

Myth: In Islam, Women Are Inferior To Men

source: thetruereligion.org

Because

- a man can marry up to 4 wives, a woman can marry only one man
- a man's share of inheritance is bigger than a woman's
- a man can marry a non-Muslim, a woman cannot
- women must wear the veil

This widely held misconception does not remotely follow from the reasons given. The first and most important observation to make about the popular question "Are men and women equal?" is that it is a badly-formed, unanswerable question. **The problem which many people conveniently ignore is that "equal" is not defined.** This is a very critical point: the equality must be specified with respect to some measurable property.

For example, women on average are superior to men if we ask who is shorter in height than the other ("Growth and Development", Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1992). Women are also superior on average if we ask whom do children bond to deeper, mothers or fathers. Women are also superior on average if we ask who has a tendency to socialize more. On the other hand, men are superior on average if we ask who is taller in height than the other. And so on: every question can be turned around, and more importantly these are properties which are irrelevant.

What then, is the really important property which we are worried about in terms of gender equality? Naturally, from the point of view of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the obvious important property is *who is dearer to Allah, men or women?* This question is emphatically answered in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:124] If any do deeds of righteousness - be they male or female - and have faith, they will enter Paradise, and not the least injustice will be done to them.

[33:35] For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for truthful 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, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.

The Qur'an and Sunnah repeat over and over again that *Allah only favors one person over another based on that person's awareness, consciousness, fear, love, and hope of Allah* (the Arabic word is difficult to translate: *Taqwa*). All other criteria are excluded: gender, ethnic group, country, ancestry, etc.

Given that Allah does not favor one gender over the other in His attention to us (and it helps to remember that Allah is neither male nor female), we can now address the differences between the genders in Islam. First, men and women are not the same as we know. The Creator states in the Qur'an (translation),

[3:36]...and the male is not like the female...

Men and women are different in their composition, and in their responsibilities under Islam. However, both are bound by obligations to one another, especially the following important one which must be understood in any discussion on men and women. From the Qur'an (translation),

[24:32] And marry those among you who are single and those who are fit among your male slaves and your female slaves; if they are needy, Allah will make them free from want out of His grace; and Allah is Ample-giving, Knowing.

In this verse, the Creator emphasizes that *marriage is to be vigorously pursued by the Muslims*: the state of being single is not to be maintained. With this in mind, we can begin to understand the four reasons cited above for the nonetheless erroneous conclusion.

Men and women are different in their responsibilities towards the families that they are strongly encouraged to set up. Women are not obligated to work, whereas men are obligated. The man must provide for the family, but the woman does not have to spend out of her money for it, though she gets a reward for doing so. Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:34] Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great.

From the Sunnah, specifically in the study of the Sunnah called Sahih Bukhari, we find:

[2:24:545] Narrated `Amr bin Al-Harith: Zainab, the wife of `Abdullah said, "I was in the Mosque and saw the Prophet (p.b.u.h) saying, `O women! Give alms even from your ornaments.'" Zainab used to provide for `Abdullah and those orphans who were under her protection. So she said to `Abdullah, "Will you ask Allah's Apostle whether it will be sufficient for me to spend part of the Zakat on you and the orphans who are under my protection?" He replied "Will you yourself ask Allah's Apostle?" (Zainab added): So I went to the Prophet and I saw there an Ansari woman who was standing at the door (of the Prophet) with a similar problem as mine. Bilal passed by us and we asked him, `Ask the Prophet whether it is permissible for me to spend (the Zakat) on my husband and the orphans under my protection.' And we requested Bilal not to inform the Prophet about us. So Bilal went inside and asked the Prophet regarding our problem. The Prophet (p.b.u.h) asked, "Who are those two?" Bilal replied that she was Zainab. The Prophet said, "Which Zainab?" Bilal said, "The wife of `Adullah (bin Masud)." The Prophet said, "Yes, (it is sufficient for her) and she will receive a double rewards (for that): One for helping relatives, and the other for giving Zakat."

Given that husbands are obligated to provide for wives, and that marriage is a highly recommended goal of Islam, it is easy to see why women's inheritance share is half that of men. We note also that men are obligated to provide a suitable dowry to women on marriage. In fact, it is preferable at this point to speak in terms of husbands and wives instead of men and women. Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:4] And give women their dowries as a free gift, but if they of themselves be pleased to give up to you a portion of it, then eat it with enjoyment and with wholesome result.

Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[2:228]...And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them...

This one degree in no way affects the position of the Creator in which He has stated that He does *not* hold women dearer to him than men, or vice versa. Rather it is simply a way of partitioning responsibilities in a household of two adults: someone must make the final decision on daily matters. As will be shown below in a section on a different misconception, though the final decision rests with the husband, it is through mutual consultation that decisions are best reached at.

While men are allowed to marry up to four wives, they are also commanded to meet the preconditions of being able to financially support them. They must also deal with **each** wife justly and fairly with respect to marital and economic obligations. Allah says in the Qur'an (translation),

[4:3] If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.

Moreover, women are allowed to reject any marriage proposal made to her by prospective suitors, thus if she does not feel she can abide by the rules of the Qur'an and Sunnah if she marries a certain person, she can reject his proposal. While it is irrelevant to Islam, it is worthwhile to note that both Judaism and Christianity allow polygamy. The idea is not as foreign to the non-Muslims as is often claimed.

Finally, the wearing of the veil by women is also an illogical premise to claim that women are inferior to men. It is more appropriate to indict a society of female exploitation if it tolerates pornography rather than if it enforces the veil. Given that Allah is neither male nor female, given that He does not endear people to Himself based on their gender, given that the Creator cares about all of us male or female, given that the sexual and violent drive of men is stronger than that of women...given all this, it is illogical to cast a negative light on the following injunctions contained in the Qur'an (translation),

[33:59] O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not be annoyed...

[24:30-31] Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands...

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On this misconception, there is a great deal more to write, most of it showing how current practices in many Muslim lands go against what the Qur'an and Sunnah have ordained, lands in which women are treated as property (unIslamic), are not educated (unIslamic), are forbidden their economic rights (unIslamic), and more. On this point in particular, we encourage everyone to consult the Qur'an and Sunnah before incriminating Islam. Always remember that Islam is a complete way of life from the Creator, and that Muslims are people who claim to follow that way of life. A Muslim may claim to follow Islam, but be wrong.