Since **International Women's Day** is being celebrated today on March 8, we decided to take a deeper approach to the narrative, we hear so frequently, "How Muslims Women Are Oppressed?"

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First let us talk about the words we hear of often, **feminism and feminist**. **Barbara Ryan**, in her book, Feminism and the women's movement, defines feminism as*“a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women*”.

Even though it wasn’t until after 1970s that the word ‘**Feminism’** gained momentum there were numerous books and research papers written to seek the birth of Feminism in the late 19th and early 20th century. Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Gloria Steinem, Monique Wittig, Joanna Russ*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B* and many more contributed a lot in reassuring women’s right in their respective time period, but the question arises, “*Are they really the pioneer of**Feminism”*?

Modern day advocates of women rights, feminists, describe the movement for women rights in three waves. The ***first wave*** refers essentially to women's suffrage movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries which concerned with women's right to vote. The ***second*** ***wave*** refers to the concepts and activities associated with the women's liberation movement which began in the 1960s which campaigned for legal and social rights for women. The ***third wave*** refers to a continuation second-wave feminism due to failures in achieving set goals; this began in the 1990s.

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| Source:Reuters |

This was just a brief look at the history of feminism or at least the history we know of. Many women still face sexism every day especially in Islamic world. When Islamic world or Arab states come in to our minds, we think of Islam as the sole culprit for diminishing women’s integrity and freedom. The debate over women's rights and Islam is often politicized and riddled with stereotypes. Islam is not alone in having religious interpretations that empower men; Christian, Jewish and Buddhist women have faced same sexism in their respective sacred books in several ways. The reason being, where there are people sexism exists, and sexism within societies is reflected to social bodies: the law, politics; religion is not an exception. When religious texts are viewed through the sexist lens of the interpreter, the outcome is evident.

As the scriptures of many religions have been used to dominate women. Muslims today face a similar struggle. What would be astonishing to many is that many Muslims see the Qur’an and hadith (sayings of Islamic Prophet Muhammad) as a support for their arguments against sexism. The Muslims perspective is a little different. The history of Feminism may actually be as old as the Islam itself, i.e. 7th century. Muslim believe that the champion and pioneer of the ***Feminism*** is none other than ***Muhammad*** who, in the age of darkness, brought abundant social, economic and domestic rights for women of Arabia. He brought the women out of dilemma and gave them social status which was never given to them in any early age of mankind. Before the arrival of Islam, the women had no social rights and women accepted the oppression as if it was carved in their destiny. In the era before Islam the female infanticide was common, women had no rights in inheritance, had no right of divorce and objectified by men. Even the dower was given to father instead of wife in marriage contract between the two men as a woman was not considered being the “party” of a marriage contract. This was the worst a woman could suffer through. Then came the Islamic Prophet Muhammad who changed the way men perceived women. Before going any further discussing the reforms Muhammad did, let us tell you what other religions say about ‘**Women’**.

The demotion of the women to outside the barrier of respect in the early societies had an impact on later times as well in undermining women’s worth in the eyes of the religious theocracy. Religion has been preserving the dynamics of male power and the continued subjugation of women. The ***Bible*** establishes a ***woman's inferior status*** and her subservience to man as divinely destined. ***New Testament*** declares, *"Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection”,*

*“*Neither was man created for women, but women for man.”

**Helen H Gardener** says in Men, Women, and Gods:”

*“This religion and the Bible require of woman everything, and give her nothing. They ask her support and her love, and repay her with contempt and oppression … Every injustice that has ever been fastened upon women in a Christian country has been 'authorized by the Bible' and riveted and perpetuated by the pulpit.”*

While according to ***Elizabeth Cady Stanton***, a 19th century feminist writer, said,

*“The church and Bible have proved to be the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation."*

*This is despite the fact that conditions before the arrival of Abrahamic religions in West and Arabia were event worst. Bible’s narrative that ‘a male God sent his male child’ left little room for women’s redemption in history.*

*Let’s talk about one of the oldest religion, Hinduism. The*oldest ***Hindu*** religious scripture, Vedas, contain prejudiced passages relating to women. The religious doctrine outlined in the ***Vedas*** encourages ***female*** ***infanticide***, child marriage and the ***burning*** ***of*** ***the*** ***widow*** *(****sati****).*It considers women do not possess an identity of their own and are completely dependent on the male for protection. According to Hindu sacred texts, *cannot own property* and are unfit to study the Vedas. Girls must only marry within their respective caste, have no right to divorce and would receive death sentence if they commit adultery. The widow cannot enjoy life in public again and she is stripped of her right to marry.

**Buddhism andJainism** that protested against the ***Hindu Vedic system,*** also opposed the custom of ***Sati***. However, because they acknowledged ***asceticism***, women were considered as divergent. Buddha is said to have warned his disciples to *stay away from women* and to avoid looking at them.

What do you **Islam** says regarding women? What do you think the Islamic Prophet Muhammad used to preach? Islam and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) took a different approach. He not only believed in equality of men and women in society but he also worked to free the women of Arabia from oppression. Muhammad abolished the traditional female infanticide by labeling it a blessing rather than a curse. At that time, this was undeniably radical approach.

Muhammad, at the time when women were man’s property, gave women the *right to own the property*and fixed their right in inheritance as much as half of their male counterparts. This proportion was set because of the level of financial responsibilities of males and because women could get a share in property from her husband after marriage. In fact, Islam gave women right to divorce according to given criteria; women were made a party in marriage contract and could set their conditions for marriage and ask for dowry. The Western middle-class trend to include a prenuptial agreement in the marriage contract is completely acceptable in Islamic law. Although in some countries today the right of women to initiate divorce is difficult because of patriarchal law; it is not an expression of Islamic values. Muhammad himself frequently instructed Muslim men to treat their wives and daughters well.

Muhammad during his first marriage is reported to have shown extreme love and respect for his wife, Khadija, at the time women, especially wives, had no rights. Another argument here is why Islam does permits polygamy? Well having multiple wives was first allowed for the sake of women, orphans and widows. The only Quranic verse on polygamy was revealed after the Battle of Uhud, which led to the death of many Muslim men who left behind families in need of support thus leading to permission of polygamy on a condition that man would remain fair to all of his wives. Despite of the practice of female infanticide, the Arab women, at that time, far outnumbered men because a large number of men were killed in the inter-tribal wars which were common in that era.

Muhammad is reported to have said*,”… If I had to order someone to prostrate than I would have ordered women to prostrate to their husbands. Because God has established a right of men over their women.”*

Wait what? Did the only truly monotheist faith is giving men a go ahead to dominate their women like God dominates them? While as a background for this hadith, saying of Prophet, is that a person saw some people prostrating in front of their kings and leaders. So this was Muhammad’s answer to him as husband have more authority over wives than kings have over their people but prostrating is forbidden. Still people would be like why not equality be ween men and women?

*“And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women."*Holy Quran

Islam believes in specific gender roles and talks about equity rather than equality because women and men differ psychologically, biologically and physically. Women have all the basic human rights but husband is supposed to help his wife in household work, provide her with financial support and treat her with kindness. While women may choose to work but only if necessary.

Muhammad was the biggest advocate of women’s education and promoted the equal educational opportunity for men and women. He said, “*Acquisition of knowledge is binding on all Muslims (both men and women without any discrimination*)”

In Islam's early period, women were professionals and property owners, as many are today. When we think of the role of women at the time of Muhammad, the thought that often comes to mind of every Muslim is of prominent historical figures such as Sumayah - the first female martyr in the early days of Islam, Khawla bint al-Azwar – a leading Muslim warrior, Nusaybah - a female companion who fought heroically with her family to protect Muhammad in a battle, Aaisha - his wife who became a great teacher of hadith, poetry and medicine, Khadija – a prominent businessman, his daughter Fatimah who helped him throughout his life in every field and many more. In fact as part of culture male child carries the lineage but in this case Muhammad’s lineage was carried by her daughter Fatimah. Also, first convert to Islam was a female. As the father of four daughters in a society that cherished sons, he told fathers of the time that, if their daughters spoke well of them on the Day of Judgment, they would enter paradise.

Muhammad married many times. Isn’t it unfair to other wives? In some cases, these marriages occurred in order to strengthen political ties, according to the custom of the day. In some cases, the marriage provided physical and economic shelter to the widows of Muslims who had died or who had been killed in battle. Only one of his wives had not been previously married.
The usual belief in the modern monogamous West that Islam encourages lustful marriages is rejected by Muslims themselves as a vague stereotype.

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| Reuters |

Why do we even compare Islam to the West? Western society in although better but it is not perfect and also a result of different culture. While West may seem to believe that women must use their sexuality in a positive way Islam tries to conceal it. The common black cloak Muslim women, especially [Arabs](https://almuhalil.blogspot.com/2018/11/saudi-arabia-challenges-ahead-for.html), wear is seen as a threat to women’s liberation. Islam orders women to cover themselves including their hairs which many other religions do. Not once it mentions the type of clothing or the color but just the word ‘modest’. Black is just a preferred choice or perhaps a part of culture. The ban on niqab or burqa (black cloak) in France is in fact questionable as it takes away women right to wear as they prefer.

Howsoever, the problems currently being faced by the women are due to ignorance and lack of Islamic knowledge, misinterpretation of Islamic text (Quran & Hadith) and cultural interventionism. The Arab and Islamic culture are different in many ways. Furthermore, the Muslims of subcontinent have had lived with Hindus for centuries so their Islamic traditions, customs and beliefs have been distorted terrible.

One of the central criticisms of the sexism experienced by Muslim women is that it is inherent to Islam. Yet many Muslim women feel different. In a study of American, religious Christian and Muslim women, researchers found that:

*It was typical for Muslim women to report that their religion supported feminism and, interestingly, it was typical of Christian women to report that their religion does not support feminist ideals.*

*Most of the Christian women in this study rejected the label of feminist, but espoused feminist values. In contrast, most of the Muslim women were willing to endorse the label of feminist, and actually identified Islam as a feminist religion.*

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| Source: Reuters |

Despite significant progress there is still a long way to go to close the wide gender-gap. According to the World Economic Forum ([WEF](https://www.weforum.org/press/2018/12/108-years-wait-for-gender-equality-gets-longer-as-women-s-share-of-workforce-politics-drops/)), the gender gap will take at least 108 years to close, and 202 years for economic gender parity at the current pace of change. Women in many countries are still victims of female genital mutilation, have no right to pass on their citizenship to their children and are paid much less than men. One in three women is likely to face violence in her lifetime, yet public transport systems are rarely planned with women's safety and mobility in mind according to the UN. At least 740 million women make their living in the informal economy with limited access to social protection, public services and infrastructure that could increase their productivity and income security. Women do 2.6 times more unpaid care and domestic work than men, with only 41 percent of the world's mothers with newborns receiving maternity benefits, says the UN.

We need to stop blaming Islam for all the mess we are in. We may continue to fool ourselves if we believe western society has put an end to sexism. Even today women are supposed to be gentle, have a slim waist, a perfect face that is not too dark or of light complexion, walk and talk decently while men, well they are fine in any way. Women must smile not too hard or not at all but just a perfect proportion. Women are judged if they do not have a perfect make-up, perfect clothes etc.; and when you say that you support women’s rights you are dropped an F-bomb and labelled a **Feminist**. For this reason people feel so insecure when calling themselves a ‘feminist’ but almost everyone calls out for equality.  We tried to cover most of the points relating feminism and Islam. Do send us your feedback or ask questions if you think we missed a point.