Frequently Asked Questions about Islam and Women in Islam

By Dr. Monia Mazigh, 2018

Please note that this is a document “under construction”, I will keep updating it and improving it. The definitions provided here are somehow short and oversimplified for the purpose of explanation.

Q: What is Islam?

A: Islam is a monotheistic religion. It is a religion that follows in the footsteps of Judaism and Christianity.

Islam is the religion.
Muslims are the people who believe in Islam.
Islamic is an adjective: Islamic dress, Islamic civilisation, Islamic art...
Islamist is a new word used frequently today in media when referring to people following Political Islam, which calls for using Islam as a political message.

Allah is simply the Arabic word for God. It is not anyhow different than the god of Jews of the god of Christians.

Q: Is Islam exclusively a religion for Arabs?

Islam is a universal religion sent to humanity and not to a specific people. Arabic is the language used by Muhammad and the Arabs at his time. But today, there are Muslims of all ethnicities, who speak different kinds of languages.

The majority of Muslims are not Arab-speakers. Indonesia is one of the largest Muslim countries in the world. It has about 250 millions Muslims and their main language isn't Arabic.

Arab is a race. It is not a religion. There are Muslims who are Arabs and there are Muslims who are not.

There are Arabs who are Christians and not Muslims, example in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, where there are large and old Christian communities.
What is the Quran?

The Quran is the Islamic holy book. Muslims believe that Quran is the word of God. Revealed to Prophet Muhammad (570 CE-632 CE) when he was in Mecca (in today’s Saudi Arabia) and later in Medina (a city about 500km away from Mecca) through the Archangel Gabriel.

The revelation was spread over about 23 years. Quran is originally in Arabic. Today, it is translated to many languages.

Prophet Muhammad was about 40 years old when he received the first revelation while he was in a Mountain cave near Mecca. His wife Khadija was the first believer. She supported him morally and financially until her death.

Quran is formed of chapters: they are called Surat in Arabic. Each chapter has a title. Examples: Surat
Each Surat has a certain number of Ayas or verses. Some Surats are long (4-5 pages) others are short only few 4-5 verses

What are the five pillars of Islam?

- Believe in the God is the only God and that Prophet Muhammad is a prophet of God
- Praying five time a day to God: Early morning, around noon, in the afternoon, at sunset and before going to bed. In Prayers, Muslims recite some Quran verses and ask God for forgiveness and mention the bounty and mercy of God. Each prayer is about 3-4 minutes.
- Fasting the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the 10th lunar month of each year. Because Muslims uses lunar calendar, the months are not fixed each year. For example, this year Ramadan will start on May 27th, 2017, last year it was June 6th 2016. Each year, it goes back of 12 days.
- Giving Zakat. Zakat is a sort of alms giving and tax intended to help the poor. It is a mandatory percentage of someone’s savings that is distributed yearly to the poor.
- Going for pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime for people who can afford it financially and physically. These rituals of Hajj are a celebration of Prophet Abraham and his wife Hajar who went to Arabia and from their descendants Islam emerged and Prophet Muhammad came
Muslims believe in all the biblical prophets: Noah, Abraham, Isaacs, Ismael, Moses, Jesus… They respect them and each time they mention their names they say: Peace be upon them.

Muslims believe that Jesus is not god or the son of God. It is mentioned in the Quran that Jesus was born to Marie (Mariam in Arabic) as a miracle from God. Muslims believes that Jesus was not crucified, as God doesn't allow his messengers to suffer horribly. In Islam, God said that Jesus was ascended by God to heaven to avoid being crucified. Another person who looked like Jesus was crucified instead.

Marie is a respected female figure for Muslims. There is only a whole Surat in the Quran named after a woman and it is Surat Mariam.

**Do Muslims worship Muhammad?**

Islam is not about worshiping any prophet or any individual. Only God is worshiped. Muhammad isn't worshiped by Muslims. However, Muslims are strongly encouraged to respect him, love him and emulate his deeds and actions.

**Is Muhammad a pedophile?**

Many people attack Islam and Muhammad by mentioning that Muhammad is a pedophile because he married his wife Aisha when she was 9 years old.

First of all it should be noted, that there are many recent studies pointing that Aisha wasn’t 9 years but rather around 17 years old when she married Muhammad.

Second, one should remember that those early marriages were not uncommon at those times. The standards were to marry really young. Moreover, Aisha was the daughter of the best friend and companion of Muhammad, Abu Bakr. It was an alliance to strengthen those ties between tribes and clan in that society. All the other wives Muhammad married were women of certain age who were widowed or divorcees.

Also, many kings and monarchs from France and Britain, married very young wives.

Examples:
Henry IV (14th century) fathered a child at the age of 15.
The youngest mother to give birth to a monarch was Lady Margaret Beaufort (15th century), wife of Edmund Tudor, who was 13 when she gave birth to Henry VII.

**Is there such a thing called honour killing in Islam?**

NO. Honour killing happens in traditional society: India, Afghanistan, Jordan… Some of these societies are Muslims and some others are not.
Are there forced marriages in Islam?

NO. Marriage is a consensual relation in Islam. It is a contract between a man and woman. The contract should be done in front of a third party witnesses.

The woman needs to see the man she is marrying and give her approval to marry him.

In the old tradition: the woman marrying for the first time can give her consent to her guardian usually the father.

If the woman was previously married, she has to give her own verbal and explicit consent.

However, in many Muslim countries marriages used to be arranged marriages by the families.

Is divorce allowed in Islam?

Yes. Divorce is discouraged but permitted in Islam. The husband or the wife can initiate a divorce. The reasons can be as incompatibility of personalities, lack of responsibility, sexual problems, and financial problems...

In practice, many Muslim countries give men right to divorce but make it is hard for women to divorce. Many women, caught in abusive marriages, won’t seek divorce because they have a precarious financial status.

What is Hadith?

Hadith collection is considered as an important source for Islamic knowledge and legal views. They are accounts of the verbal and physical teachings and traditions of Muhammad. That tradition is refereed to Sunnah. Hadiths were compiled several generations after his death by notable individuals. These individuals went and asked the companions of the prophets about what they have heard from the prophet when he was alive.
What is Sharia?

Literally, the term means "way" or "path"; it is the legal framework within which the public and some private aspects of life are regulated for those living in a legal system based on Islam. Simply speaking, Sharia is the Islamic law.

Today when people hear about Sharia they think of hands cut and women stoned.

Sharia include all the legal opinions on family laws, business law, criminal law... It is based on the interpretations of Quran, on the Sunnah and all the jurisprudence built over the years regarding issues.

What is a fatwa?
Fatwa is a legal opinion. Fatwa are given when there is no religious text about a certain matter.

Do all Muslim countries use Sharia?
No. Saudi Arabia and Iran use sharia law. But for instance, countries like Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey and many others Muslims countries, don’t follow sharia law. However, some of their family law is inspired by Islamic law, like marriage, divorce, inheritance rights...

Are women oppressed in Islam?
There are many verses in Quran emphasizing on equality between men and women.

Unfortunately, the reality of many Muslim women is totally different today. There is oppression, illiteracy, abuse, sexual harassment, and discrimination...
One cannot attribute those social problems to Islam. Culture and traditions are much stronger and entrenched in people live than religion.

Unfortunately, Islam is used and interpreted by some religious leaders to perpetuate injustice toward Muslim women. Many Muslim women are challenging those traditions and empowering themselves with what Islam really said about women and their status as equal human beings to men.

Chapter 3, verse 195

"Their Lord responded to them: "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female - you are equal to one another. Thus, those who immigrate, and get evicted from their homes, and are persecuted because of Me, and fight and get killed, I will surely remit their sins and admit them into gardens with
"flowing streams."

**Chapter 4, verse 124**

“As for those who lead a righteous life, male or female, while believing, they enter Paradise; without the slightest injustice”.

**Chapter 16, verse 97**

“Anyone who works righteousness, male or female, while believing, we will surely grant them a happy life in this world, and we will surely pay them their full recompense (on the Day of Judgment) for their righteous works.”

**Chapter 33, verse 35**

“The submitting men, the submitting women, the believing men, the believing women, the obedient men, the obedient women, the truthful men, the truthful women, the steadfast men, the steadfast women, the reverent men, the reverent women, the charitable men, the charitable women, the fasting men, the fasting women, the chaste men, the chaste women, and the men who commemorate GOD frequently, and the commemorating women; GOD has prepared for them forgiveness and a great recompense.”

**Chapter 40, verse 40**

“Whoever commits a sin is requited for just that, and whoever works righteousness - male or female - while believing, these will enter Paradise wherein they receive provisions without any limits.”

**Chapter 49, verse 13**

“O people, we created you from the same male and female, and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes, that you may recognize one another. The best among you in the sight of GOD is the most righteous. GOD is Omniscient, Cognizant.”

**Are Muslim Women financially dependent on Men?**

When a Muslim woman marries, she keeps her money for her own needs and for her own interest. Her husband can’t force her to pay the bills. It is the husband who has to be financial responsible of his household. A woman in Islam keeps her own name and doesn’t change her name to her husband’s.
What does Islam say about a man beating his wife?

There is ONE controversial verse in Quran about “beating wives”. The verse, in Chapter 4, verse 34, uses the word “Daraba” which literally means “hit” but also can have other meanings.

“Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High Exalted, Great.”

Translation by Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*

Please note that the 2007 translation *The Sublime Quran* by Laleh Bakhtiar translates *iḍribūhunna* not as 'beat them' but as 'go away from them'. The introduction to her translation discusses the linguistic and sharia reasons in Arabic for understanding this verb in context. The Prophet never beat his wives, and his example from the Sunnah informs the interpretation of this verse. This interpretation is supported by the fact that some other verses, such as 4:101 which contains word *darabtum* (derivation from *daraba*), demonstrate also the interpretation of Arabic word *daraba* to have meaning 'going' or 'moving'...

What does Islam say about Polygyny?

Chapter 4, verse 3

“And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice].”

Polygyny is allowed in Islam. But there is a condition to it.

Men aren't allowed to have more than four wives at the same time AND they have to be fair financially and morally to their wives. If they can't (which is almost impossible to be fair) then Islam recommends that a man should stick to ONE wife.

Some Muslim scholars think that polygyny was made legal in the Quran because it was practiced and normal at those times and banning would have been so difficult. Also, during wars, many men died and polygyny was so convenient as a social welfare tool to help the widows and the orphans.
Today, there are some Muslims countries who moved to ban polygyny and other to limit it to special circumstances (social, health...)

**Why some Muslim women wear hijab?**

Today people hear a lot about Hijab, Burqa, Niqab.

In Quran, there is a verse explicitly advising women AND men to be modest. Hijab isn’t an order by men to women. Hijab is a recommendation by God to women. So women who feel strongly about pleasing God would conform. Others, wouldn’t.

Muslim women who do not wear Hijab are not sinners or bad women, they have other views and other ways to live and practice their faith.

Hair is part of woman beauty and covering it and wearing not sexualized cloth is more like etiquette between men and women in Islam.

Men also need to be modest. They shouldn’t wear tight cloth that reveals their virility.

However, both men and women are not prevented to dress clean and nice cloth and take care of their appearance.

At home, a woman is not asked to have hijab in front of her husband, her children, her female relatives or female friends.

A woman wears hijab in front of her males relatives that she can official marry or in front of male strangers in general.

Hijab shouldn’t be understood that a woman is a temptress and by covering her hair she is helping the men to tame their sexual desires.

Men and women are responsible of their sexual desires and they have to direct them in a proper way. By both dressing modestly in the public arena, Islam would like to make the public sphere “asexual” and leave the sexual side as a private matter.

Hijab is a religious requirement for woman and not to help men remain chaste.

Chapter 24, verse 30
“Say to the believing men that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them.”

Chapter 24, verse 31
“Say to the believing women that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste) and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms…”

Khumur is the plural word of khimar. It means a piece of cloth that covers the head.

Is Niqab a religious requirement?

Niqab is when a woman covers her body and even her face with a garment called Niqab.
There is a minority view in Muslim scholars that Niqab is a religious requirement. But the majority of Muslims scholars consider only hijab to be a religious requirement.

Isn’t true that Islam is a religion that spread with the sword?

In some regions, the local population became Muslims after they lost the wars with Muslims. However, people who wanted to keep their religions were allowed.

In the majority of the regions who are today Muslims, the local population became Muslims because they engaged in trade relations with Muslims merchants and there were no battles involved or wars. Examples: Indonesia, China, African countries...

Is Islam a violent religion?

Violence isn’t exclusive to any religion. There are always social, financial, political forces that cause violence and wars.

During the life of the Prophet, there was the Mecca time and the Medina time.

After Prophet Muhammad received the Revelation in Mecca, he had few followers who embraced Islam. The majority of his clan and other tribes rejected his message. He didn't force people to follow him.

When the persecution of Muhammad and his followers by the rest of the population in Mecca became so intense and violent, God ordered Muhammad to migrate to another city: Medina.

Muhammad and his followers migrated to Mecca. That migration is called “Hijra”. That was an important milestone in Islam. It corresponded to the year 622 CE. Muslims start counting their civilization from that year. This year, we are in year 1437 hijri.
In Medina, the population was nicer and more open to Islam. Gradually, many of the inhabitants of Medina embraced Islam.

Later, when people of Mecca, realized that Muhammad was gaining momentum and many people were embracing Islam, they started waging wars on Mohammad and Muslims. Mohammed formed an army and fought along the Muslims in those battles.

Few years before his death, Muhammad took over Mecca with his army. He didn’t order the executions of those who waged war against him all those years. He ordered them free.

During his lifetime, Mohammad sent armies to empires like Sasanian Empire and Byzantine Empire. He invited them to Islam and later, there were battles between Muslims and those empires.

**What does Islam say about homosexuality?**

As in Judaism and Christianity, homosexuality isn’t accepted in Islam.

Islam considers that only a man and a woman are allowed to marry and have sexual relationship.

**How about Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), is it part of Islam?**

No. Female Genital Mutilation is not part of Islam. It is an old tradition practiced in some regions especially in Africa. It is practiced by Muslims AND non Muslims alike. Islam doesn’t inhibit individuals, man and woman, to have sexual desires.

**What are Sunnis and Shias?**

Sunnii is a word used to refer to Muslims who follow the Sunnah (tradition) of the prophet Muhammad.

Shia is a word used to refer to the followers of Ali. Ali is the cousin of the prophet and the fourth caliph in Islam who had a disagreement at his time with some other Muslim leaders.

From that political disagreement, both groups emerged.

Very simply:
- Sunnis believe that the caliph (successor to the prophet) can only be an Arab from the tribe of Quraish (the tribe of prophet Muhammad).

- Shias believe that only a descendant of the prophet Muhammad can be eligible to become a caliph.

Over the last 14 centuries (since Islam emerged), these two groups developed different interpretation of Islamic law. They also fought fiercely between each other.