

Envisioning a World Where Women Thrive

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Every year on March 8th, thousands of events are held throughout the world to celebrate women's achievements, ranging from political rallies to artistic performances and business conferences. On this day, we acknowledge women's contributions to international peace and security and recognize that societal progress requires women's full participation.

While many advances have been made in recent decades, domestic violence continues to be a major cause of death or disability among women, and the majority of the world's 1.3 billion extreme poor are female. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted at her confirmation hearing, women and girls "comprise the majority of the world's unhealthy, unschooled, unfed, and unpaid," so "half of the world's population remains vulnerable to economic, political, legal, and social marginalization." In contrast, the Holy Quran calls for gender equality as a vital part of just societies.

Right from the earliest revelations, males and females are said to be created from the exact same physical and spiritual sources (4:1, 53:44-46, 75:37-39, 92:1-3); there is no mention of God creating Eve from Adam's rib as an afterthought, as in Genesis. Islam also clears women of the charge that they are somehow responsible for introducing sin into the human race; while according to the Bible, it was woman who listened to the devil and then misled Adam by tempting him, the Quran states that it was both Adam and Eve together who were deceived by the devil (2:36, 7:22). Thus, there is no Quranic basis for characterizing women as inferior or essentially sinful. In fact, women are named as honorable recipients of Divine revelation (3:41, 28:7) and spoken of as spiritual equals throughout (4:124, 16:97, 40:40). This exemplary verse repeats ten times that women are equal to men:

Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the charitable men and the charitable women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their chastity and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah much and women who remember — Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward (33:35).

Significantly, the Qur'an repeatedly enjoins all believers to seek knowledge to their full potential. Women's rights are explicitly stated, including the right to work: "For men is the benefit of what they earn, and for women is the benefit of what they earn" (4:32); the right to inheritance: "For men is a share of what the parents and the near relatives leave, and for women a share of what the parents and the near relatives leave" (4:7); and the right to a dowry: "And give women their dowries as a free gift" (4:4; also 4:20, 4:24, 5:5). These crucial property rights empower women by enabling their financial independence and the right to divorce. Moreover, men are specifically commanded to treat women with respect and kindness: "Live with them [your wives] in kindness; even if you dislike them, perhaps you dislike something in which Allah has placed abundant good" (4:19; also 2:229). Prophet Muhammad declared, "The most excellent of you is he who is best in his treatment of his wife" (Tirmidhi 1/217). His first wife, Khadijah, was a successful businesswoman, and

his wife Aishah played a leading intellectual role in preserving his teachings after he died.

The plight of most women today is a far cry from Islamic ideals. Instead of being appreciated as Allah's gifts (42:49-50), daughters are scorned while sons are celebrated. Instead of adhering to Islamic commandments of personal accountability, tolerance and nonviolence, men regularly endanger the safety and dignity of innocent women through "honor crimes." Instead of societies that value education, illiteracy is rampant and girls are prohibited from attending school. Whereas the Quran condemns forced marriages as unlawful (4:19), they frequently occur, and marriage is not treated as a sacred, consensual contract (4:21, 2:228) based on mutual love and compassion (30:21, 2:187). Instead of being autonomous individuals, women are treated as mere property. In fact, these attitudes and practices are reminiscent of the conditions in the very same tribes that Prophet Muhammad reformed from their Dark Age, and the slavery that he sought to abolish centuries ago. As his revolutionary transformation of the Arabian social order demonstrated, Islam seeks to replace patriarchal domination with human equality, freedom of conscience, and direct allegiance to God. International Women's Day reminds us to envision a world where women thrive as equal members of society, an Islamic ideal we must strive to make reality.