

An Introduction To Muslim Family (part 1 of 2)

Description: The family is one of the central organizing institutions of the Muslim society. This two-part lesson gives insight into the core sentiments of family life that define the nature and meaning of this social institution. Part 1: The basics and purpose of marriage, inter-faith marriages and spousal rights.

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Objectives

- To learn the basics of basics of marriage and family in Islam.
- To learn the purpose of marriage.
- To become familiar with the Islamic regulations on inter-faith marriages.
- To appreciate the rights of husbands and wives on each other.

Arabic Terms

- *Mahr* - dowry, bridal gift, given from a man to his wife.

The family is one of the central organizing institutions of society. In Islam a family is built through marriage. Marriage is a legal arrangement in Islam, not a sacrament in the Christian sense, and is secured with a written contract. Marriage is about stability, loyalty, security, and adulthood. Marital life is marked by mercy, love, and compassion as Allah says:

"And He has placed between you love and compassion." (Quran 30:21)

The core sentiments of family life that define the nature and meaning of this social institution are love, nurturance, and dependability where spouses find comfort in each other:

"It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might find comfort in her." (Quran 7:189)

"They are as a garment for you, and you are as a garment for them." (Quran 2:187)

Purpose of Marriage

1. Sexual drive is a normal human emotion. Islam does not block it or look at it with disdain. It provides channels to satisfy sexual urges without undermining social responsibility. It does so by regulating sexuality within marriage.
2. A single person is too weak to go through this life on his own. A life partner in the form of a spouse shares the joys and burdens of life. Marriage provides the social support individuals need. Marriage provides meaning and a set of personal, intimate relationships against the backdrop of the impersonal, bureaucratized world of modern society.
3. The family is about continuity and extension. Marriage concerns raising the future generation and passing on to them the values and wisdom of the past generation.
4. Marriage safeguards lineage, controls reproduction, and ensures the socialization of children who are born within the family unit. Islam does not make the mother solely responsible for raising children; rather, it makes the father primarily responsible for them. Every child should be attributable to his biological father, so lineages do not get mixed up due to loose sexual relations in the society. Through the institution of marriage, individuals are joined together and given the social and legal sanction to perpetuate their name and traditions through their offspring.

Inter-faith Marriages

Faith is the most important denominator for a Muslim in choosing a spouse. Muslims are not allowed to marry non-Muslims. The only exception is that Muslim men are allowed to marry Jewish or Christian women with certain conditions. They are not allowed to marry any non-Muslim women, but only those who adhere to the Jewish or Christian faith. However, chastity is an important condition. Only a woman who is a virgin, divorcee, or a widow may be married.

The reason for limiting the permission for marrying people of other faiths is given men alone is essence to protect the Muslim woman's religion. If a Muslim husband asks his wife not to dress inappropriately or not to kiss his male friends - an acceptable social practice in the West - she could comply without affecting the teachings of her religion. But a Christian husband's request that his Muslim wife buys alcohol, serves him pork, wears tight revealing clothes, or kisses his friends would involve disobeying Allah, and therefore be destructive to her religious practice. Furthermore, Muslim men are especially discouraged from marrying Jewish or Christian women where the government is non-Muslim and the Muslims are a minority. If their marriage ends in divorce, or the husband dies, the court will usually grant custody to the mother who will raise them as non-Muslims.

Spousal Rights

Islam clearly sets out the rights and responsibilities of each spouse to maintain marital harmony. The fact is spelled out in the Quran:

"And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is well-known, but men have a degree over them." (Quran 2:228)

In general, husbands have more rights which are due to them than the wife due to their role on the family, just as parents have more rights than their children, and leaders have more rights than the general masses, etc. A husband is in charge of the family.

Leadership however is based on mutual consultation, it is not a dictatorship. Addressing one of the issues of marital life - the weaning of a child - the Quran encourages mutual consultation:

"But if the couple desire to wean by mutual consent and consultation, then there is no blame on them." (Quran 2:233)

The Quran encourages spouses to live in kindness and to consult each other:

"And consult together in kindness." (Quran 65:6)

In brief, the rights of a wife over her husband are:

- (1) *Mahr* or bridal gift given at the time of marriage from the husband.
- (2) Financially maintenance, including accommodation, food, clothing, and spend on her according to what is commonly acceptable.
- (3) Good behavior and kindness.
- (4) Sexual intercourse.
- (5) Divorce: A wife may seek divorce from a man who insists on disobeying Allah. A wife may also seek divorce due to cruel behavior and physical abuse, or non-fulfillment of her rights, or any other valid reason.

The rights of a husband over his wife are:

- (1) Obedience. A husband has right over his wife that she obeys him in what he commands her as long as it is reasonably within her abilities, and does not involve Allah's disobedience. A Muslim cannot obey anyone in a sin, let alone a husband.
- (2) Husband has a right to good behavior and kindness.
- (3) Sexual intercourse.
- (4) Divorce

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