



# Discover Islam DVD Series Study Guide



## #3 Women in Islam

### Summary of DVD content

The DVD begins to answer "Who are Muslim women?" by discussing what are seen as media misconceptions about the status of Muslim women, some of whom were given the right to vote centuries before women in the West. Islam in principle protects the rights of women. But Muslims, often following cultural practices that pre-date Islam, do not always comply; and there are widely varying practices around the globe. The prophet Muhammad respected women, and his teaching and leadership eliminated many unjust traditions in seventh century Arabia and elsewhere when Islamic precepts were adopted. Muhammad's wife Khadija helped promote his role as prophet and transmitter of revelation from God, and women had important roles in the early days of the Islamic community. In fact, Khadija was a successful businesswoman for whom Muhammad initially worked.

The Qur'an reveres Mary as mother of Jesus and symbol of piety, submission, chastity and purity. She is depicted in modest apparel – the expectation for all Muslim women – and is held up as a model for the modesty expected of both Muslim women and men. The DVD contends that Muslims have exercised freedom of conscience regarding how to dress, and that there is also to be no coercion in marriage. Although women and men exercise differing roles and responsibilities, in the Islamic ideal they are equal in status, and both have a right to education. Parenthood is the responsibility of both parents. In some geographic areas where Islam is the majority religion, practice fails to curb discrimination against women, and Muslim women are speaking out against such violations and organizing for the betterment of society.

### Elaboration on key topics

1. The DVD refers to the **gap between the Islamic ideal and actual practice** regarding women's rights, and mentions treatment of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan as a negative example. This particular DVD highlights women in the American and Middle Eastern contexts. However, it is important to recognize the **cultural differences that affect the status of women** in such places as West Africa and Indonesia, where conditions may be dissimilar. **The DVD overall portrays a uniformity of Islamic practice on gender and sexual matters that does not fully reflect the diverse realities across many nations and cultures.** For example,

although many Islamic religious leaders condemn homosexuality as forbidden by the Qur'an, there are organizations dedicated to helping gay Muslims be both authentically themselves and observant Muslims, as is the case in the Jewish and Christian traditions. You can learn more about efforts by Muslims globally to correct abuses and achieve equal rights by visiting the websites of such organizations as those listed below at [Learn more](#).

2. **Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a major figure in the Qur'an**; in fact, she is the only woman referred to by her proper name. To this day Mary is a female role model for Muslim children and a person revered by many Muslims. The story of Mary in the Qur'an has some important differences from the Christian gospels. In the Qur'an, she is a pious virgin dedicated to God's service. The birth of Jesus without a human father is a miracle of God's power – but the Qur'an does not in any way suggest that God is Jesus' father. Some details of Mary's family background have parallels in such second century Christian texts as the Infancy Gospel of James, not included in the New Testament. Read the Qur'anic stories of Mary's and Jesus' births in Surah 3, The House of 'Imran, and Surah 19, Mary. For more about the Qur'anic portrayal of Jesus and his importance, see the study guide for the DVD segment "#1 Christians and Islam."

3. Two important assertions merit further discussion: "**Muslim women and men have freedom of conscience**" and there is to be "**no compulsion in religion**." Regarding the first of these, it is true that in Islam every human being, whether male or female, is accountable to God as an individual. Thus, under the best of circumstances, individual women can choose how to express their submission to God in their choices of dress, education, family life and career. While it is true that the Islamic ideal is to have no compulsion in religion, in practice in some parts of the world Muslim females may be prohibited from attending school, may not be accorded the right of refusal of a marriage partner, and may experience other such restrictions. But it must be remembered that practitioners of all religions fall short of the ideal the religion holds and which they themselves may claim to hold. In the Christian tradition, for example, despite Paul's declaration of equality in Galatians 3:28 ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"), there are Christian cultures and denominations that curb women's public roles in society and in organized religion and make wives subservient to their husbands.

4. The DVD gives examples of **female leaders** in Islam's early history and features some professional Muslim women today. Muslim women's access to education and work life in many countries is similar to that for western non-Muslim women, with some exceptions based on cultural and geographic context. More controversial and

much more limited is **women's access to religious leadership roles**, as is the case for some Christian and Jewish denominations. Muslim women often are permitted to lead prayers and Qur'anic instruction for other women, but not for men. In 2005 African American Islamic scholar Amina Wadud led gender-mixed Friday prayers in an Anglican church building in New York City, evoking both praise and condemnation. [Read more at <http://pluralism.org/reports/view/111>.] Although not a case of worship leadership, in 2006 Islamic scholar Ingrid Mattson became the first female president of the Islamic Society of North America. For many years Lena Larssen chaired the organization of the Norwegian Muslims. Recently religious authorities, for example in Morocco and Turkey, have begun to encourage women's leadership roles.

5. Most Muslim women in the DVD appear in modest clothing and a headscarf, perhaps the new common form of "**hijab**," **a term commonly used for adherence to approved apparel standards**. Although some speakers assert that Muslim women have complete freedom regarding such apparel, the degree to which that is true can depend on one's family and cultural setting. In the United States religiously observant Muslim women exhibit a wide range of dress, from ordinary Western clothing to full cloak, headscarf and face veil. Similar variation exists even in many predominantly Muslim countries, and not all women wear a form of hijab. But in general both Muslim women and men are expected to dress modestly.

## **Discussion questions**

1. Discuss some of the new insights for you in this DVD.
2. What questions did the DVD evoke for you? What are some topics you would like to explore further?
3. Compare and contrast what you may have previously heard about the prophet Muhammad and his views on women's roles with what you heard in the DVD.
4. Brainstorm which countries have the greatest percentage of women in government positions. Then check the statistics on national parliaments at [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm). Discuss what role predominant religious affiliations might play in such discrepancies. How can we explain that a society like ours in the United States, which claims to treat women equally, has a much lower percentage of female political leaders than some Muslim countries? How do we explain the fact that Muslim countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Turkey have had female heads of state, but the United States never has (even if these Muslim women, as members of the aristocracy, are somewhat exceptional in their own contexts)? [Learn more at [www.catalyst.org/publication/244/women-in-government](http://www.catalyst.org/publication/244/women-in-government) and <http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/>.]

5. Read some of the Bible and Qur'an passages listed here that deal with women's issues. What do they tell us about gender roles and rights in both Christian and Muslim holy books? Discuss ways in which actual practice in both traditions more often than not deviates from these scriptural ideals. See Qur'an Surahs 33.35, 4.34, 2.228, 24.30-1, 33.59 [find online at [www.quranbrowser.org/](http://www.quranbrowser.org/)]; 1 Timothy 2:8-15; Galatians 3:2; Acts 2:17. Note that some Muslim women may wear special clothing for prayer and ceremonies, but take off the hijab (e.g., cloak and headscarf) for a leisure activity such as a walk with their children. Discuss times that Christian women might choose to dress in a particular way for religious activities.

## Learn more

### ELCA resources

See in Women in Islam, "**Christian-Muslim Talking Points**"

[www.elca.org/ecumenical/christianmuslimtalkingpoints](http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/christianmuslimtalkingpoints)

For more on rights of women in Judaism and Islam see pp. 30–31 of "**Windows for Understanding: Jewish-Muslim-Lutheran Relations.**" Scroll down at [www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Presiding-Bishop/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations.aspx](http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Presiding-Bishop/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations.aspx)

### Other resources

Ahmed, Leila, *Women and Gender in Islam: The Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*

\_\_\_\_\_ *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck and Jane I. Smith, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*

Safi, Omid. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*

Smith, Jane I. *Women in Contemporary Muslim Societies*

Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*

Wadud, Amina. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*

### Organizations

Musawah [www.musawah.org](http://www.musawah.org)

Karamah, Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights [www.karamah.org/](http://www.karamah.org/)

Muslim Women's League [www.mwlusa.org/](http://www.mwlusa.org/)

Imaan, LGBT Muslim Support Group [www.imaan.org.uk/](http://www.imaan.org.uk/)

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