This is when I was introduced to the concept of following the Quran alone.

I am still bathing in this blessing and pray that God keeps showering me with the understanding of the Quran. Yes, in the Quran I found the reason why I couldn't relate to *hadith*. I needed to be free to worship God, as He should be worshiped, alone. I did not need to change my appearance. All I needed was the Quran. I don't need to make a statement of my religion or my culture. My worry is to please God and to be a righteous person. Praise be to God who allowed me to pursue the path of enlightenment. He saved me from myself and the ignorant ones. God is the Greatest. The pieces of this puzzle do fit right. There is no contradiction. May God continue to shower me and my family with His grace. He made my children Submitters, what a gift. I feel free!

—Naima, Morocco & U.S.A.

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Each woman must find her own place in her society. And each woman's path in that quest becomes her own, as Lydia's story shows.

Finding your place

I never wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer; never dreamed of being President of the United States. But I never felt like I couldn't do those things if I had wanted to. Being a woman might make it a little harder, but America was the land of opportunity, even for women.

My problem was I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew I didn't want to be a teacher (and what else can you do with a History major?). I didn't want to be a stewardess (they were all "stewardesses" back then—"flight attendant" came later). I didn't want to be a nurse (bedpans!).

Having never owned a dog until I moved to Tucson and having never been around people with disabilities, who would suspect that I would be a founder of an organization called Top Dog, which trained people with disabilities to train their own dogs to help them! But that's what God guided me to do.

It was the most rewarding career I could have imagined. It didn't bring financial success, but a much greater return—a life of service. For more than 25 years, I worked with wonderful people—people who had suffered terrible injuries; people born with crippling diseases; people who in the prime of life were suddenly struck down with illness. These people were inspiring. They showed resilience in the face of hardship, joy in the face of tragedy. They came to Top Dog to find a way to make their lives better.

¹ *Editor's note:* Naima read the *Submitter's Perspective*, the monthly newsletter published by Masjid Tucson, PO Box 43476, Tucson, AZ 85733-3476, USA. The newsletters are also available on the mosque's [website](#).

And we showed them how. How can someone born with both arms truncated at the elbow learn to hold a leash and give treats to his dog? We worked together to find a way. How can someone whose speech is barely understandable communicate commands and praise to his dog? It's amazing how much dogs understand without words. We had a ten-year-old girl who was tired of being known as the kid with arthritis blossom into the cool kid with the dog.

The dogs were taught amazing skills to help their owners. They picked up anything dropped and retrieved keys, phone, and remote controls. They pulled wheelchairs. They helped with getting dressed and undressed. They opened doors. They turned on lights. Anything the owner needed, we found a way to teach the dog. And the dog was happy to learn, happy to help.

I was very blessed to work with so many special people and so many wonderful dogs.

We don't know where life will take us. We don't know what our place will be. We just have to take each day as it comes. I thank God for guiding me to volunteer with one dog training group which led to working with four people with a vision. This led to Top Dog. It's not the path I might have imagined but what a wonderful path it has been.

—Lydia, U.S.A.

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I ask myself, "Have I found my place in society as Naima and Lydia have?" My answer varies depending on what I look at. I have raised no children as Naima has. Nor have I helped found a valuable volunteer organization as Lydia did. Still, I have had some impact with my writing. And I believe that my personal relationships usually provide enjoyment and value for both my friends and me. I don't think I have done anything earth-shaking, but I try to live as ecologically as I can and I try to be socially responsible. Most importantly, I try to live in a manner that pleases my Creator and Sustainer.

God has blessed me with some amazing opportunities, some of which I wrote about in this book, and I am very thankful for all of them. As I grow older it seems to me perhaps these things suffice. When I look at my one small life in relation to all the lives lived on this planet, I am not at all important. Very few humans make a lasting impact in the world. But I don't think that matters much, given God's own words:

*I did not create the jinns and the humans except to worship Me alone.
(Quran: The Final Testament 51:56)*