

CHAPTER 33

Marriage and Family in Islam

“The family provides the environment within which human values and morals develop and grow in the new generation. The family system and the relationships between the sexes determine the whole character of society and whether it is backward or civilized.”

— Sayyid Qutb, modern Muslim reformer

The family

Muslims regard the family as an institution ordained by God. For this reason the Koran deals more with family life than with any other subject.

The Muslim family does not consist solely of the mother and father plus children. It is a complex, interwoven unit that includes brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins. If tragedy hits any relative or even a member of a neighbor's household, the family is expected to rally round and give support during the time of need.

Every member of the family has a clearly defined role and responsibilities. Special honor is given to the elders. In Muslim families age comes first, and grandparents take priority over children, who are taught to be respectful and considerate.



He who has no compassion for our little ones and does not acknowledge the honor due to our elders is not one of us.

— Hadith

Great importance is laid upon the training and education of all Muslim children. This process begins when a child is born. The head of the family whispers the call to prayer into the baby's ear so that the first word he hears is "Allah." As children grow up, parents teach them the manners expected of them in their religion and the society in which they live. The source of authority is custom and tradition reinforced by the extended family.

Instructions to children:

- ✗ Be patient, grateful, compassionate, respectful and kind to your parents.
- ✗ Listen when parents speak. Do not interrupt or argue with them.
- ✗ It is impolite to call your parents by their first names.
- ✗ If your parents ask something that you cannot fulfill, apologize politely.
- ✗ Help your parents without being asked.
- ✗ When parents become old, be aware of their increased physical weakness and possible mental weakness. Be aware, and increase your patience and kindness.

Instructions to parents:

- ✗ Avoid overconfidence and false pride arising from your love for your children, and be on guard against misdeeds.
- ✗ Give them the best possible education, not just to be clever but also to be able to earn a living.
- ✗ Help them to make happy marriages.
- ✗ Always treat them justly and with love. Never be unfair.
- ✗ Don't be overprotective or negligent.
- ✗ Don't put heavy burdens on them by trying to force them to do things beyond their capability.
- ✗ Train them to be Muslims.

Men and women

Islam teaches that Allah created everything in complementary pairs, and for this reason men and women have equal spiritual worth. This was a tremendous advance on the pre-Islamic era in which women were regarded as little more than chattel and could be commanded as fathers or husbands pleased. Daughters had no inheritance rights and often were buried alive in their infancy.

The principle of equality before Allah gave great rights and freedoms to women at a time when they were considered to be inferior beings. But Islam does take account of the physical differences between the sexes. The idea of ending the difference between the roles of men and women is unthinkable to Muslims. They have observed the catastrophic consequences for sexual morality and consequent family breakdown that have occurred in societies where traditional roles have been rejected.

By sanctifying the institution of marriage, Islam made its greatest contribution to the lives of women:

- ✗ Marriage became the sole legitimate place for sexual relationships.
- ✗ A woman has to give her free consent before she may be wed.
- ✗ The marriage bond was strengthened and just provision was made in case of divorce, which also can be initiated by the wife.
- ✗ Women were given the right to own and inherit property.

Wife and mother

A Muslim woman's primary role is that of wife and mother. She manages the household, raises the children, and supervises their religious and moral training. Although a Muslim woman is permitted to go out to work, in practice not many do so. Nevertheless, in the modern world more and more Muslim women receive higher education, as they take up their right to equality with men.

Muslim women behave and dress modestly. When in public, women try not to draw attention to themselves. If

they catch a man's eye, they do not stare at him but look away.

Muslim women usually cover their heads with some kind of scarf or veil. They cover their arms to the wrists and their legs to the ankles. This is called wearing *hijab*. The wearing of the black *chador*, or veil covering the face, is a matter of local custom and is not a requirement of Islam. Problems arise in modernizing Muslim societies when women may be forced to wear such garments against their will.

When a woman becomes a mother, she takes on an enormous responsibility. In allowing her body to produce a new living being, she should bear in mind the inalienable rights of every child:

- ✗ The right to life, and equal chances in life.
- ✗ The right to legitimacy—which means that every child should have a legal father.
- ✗ The right to a good and loving upbringing.

Husband and father

Despite the equality that the Koran gives to men and women, in Muslim societies men take the dominant roles in most of the social, religious and political institutions.

A man's social standing, though, is initially largely dependent on his being a good husband and father.

The father is head of the family and is responsible for the family's welfare and business outside the home. The man is expected to provide the means for the family to live and fulfill its responsibilities to the wider community as well as to protect the home and generally to enable his wife to fulfill her role.



Modesty and faith are joined closely together; if either of them is lost, the other goes also. Every religion has a special character; the character of Islam is modesty.

— Hadith

The best gift that a father gives to his children is that of a good education and manners.

— Hadith

Marriage

Muslims regard marriage as the normal human status for all adults. Marriage is regarded as a sacred covenant, a legal contract not simply between two individuals but between two families. It is quite normal in Muslim countries for relatives outside the immediate family, such as cousins, to marry. This makes the extended family very close.

[H]e created you mates that you may dwell in tranquility with them and he has put love and mercy between your hearts ...

— Koran 30:21

We created you from a simple pair of a male and a female ... that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other).

— Koran 49:13

Islam teaches that the spiritual and physical desires that everyone has should be fulfilled in a wholesome and pure way without excess and without causing suffering. Muslims believe that sex is good but that sexual pleasure pursued without regard to moral considerations is unwholesome. It degrades sex and corrupts the people that engage in it. Such permissiveness leads to the breakdown of society, to selfishness, rape, lying and deception, lack of responsibility, alcohol and drug addiction, theft and even murder.

That is why Islam prohibits any type of privacy between couples who are not married to each other. Muslims do not believe that sexual freedom before a commitment to marriage contributes anything to the future stability of that marriage. The assumption that the couple will have “tried each other out” and so will “know” each other is nonsense to Muslims. In societies in which sexual freedom is tolerated, many marriages fail and divorce rates are very high. Muslims would not welcome mar-

When a husband and wife share intimacy, it is rewarded, and a blessing from Allah; just as they would be punished if they engaged in illicit sex.

— Hadith





riage to a partner who had experienced many previous “trial encounters,” because they might quite easily seek other “trials” even after marriage.

Arranged marriages

Marriages for young Muslim couples are often arranged by their parents. For Muslims marriage is not just about two people starting a new family, but rather the joining together of existing families. Although both partners must freely consent to the marriage, parents help their children to choose.

The Prophet said, “A woman should only be married to a person who is good enough for her or compatible to her.”

— Hadith

Muslims think that parents know their children and, as married people themselves, know what kind of qualities are necessary for a good marriage. Muslims regard “being under the influence of love” as a dangerous and intoxicating state of mind that can easily cloud their judgment. Although for Muslim couples love usually comes after marriage and not before, the divorce rate in Muslim countries is very low.

Potential Muslim couples get to know each other in order to find out each other’s qualities and to discover whether there is a basis for mutual understanding. They see each other before marriage so that feelings of love, companionship and closeness develop. They are not on their own but are chaperoned, often by one of their brothers. Courtship is only the first step toward marriage and may not always end in marriage. Therefore a woman’s reputation and chastity have to be protected.

Do not marry only for a person’s looks; their beauty may become the cause of moral decline. Do not marry for wealth, for this may become the cause of disobedience. Marry rather on the grounds of religious devotion.

— Hadith

The most important ingredients in a Muslim marriage are shared values and beliefs, so that even if the couple come from different cultures and backgrounds, they possess the same basic worldview, attitudes and habits which bind them together. The most important compatibility is one of heart.

Although Muslims often marry a relative, interracial and international marriages are not unusual. This is because the Islamic family, the *ummah*, crosses the boundaries of race and nationality. People are Muslims first and only secondly are they members of a particular nation or tribe.

The wedding

The actual wedding ceremony usually takes place in the home of the bride. Sometimes the bride and bridegroom take their marriage vows in each other’s hearing, but at other times they remain in different places, so witnesses hear the vows and pass word to the partner that the promises have been made. The bride and bridegroom make their vows in the presence of two adult male witnesses. Prayers are said, passages are read from the Koran and the vows are made. Rings are exchanged and a marriage contract is drawn up and signed.

The best of treasures is a good wife. She is pleasing to her husband's eyes, obedient to his word, and watchful over his possessions in his absence; and the best of you are those who treat their wives best.

— Hadith

The most detestable act that God has permitted is divorce.

— Hadith

Within a few days of the wedding a party called the *walima* is given for all friends and family. It usually consists of a sumptuous feast, and many presents are given.

Divorce

Although Islam upholds the sanctity of marriage and the need for its continuance and permanence, it also recognizes that not every marriage will be successful. Therefore Islam, although strongly discouraging it, allows for divorce as a last resort.

Before there is a divorce, all members of both families try to bring about a reconciliation, since the ending of a marriage is almost like death. However, the divorce process itself is quick and easy and the woman is provided for fairly. Despite the ease with which Muslims can divorce, the divorce rate is actually extremely low.

Adultery

Muslims regard adultery as the most dishonorable and shameful thing a person can do. It is a serious crime because it can cause the breakup of one if not two families. The hurt and betrayal it causes are so deep that it is almost impossible to be forgiven for it.

Have nothing to do with adultery, for it is a shameful thing and an evil opening the way to other evils.

— Koran 17:32

Therefore Muslim men are forbidden to tempt married women, and a wife should never willingly betray her husband's trust. A good wife would prefer death to dishonor.



Polygamy

There has been much misunderstanding of the Islamic view of polygamy. Islam permits a limited polygamy, but it does not encourage it. The ideal Muslim family is one husband and one wife, and nearly all Muslim marriages are monogamous. However, Muslim men are permitted to have up to four wives, but only on certain conditions:

- ✗ the first wife should give permission
- ✗ later wives must not be a cause of distress
- ✗ all wives must be treated equally

Since the last stipulation is virtually impossible to keep, Muslims often say that when Muhammad made this stipulation, he was really saying that men should have only one wife.

Situations in which a man may take a second wife are:

- ✗ if the first marriage does not produce children;
- ✗ if the first wife is so unwell that she as well as the husband and children need to be looked after.

Muslims point out that men in Western countries practice “serial polygamy” by having one wife after another, and also sire many fatherless children. Muslims think it would be better to have polygamy than a society full of one-parent families and abandoned older women. However, as mentioned before, monogamy is without question the Islamic ideal.

Something to think about



- How important do you think it is for a person to marry someone who shares the same religious beliefs?
- What do you think of the division of roles between husband and wife?
- Why do Muslims think it is better for the family if mothers stay at home?
- What does equality in marriage mean?
- How does the rare Muslim practice of polygamy compare with having one wife after another?
- What is the role of a Muslim father in the family? Do you think it is good for the man to take responsibility for his household?
- Explain why Muslims think that permissiveness is so destructive. How does promiscuity lead to the breakdown of society and the corruption of values?
- Can you think of any reasons why arranged marriages, such as those found among Muslims, often survive longer than love matches?

On Marriage

by Kahlil Gibran

Then Almitra spoke again and said,
And what of marriage, Master?
And he answered saying:
You were born together, and together
you shall be forevermore.
You shall be together
when the white wings of death scatter your days.
Ay, you shall be together
even in the silent memory of God.
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond of love.
Let it rather be a moving sea
between the shores of your souls.
Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.
Give one another of your bread
but eat not from the same loaf.
Sing and dance together and be joyous,
but let each one of you be alone.
Even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same music.

Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.
For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.
And stand together yet not too near together:
For the pillars of the temple stand apart.
And the oak tree and the cypress
grow not in each other's shadow.