

In the U.A.E., a Friday Sermon on Women

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In the United Arab Emirates, a Friday sermon that was distributed to be read out in all the mosques in the country some time ago was about “the equal role of women in Islam.”

Here it is:

Mosque-goers will be told that Islam gave women their rights, and they have gone on to do great things.

God has placed men and women in equal positions, as counterparts to each other in duties, rulings and performing good deeds, the sermon will tell worshippers on Friday.

Women are mentioned throughout the Quran. One instance is in the start of Surat An-Nisaa (Chapter of women): “Oh mankind,

fear you Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women.” (An-Nisaa: 1) Prophet Mohammed said: “Indeed, women are the partners of men.”

When it comes to actions, men and women are judged equally – as is mentioned by God in the Quran.

“Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while they are a believer – We will surely cause them to live a good life and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do.” (An-Nahl: 97).

When men and women are judged equally in Islam, that is, by the same standard, then there must be something very wrong with women, because according to a famous hadith, the Muslim hell is filled overwhelmingly with women.

Here is the hadith that occurs in both Bukhari and Muslim:

‘It was narrated from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) that women will form the majority of the people of Hell. It was narrated from ‘Imran ibn Husayn that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “I looked into Paradise and I saw that the majority of its people were the poor. **And I looked into Hell and I saw that the majority of its people are women.**” (Narrated by al-Bukhari, 3241; Muslim, 2737)

Islam attributes many special privileges to women. One of them is the right to protect her financial earnings.

It sounds as if this “special privilege” – for women to be able to keep their earnings – is available only in Islam. But that is false: in Christianity and Judaism, women are also allowed to keep what they earn. The statement ought to have read: “As in many other religions, in Islam a women is allowed

to keep her own earnings.” That, however, would fatally vitiate the attempt to make a special claim for Islam, in the financial independence it supposedly granted women..

Islam also made it obligatory for women to be granted part of an inheritance, as specified in the Quran: “for men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much – an obligatory share.” (An-Nisaa: 7).

But left carefully unsaid is that a daughter is granted only one-half the inheritance that is granted a son. Did those who wrote this sermon think the mosque audience would have forgotten that?

Women’s right to education, at a time when they were solely considered homemakers, was also safeguarded by Islam.

How were a woman’s “right to education” safeguarded in early Islam? What schools did they go to? Was little Aisha sent to school? Did girls attend madrasas? And from the early 7th century until now, what has been the experience of Muslim women over 1400 years, if not of substandard or non-existent schooling? We need only look at the practice of Muslims today to draw some conclusions about the educational opportunities for Muslim women. In what Muslim country have girls been given opportunities for schooling anything like those available to boys? Nowhere. What percentage of Muslim women attend college, as compared to the percentage of Muslim men? Women may have a “right” to education, but there are many different levels and kinds of education. We would have to find out how Muslim women fare in the amount of education they normally receive. Around the globe, Muslim men have, according to a Pew Center study, received an average of 6.4 years of education, while Muslim women have an average of 4.9 years. Muslim women in higher education are discouraged from studying certain subjects,

especially in science and engineering, that are deemed more fitting for men, but are channeled into the study of subjects thought more appropriate for women, such as literature and history. **Such discouragement is islamically justified, for according to Muhammad, women are “deficient in intelligence.”**

In some Muslim countries, women are confined to women-only campuses, as in Saudi Arabia and Iran. When it comes to the study of Islam itself, with 1.6 billion Muslims, how many religious scholars are women? How many imams are women? **For 1400 years, there were no woman imams, and the first one, Amina Wadud, appeared only in 2005, in the United States.** She was subject to worldwide condemnation by mainstream Muslims. She now preaches – under strict security – to a mixed congregation in Berlin. A bare handful of women – under two dozen – are now known to have delivered Friday sermons since Amina Wadud. For daring to do this, they have been attacked by both conservative and mainstream clerics, and even been subject to death threats.

The Quran mentions many women as examples of strong role models. Among them is Sayida Mariam (Mary) the mother of Isa (Jesus). Another is Queen Balqees (the queen of Sheba) who was known for her wisdom and rigorous decisions.

One of the first women mentioned in the history of Islam is Khadija bint Khuwailid. She was the first to believe in the Prophet, helped him in his cause and supported him with her wealth after she became his wife. Her daughter, Fatima bint Mohammed set another example in defending her father and supporting her husband.

What does the financial and other support Muhammad received from Khadija have to do with the position of women as set out in the Qur'an and Hadith? Muhammad still endorsed beating of disobedient wives, still insisted on polygyny, still hit Aisha in her chest until she was in pain, still delighted in the

killing of his female enemies, still took female sex slaves, still considered women as “deficient in intelligence.” He was happy to have the financial support of Khadija, but this did not affect his dim view of women.

*Worshippers will be told that Islam has opened all the doorways of goodness for women to play a positive role in building society and women have seized this opportunity and many of them became innovators. **The idea for the first pulpit made for the Prophet came from a woman and the pulpit went on to become an integral part of all mosques.***

One is tempted to ask the sermon-writers what “innovations” Muslim women have been responsible for over the past 1,400 years. The sermon mentions exactly one: the “idea for the first pulpit,” the minbar, is described as an “innovation” by a woman. But surely the mosque pulpit merely copies the pulpit already in use in Christian churches. Furthermore, nowhere online can one find a source for the claim that the first minbar owes its existence to a woman.

Women have left their remarkable footprints in every walk of life, the sermon will say, before enjoining worshippers to pray to Allah to bless, protect and honor them in this world and in the Hereafter.

Can a single example – or two, or three – be given of Muslim women leaving “their remarkable footprints in every walk of life”? Any famous scientists, artists, thinkers among them? I can think only of one, the architect Zaha Hadid. One in 1,400 years, or even ten (were another nine to be found), is not exactly overwhelming.

Why was it deemed necessary to publish, and to offer this as the text to be used (“the sermon will say”) in all the UAE mosques, for the Friday sermon on women? It is precisely because women have not been, and are not, treated equally in

Islam, that by such sermons – that studiously ignore the deep misogyny of the Qur'an and Hadith – the UAE authorities hope to convince men to treat women better. Were women truly equal in Islam, none of this would have been necessary. In order to perform this task, a great deal in the Islamic texts has had to be omitted, beginning with Qur'an 4:34, where men are told they may “beat” their wives if they are disobedient.

Here is just some of what that Sermon left out, from the Qur'an and Hadith, that tell quite a different tale about the position of women in Islam.

One of the most common questions asked by Muslims at online sites, answered by Islamic experts, is:

Does Islam allow a man to hit his wife?

Yes, but only if she doesn't do as he asks. The beating must stop if the woman complies with her husband's demands. Behind verbal abuse and abandonment, beating is intended as last resort solution to coerce submission.

Quran (4:34) – “Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great.”

Some apologists claim the word should not be translated as “beat,” but it is the same Arabic word that is used in verse 8:12, where it clearly means “to strike.”

According to her testimony in the Hadith, Muhammad physically struck Aisha, his favorite wife, for leaving the house without his permission: **“He struck me on the chest which caused me**

pain." (Sahih Muslim 4.2127). It is not known how he treated his less-favored wives.

Muhammad is the Perfect Man and Model of Conduct. If he struck Aisha for leaving the house without his permission, a Muslim husband has license to do the same – to inflict the same kind of punishment on his wives when they are disobedient.

Nor is this the only place in the Qur'an where a man is told to beat his wife.

Quran (38:44) – "And take in your hand a green branch and beat her with it, and do not break your oath..." This is, according to the Tafsir (commentary), Allah telling Job to beat his wife.

There are many examples of Muhammad taking the side of a husband rather than the wife who was being beaten:

Sahih Bukhari (72:715) – A woman came to Muhammad and begged her to stop her husband from beating her. **Her skin was bruised so badly that it is described as being "greener" than the green veil she was wearing. Muhammad did not admonish her husband, but instead ordered her to return to him and submit to his sexual desires.**

Aisha testified that Muslim women suffered more than women of other religions:

Sahih Bukhari (72:715) – "Aisha said, 'I have not seen any woman suffering as much as the believing women.'"

Sahih Muslim (9:3506) describes Muhammad as being amused by his fathers-in-law (Abu Bakr and Umar) slapping his wives (Aisha and Hafsa) for annoying him. According to the Hadith, the prophet of Islam laughed upon hearing this.

Abu Dawud (2141) – "Iyas bin 'Abd Allah bin Abi Dhubab reported the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) as saying: Do not beat Allah's handmaidens, but when 'Umar came

to the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) and said: Women have become emboldened towards their husbands, he (the Prophet) gave permission to beat them." At first, Muhammad forbade men from beating their wives, but he rescinded this once it was reported that women were becoming emboldened toward their husbands. **Beatings in a Muslim marriage are sometimes necessary to keep women in their place.**

Kash-shaf (the revealer) of al-Zamkhshari (Vol. 1, p. 525) quotes Muhammad:

"Hang up your scourge [with which you beat her] where your wife can see it"

Wife-beating has been unambiguously endorsed, too, by contemporary Muslim scholars:

Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi, one of the most respected Muslim clerics in the world, has said that "It is forbidden to beat the woman, unless it is necessary." He went on to say that "one may beat only to safeguard Islamic behavior," leaving no doubt that wife-beating is a matter of religious sanction.

Dr. Muzammil Saddiqi, the former president of ISNA (the Islamic Society of North America), a mainstream Muslim organization, says it is important that a wife "recognizes the authority of her husband in the house" and that he may use physical force if he is "sure it would improve the situation."

Sheikh Dr. Ahmad Muhammad Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the head of Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's most prestigious institution, says that "light beatings" and "punching" are part of a program to "reform the wife."

Dr. Jamal Badawi endorses corporal punishment as "another measure that may save the marriage." He isn't clear on how striking a woman will make her more inclined toward staying with her assailant, unless the implication is fear of more serious consequences if she leaves.

An Egyptian cleric, Abd al-Rahman Mansour, said in a 2012 televised broadcast that, in addition to discouraging the wife from filing for divorce, beatings would inspire the wife to “treat him with kindness and respect, and know that her husband has a higher status than her.”

During Ramadan of 2010, another cleric named Sa’d Arafat actually said the woman is “honored” by the beating. No one else seemed surprised or upset by this.

An undercover report from Sweden in 2012 found that 60% of mosques there actually advised beaten women not to report the abuse to the police. These women were also told that they must submit to non-consensual sex with their husbands.

About half of Saudi women are beaten at home. “Hands and sticks were found to be used mostly in beating women, following by men’s head cover and to a lesser extent, sharp objects.”

According to Islamic law, a husband may strike his wife for any one of the following four reasons:

- She does not attempt to make herself beautiful for him (i.e., “lets herself go”)
- She refuses to meet his sexual demands
- She leaves the house without his permission or for a “legitimate reason”
- She neglects her religious duties

Any of these are also sufficient grounds for divorce.

Respected Qur’an scholars in the past interpreted verse 4:34 as clearly involving real force, even if it should lead to death. Tabari said that it means to “admonish them, but if they refused to repent, then tie them up in their homes and beat them until they obey Allah’s commands toward you.”

Qurtubi told wife-beaters to avoid breaking bones, if possible, but added that “it is not a crime if it leads to death.”

There are a number of cases in which **Muhammad did have women killed in the most brutal fashion**. One was Asma bint Marwan, a mother of five, who wrote a poem criticizing the Medinans for accepting Muhammad after he had ordered the murder of an elderly man. In this case, the prophet’s assassins pulled a sleeping baby from her breast and stabbed her to death.

After taking Mecca in 630, Muhammad also ordered the murder of a slave girl who had merely made up songs mocking him. The Hadith contain many accounts of women who were stoned to death for sexual immorality on Muhammad’s command. Muhammad also encouraged his own men to rape women captured in battle (Abu Dawud 2150, Muslim 3433) and did not punish them for killing non-Muslim women (as the warrior Khalid ibn Walid did on several occasions – see Ibn Ishaq 838 and 856).

None of this is mentioned in the UAE Friday sermon on women. Did the Emirati authorities think that Muslims would not know the contents of Qur’an 4:34, or that some Qur’anic scholars think even beating a wife to death can be justified? Did they think the attendees at the mosques would not know the Hadith in which Aisha accuses Muhammad of hitting her in the chest so hard as to cause her pain? Did they think the killings of women, such as Asma bint Marwan, authorized or justified by Muhammad, would not be known to those attending the mosque? Would they not know that the mosque visitors would themselves know about Saafiya, Muhammad’s Jewish sex slave from Khaybar, who was promoted quickly to status of wife? Would they not know that according to Muhammad, Hell is filled with women? Would they be unaware of Muhammad’s celebrated description of women as “deficient in intelligence” as the justification for valuing their testimony as worth only one half that of a man? Most of this would undoubtedly have been known to those Emirati men at the mosque, and to the women, too.

The practice of polygyny – one husband, many wives – clearly devalues women. So does the ease with which a husband can divorce a wife through merely uttering the triple-talaq, as compared to what a wife must go through to divorce her husband. For she has no triple-talaq, but is required both to repay her husband the *mahr*, or bride-price he had paid when first entering into the marriage, and to supply a reason for wanting a divorce that must be judged sufficiently significant – mere dislike will not do – to justify such a divorce.

This sanitized version of Islam in the prepared Friday sermon may have been composed with good intentions: that is, to encourage better treatment for women in the Emirates. The baseless claims made for Muslim women as “innovators” raise more questions. For exactly one example of female “innovations” is given – the minbar – which turns out not to have been an innovation at all, but merely a borrowing from the Christians. As for Khadija, she was a businesswoman years before Islam came along, and in any case, as a female in business, she was not the rule but the exception. As the Emirati authorities will discover, it will not be easy, and probably not possible, to overcome the effect of Qur’anic verses, and the words and deeds of Muhammad in the Hadith, pertaining to women. The overwhelming weight of authority, in both the texts, and in the practice, of Islam, does nothing to promote gender equality, but instead promotes mistreatment of women. “Deficient in intelligence,” they deserve to be beaten when disobedient; they must uncomplainingly accept polygyny, the triple-talaq divorce, and accept, too, that both their inheritance and their testimony are worth only half that of a man.

For those who wish to improve the lot of Muslim women, now as for the last 1,400 years, the greatest stumbling block continues to be the immutable Qur’an, the Hadith, and the example of the Perfect Man and Model of Conduct, Muhammad.

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