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## Women's Position

I've always been fascinated by the concept of culture and the way it affects us humans. After stumbling around in my first two years as an undergraduate, I finally decided I'd study something that I really enjoyed. I chose anthropology – which includes the study of culture. It was not a great choice for a career that will support you, but one that has given me a bit more understanding of myself and the many friends I have from different cultures.

Though I was interested in different cultures, I never guessed that I would come to have friends from all over the world. It happened in a most unexpected manner.

Before I sailed with friends in their schooner from southern California through the Panama Canal to the Virgin Islands, I had been reading the Quran for a year or two. During that trip we sailed about 500 miles off the coast of Mexico because we had heard horror stories about pirates taking over boats and appropriating them for their drug trafficking.

Sailing so far off shore we encountered some pretty heavy weather, and it was in one of those storms that I became Muslim! (This is the storm described in the last chapter.) That night while I shared the second watch, I made the commitment to do more than just read the Quran. I had to try and become a Muslim, in spite of all the scary things I thought I knew about Islam. The Quran certainly felt right, maybe the rest would follow.

That was in December 1976, and I have never regretted my decision. I've been a practicing Muslim ever since – or rather ever since I learned the practices. It has changed my life more wonderfully than I could ever have imagined.

As described in Chapter 1, when I got back to the States, several months later, I contacted the only Muslim I knew who was actively involved in the religion. Soon I was caught up in a new world, making friends with people from very diverse cultures and coming to use far more of my anthropology than I had ever dreamed of doing. My interest in culture was certainly paying off.

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

I have found that often when the practice of some Muslims does not mesh with my understanding of the Quran, the issue is one of culture.

What is culture? Good question. Many volumes have attempted to define it.

Stated in a simplistic way, I see it as all of the things that make a group of people similar to each other, and distinct from other groups. It encompasses the manner in which we speak, the words we use, the foods we eat, the stories we were told 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 comprises a million things that we unthinkingly accept as part of who we are.

The personal distance we surround ourselves with is yet another result of our culture. Have you ever found yourself backing away as someone you are talking to keeps pushing your space? Or perhaps you have been the space pusher. You have just come face to face with differences in culture.

A few years ago, I spent some sadly sleepless nights with a wonderful friend from Egypt. She had grown up in a small village, comfortably surrounded by the sounds of people and animals. She could not sleep without such noise, so always had the television or radio playing. I, on the other hand, grew up in a culture where the ideal is to have your own quiet bedroom, 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 having to take a deep breath and count to ten when someone playing really loud music drives up to my quiet picnic spot. Although I have some understanding, I am still bound by my own culture, where loud music in a peaceful place is upsetting.

These cultural differences carry over into religion too. We often accept that people eat food that is very different from what we enjoy and listen to music that puts our nerves on edge but then still expect them to have the same spiritual reality we do. This is very human, but very unrealistic. In many ways our spiritual reality is at the core of our culture, and thus at the core of ourselves. How can we expect it to be the same for everyone?

Before I first started reading the Quran, I thought I knew all about Islam – and it was very demeaning to women. Naturally, I assumed that the Quran would bear this out.

I was in for quite a surprise! According to the Quran, men and women are *equal*.

However, I couldn't see that clearly at first.

In the introduction I mentioned that a friend gave me a Quran that she did not want her dog to chew anymore. It was Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation, the 1968 edition. I had read the Christian Bible, the Torah and some of the Bhagavad-Gita. I decided that I really should read the Quran, though I was quite convinced that it was not for me.

Like most Westerners I saw Islam as one belief system, with all Muslims following the same understanding. Little did I know that there is as much variety of understanding among Muslims as there is among Christians, Jews or any other major religion.

What I had always assumed to be the only form of Islam really did not attract me at all. It was a footnote in that Yusuf Ali translation that first piqued my interest, and started the learning process that culminated on that stormy night with my decision to become Muslim. When I first read his translation of verse

3:195, nothing jumped out at me. The verse refers to believers in God who are praying to Him for His forgiveness and mercy. He has promised:

*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....  
Verily, I will blot out  
From them their iniquities,  
And admit them into Gardens....  
(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 be saying that Islam insists on the equal status of men and women? This was totally unexpected. Women are subservient in Islam, right? Of course I was right! Every report in the media, every book I had ever read, told me so.

Perhaps he was incorrect. Maybe his translation was biased. Looking at other translations for Chapter 3 Verse 195, I did not see any other indication of this equal status. It wasn't until years later that I read Rashad Khalifa's translation. I quote here from the 1992 edition:

*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)*

There it was at last, in black and white. Men and women are *equal* in Islam.

But why didn't the other translations say so? Looking again at other translations, the wording is not straight forward, but the same meaning is implied. All of the others I have seen are similar to Yusuf Ali's "*Ye are members, one of another.*" What does that mean but that you are essentially the same, equal?

However, if you are coming from a cultural background where the equality of the sexes is not accepted, you may not catch that meaning. I was coming from a background that accepts equality between the sexes, and still had not caught it!

Perhaps there is a clue here. I was already sure that Islam was unfair to women. There is plenty of evidence to show that we tend to see what we expect to be there. This is probably the biggest blind spot for all of us. I had set myself up not to see the equality of men and women in the Quran. Perhaps most translators of the Quran have also.

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 are women absolutely equal to men, but they too can work in the cause of God. Women can immigrate, be persecuted, fight and die for God.

I would like to highlight that these verses not only indicate that men and women are equal, but also that they can equally strive in God's cause. To me it follows that they must have the means to do so.

The picture from these verses is not of 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 are women actively involved in the society. They are women who are fighting, immigrating, and being persecuted.

Those are things that can only happen to women who are out on the front lines, so to speak.

These verses are not the only place where God tells us that righteous believers are equal, regardless of their sex. Reading further in the Quran, this equality is stated again:

*If any do deeds  
Of righteousness, –  
Be they male or female –  
And have faith,  
They will enter Heaven....  
(The Holy Quran IV:124 [4:124])*

Thus, the reward for believers who lead a righteous life is Paradise, no matter whether they are male or female.

Before we go any further, let me say just a quick word about the Quran translations I am using. I often use A. Yusuf Ali's 1968 edition (the edition I was first given by my Sufi friend). Yusuf Ali is one of the most widely used translations, and when I became Muslim was generally thought to be the best. You can tell when I have used that translation because the reference at the end of the verse reads "*The Holy Quran*," which is the title Yusuf Ali gave his translation. Then it gives the verse reference, first with the Roman numerals he used, followed by the reference translated to Arabic numerals in brackets.

The other translation I use is Dr. Rashad Khalifa's 1992 edition. Though this is not as well known, I find it to be especially clear and easy for native English readers. For my personal reading, this is the version that I use. Rashad Khalifa chose to use "*Quran: The Final Testament*" as the title for his translation. So where I am quoting his translation, you will see that title and the verse reference.

If you do not have a Quran handy and you wish to look at one of the references that is given, you can find it in Appendix 1. This has all verses referenced, taken from Rashad Khalifa's translation, *Quran: The Final Testament*. The Bible verses are probably more familiar to most readers. The editions used for those

quotes are referenced with their dates the first time the reference is used, and with just the title thereafter.

Now, back to the issue of the equality of men and women. This equality is again declared in the Quran in verse 16:97:

*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)*

For the righteous believers there is happiness in this world as well as in the hereafter. It does not matter whether these believers are male or female. In my view, we can be truly happy only if we are not oppressed, nor oppressing others. Oppression hurts both the oppressed and the oppressors.

Verse 40 of Chapter 40 again tells us the same thing, men and women are equally rewarded for their good works and lets us know that if we sin, we are "requited for just that."

This equality between men and women was not just a theoretical philosophy in the early days of Islam. Here is an interesting example of the way in which the Prophet Muhammad, through whom the Quran was revealed, dealt with women as equals. In Chapter 58, entitled "The Debate" we find that 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)*

One does not debate with someone who is inferior. Clearly women had a much higher standing in the society of the Prophet Muhammad than they have now in many societies claiming to follow him. Can you imagine a woman debating with a leader of the Taliban?

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

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Here is another shorter example of Jesus debating with a woman:

*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, that men and women are equal and their rewards for belief and leading a righteous life are also equal. This equality of the sexes is not stated quite as clearly in the Bible. Jesus certainly dealt equitably with all, regardless of their gender. 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 that Paul did not believe women to be equal:

*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 we must remember that Paul's letters were written to address specific issues in the early Christian communities. We do not have all of the background for these letters, and in a sense are listening to only one side of the conversation. Also, remember that Paul was speaking to an audience that was accustomed to thinking of women essentially as 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)*

This is very significant because in Acts, it is clear that 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, which seems to indicate that women may not teach. It also may explain what seems to many to be 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;*

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*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, one Biblical understanding is that Eve caused the fall of mankind from the Garden of Eden. Thus woman is blamed. On the other hand, while Eve was deceived, Paul indicates in Romans 5:19 that 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 makes it clear that both Adam and Eve were guilty. The Quran also says that both Adam and Eve were guilty and both were duped by Satan. (Please see the Quran 2:34-36, 7:19-22 and 7:27.) Moreover there is one Quranic passage where it seems that Adam is actually the one whom Satan tempted:

*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)*

In truth, it really does not matter whether it was Adam or Eve who was tempted. Both of them disobeyed God, and both were responsible for their sin. However, it is useful to realize that the Quran does not blame Eve over Adam. (If you look at the whole picture, I do not believe that the Bible does either.) This is just another example of the way in which the Quran deals with men and women as equals.

We have been looking at the way that righteous men and women are equal in the Quran. However, society is not made up of just righteous people. It follows that men and women are equal in unrighteousness also. Our personal experience shows this to be true. All of us have known unrighteous women, as well as unrighteous men. Here is the Quranic proof:

*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 not only shows a sadder equality between the sexes, but also shows again the way in which culture affects the way we look at God's commandments. It has long been understood in much of the Muslim world that the thief's hand should be cut off. This severe punishment comes from a cultural understanding that the word in verse 5:38 translated as "to mark" the hand (I am told it means "to cut") means "to cut off." However verse 39 shows that if the thief repents and reforms, God redeems him or her. If the hand is gone, where is the redemption? That person is forever crippled.

Further support for this understanding comes from the Quran's telling 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, the Arabic word is the same (see the Quran 12:31). Clearly the women could not have cut off their hands when startled by the beauty of this young man. It only makes sense that they cut or nicked their hands.

Verses on adultery are another example both of women's equality, and the affect of culture on the understanding of the scripture. When I was first learning about Islam, I was horrified to learn that the traditional punishment for adultery is stoning to death. I accepted that adultery is a serious offense, but to

put people to death seemed barbaric! What a relief it was to 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)*

Though the traditional punishment for adultery is death, clearly from these verses even the lashing cannot be excessively severe, but rather must be non-maiming. This must be so if the offenders will end up marrying others guilty of adultery, or idol worshipers. You cannot marry if you are dead or badly maimed.

Also, I believe that the next verse indicates that if the offending couple repents and changes their ways, they should be left alone:

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

It is interesting to contrast these verses with the penalties given in books of the Torah or Old Testament. In Leviticus 20:10-12 the punishment for committing adultery with a married woman is death for both parties. If the woman is a virgin and not betrothed Exodus 22:15-16 says the man must pay the marriage price to her father. If the father will allow it, he must marry her. Thus if the woman is married, the Biblical punishment is much greater than the Quranic one, while if she is not married it might be considered less.

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

*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 casting stones, Jesus told her to go on her way and not to sin again.

In all editions of the Bible that I am familiar with, adultery is committed by married people, and fornication by the unmarried. The Quran does not make that distinction. Any sexual relations outside of your own marriage are called adultery, period. Thus it does not matter if you are a swinging single sowing your wild oats, or an unfaithful spouse, by the Quran's definition you are committing adultery.

However, I've heard a traditional argument that Quranic verses (24:2-3) only apply to single men and women who have sexual relations without being married. This traditional belief is that adultery committed by married people is punishable by death, as it is in the Torah and Old Testament, though this punishment is never mentioned in the Quran.

I can perhaps see that 24:2-3 might refer only to the unmarried if I look just at those verses. However, verse 4:25 describes marrying a slave woman, and proves that death can never be the punishment for adultery:

*If any of you have not  
The means wherewith  
To wed free believing women,  
They may wed believing  
Girls from among those  
Whom your right hands possess:...  
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)*

It is not possible to half kill someone. But you can give them half the number of lashes you would give an adulterer or adulteress who has always been free.

This verse brings up another issue that always confused me about Islam: slavery. Let me digress just a moment and discuss this issue, because it is so important. After careful reading of the Quran, I realize the Quran gives reason after reason to free slaves. In addition, the Quran makes it clear that in God's eyes it is a person's righteousness, not their status in society that gives them value.

At the time of the Quran's revelation, slavery was an integral part of the way of life. Rather than outlawing it directly, and causing great upheaval in the society, the Quran sets out a model for a society where slavery gradually dies out. As, thankfully, it has in most of the world.

Back to the topic of women's position. We have now seen verses showing the negative ways in which men and women are equal. These negative aspects of the equality again highlight the fact that in the Quran women are not hidden away. They are actively engaged in the society. How else can a woman become a thief or an adulteress?

There is one more critically important point for us to look at. That is the fact that 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 sex:

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 for whom the reference to God as "He" is disturbing, I apologize. I want to stress that God is *neither male*

*nor female.* However, I find it very awkward to avoid a pronoun for God. Changing the pronoun to “She” does not solve the problem for me. I have used 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 that I was wrong in many ways. There are areas where Islam, as traditionally practiced, is unfair to women. But it is crystal clear that those practices are not from the Quran. As in all religions, the practice does not always match the revelation from God. In fact, we will see that the practices often go against the principles of the Quran.

The Quran was (and still is) an emancipating document for women!

I am eternally thankful that my friend's dog had 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.



*I want to give you input from other sources on the issues discussed in the book. At the end of each chapter you will find writings from other people.*

*It has been helpful to me to come to know other women who had difficulties with the cultural understandings of traditional Islam. Here are the reactions of a sister from India:*

### A Muslim Experience

All my life I grew up with a multitude of traditions that controlled and dictated my every action. The “Muslim culture,” doctrines and traditions, are followed by the community, 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*