

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

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I would like to thank Dr. Memoona Hasnain for including me in this conference on Muslim women's health needs. She has asked that I talk about women's place in Islam so as to distinguish facts from perceptions.

This is such a broad topic, and since I have about half an hour for my comments, I am going to be very selective. Rather than recite a list of women's rights, I will speak about four issues—gender preferences, the young age of marriage for girls, views of the wife as her husband's sexual property, and polygamy—all of which raise practical problems for Muslim women and all of which are bogged down in false stereotypes. My aim in doing this is to help you understand and discuss the health care needs of Muslim women within the context of Islamic tenets.

Basically, what I want to do is to share with you what Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, has to say about each issue and there are two reasons why I think this is important to do. First, for Muslims, the Qur'an is the word of God that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over a 23-year period in the seventh century in Arabia. It is therefore the most authoritative source of Islam's teachings.

Second, many people hold that the Qur'an itself oppresses women based on their reading of three or four lines in it. I won't have time to discuss all the lines and nor do I want to pretend that one can settle all disputes by quoting the Qur'an since Muslims disagree on the translations and meanings of certain words. Even so, I think one of the most powerful ways to challenge the abuse of women in the name of Islam is to show that the Qur'an does not in fact sanction many ideas and practices that we associate with Islam.

Since I have to be brief, I will likely gloss over some things, so do feel free to question me later. Those of you who want a more nuanced analysis than I can offer in the talk, may want to look at my book *"Believing Women" in Islam*.

#### A. Gender preferences

Perception 1: Islam values men over women and even gives men the right to kill women as evidenced by so-called "honor" killings in some Muslim societies.

Fact: No.

The Qur'an teaches that women and men originated in a single self, that they are both God's representatives on earth, and that they are equally capable of moral personality. That is, it does not discriminate against human beings based on their

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

---

biological sex. Nor does it teach that the woman was created from the man's rib or that she was responsible for the Fall. In fact, the Qur'an does not teach the concept of original sin or the Fall.

These are the foundational teachings of the Qur'an that we need to keep in mind when examining its position on all aspects of male-female relationships.

The issue of gender preferences comes up in the Qur'an in two contexts. One is in the context of its criticism of the polytheists—people who worship many gods—who were in the habit of ascribing daughters to God. As the Qur'an points out, the same Arabs were burying their own new-born girls alive and abusing those whom they allowed to survive, and it condemns both practices equally sharply:

And they assign to God daughters; glory be to Him!—and they have their desire [for sons]; and when any of them is given the good tidings of a girl, his face is darkened and he chokes inwardly, as he hides him from the people because of the evil of the good tidings that have been given unto him; whether he shall preserve it in humiliation, or trample it into the dust. Ah, evil is that they judge! (16: 55-60; in A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, 1952: 292; my emphasis).

It is clear that what the Qur'an finds contemptible is not daughters, since it refers to their birth as "good tidings," but ascribing paternity to God, and other verses condemn those polytheists who, says the Qur'an,

falsely,  
Having no knowledge,  
Attribute to [God]  
Sons and daughters.  
Praise and glory be  
To [God Who] is above  
What they attribute to Him!

Indeed, the Qur'an even forbids sacralizing God as the father of Jesus. As it says, "Jesus the son of Mary Was (no more than) An apostle of God. . . . God is One God: Glory be to Him: (Far Exalted is He) above Having a son" (4: 171; in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 1988: 234). In other verses, the Qur'an forbids depicting God as a figurative father.

So, what is at issue here are not gender preferences since the Qur'an rejects not just ascribing daughters *to* God, but the male gender *for* God. Rather, what is at issue is a rejection of the patriarchal imaginary of God the Father. Significantly, the Qur'an also does not valorize fathers, fatherhood, or the concept of father-rule, which is one of the reasons that I read it as an anti-patriarchal text.

The second context in which the issue of gender preference comes up in the Qur'an is in the context of female infanticide. As I noted, many Arabs used to bury their

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

---

baby girls alive and the Qur'an promises that on Judgment Day "the female (infant) Buried alive [will be] questioned For what crime She was killed" (81:8-9, in Ali, 1694). In effect, God will hold men accountable for the murders they commit based on *their* gender preferences. I have no idea how anyone can read this verse and yet think that a Muslim man can kill any woman in order to protect his "honor!"

While on the subject of girls, I want to consider the issue of the young age of marriage for girls in some Muslim societies.

### B. Age of marriage

Perception 2: Islam enjoins marriage to little girls.

Fact: No.

Before I say anything about Muslims, I want to point out the obvious: that all patriarchal societies put a high premium on female youth and virginity. Indeed, even in the U.S., the age of consent for girls was between 7-10 years as late as 1889 and was raised to 18 only as the result of feminist campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

An interesting if horrific consequence of protecting women in the U.S. and Europe against child marriage and sexuality has been that many U.S. and European men now go to Third World countries to have sex with minors and the fear of Aids has led to a thriving market in children, both girls and boys, as young as 5 and 6.

I make this point so as to contextualize this discussion and not make it seem that Muslims are aberrant in this respect. However, there is no denying that among Muslims there is religious sanction for marrying young girls because one of the Prophet Muhammad's wife, Ayesha, was a young girl when they got married.

In passing I should mention that all his other wives were either widows or divorcees and with some, he had no sexual relationship but took them in as a way to offer them protection (I will speak about this notion of protection when I talk about polygamy). Also, his first marriage to Khadijah was monogamous. She was twice widowed and 15 years older than him when they got married (he was 25).

As for the Prophet's marriage to Ayesha, we need to keep several things in mind:

- Most obviously, there was no concept of childhood in the seventh century and such marriages were not unusual;
- the Prophet was allowed certain marriages as "a privilege for thee only, not for the (rest of) believers" (33: 50; in Pickthall, 305). So not all the types of marriages he contracted are binding on Muslim men;

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*: New York: Basic Books, 1997.

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

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- since all his wives, except one, were widows and divorcees, Muslim men who want to follow his example could just as easily follow the norm rather than the exception;
- most importantly, there is no conclusive agreement about Ayesha's age.

Some people put it as low as nine because of stories that she was playing with dolls when she got married. But then there are other stories that say that she had "good knowledge of Ancient Arabic poetry and genealogy" and could pronounce the "rules of Arabic-Islamic ethics,"<sup>2</sup> which a child of nine could hardly have done.

Based on these stories as well as what we know of her sister, Asma's age and of the Prophet's migration from Makkah to Madina some people say that she was over 13 and perhaps between 17-19 at the time of her marriage.

The point is that everything we know about her is from stories of her life written a century and a half after her death, so that even the earliest written sources "already capture [her] life as a legacy, an interpretation." In studying Ayesha, therefore, we are studying "male intellectual history, not a woman's history, but reflections about the place of a woman, and by extension, all women, in exclusively male assertions about Muslim society."<sup>3</sup>

That is why drawing on Ayesha's example to justify pedophilia is wrong and it also tarnishes the Prophet's legacy by obscuring the differences in historical understanding between his time and ours. Most troublingly, men who want to marry little girls ignore that an Islamic marriage is to be based in chastity not lust.

### C. Women as sexual property

This provides a good segue into the next topic, and this is the perception that in Islam a wife is her husband's sexual property and he can treat her as he wills.

Fact: No.

Last year, the *New York Times* published a still from the Dutch film "Submission," whose director, Theo Van Gogh, was later killed by a Muslim. The picture was of a Muslim bride's back with a line from the Qur'an written on it saying that "a man may take his woman in any manner, time or place ordained by God."<sup>4</sup>

I don't think there's a more powerful or troubling way to suggest that Muslim women's oppression is codified in the scripture itself. And, of course, since most people have never read the Qur'an, it's hard for them to believe otherwise.

I want to place that line in context, by reading the verses from which it is taken:

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<sup>2</sup> Wibke Walther, *Woman in Islam*. Montclair, N.J.: Abner Schram, 1981: 75.

<sup>3</sup> D.A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*. NY: Columbia University, 1994: 2; 191.

<sup>4</sup> Marlise Simons, "Graphic Film of Protest, and Cries of Blasphemy," *NYT*, Sept. 27, A4.

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

---

They question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say: it is an *adan* so let women alone at such times and go not in unto them till they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then go in unto them as Allah hath enjoined upon you. Truly Allah loveth those who turn unto Him and loveth those who have a care for cleanness. Your women are a *harth* for you (to cultivate) so go to your *harth* as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah, and know that ye will (one day) meet Him (2:222-223; in M.M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York, Mentor Books, n.d. 53).

First, it's important to understand that the root meanings of *adan* are "damage, harm, injury, trouble, annoyance, and grievance."<sup>5</sup> That is, menstruation is hurt, etc., and not pollution. Even if menstrual *blood* is polluting, it doesn't follow that the woman's *body* is polluting since not a single verses in the Qur'an says that.

Moreover, the Qur'an also counsels cleansing after calls of nature, indicating that uncleanness results from biological *functions* and not from biological *differences*.

These verses are said to have been revealed after some men asked the Prophet as to when and in what positions they could have sex. The Qur'an's response to the "when" is to forbid sex when women are menstruating since it is a time of hurt and trial for them (the Qur'an also forbids sex during the fast in Ramadan).

The Qur'an's response to the "how" is to refer to what God "has enjoined." But what precisely has God enjoined? The preceding line says that men are not to go into women until they are cleansed. So, most obviously what God has enjoined is cleanliness. However, the line following this phrase refers to women as "*harth*" which Muslims translate as tith or property.

Based on this translation and the phrase "as ye will," they assume that a husband may take his wife in any time, manner, or place as he wants since she is his sexual property. But this is an unwarranted conclusion for a number of reasons.

First, at the time that the Qur'an was revealed, there was no concept of property in land and hence no notion of ownership of land. So *harth* could not have meant property or ownership. (Even when Europeans arrived in North America in the fifteenth century, indigenous peoples did not view land in terms of ownership.)

That is why early Muslim scholars understood the Qur'anic reference to *harth* to mean not property or ownership, but tillage, or sowing; to put it bluntly, vaginal sex since the concept of tith denotes the sowing of seed.

It is also instructive to look at how the Qur'an uses the word *harth* in other contexts and in at least one, it uses the word for paradise. Since paradise is not

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<sup>5</sup> J.M. Cowan, *Arabic-English Dictionary*. Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Service, 1976: 12.

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

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real estate to be parceled out to property owners, it is reasonable to assume that the word *harth* in the Qur'an does not imply either ownership or property.

Second, the Qur'an repeatedly and categorically instructs that marriage should be based in "chastity, not lust" (4:24; in Ali, 187) and it includes among chaste women Jews and Christians whom it calls the People of the Book. In its words, permitted to Muslim men are "Chaste women among The People of the Book, Revealed before your time,--When ye give them Their due dowers, and desire Chastity, not lewdness, Nor secret intrigues" (5:6; in Ali, 241-42).<sup>6</sup>

Chastity then implies not the absence of sex but, rather a mode of sex that is neither lewd nor lustful. Thus, God is enjoining uncorrupted behavior between spouses and one can assume that violence and rape do not qualify as such behavior.

Third, while the Qur'an does not refer to the wife's consent or will in this verse, it does so in other verses and if we are to have a composite picture of its teachings we need to read all the verses on a particular subject rather than one or two.

In 4:19, the Qur'an outlaws the practice of inheriting "Women against their will" (in Ali, 185), a reference to the seventh-century Arab practice of acquiring a dead father's wives as part of his estate. What is significant is not just that the Qur'an banned this heinous practice but that it did so by imputing a *will to women*.

If the Qur'an acknowledges a woman's will and instructs men to respect it, what reason is there to believe that a wife has no will or that her husband has no duty to respect it if she expresses it by declining a certain mode of sexual behavior?

Indeed, the Qur'an clearly states that God created helpmates from ourselves so what "ye might find [*sukun*] in them, and [God] ordained between you love and mercy " (30:21; in Pickthall, 291). *Sukun* is often rendered as love but it implies a deeper intimacy that grows from sexual gratification and mental peace.<sup>7</sup>

By emphasizing the mutuality of sexual desire, the Qur'an establishes women as sexual beings and affirms that sex is a joyful and purposive activity in and of itself. How could such a view of marriage be compatible with sexual abuse? After all, in the Qur'an's telling spouses are each others *awliya* (friends, guides) and garments.

So, for all these reasons, the permission to a husband to go into his wife as he wills and God enjoins isn't as open-ended as it seems and it is certainly not an incitement to rape as that one line on the bride's back so misleadingly suggests.

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<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, Commentary*. New York: Tehrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Mustansir Mir, *Dictionary of Islamic Terms*. NY: Garland Publishing, 1987.

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

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Of course, at this point some of you may be wondering why, if what I've said about the Qur'an's teachings is true, does it privilege men by allowing polygamy and this brings me to the last issue.

### D. Polygamy

Perception 4: Islam allows all men to marry four wives because men have more sexual needs than women and/or because they need sons to carry on their line, etc.

Fact: No.

The Qur'an only speaks about polygamy in the context of orphans:

Give the orphans their property, and do not exchange the corrupt for the good [i.e., your worthless things for their good ones]; and devour not their property with your property; surely that is a great crime. If you fear that you will not act justly towards the orphans, marry such women as seem good to you, two, three, four; but if you fear you will not be equitable, then only one, [aw] what your right hands own; so it is likelier you will not be partial (4:1; in A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, 1955: 100; my emphases).

This reference to women whom men's "right hands own" is said to be war captives, slaves, and concubines, all of whom were part of the structure of seventh century tribal Arab society and for whose just treatment the Qur'an laid down guidelines.

However, some scholars translate "aw" as "that is;" on their reading, the Qur'an is referring to women whom men's right hands possess, *that is*, their spouses. In other words, it is encouraging men to remain married to their spouses.

Even if one does not accept this translation, the point is that polygamy is *restricted to orphans*, and then too only in those cases where the guardian feels that (a) he may be unable to do full justice to his charge outside of marriage (the assumption being that marriage gives the husband a stake in the honest management of his wife's property), and, (b) if the marriage does not do injustice to the *wife*; if there is such a likelihood then the Qur'an is clear that a man should marry only one wife.

Indeed, in another verse the Qur'an says that men in polygamous situations are never "able to be equitable between your wives, be you ever so eager" (4:125; in Arberry, 119). So, the Qur'an itself makes it clear that men are generally not able to treat more than one wife justly. So then why did it even permit polygamy?

The reason is simple: in a predatory tribal society, marrying a woman, specially someone as vulnerable as an orphan, was the only way to secure her protection. It was thus an ethical concern for orphans that motivated the Qur'anic provisions on polygamy, not the desire to favor men. After all, the Qur'an never presents polygamy as a way for men to fulfill their sexual needs or to acquire offspring.

## Women in Islam : Facts and Perceptions

Asma Barlas

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Lastly, (and I say this for the benefit of those who may not know much about any religion) Islam did not invent polygamy; other than Jesus, none of the Hebrew prophets was celibate or monogamous and some, like David, had 900 wives and concubines. Monogamy is a relatively modern practice and, contrary to popular perceptions, the overwhelming majority of Muslim marriages are monogamous.

### III. Conclusion

This has been a long talk, so I will make my conclusions brief.

Basically, I want to say two things. First, for reasons that I hope are clear by now, it is wrong to explain everything that happens to Muslim women in terms of Islam's teachings. Just as there are Jews and Christians whose lives do not reflect Biblical precepts, so there are Muslims whose lives do not mirror the Qur'an's teachings. To put it simply, not everything Muslims do is Islamic. Many of the practices in Muslim communities have less to do with Islam than with patriarchal cultures and prejudices most of whom run counter to Islam.

The question, of course, remains as to why certain practices continue to persist in Muslim societies and communities and that is a complex issue to which there are no easy answers though I have hazarded some in other talks and papers.

Second, I think it's obvious that even though Muslims live in our midst, most people know nothing about their religion and, in some ways, 9/11 has made it even harder for them to approach Islam with an open mind. I know that we like to think of the U.S. as a great "melting pot" of cultures but the truth is that most people are locked into enclaves of mutual ignorance and animosity. And yet, for better or worse, the welfare of different communities is tied together so we have to find more ethical and sustainable ways to "know one another"—as the Qur'an calls it—in our own self-interest. By dispelling some myths I hope I have provided an incentive to some of you to want to embark on such a journey.