

[The Family in Islam](#)

Category : [March 1996](#)

Published by Anonymous on Mar. 02, 1996

The Family in Islam

Respect for Traditional Marriage Roles Bestows Lasting Family Stability

Dr. Muhammad Abdul-Rauf

The "Family" is a network of relationships: relationships between husband and wife, brothers and sisters, parents and children. These three ties are the basic elementary types of domestic relationships through which many other relationships are derived, including those between grandparents and grandchildren, close and distant cousins, uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces. The family in Islam is not merely paternal or maternal. It recognizes ancestry on both sides, whether the family by tradition is patrilocal or matrilocal--or neither, as often seems to be the case today when newly married couples in modern times go their own way and wherever it is convenient to them.

The Husband's Duty

The importance of these relationships, conjugal or consanguineous, is that a relationship between each two persons so related gives rise to certain mutual rights and obligations. For example, according to Islamic law, a husband is fully responsible for the protection of his wife and for the cost of all her needs, even when his wife happens to be wealthy. She does not even have to contribute to the cost of

her needs or those of her husband or her children unless she voluntarily decides to do so. Her husband has to provide the cost of her food, her clothes and her dwelling, as well as her other needs, including medical expenses. Her children are the responsibility of their father.

The Wife's Duty

A woman, like a man, is an independently responsible agent. So long as she is of sound mind and suffers no physical incapacity, she has the same obligations, be they religious, social or financial, as her male counterpart. Unless she is going through the monthly discharges or is within the postnatal blood period, she has to perform the five daily prayers, fast during the month of Ramadan and pay the obligatory alms if she owns the minimum limit of wealth in which such payment to the poor applies. She also has to make pilgrimage to Mekkah at least once in a lifetime if she can afford it; but she does not have to make the journey except in the company of her husband or a male close relative like her brother or father, or a trustworthy group of people, such as passengers traveling by plane.

Once again, it is to be emphasized that a woman is a fully responsible agent. She is entitled to possess the fruit of her labor, to get engaged in any gainful pursuit and to choose the profession she prefers. It is her parents' obligation to provide her with the type of education they can afford; to give her a good name at birth, and even to greet her by holding a party in her honor on the seventh day after her birth, for which a camel, a cow, or a sheep should be sacrificed according to their means.

The Female Child Saved

Islam, in fact, delivered women from their pre-Islamic plight. We do not need to remind the reader of how girls were treated in Europe during the Middle Ages. But in Arabia, before Islam, the birth of a daughter brought so much disgrace to her family that she was sometimes buried alive--a shameful custom which Islam successfully put to an end. The Holy Qur'an, believed by Muslims to be the Word of God, strongly condemned that custom with the following words:

"When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female child, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief. With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had. Shall he retain it on sufferance and contempt or bury it in the dust? What an evil choice they decide on!"¹

Not only did Islam stop that inhuman practice, but it honored female children, urging that they be given good training and adequate education. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is related to have said, "'Whosoever is blessed with three of them (daughters or sisters), and he takes good care of them, he will be with me in Paradise as close as these [two fingers],' pointing his index and middle fingers. Someone said, 'What is it if they should be only two of them?' The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, 'Even if they be should be only two.'"²

Arranging a Marriage

The guardian of a girl--her father, or brother in the absence of the father--cannot give her away in marriage against her will.

Her view of anyone who proposes to her should be duly considered, although the majority of the Muslim jurists are of the view that her guardian should go himself through her marriage contract, rather than she herself, since this procedure is more in keeping with the honor of the girl, who is usually too shy to publicly declare her approval of marriage, especially when she is getting married for the first time. Therefore, immediately before the marriage contract is proceeded with, she is to be asked to express her own wishes, namely approval or disapproval of the marriage to the groom. If she is still a virgin, her silence is regarded as silent approval. But if she has been married earlier but was separated by divorce or death from her first husband, she must be asked to categorically indicate her approval. The bridegroom has to pay her a suitable dower as an indication of respect of her dignity.

The eve of the day preceding the wedding is called "The Henna Night." That night--and indeed the preceding nights for a week or even much earlier--is celebrated with merry gatherings of traditional innocent songs to the tune of small drumbeating and sometimes dance. The closer the wedding day, the more intensified the celebrations become.

On the Henna Night, both bride and bridegroom have their hands and feet dyed with henna, each still being in his and her respective homes. During the weeks preceding the wedding, the groom often pays visits to his in-laws. As soon as his (designated) bride hears his voice, she is supposed to run away and hide somewhere on account of shyness. He usually brings along gifts to his bride and in-laws, besides a formal gift the groom usually extends to his bride at the time of making his proposal of marriage. Nowadays this is a gold ring with his

name engraved on it. He usually provides another ring with her name engraved on it as well. The ceremony of the exchange of wedding rings is customarily called "the engagement party."

Traditionally the bride's family provides household articles needed for use by the newlywed couple, but that custom is now changing. The couple nowadays takes care of its own needs.

Man's Leadership Role

In a Muslim domestic household, authority is normally vested in the husband, who was and still is responsible for the protection and upkeep of his wife and children. Such a role is consistent with physiological and anthropological realities. This arrangement provides an outlet for the male ego and innate aggressiveness. On the other hand, the wife's role of receiving and comforting her husband conforms with her gentle nature and provides her with a deep sense of security under the protective wing of her husband. This pattern or relationship, however, should have a degree of flexibility within which the couple may adjust its special needs according to the circumstances. So the roles played by each of the married couple within the family structure are reciprocal and complementary. If the husband is a professor or a renowned politician, his wife, with her childbearing function, is by no means less honorable. Sex role differences should not entail a position of inferiority or superiority.

Islamic Family Principles

In a Muslim domestic setting, the following principles operate:

1. The conjugal band unites the couple in a permanent

partnership of equality, love and mutual respect.

2. The couple and their children, if any, form a human cooperative team in which the husband is the leader, with no implication of superiority, and the wife is the lieutenant and gentle executive of the team.

3. Love and mutual care and concern, as well as serious honest commitment, are the overriding elements in the relationship.

4. Each spouse should pay due attention to the sensual and psychological needs of his or her partner, should regard them as much as his own and endeavor to fulfill them.

5. The husband should always be ready to take action when needed as the protective arm and the provider of the family's needs.

6. The wife should have sincere regard for the wishes of her husband, and due respect for his firm decision. An ancient Arab poet addressed his wife thus: "Accept the little I offer you, so you perpetuate my love for you. And shout not when I am in a moody state."

7. A wife should be aware of her function to promote a climate of peace at home, and struggle to make the domestic dwelling a warm nest to which her husband and her children eagerly long to return from their outside activities.

8. The wife should be given a full chance to share in formulating the policy affecting the family's life.

9. The moral growth and well-being of the children in general should be the mutual responsibility of all the parties involved.

10. And finally, the sentiments of sympathy, kindness, concern, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, generosity and understanding should saturate the domestic climate.

Women in Family Life

Success of the family in achieving its objectives and functions

as a productive social unit, providing happy companionship and effectively rearing its young ones, depends on conformity with the above observations, which are implicit in the Holy Qur'an and were taught by the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. Let us quote here the following texts:

"No matter how hard you try, you cannot do full justice to women. However, be not too unfair to a wife, separating from her with no determined decision. But if you come to a friendly understanding and practice self-restraint, God is Forgiving and Merciful."³

"And live with them [women] honorably. If you are averse to them, it is possible you may be averse to a thing and God sets in it much good."⁴

"Live with them honorably or part with them honorably."⁵

"And women have rights equal to the rights incumbent on them according to what is equitable...."⁶

"Men are in charge of the affairs of their women by virtue of what God has favored some above the other, and for what they have expended of their property."⁷

"I urge you to treat women kindly. They are a trust in your hands. Fear God in His trust." ⁸

"Whoever of you whose wife behaves in a disagreeable manner but he responds by kindness and patience, God will give him regards as much as He will give Job for his forbearance."⁹

"The gate of Paradise will be widely open to welcome a woman who observes her mandatory prayers, and the fasting for the month of Ramadan, and preserves her honor and obeys her husband."¹⁰

"The best of your women is the one who when her husband looks at her, she pleases him. When he beckons to her, she obeys him; and when he is away, she continues to have regard for him, protecting his wealth and preserving her honor." ¹¹

"And we have enjoined upon man to do good to his parents.

His mother bears him with trouble, and she brings him forth in pain. And the bearing of him and the weaning of him is thirty months." 12

The Children of Islam

Children, too, should be treated equitably. Favoring one over the others provokes jealousy which is harmful and destructive. Once, a man went to the Prophet and requested that he be witness that he had given his son an orchard as a gift. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, asked him, "Do you have other children?" "Yes," replied the man. The Prophet asked further, "Are you giving each one of them a similar gift?" The man answered, "No." The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, then responded, "I do not bear witness to an injustice." 3

The Significance of Family

In conclusion, we may safely say that the institution of the family provides its members with a sense of belonging and interdependence and inspires each one of them with a feeling of being wanted. The family coordinates the work and the activities of its members. Through the family, the individual satisfies his biological and psychological needs: food, clothes, shelter, sex, protection and security. The older generation rears and nurtures the younger ones and transmits to them their social and cultural heritage. The parents willingly and lovingly take care of their baby, clean its dirt without resentment, feed it day and night, and protect it from all harm. The young ones provide hope for the elders. They will perpetuate their traditions and ensure the continuity of their kinship. Moreover, the family makes a fundamental contribution to society through its reproductive function in

perpetuating the existence and expansion of the human race and the human culture. The family is therefore regarded as the building block of society.

Dr. Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, born in Egypt, graduated in 1942 from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, then obtained an M.A. from Cambridge University and a Ph.D. from London University. In 1955 he founded a college in Malaysia that subsequently became the National University of Malaysia. He was Director of the Islamic Center in New York from 1966 to 1971, Director of the Islamic Center in Washington, then Rector of the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, and served as advisor on Islamic education for the Malaysian Government. Dr. Abdul-Rauf is the author of several books on Islamic and Arabic language and on Muslim intellectual life.

Notes: 1. The Holy Qur'an, XVI.58-59; 2. This is a hadith (a saying of The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him.) See Muhammad Ibn Yazid, better known as Ibn Majah, Sunan (Cairo: Halabi Press, 1953), Vol. II, 1210; 3. The Holy Qur'an, IV.129; 4. Ibid, IV.19; 5. Ibid, II.234; 6. Ibid, II.228; 7. Ibid, IV.34; 8. Imam Muhammad Al-Ghazali, 'hya' 'Ulum Al-Din, Revival of Religious Sciences (Cairo: Halabi Press, 1958), Vol. II, 39; 9. Ibn Majah, op. cit, 595-797; 10. Al-Ghazali, op. cit., Vol. II, 57; 11. Al-Ghazali, op. cit., Vol. II, 36; 12. Holy Qur'an, XXXI.14, XLVI.5; 13. Imam Muslim ibn Hajjah, Al-Sahih (Cairo: Halabi Press), Vol. II, 7-8, and Ibn Majah, op cit., II.795.