

## Chapter 5



# ISLAM OPPRESSES WOMEN

**O**n March 18, 2005, a Muslim woman named Amina Wadud led an Islamic prayer service in New York City. Because she is a woman, three mosques refused to host the service, so it was set for an art gallery, but the gallery withdrew the invitation after receiving a bomb threat. Finally, it was held in an Episcopal church. A Muslim protester outside the event fumed, “These people do not represent Islam. If this was an Islamic state, this woman would be hanged, she would be killed, she would be diced into pieces.”<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly true; nevertheless, Wadud maintained that such treatment was fundamentally un-Islamic: in the Qur’an, she asserted, men and women are equal. It is only by distorting the Qur’an that Muslim men have come to regard women as only good for sex and housekeeping.<sup>2</sup>

### ***PC Myth: Islam respects and honors women***

It’s widely accepted, almost to the point of being axiomatic, that Islamic mistreatment of women is cultural and does not stem from the Qur’an—and that Islam actually offers women a better life than they can enjoy in the West. The Los Angeles-based Muslim Women’s League claims that “spiritual equality, responsibility, and accountability for both men and women is a well-developed theme in the Quran. Spiritual equality between men and women in the sight of God is not limited to purely

### **Guess what?**

- The Qur’an and Islamic law treat women as nothing more than possessions of men.
- The Qur’an sanctions wife-beating.
- Islam also allows for child marriage, the virtual imprisonment of women in their homes, “temporary marriage” (i.e., prostitution—but only for Shi’ites!), and more.

spiritual, religious issues, but is the basis for equality in all temporal aspects of human endeavor.”<sup>3</sup>

Another Muslim women’s advocate, the Egyptian Dr. Nawal el-Saadawi, who has run afoul of the Egyptian authorities because Muslim divines consider her opinions less than Islamic, goes still further: “Our Islamic religion has given women more rights than any other religion has, and has guaranteed her honour and pride.”<sup>4</sup>

In the same vein, the *Christian Science Monitor* in December 2004 featured several Latin American female converts to Islam.<sup>5</sup> One of them, Jasmine Pinet, explained that she “has found greater respect as a woman by converting to Islam.” Pinet praised Muslim men for their respect for women: “They’re not gonna say, ‘Hey *mami*, how are you?’ Usually they say, ‘Hello, sister.’ And they don’t look at you like a sex object.” The *Monitor* reports that there are forty thousand Latin American Muslims in the United States today, and that “many of the Latina converts say that their belief that women are treated better in Islam was a significant factor in converting.”

For readers who might find this surprising—given the burqa, polygamy, the prohibition of female drivers in Saudi Arabia, and other elements of the Islamic record on women that are well known in the West—the *Monitor* quotes Leila Ahmed, professor of women’s studies and religion at Harvard: “It astounds me, the extent to which people think Afghanistan and the Taliban represent women and Islam.” Ahmed says that “we’re in the early stages of a major rethinking of Islam that will open Islam for women. [Muslim scholars] are rereading the core texts of Islam—from the Koran to legal texts—in every possible way.”

But did the Taliban really originate the features of Islam that discriminate against women? Will a “rereading” of the Qur’an and other core texts of Islam really help “open Islam for women”? These are some of the texts that will have to be “reread”:

- ❁ Women are inferior to men, and must be ruled by them: “Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other” (Qur’an 4:34)
- ❁ The Qur’an likens a woman to a field (*tilth*), to be used by a man as he wills: “Your women are a tilth for you to cultivate so go to your tilth as ye will” (2:223)
- ❁ It declares that a woman’s testimony is worth half that of a man: “Get two witnesses, out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as ye choose, for witnesses, so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her” (2:282)
- ❁ It allows men to marry up to four wives, and have sex with slave girls also: “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” (4:3)
- ❁ It rules that a son’s inheritance should be twice the size of that of a daughter: “Allah thus directs you as regards your children’s inheritance: to the male, a portion equal to that of two females” (4:11)
- ❁ It tells husbands to beat their disobedient wives: “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” (4:34)

Aisha, the most beloved of Muhammad’s many wives, admonished women in no uncertain terms: “O womenfolk, if you knew the rights that

your husbands have over you, every one of you would wipe the dust from her husband's feet with her face.”<sup>6</sup>

Individual Muslims may respect and honor women, but Islam doesn't.

## The great Islamic cover-up

The Qur'an directs that women must “lower their gaze and guard their modesty; 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, their fathers” and a few others (Qur'an 24:31).

Muhammad was more specific when Asma, daughter of one of his leading companions (and first successor) Abu Bakr, came to see him while “wearing thin clothes.” “O Asma,” exclaimed the Prophet, “when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and hands.”<sup>7</sup>

In our own day, this covering has become the foremost symbol of the place of women in Islam.

## Child marriage

The Qur'an takes child marriage for granted in its directives about divorce. Discussing the waiting period required in order to determine if the woman is pregnant, it says:



### Just Like Today: Girls die for the burqa

**A** graphic example of the oppression that Islamic dress regulations for women engender came in March 2002 in Mecca, when fifteen girls were killed in a fire at their school. Saudi Arabia's religious police, the *muttawa*, wouldn't let the girls out of the building. Since only women were in the school, the girls had shed their all-concealing outer garments. The *muttawa* preferred the girls' death to transgression of Islamic law—to the extent that they actually battled police and firemen who were trying to open the school's doors.<sup>8</sup>

“If you are in doubt concerning those of your wives who have ceased menstruating, know that their waiting period shall be three months. The same shall apply to *those who have not yet menstruated*” (Qur’an 65:4, emphasis added). In other words, Allah is here envisioning a scenario in which a pre-pubescent woman is not only married, but is being divorced by her husband.

One reason why such a verse might have been “revealed” to Muhammad is that he himself had a child bride: The Prophet “married ‘Aisha when she was a girl of six years of age, and he consummated that marriage when she was nine years old.”<sup>10</sup> Child marriages were common in seventh-century Arabia—and here again the Qur’an has taken a practice that should have been abandoned long ago and given it the sanction of divine revelation.

### **Wife-beating**

Muhammad was once told that “women have become emboldened towards their husbands,” whereupon he “gave permission to beat them.” When some women complained, Muhammad noted: “Many women have gone round Muhammad’s family complaining against their husbands. They are not the best among you.”<sup>14</sup> He was unhappy



### **Just Like Today: Child marriages in the Islamic world**

**T**his has touched millions of women and girls in societies where the Qur’an is absolute truth and Muhammad is the model for all human behavior. More than half of the teenage girls in Afghanistan and Bangladesh are married.<sup>9</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini told the Muslim faithful that marrying a girl before she began menstruating was “a divine blessing.” He counseled fathers: “Do your best to ensure that your daughters do not see their first blood in your house.”<sup>11</sup>

Iranian girls can get married when they are as young as nine with parental permission, or thirteen without consent.<sup>12</sup> With child marriage comes domestic violence: “In Egypt 29 percent of married adolescents have been beaten by their husbands; of those, 41 percent were beaten during pregnancy. A study in Jordan indicated that 26 percent of reported cases of domestic violence were committed against wives under 18.”<sup>13</sup>

with the women who complained, not with their husbands who beat them. At another point he added: “A man will not be asked as to why he beat his wife.”<sup>15</sup>

Another hadith recounts that on one occasion a woman came to Muhammad looking for justice. “‘Aishah said that the lady (came), wearing a green veil (and complained to her (‘Aishah) of her husband and showed her a green spot on her skin caused by beating). It was the habit of ladies to support each other, so when Allah’s Messenger came, ‘Aishah said, ‘I have not seen any woman suffering as much as the believing women. Look! Her skin is greener than her clothes!’”<sup>16</sup>

“I have not seen any woman suffering as much as the believing women”? Aisha doesn’t seem to have had any illusions that, in Nawal El-Saadawi’s words, “our Islamic religion has given women more rights than any other religion has.” But Muhammad is unmoved by Aisha’s alarm at the woman’s bruises: When her husband appears, Muhammad does not

reprove him for beating his wife—in fact, he doesn’t mention it at all. And why would he, since Allah had already revealed to him that a man should treat his disobedient wife this way?

Muhammad even struck Aisha herself. One night, thinking she was asleep, he went out. Aisha surreptitiously followed him. When he found out what she had done, he hit her: “He struck me on the chest which caused me pain, and then said: Did you think that Allah and His Apostle would deal unjustly with you?”<sup>18</sup>



### Just Like Today: Wife-beating

The Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences has determined that *over 90 percent* of Pakistani wives have been struck, beaten, or abused sexually—for offenses on the order of cooking an unsatisfactory meal. Others were punished for failing to give birth to a male child.<sup>17</sup>

## **An offer they can't refuse**

Muhammad emphasized that women were possessions of their husbands: “Allah’s Messenger said, ‘If a husband calls his wife to his bed (i.e. to have sexual relations) and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels will curse her till morning.’”<sup>19</sup> This has become enshrined in Islamic law: “The husband is only obliged to support his wife when she gives herself to him or offers to, meaning she allows him full enjoyment of her person and does not refuse him sex at any time of the night or day.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Don't go out alone**

Islamic law stipulates that “the husband may forbid his wife to leave the home”<sup>21</sup> and that “a woman may not leave the city without her husband or a member of her unmarriageable kin accompanying her, unless the journey is obligatory, like the hajj. It is unlawful for her to travel otherwise, and unlawful for her husband to allow her to.”<sup>22</sup>

According to Amnesty International, in Saudi Arabia “women . . . who walk unaccompanied, or are in the company of a man who is neither their husband nor a close relative, are at risk of arrest on suspicion of prostitution or other ‘moral’ offences.”<sup>23</sup>

## **Temporary husbands**

Nothing is easier than divorce for a Muslim male: All he has to do is tell his wife, “I divorce you,” and the divorce is consummated. The apparent harshness of this seems to be mitigated by another verse from the Qur’an: “If a wife fears cruelty or desertion on her husband’s part, there is no blame on them if they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves; and such settlement is best” (Qur’an 4:128). But this call for an agreement is not a call for a meeting of equals—at least as it has been interpreted in the hadith. Aisha explains this verse: “It concerns the

woman whose husband does not want to keep her with him any longer, but wants to divorce her and marry some other lady, so she says to him: ‘Keep me and do not divorce me, and then marry another woman, and you may neither spend on me, nor sleep with me.’”<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the likelihood that a man may divorce his wife in a fit of anger and then want to reconcile with her later gives rise to another odd point of Islamic law: Once a Muslim woman has been thrice divorced by the same husband, she must marry and divorce another man before going back to him: “When a free man has pronounced a threefold divorce, it is unlawful for him to remarry the divorced wife until she has married another husband in a valid marriage and the new husband has copulated with her.”<sup>25</sup>

Muhammad insisted on this. Once a woman came to him for help. Her husband had divorced her and she had remarried. However, her second husband was impotent, and she wanted to remarry her first husband. The Prophet was unyielding, telling her that she could not remarry her first husband “unless you had a complete sexual relation with your present husband and he enjoys a complete sexual relation with you.”<sup>26</sup>

This has given rise to the phenomenon of “temporary husbands.” After a husband has divorced his wife in a fit of pique, these men will “marry” the hapless divorcee for one night in order to allow her to return to her husband and family.

## **Prophetic license**

When Muhammad already had nine wives and numerous concubines, Allah gave him special permission to have as many women as he desired: “O Prophet! Lo! We have made lawful unto thee thy wives unto whom thou hast paid their dowries, and those whom thy right hand possesseth of those whom Allah hath given thee as spoils of war, and the daughters of thine uncle on the father’s side and the daughters of thine aunts on the father’s




side, and the daughters of thine uncle on the mother's side and the daughters of thine aunts on the mother's side who emigrated with thee, and a believing woman if she give herself unto the Prophet and the Prophet desire to ask her in marriage—a privilege for thee only, not for the (rest of) believers" (Qur'an 33:50). Such convenient prophecies are numerous in the Qur'an—Allah even commands Muhammad to marry the comely divorced wife of his adopted son (33:37).

Muhammad's desire has borne bitter fruit. These two Qur'anic passages are just two elements of a pervasive assumption that women are not entitled to equality of dignity with men as human beings, but are objects to be awarded to men and used by them. Polygamy, of course, is a foundation of this assumption, and is moving westward with Islam. In late 2004, polygamy had become so common among Muslims in Britain that the British were considering recognizing it for tax purposes.<sup>28</sup>

## Temporary wives

Shi'ite Islam, the dominant form of Islam in Iran, also allows for "temporary wives." This is a provision for men to gain female companionship on a short-term basis. In a temporary marriage, or *mut'a*, the couple signs a marriage agreement that is ordinary in every respect except that it carries a time limit. One tradition of Muhammad stipulates that a temporary marriage "should last for three nights, and if they like to continue, they can do so, and if they want to separate, they can do so."<sup>29</sup> Many such unions, however, don't last as long as three nights.



**Just Like Today:  
Put down that book**

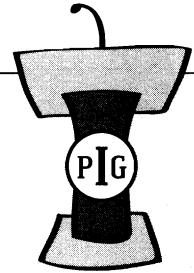
**I**slamic hardliners in Pakistan were so opposed to the education of women that, in one tumultuous five-day period in February 2004, they burned down eight girls' schools.<sup>27</sup>

The authority for this practice rests upon a variant Shi'ite reading of a verse of the Qur'an (4:24), as well as this passage from the Hadith: "Narrated Jabir bin Abdullah and Salama bin Al-Akwa: While we were in an army, Allah's Messenger came to us and said, 'You have been allowed to do the *Mut'a* (marriage), so do it.'"<sup>30</sup> Sunni Muslims, who account for 85 percent of all Muslims, claim that Muhammad later revoked this provision—but Shi'ites disagree. In any case, temporary wives tend to congregate in Shi'ite holy cities, where they can offer companionship to lonely seminarians.

### **Rape: Four witnesses needed**

Most threatening of all to women may be the Muslim understanding of rape as it plays out in conjunction with Islamic restrictions on the validity of a woman's testimony. In court, a woman's testimony is worth half as much as that of a man. (Qur'an 2:282).

Islamic legal theorists have restricted the validity of a woman's testimony even further by limiting it to, in the words of one Muslim legal manual, "cases involving property, or transactions dealing with property, such as sales."<sup>31</sup> Otherwise only men can testify. And in cases of sexual misbehavior, four male witnesses are required. These witnesses must be able to do more than simply testify that an instance of fornication, adultery, or rape happened; they must have seen the act itself. This peculiar and destructive stipulation had its genesis in an incident in Muhammad's life, when his wife Aisha, was accused of infidelity. The accusation particularly distressed Muhammad, since Aisha was his favorite wife. But in this case, as in many others, Allah came to the aid of his Prophet: He revealed Aisha's innocence and instituted the stipulation of four witnesses for sexual sins: "Why did they not produce four witnesses? Since they produce not witnesses, they verily are liars in the sight of Allah" (Qur'an 24:13).<sup>32</sup>



## Muhammad vs. Jesus

“Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?’ They said this to test Him, so that they could have some charge to bring against Him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with His finger. But when they continued asking Him, He straightened up and said to them, ‘Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again He bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So He was left alone with the woman before Him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She replied, ‘No one, sir.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.’”

### John 7:53–8:11

“There came to him (the Holy Prophet) a woman from Ghamid and said: Allah’s Messenger, I have committed adultery, so purify me. He (the Holy Prophet) turned her away. On the following day she said: Allah’s Messenger, Why do you turn me away? . . . By Allah, I have become pregnant. He said: Well, if you insist upon it, then go away until you give birth to the child. When she was delivered she came with the child wrapped in a rag and said: Here is the child whom I have given birth to. He said: Go away and suckle him until you wean him. When she had weaned him, she came to him. . . . She said: Allah’s Apostle, here is he as I have weaned him and he eats food. He (the Holy Prophet) entrusted the child to one of the Muslims and then pronounced punishment. And she was put in a ditch up to her chest and he commanded people and they stoned her. Khalid bin Walid came forward with a stone which he flung at her head and there spurted blood on the face of Khalid and so he abused her. Allah’s Apostle heard his (Khalid’s) curse that he had hurled upon her. Thereupon he (the Holy Prophet) said: Khalid, be gentle. By Him in Whose Hand is my life, she has made such a repentance that even if a wrongful tax-collector were to repent, he would have been forgiven. Then giving command regarding her, he prayed over her and she was buried.”<sup>33</sup>



## **A Book You're Not Supposed to Read**

*Voices Behind the Veil: The World of Islam Through the Eyes of Women*, edited by Ergun Mehmet Caner; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004.

Consequently, it is almost impossible to prove rape in lands that follow the dictates of the Sharia. Men can commit rape with impunity: As long as they deny the charge and there are no witnesses, they will get off scot-free, because the victim's testimony is inadmissible. Even worse, if a woman accuses a man of rape, she may end up incriminating herself. If the required male witnesses can't be

found, the victim's charge of rape becomes an admission of adultery. That accounts for the grim fact that as many as 75 percent of the imprisoned women in Pakistan are, in fact, behind bars for the crime of being a victim of rape.<sup>34</sup> Several high-profile cases in Nigeria recently have also revolved around rape accusations being turned around by Islamic authorities into charges of fornication, resulting in death sentences that were modified only after international pressure.<sup>35</sup>

## **Female circumcision**

Female circumcision is yet another source of misery for women in some Islamic countries. This is not a specifically Islamic custom, for it's found among a number of cultural and religious groups in Africa and South Asia. Among Muslims, it's prevalent mainly in Egypt and the surrounding lands. Yet despite the fact that there is scant (at best) attestation in the Qur'an or Hadith for this horrific practice, the Muslims who do practice it invest it with religious significance. An Islamic legal manual states that circumcision is required "for both men and women."<sup>36</sup>

To Sheikh Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, the grand sheikh of al-Azhar, female circumcision is "a laudable practice that [does] honor to women."<sup>37</sup> As the grand imam of al-Azhar, Tantawi is, in the words of a BBC report, "the highest spiritual authority for nearly a billion Sunni Muslims."<sup>38</sup>

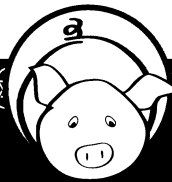
Perhaps in the eyes of Sheikh Tantawi, the pain that female circumcision causes its victims is worth the result; most authorities agree that female circumcision is designed to diminish a woman's sexual response, so that she will be less likely to commit adultery.

### **Long-term prospects? Dim**

As long as men read and believe the Qur'an, women will be despised, second-class citizens, subject to the heartbreak and dehumanization of polygamy, the threat of an easy and capricious divorce, and worse—including beatings, false accusations, and the loss of virtually all of the most basic human freedoms. These are not phenomena of a group, party, or anything so ephemeral. They are the consequences of regarding the Qur'an as the absolute, eternally valid, and perfect word of Allah. As long as men continue to take the Qur'an at face value, women will be at risk.

"May Allah rip out his spine from his back and split his brains in two, and then put them both back, and then do it over and over again. Amen."

—"praise" for the author on RevivingIslam.com



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