

¹Does Islam discriminate against women and believe they are unequal to men?

What does Islam say about the equality of men and women?

According to Islam, men and women are spiritually equal beings created from a common origin. All of the religious obligations in Islam are incumbent upon both women and men, such as daily worship, fasting, performing the *Hajj*, etc. God's mercy and forgiveness apply equally to men and women. The following *Qur'anic* verse, arguably the first gender-equity statement in any major scripture, illustrates this point:

*"For Muslim men and Muslim women,
For believing men and believing women,
For devout men and devout women,
For true men and true 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,
For men and women who guard their chastity,
And for men and women who engage much in God's praise,
For them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward."
(Qur'an, 33:35)*

As a consequence of physiological, psychological and other distinguishing factors embodied in men and women by the Creator, the rights, responsibilities, and roles of men and women are believed to naturally differ. Muslims believe that God has assigned the responsibility of providing financially for the family to men, and the important responsibility of fostering a God-conscious and righteous family to women. Such roles do not preclude women from having careers and earning income or men from helping to raise a family. Rather they provide a general framework for Muslim society, designed to reinforce the concept of a nuclear family unit.

The guidelines for men and women's roles are also meant to ensure dignified and proper relations between people of the opposite sex. Minimal mixing of the sexes in Muslim societies should not be construed to imply inequality or confinement. Rather, such measures are designed to protect individuals from unsolicited attention, inappropriate sexual attraction, adultery and fornication, and possibly even forms of violence such as rape.

¹ Council on Islamic Education. *Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom*. Compiled by Munir A. Shaikh. February 1998. Handbook for teaching about Islam and Muslims, California, Fountain Valley.

What are the rights of women in Islam?

In the seventh century, a revolution in women's rights occurred due to the message of the *Qur'an* and its directives for forging a just and righteous society. In pre-Islamic Arabia as in other places in the world, women were considered little more than chattel, with no independent rights of their own. The *Qur'an* specifies the natural and inherent rights of women as well as men, and enjoins people to act in line with God's teachings of justice and equity. Some of the rights of women elaborated in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* include the right to own and inherit property, the right to obtain an education, the right to contract marriage and seek divorce, the right to retain one's family name upon marriage, the right to vote and express opinions on societal affairs, and the right to be supported financially by male relatives (husband, father, brother, etc.).

Such rights were unheard of in the seventh century, yet were implemented to varying degrees in Muslim civilization throughout the last fourteen hundred years. It is also important to recognize that only in the last two centuries have such rights been available to women in Western societies. Clearly, common stereotypes regarding women's rights must be carefully considered, and the current practice of Muslims in various countries and regions must be examined within the context of history and with in light of the sources of Islam in order to ascertain the degree to which Muslim women are able to exercise their rights today. Prevailing cultural factors must also be taken into account.

What is the dress code for Muslims?

The *Quran*, *Sunnah* and the consensus of Muslim scholars provide a general Islamic dress code that applies to both men and women. In practice, Muslim peoples have integrated the Islamic dress code with their own local cultures, customs and geographical conditions, resulting in great varieties of Muslim dress from region to region.

From the Islamic perspective, clothes are meant for cover and simple adornment, not for demonstration of social status or attraction of the opposite sex. In other words, guidelines for dress are meant to prevent men and women from being objects of desire and temptation. Islamic dress is based on a few guidelines: clothes should be loose fitting, such that the shape of the body is not highlighted; clothes should not be transparent or sheer; clothes should cover certain prescribed parts of the body—for men, minimally the body from the navel to the knee (though it is extremely rare to see a male in a Muslim setting who isn't covered from ankle to neck), and for women, everything except for face, hands and feet. Muslim women who cover according to these guidelines are said to be in *hijab*. The term is also used commonly to describe the head covering or scarf worn by many Muslim women. A Muslim woman who covers her hair does so out of a sense of religious obligation, piety and modesty, and to be clearly recognized as a Muslim woman.

As indicated above, the dress code is interpreted according to cultural setting. In Muslim countries, people often dress in traditional attire. Men may be seen wearing a long tunic-like garment (*thawb* or *jelabiyah*) that extends to the feet, or a shorter shirt-like garment that extends below the hips. Many Muslim men also wear a religious or cultural cap or head dress, such as a *kefiyah*, *kufi* or *fez*. The traditional Muslim woman's dress varies greatly from culture to culture: the full-length chador is popular in the Gulf states and Iran, long coat-like garments are typical of Syria and Jordan, colorful long dresses and turbans can be seen in West Africa, and wrapped saris are common in India. It is also not uncommon in some Muslim countries to see Muslim men and women wearing Western styles. In the United States, immigrant Muslims can be seen in varying traditional clothing, whereas native-born or second and third generation Muslim men and women typically wear Western styles of clothing adapted to the Islamic requirements of covering.

Considering the greater degree of covering required of women, due to pronounced physical differences between men and women, men have a particular responsibility to avert their eyes and treat women with dignity and respect.

"Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity: this will be most conducive to their purity- verily, God is aware of all that we do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms (in public) beyond what may (decently) be apparent thereof; let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms." (Qur'an, 24: 30-31)