

Women in Islam

by [Jane I. Smith](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

When former secretary of State Madeleine Albright was fielding questions about Afghanistan recently, one inquirer asked about the role of women in Islam, citing the miserable treatment of females in Afghanistan. Albright's response was less interesting than the assumptions of the questioner, who was clearly expressing the opinion of many Americans. When the first photos of Afghans appeared after the trouncing of the Taliban, most Westerners viewed the newly uncovered faces of women as more proof that American military action against the Taliban was indeed justified.

For the past four months, the U.S. government and even the press have been fairly careful to warn Americans against generalizing about Muslims. Some journalists and many scholars have taken particular pains to make clear that the vivid pictures of women behind enveloping burkas, relegated to the home and excluded from the public square, do not represent the lives of most Muslim women. Yet the photos of those Afghan women are so compelling, and their story is so graphically told by eager journalists, that the average American reader or viewer makes them his reference in thinking about Islam.

But other references are all around us. Muslims live and work throughout the U.S. It would be hard to find many people today who do not live in towns with Muslim inhabitants, whose children do not have Muslim schoolmates, or who have not encountered Muslim mothers, wives or women professionals who are also American citizens. What do we see in such cases?

Often it is not possible to recognize an American woman as Muslim because she chooses not to show her religious identity in external, visual ways. She may not wear a scarf or other form of Islamic head-covering. Many Muslim women simply do not believe that it is religiously essential that they dress in one way or another. For others, the wearing of "Islamic dress," whatever form that might take, is not only an outward and visible way of affirming their identity with and pride in Islam, but also is understood to be God's specific requirement for women. How do we weave our way

through these various images and interpretations?

When I speak about who Muslims are and what they believe, I can usually expect two questions: Why does Islam condone violence? and why does Islam devalue and mistreat its women? In addressing the second issue, I usually begin by assuring my listeners that Islam itself is not an agent; it neither devalues nor mistreats. When Muslim women are mistreated, it is because Muslim men—and some Muslim women—mistreat them. Muslims (like many of the rest of us) may scramble to find religious justification for what they want to do or believe is the right thing to do. But the culprit behind much of what is unarguably the unjust and sometimes miserable treatment of women in many Islamic societies is culture, pervaded by heavy measures of patriarchy, and not religion itself. Or at least not religion in terms of its scripture, texts and reliable traditions.

The problem that Muslims have been facing for over a century, a problem that is becoming increasingly acute, is twofold: first, they must rediscover what their religious texts really say about women's rights and responsibilities, and second, they must find ways to address those cultural practices that are not in accord with the teachings of the Qur'an and the practices of Prophet Muhammad. In most Muslim societies today no discussion is more urgent than that concerning the roles of women: how they should act, dress, function in the home and comport themselves (if at all) in the public sphere.

Not long ago BBC News featured a program on Muslims in China. While a few women were shown studying in a Qur'an school, none of the pictures of Muslims at prayer or congregating in public revealed a single woman. This bifurcation of the sexes into private and public spheres has characterized most Islamic societies since soon after the death of the Prophet in 632 c.e., though scholars are increasingly convinced that Muhammad himself did not support such a separation. Women were very much in evidence in the first Islamic community, and the Prophet's wives serve today as models for Muslim women who want to legitimize female activity in all ranges of society.

So what happened? The full story is complex, but in brief: women in Muslim cultures have been relegated and sometimes confined to the home, have practiced their religion in private rather than at the mosque, and have been subject to the dictates of the males of their families. (Much of that reality, of course, they share with virtually all societies in the world.) For the most part, traditional Islam, which

continues to hold sway over many areas of the Muslim world, still insists that it is necessary for women to be bound to the home. Many of the world's more than half a billion Muslim women live in extreme poverty, have little education, bear large numbers of children and remain excluded from their society's public realms.

However, many Muslim societies are struggling to find ways to put things right. That they do not always agree about what "right" may mean is hardly surprising; Christians and Jews will recognize this as familiar ground. Much of the conversation is about reformulating family and personal law, and has for the past several decades focused on such concerns as women's education, participation in the workforce, political activity, dress and assumption of new roles and responsibilities in the practice of Islam.

The starting point for religious reflection on reform, of course, is the Qur'an. First-time readers of this sacred scripture will be surprised to find that it is generally a very egalitarian document. For the most part, women and men have equal religious obligations, opportunities (with a few significant exceptions) and promise of eternal reward. (In light of the current fascination with the practice of martyrdom in Islam, we should note that the Qur'an does not specify that those who are killed fighting in the way of God will receive a reward of 72 or 76 virgin maidens.) Men, however, do have the responsibility to care for women. Qur'an 4:34, a verse that has engendered a great deal of exegetical interest in recent years, says that "men are in charge of women" and adds that in certain cases men have the right to strike their wives (lightly).

How one interprets the Qur'an and who is qualified to do so is a topic of very lively debate among Muslims. For virtually the first time, some women are now assuming that the right of scriptural exegesis is theirs as well as men's. Analysis of verses like 4:34 and others is taking place in Iran, in Pakistan, in Malaysia and in other parts of the Muslim world as well as in America. The results are starting to be very interesting.

What does the Qur'an say specifically about how women should dress? While translation from the Arabic always involves interpretation, and interpretations differ, the basic injunction is that both men and women should dress modestly, and that women should draw their veils over themselves when going out in public. In fact, most Muslim women over the centuries have dressed modestly, although in very different ways according to the norms of their respective cultures.

The recent phenomenon of self-consciously adopting Islamic dress, evident in the West as well as across the Islamic world, is a very different matter. Dress has become a matter not of custom or obligation but of opportunity. The reasons some women choose to interpret the Qur'an verses on dress as a mandate for at least covering their hair have as much to do with politics as with religious responsibility. It is not a coincidence that the first evidence of an Islamic revival involving adoption of Islamic dress began shortly after the 1967 and 1973 wars in Israel/Palestine.

Muslims have been immigrating to America for the past century and to virtually all European countries for at least several decades. Among the many issues they face is that of identity. What does it mean to be Muslim in a society in which one's co-religionists represent many different countries and cultures and yet make up only a small proportion of the total society? That question is made more complicated by being female at a time when the role of women is so hotly debated. Many women, of course, are absorbed in the struggle for the survival of their family and children, and for them—often economic and political refugees—thoughts of identity are peripheral. For other women the search to discover how their Western citizenship relates to their religious and cultural identities as Muslims is crucial.

The issue of how and why Muslim women dress as they do is obviously of great interest to Americans. (I have had Muslim women tell me that they refuse to participate in Christian-Muslim dialogue anymore because the Christian women can't get past focusing on their headgear.) And it is, indeed, a significant issue for Muslim women as they formulate their identities in the Western context.

Immigrant Muslim women, who constitute well over half the female American Muslim community, often have to choose between wearing "traditional" dress from their respective cultures, adopting a new form of Islamic headgear, or simply dressing as other American women do. Women who convert to Islam—a group primarily but not exclusively African-American—usually decide that their new identity should be signaled by a new form of clothing, and especially by a head-covering. The result is that there is a great variation of choice and style. Since September 11, some of my Muslim friends who opted not to dress Islamically in earlier days are now wearing scarves, which I take to be part of the general affirmation of pride in being Muslim that has been encouraged by American Muslim leaders since that event.

The most obvious of the problems faced by women who wear Islamic dress is, of course, American prejudice. We know that while there has been a great deal of

support for Muslims since September 11, there have also been many hundreds of instances of harassment, often against Islamically dressed women. Many women report instances of prejudicial treatment in the workplace, university or other public location. They have, for example, been accused of wearing “rags” or “shrouds” on their heads. Some women who choose to wear a scarf while attending the mosque but not at other times resent the pressure from others in the Muslim community to be more consistent in their dress. Debates get complicated when those who make one choice openly criticize those who have made another.

Teenage girls may be particularly vulnerable to the response of their classmates if they begin to wear Islamically identifiable clothes. For a teenage girl in the West, wearing Islamic dress often accompanies her own decision, or that of her parents, that she not date or engage in social activities in which there is gender and interfaith mixing. Some Muslim parents insist that their daughters not be forced to participate in activities such as physical education if those activities require them to wear un-Islamic clothes, or that they not be required to go on school trips where the genders are mixed. Girls who attend Islamic schools, of which there are now nearly 400 in America, are often segregated from boys for a significant part of the educational program.

Muslims in general are shocked by what they see as the excessive secularization and liberalization of American culture, and are eager that their young people—especially girls—not be put in situations in which they might be compromised in any way. They are also concerned about intermarriage; while Islamic law allows Muslim men to marry Christians or Jews, the same is not true for women. Thus many Muslims believe that it is important to keep their girls away from social interaction with non-Muslim young men and, correspondingly, to provide Islamically acceptable contexts for girls and boys to become acquainted.

One of the new realities for Islam in America is the increasingly public ways in which women are participating in the practice of the faith. Traditionally the mosque has been the province of men. But here, for those Muslim women who choose to be actively religious, the mosque is clearly an important venue. For many years they have participated in mosque activities and now are beginning to assume positions of leadership, such as president of the congregation. For the first time the vice president of the Islamic Society of North America, the largest Muslim organization in the U.S., is a woman. Muslim women are considered “ineligible” for the role of imam, or leader of prayer, a nonordained position in Islam that is coming increasingly to

resemble the role of pastor, priest or rabbi. With few exceptions, women are not agitating to change their exclusion from this role, though some in America, as in other parts of the world, are studying religious arts such as Qur'an recitation.

Such changes in the circumstances of Muslim women do not fit the agendas of those international organizations that foster a revivalist (often erroneously called "fundamentalist") brand of Islam. While their platforms may not depend on the subjugation of women, there is little question of endorsing equal opportunity or equal access within those ideologies. Such movements differ, however, from traditional patriarchal Islam. Despite popular opinion to the contrary, most revivalist (often called Islamist) movements affirm the necessity of developing new roles for women and acknowledge that the goal of a truly Islamic society cannot be reached when women are denied participation in the public sphere. The very movements that insist on Islamic dress for women often also affirm their active roles in all levels of society. Central to such contemporary ideology is a general rejection of the West and Western "freedoms," especially those in which women's bodies are revealed and commodified. Revivalists argue that Western women are the objects not of liberation, but of sexual exploitation.

Twists and permutations of interpretation make it difficult, and probably unwise, for non-Muslims to try to determine whether or not various movements represent "progress" in Western terms. One of the signal contributions of some Muslims to the international discourse on women is to call sharp attention to the different ways in which "liberation" is to be understood and achieved. Even the more progressive Muslim women generally separate themselves from what they see as the Western feminist agenda, and are determining for themselves what are appropriate, desirable and full opportunities for them within a context that is framed by the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet and his companions. Many are dedicated to helping educate and instruct those who are disadvantaged, teaching them about everything from medical care to their rights as defined by scripture and Islamic law.

Often these women are not enthusiastic about Islamic dress, especially in its more extreme forms, although they share with their more conservative sisters a disapproval of Western "exhibitionism." Like their Islamist counterparts, they affirm the importance of women's responsibilities in the context of the larger society, but they are also deeply concerned that more conservative interpretations subsume individual women's rights under the umbrella of the good of the whole and thus may serve to negate those rights.

Whether working for Qur'anic reinterpretation, social action or legal access, Muslim women are greatly aided by new forms of international communication. Networking, which has always been a prime form of support for women, is taking on new meaning for Muslim women through the increased use of the Internet. Rapidly growing women's groups and networks provide support, information and companionship, functioning much as the extended family has functioned in traditional Muslim societies. Such support is especially important in the West, where large family structures generally do not exist. Along with the growing religious and educational resources provided by Muslim leaders, such networking is offering opportunities for women to identify common problems and to share solutions. Muslim women are increasingly able to support each other's efforts both to work for fundamental changes in their societies and to define their own identity.