Islam and women - stories from behind the veil

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There is more to it than meets the eye of the beholder...

A few years ago when I was on talk back radio, a young lady phoned in from interstate. She told me she was a Muslim and wanted to ask some questions. To provide some context I asked where she had gone to school. She named a Christian denominational school that she had attended for 12 years. I next asked had she ever read a Bible. She hadn't.

"But you've become a Muslim?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever read the Quran?"

"No."

"So how and why did you become a Muslim?"

"Some of my friends and I thought it would be a 'cool' thing to do."

She didn't know that while the front door to enter the house of Islam is attractively open and inviting, there is no back door of exit. Sharia law mandates death for males (Quran 4:89) and imprisonment for females who may wish to leave. The Muslim nation of Pakistan additionally imposes the death penalty for blasphemy as well as apostasy.

An attractive picture

Reportedly Julia Maukhallalti left her Orthodox church to convert to Islam. (From a Muslim perspective no one converts to Islam. They revert. This is based upon their belief that everyone is born sinless and is a Muslim. Because of ignorance some stray from the true path of Islam and need to be called back.)

When Julia was just 18 years of age she met Raed in a Sydney restaurant. Three months later she married him. She later declared that according to the introductory religious teaching she had received, contrary to negative common stereotypes, in Islam women are not oppressed. Rather they are put on a pedestal to be "treated like a rare diamond."

Yasmin Abdel-Mageid, a Muslim self-styled "activist" of Sudanese Egyptian origins, made frequent appearances on various ABC radio and television programmes. She claimed that:

- Islam is "the most feminist religion"
- Muslim women "got equal rights well before Europeans"
- "Anti-woman issues" in some Muslim states are because of "political and cultural reasons" not because such practices are mandated within Islam's sacred texts.

Perhaps in view of these positive messages, this might partially explain why the Australian New Muslim Association could report that two thirds of converts to Islam each year in Australia are female. Of these reportedly 60 percent become Muslim because of their new husbands.

When one looks within long established Muslim majority countries, quite a different picture emerges.

A different picture

One of the most unfortunate results of warfare of the last century is that when the fighting has finished and combatants have reconciled, often the deadly detritus of their struggle remains in or near the killing fields. Millions of landmines lay buried near the surface of soil or sand awaiting the slightest pressure to trigger their deadly purpose. One of these areas remains in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula.

The government of Egypt with its limited resources has done its best to clear some, but not all of these hidden sensitive instruments of death. There are various means used to clear and create safe passage through minefields. Local Muslim Bedouin tribesmen have developed a cheap effective method of neutralizing the danger. When they decide to cross unfamiliar territory "their women were dispatched out in front to be followed by the camels and then the men." The practice provides a graphic image of the status and comparative value accorded to many women in Muslim countries.



Leyla Zara was born in the province of Diyarbakir in southeast Turkey in 1961. When she was 14 years of age her father arranged for her to be married to 34-year-old Mehdi Zara. When she was 30 she became the first Kurdish woman to be elected to the Turkish Parliament. Her own reported summation of her life experience in Muslim Turkey was: "If you are a man, you have value; if you are a woman, you don't."

Five-year-old Lama al-Gamdi of Saudi Arabia, didn't get a chance to experience much of life. She died reportedly suffering from multiple injuries: a broken back, a crushed skull, broken ribs, a broken left arm, burns and evidence of repeated rape. Her father, Fayhar al-Ghamdi, was a prominent Islamist preacher. He was the perpetrator of the violence. His reason was that he considered her virginity was suspect. The court ruled that according to Islamic law "blood money" might be paid by way of compensation for loss of life to the child's next of kin, if requested. It's unlikely that any family members would have made such a request. The amount of money paid would have been double had the victim been male.

A Palestinian West Bank citizen summed up her life experience as follows:

"Where I come from, being born a girl is a curse: a wife must first produce a son, at least one, and if she gives birth to only girls, she is mocked. At most, two or three girls are needed to help with the housework, to work on the land and to tend the animals. If more girls are born it is a great misfortune and they should be got rid of as soon as possible. I lived like this till I was 18, knowing nothing except that I was worth less than an animal because I was a girl."

Islam varies from country to country and within country from urban to rural. The purest form of Islam that is rapidly metastasizing internationally is sourced in Saudi Arabia. It represents the "gold standard" to which various reform movements and some governments, desirous of attracting Saudi financial

support, would aspire. Some Saudi women are very well educated and academically hold their own in any assessment of or debate about their country's religious and social practices. One such is Badriyya Al-Bishr, a lecturer in social sciences at King Saud University. She published an article in Al Sharq Al-Awsat, a London Arabic language daily. It was entitled "Imagine you're a woman." In summary she outlines what life is like for a woman in her country. She reportedly said:

- The birth of boys is welcome, but for the birth of girls, if there are more than two this may result in something undesirable happening to the mother.
- You always need your guardian's approval for each and every matter.
- Your guardian may be a 15-year-old son or brother who sometimes asks for a bribe to obtain his permission.
- If you are subject to assault, beatings or murder, the primary question is, was the victim's face properly veiled and if the husband broke his wife's ribs there must have been a good reason for it.
- If you go to the magistrate to lodge a complaint because your husband beat you up and broke your bones, the court officer may well reply, "That's all?" Beating exists among all couples. As the saying goes, "Beating the beloved is like eating raisins."
- You are not permitted to drive.
- An approved male must always accompany you.
- Any time women raise their concerns they are dismissed as mere "women's talk."

Reconciling differences

How are the disturbing reports from women in Muslim majority countries to be reconciled with the more positive, even glowing assessments of women within Islam in a country such as Australia? There are at least three possibilities:

1. Legal restraint

In secular "Western" countries, the implementation of Sharia Law is significantly restrained in the public domain. Emerging evidence suggests however that, in spite of legal restraints, what seems to be occurring in various jurisdictions especially within newer communities, is that there may be immigration without assimilation or integration.

Western politicians keep assuring their sometimes-anxious constituents that the diversity of multiculturalism is a glowing political, economic and social success. Where longer established or newer refugee Muslim communities are concerned, reports to the contrary keep emerging on matters such as under age marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), honour killings and fraught domestic relationships.

When these matters are brought before the courts, appropriate sanctions are applied in the hope of deterring and restraining future reoccurrence by those who may prefer sharia to western secular law.

2. Deception

Within historic Islam there is a long-standing practice of deception or disguise known as the doctrine of Taqiyya. This permits a believer to engage in dissimulation to protect oneself or one's religion, to avoid harm or persecution (Quran 16:106). Similarly, normally forbidden foods may be eaten (Quran 5:3; 6:119) and only when necessary, friendship with unbelievers may be temporarily entertained. Tradition states that Islam's Prophet Muhammad exemplified the practice until Allah assured him protection (Quran 5:67). Today the practice seems to be more common where a believer feels unable to profess faith openly or fully.

3. Ignorance

Muslims and others who have lived extensively in Muslim countries, frequently encounter this among unbelievers or infidels of the secular West. It is possible that newer "reverts" to Islam may not have been too thoroughly taught the full implications of Islam prior to their decision to submit to Allah and all the "revelations" conveyed by his Prophet Mohammad. Frequently Muslims themselves are not well educated in the particulars of their religion. One of the barriers to increased understanding is that their most sacred text, the Quran is said to exist only in the language of the Islamic heaven-Arabic. Translations into other languages are regarded as "interpretations" and therefore cannot be the true Quran.

Relatively few are competent in understanding the Quranic text and even more so because the ancient form in which it has been transmitted is understood mostly by scholars, but not by average believers. This means that the faithful are dependent upon what their religious leaders reveal or conceal regarding the faith.

Therefore, for a more accurate understanding of Islam's attitudes toward women, well-meaning opinions of newer "reverts" in the West hold less authority than those of scholars in Muslim countries and what the texts themselves actually convey. It is to these one must turn to obtain a fundamentally more accurate picture of women and Islam.

Some Muslims' practices

When a baby girl is born into a Muslim family within minutes her father will whisper into her ear the Sahadah, "There is no God but Allah and Mohammad is the Prophet of Allah". This act is said to cleanse from the newborn the error of Adam's disobedience. The result is that the child is secured irrevocably within the community of the faithful.

Later her mother will commence teaching her daughter prayers that must be recited five times daily. To forget or to be careless in this obligatory matter could invoke her father's wrath resulting in a beating. Later still she must learn to recite the Quran in Arabic. This is said to provide protection from evil spirits. Unfortunately such protection may not be afforded always to mothers who give birth to girls. In Pakistan during an eleven-month period, reportedly 56 women were killed "for giving birth to a girl rather than a boy." No one can calculate how many similar cases went unreported.

Before a girl reaches puberty, in many Muslim contexts it is highly probable that she will have submitted involuntarily to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Moira Svirsky identifies four different types of FGM.

- Type 1: Removal of the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris with or without removal of the entire clitoris.
- Type 2: Excision of the clitoris along with parts of the labia minora or majora.
- Type 3: Removal of all or part of the external genitalia along with stitching and narrowing the vagina.
- Type 4: Pricking, piercing, cutting or cauterization of the clitoris and surrounding tissue after which corrosive substances may be inserted to cause restrictions.

She has further reported that 5391 new cases of FGM were compulsorily reported in the UK in the first half of 2017. One third of the newly reported victims were of Somalian origin. 112 were UK born. This is in spite of the fact that FGM was classified as a criminal offence 32 years ago in 1985 in the UK.

The Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights reported that in their country in 1995 "as many as 3600 girls are circumcised every day." Egypt's Al Azhar University is regarded as the world's foremost authority on Islamic law. In 1981 its Grand Sheikh sanctioned the practice.

In spite of the well-documented serious psychological and physical implications for the victims, its widespread practice in



5391 UK cases of FGM were reported within six months

Muslim countries is regarded as an attempt to dampen female sexuality to reduce the possibility of immoral behavior.

Eminent Saudi cleric, Sheikh Mohammad Alarefe reportedly declared "female circumcision is a noble act to do to women."

Professor Abd al-Rahman declared "….a girl gets easily aroused if she is not circumcised. It makes her shameless and prey to her sexual instincts". Egyptian cleric Abd Al-Wahhab Al-Maligi reportedly claims there are economic and health benefits to FGM. He further contends "that it is because of FGM that Egyptian women are fertile versus European women who are infertile."

Muslim spokespersons in an attempt to dismiss objections to FGM will claim it has nothing to do with Islam because it is not mentioned in the Quran. But their learned scholars base their approval of the practice not on the silence of the Quran but upon one of Islam's most authoritative texts of Islamic Law that in turn is based upon the sayings and behaviours of the Prophet. It is the famous *Reliance of the Traveller, a Classic Manual of Islamic Law*. Not to be circumcised is regarded as "an enormity", i.e. a very serious sin against Islam.

In matters of marriage, Muslim girls may be married while still quite young. This is permitted because of the example of Prophet Mohammad. He married Aishah, his favourite wife when she was six and consummated the marriage when she was nine. Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women on the understanding that any children of the marriage must be raised as Muslims. The same freedom is not afforded Muslim women. They can only marry Muslim men who are often much older than their brides. This also has serious implications for young girls.

In 2009 the Government of Yemen set the minimum age of marriage for girls at 17. This was later repealed because it was considered "un-Islamic". In September 2014 an 8-year-old girl reportedly died on her wedding night from internal injuries inflicted upon her due to the sexual trauma caused by her 40-year-old husband. The same report revealed that over a quarter of that country's girls are married before they are 15 and that "these child brides are commonly subjected to physical, emotional and sexual violence in forced marriages."

Men may have up to four wives at any one time but women may marry only one man. Divorce is a relatively simple matter and is usually initiated by the man. He repeats a statement of repudiation (al-talaq) three times, either once a month for three months or at the one time. In the latter case he still must wait a period of three months to ensure his former wife is not pregnant. If pregnant the divorce cannot be effected till after the birth of the baby.

If divorce is by mutual consent, it comes into effect immediately. A wife may obtain a divorce only through judicial proceedings and only then upon the grounds of some serious defect within the marriage such as "the husband's impotence, apostasy, madness, dangerous illness or some other defect."

When non Muslims comment negatively upon the practice of Muslim men being permitted to have up to four wives at any one time, Muslim men sometimes retort that the only difference between Muslim and non-Muslim men regarding marriage, is that while they do have up to four wives simultaneously, non Muslim men have them serially. Within the post Christian West there is a degree of truth in the assertion.

Western advocates may assert that child marriage should be classified as paedophilia that is repugnant in Western jurisdictions. It attracts severe penalties under the law. But such criticisms are unlikely to effect change within Muslim jurisdictions.

Senior cleric, Dr Salih Bin Fauzan reportedly summed up the Muslim position thus: "(Sharia) Laws are Allah's province; and legislation is his exclusive right, to be shared by none other. And among these are the rules governing marriage."

An Iranian Shiite counterpart Mohammad Ali Isfenani, Chairman for the legal affairs committee for Iran reportedly said, "We must regard nine as being the appropriate age for a girl to have reached marriage and qualified to get married. To do otherwise would be to contradict and challenge Sharia Law.

In Iran in the time of the Shah the legal age for marriage for girls was 18. After Ayatollah Khomeini ushered in the Islamic Revolution on April 1, 1989, the age was lowered to nine in keeping with Prophet Mohammad's example and Sharia Law based upon his teaching and example.

Upon marriage a wife is regarded as the husband's property. He has complete control over her. Afghan sociology researcher, Assadullah Ahmadi reported that "the sale and exchange of women as goods is rampant….as part of the socially accepted use of wives and daughters as possessions…. Afghan women were often sold….and usually for less than the cost of a mule."

Should the wife be disobedient to her husband's wishes, she is progressively punished by being admonished, banned from the marriage bed and if the disobedience continues, the husband may "scourge" her. (Quran 4:34)

Women historically and in contemporary times are regarded as war booty and may be forced to marry their captors or be treated as sex slaves. (Quran 4:23; 23:5-6; 9:11; 70:29-30)

In Sharia Law illicit sexual relations (zina) attract penalties of imprisonment, lashing and death by stoning. If rape occurs



A 14-year-old Bangladeshi girl died after receiving 70 lashes as 'punishment' for being raped in 2011

the only hope a woman has of proving her innocence is if four males were present at the time, witnessed the event and are prepared to testify as to the truthfulness of the victim's account. Her own testimony is unacceptable. The above conditions are seldom if ever met. So it is assumed that the woman seduced the male into committing the act.

Marte Dalelu, a Norwegian businesswoman was raped in Dubai. She did what any Western non-Muslim woman would do. She reported the attack to the police. What she and many other happy tourists to glitzy Dubai did not understand was that Dubai and other countries in the region are governed by Sharia Law. Understandably she did not have the support of four male witnesses so she was jailed. She may have remained there for years if significant international pressure had not eventually caused her release.

Upon release had she been a Muslim, it is probable she could have been killed to restore honour to the family that was shamed by her being implicated in rape. In 2011, 14-year-old Bangladeshi Hena Akhter was abducted and raped by 42-year-old Mahbub Khan who was a married man. Her father beat and trampled on her. The local Imam decreed her punishment to be 101 lashes. After 70 lashes, still protesting her innocence, she dropped and later died. Local medical authorities issued an autopsy report stating that death was caused through suicide.

Attitude and behavioural causes

What causes such attitudes and behaviours by men toward women in Muslim society? There are three main sacred sources:

1. The Holy Quran—the unchangeable revelation from Allah revealed to humankind through his Prophet Mohammad.
2. The Hadith or Traditions, transmitted through reliable sources collected into many volumes. These are the sayings and activities of the Prophet.
3. Early biographies of the Prophet who is regarded as the perfect

man and model for all humanity. Together these sources combine as the primary material for the development of Sharia Law.

From these we learn that:

- Men are superior to women (Quran 2:228) and therefore they "are in charge of women." (Quran 4:34)
- Women can be dangerously evil and inclined toward guile and maliciousness. (Quran 12:28, 33, 34, 50)
- Women are the most harmful trial and affliction to men. (Hadith Shahi Al Bukhari, Vol.7, Book 67, No.5096)
- Women are deficient in matters of intelligence and religion. (Al Bukhari, Vol.1, Book 6, No.304) and therefore, at law a woman's testimony is worth only half that of a man. (Quran 2:282)
- Child marriage is permissible (Quran 65:4) because of the example of the Prophet. (Al Bukhari, Book 58, No. 236, Book 67, No. 5133)
- A wife needs her husband's permission to fast (Al Bukhari, 5192) or to attend a meeting at the mosque. (Al Bukhari, Vol.1, Book 10. No. 873)
- A husband has total rights over his wives' bodies. (Quran 2:223; Al Bukhari, Vol. 6, Book 65, No. 4528)
- Should a wife disobey her husband angels will curse her till she obeys. (Al Bukhari, No. 5193-5194)
- A disobedient wife may be punished by "scourging". (Quran 4:34)
- A wife should not allow anyone to enter the home without her husband's consent. (Al Bukhari, No. 5098)
- In inheritance a daughter will be gifted only half that which is deeded to a son. (Quran 4:34; Al Bukhari, No. 5204)
- People ruled by a woman will never be successful. (Al Bukhari, Vol. 5, Book 64, No. 4425)
- When a man is praying, should a dog, a donkey or a woman pass in front of him his prayer is annulled. (Al Bukhari, Nos. 508, 511, 504, 519)
- The majority of the inhabitants of Hell will be women. (Al Bukhari, Vol. 1, Book 6, No. 304, Vol.7, Book 67, No. 5096). One of the main resons for this is that they were ungrateful to their husbands. (Al Bukhari, Vol. 1, Book 6, No. 304, Vol. 7, Book 67, Nos. 5197-5198)

The above references are only an introduction to restrictions placed upon women as compared to men.

In February 2016 the Legislature of Punjab passed a bill prohibiting violence against women. All mainstream Islamic political parties and 30 other Islamic groups reportedly denounced the Legislation.

One prominent Muslim leader denounced the bill because "it was against the Quran and the Sunnah" and could result in men being suppressed by women.

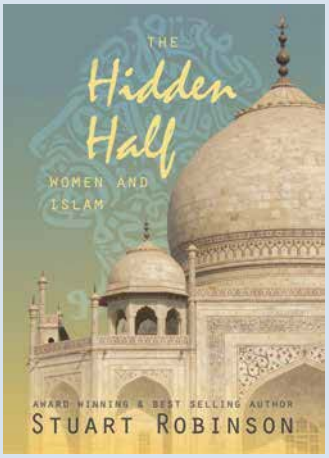
An uncertain future

In the Australian census period 2011-2016 the number of Muslims increased in this country by 27%. The reported majority of the increase was "refugees" from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Understandably they bring their religious practice with them. A reported three-year study funded by the Australian Research Council says some refugees argue "women's and child's rights contravene the cultural values, norms and mores" of their ethnic groups. The report concludes, "Many refugees see human rights, in particular, those relating to women and children's rights, as detrimental to their successful settlement in Australia."

The study reportedly further advocated for "cultural sensitivity and understanding on the impact of male refugees and….feelings of alienation and disappointments." It may be that the Australian legal system is already responding to these sensitivities.

Within the Law Faculty of Sydney University reportedly courses are being offered on Islamic Law by Muslim staff, Dr Ghena Krayem and Associate Professor Salim Farrar. Dr Krayem and others were awarded a federal government grant in 2015 to research aspects of Australian Family Law and Islamic Sharia Law and how this might influence "future policy developments". In April an Afghan male, having pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting eight women and girls on a Queensland beach, was acquitted because of "cultural differences." From this some might argue that in future females in Australia need to accept a change in their legally protected status because historic Australian values may be gradually eroded and replaced by those of Islam! Historically that has been the case whenever Islam has become the majority religion.

For more extensive information on the role of women and Islam buy a copy of The Hidden Half — Women and Islam, *available from drstuartrobinson.com/books.*



Dr Robinson's new book available from drstuartrobinson.com

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