

Noor, Ex-Hindu, UK (part 1 of 2)

Description: Pondering the status of women in today's society leads Noor to accept Islam.

By Noor

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I came from a purely Hindu family where we were always taught to regard ourselves (i.e. women) as beings who were eventually to be married off and have children and serve the husband - whether he was kind or not. Other than this, I found that there were a lot of things which really oppressed women, such as:

If a woman was widowed, she would always have to wear a white sari (costume), eat vegetarian meals, cut her hair short, and never re-marry. The bride always had to pay the dowry (bridal money) to the husband's family. And the husband could ask for anything, irrespective of whether the bride would have difficulty giving it.

Not only that, if, after marriage, she was not able to pay the full dowry, she would be both emotionally and physically tortured, and could end up being a victim of "kitchen death" where the husband, or both the mother-in-law and the husband, try to set fire to the wife while she is cooking or is in the kitchen and try to make it look like an accidental death. More and more of these instances are taking place. The daughter of a friend of my own father's had the same fate last year!

In addition to all this, men in Hinduism are treated literally as among the gods. In one of the religious Hindu celebrations, unmarried girls pray for and worship an idol representing a particular god (Shiva) so that they may have husbands like him. Even my own mother had asked me to do this. This made me see that the Hindu religion, which is based on superstitions and things that have no manifest proof but were merely traditions which oppressed women, could not be right.

Subsequently, when I came to England to study, I thought that at least this is a country which gives equal rights to men and women and does not oppress them. We all have the freedom to do as we like, I thought. Well, as I started to meet people and make new friends, learn about this new society, and go to all the places my friends went to in order to "socialize" (bars, dance halls, etc.), I realized that this "equality" was not so true in practice as it was in theory.

Outwardly, women were seen to be given equal rights in education, work, and so forth, but in reality women were still oppressed in a different, more subtle way. When I went with my friends to those places they hung out at, I found everybody interested to talk to me, and I thought that was normal. But it was only later that I realized how naïve I was and recognized what these people were really looking for. I soon began to feel uncomfortable, as if I was not myself: I had to dress in a certain way so that people would like me, and had to talk in a certain way to please them. I soon found that I was feeling

more and more uncomfortable, less and less myself, yet I could not get out. Everybody was saying they were enjoying themselves, but I don't call this enjoying.

I think women in this way of life are oppressed: they have to dress in a certain way in order to please and appear more appealing and also talk in a certain way so people like them. During this time, I had not thought about Islam, even though I had some Muslim acquaintances. But I felt I really had to do something to find something that I would be happy and secure with and would feel respected with. Something to believe in that is the right belief, because everybody has a belief that they live according to. If having fun by getting off with other people is someone's belief, they do this. If making money is someone's belief, they do everything to achieve this. If they believe drinking is one way to enjoy life then they do it. But I feel all this leads to nowhere; no one is truly satisfied, and the respect women are looking for is diminishing in this way.

Noor, Ex-Hindu, UK (part 2 of 2)

Description: Noor explains how Islam has raised her status as a woman.

By Noor

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In these days of so called "society of equal rights", you are expected to have a boyfriend (or you're weird!) and to not be a virgin. So this is a form of oppression even though some women do not realize it. When I came to Islam, it was obvious that I had finally found permanent security. A religion, a belief that was so complete and clear in every aspect of life. Many people have a misconception that Islam is an oppressive religion, where women are covered from head to toe and are not allowed any freedom or rights. In fact, women in Islam are given more rights, and have been for the past 1400 years compared to the only-recently rights given to non-Muslim women in some western and some other societies. But there are, even now, societies where women are still oppressed, as I mentioned earlier in relation to Hindu women.

Muslim women have the right to inheritance. They have the right to run their own trade and business. They have the full right to ownership, property, disposal over their wealth to which the husband has no right. They have the right to education, a right to refuse marriage as long as this refusal is according to reasonable and justifiable grounds. The Quran itself, which is the Word of God, contains many verses commanding men to be kind to their wives and stressing the rights of women. Islam gives the right set of rules, because they are NOT made by men, but made by God; hence it is a perfect religion.

Quite often Muslim women are asked why they are covered from head to toe and are told that this is oppression - it is not. In Islam, marriage is an important part of life, the making of the society. Therefore, a woman should not go around showing herself to

everybody, only for her husband. Even the man is not allowed to show certain parts of his body to none but his wife. In addition, God has commanded Muslim women to cover themselves for their modesty:

"O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) over their bodies (when outdoors). That is most convenient that they could be known as such (i.e. decent and chaste) and not molested." (Quran 33:59)

If we look around at any other society, we find that in the majority of cases, women are attacked and molested because of how they are dressed. Another point I'd like to comment on is that the rules and regulation laid down in Islam by God do not apply just to women but to men also. There is no intermingling and free-running between men and women for the benefit of both. Whatever God commands is right, wholesome, pure and beneficial to mankind; there is no doubt about that. A verse in the Quran explains this concept clearly:

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and protect their private parts (i.e. from indecency, illegal sexual acts, etc.); that will make for greater purity for them. And God is well aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and protect their private parts (from indecency, illegal sexual intercourse, etc.); and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments..." (Quran 24:31)

When I put on my hijab (veil), I was really happy to do it. In fact, I really want to do it. When I put on the hijab, I felt a great sense of satisfaction and happiness: satisfied that I had obeyed God's command, and happy with the good and blessings that come with it. I have felt secure and protected. In fact people respect me more for it. I could really see the difference in behavior towards me.

Finally, I'd like to say that I had accepted Islam not blindly, or under any compulsion. In the Quran itself there is a verse which says

"...Let there be no compulsion in religion..." (Quran 2:256)

I accepted Islam with conviction. I have seen, been there, done that, and seen both sides of the story. I know and have experienced what the other side is like, and I know that I have done the right thing. Islam does not oppress women, but rather Islam liberates them and gives them the respect they deserve. Islam is the religion God has chosen for the whole of mankind. Those who accept it are truly liberated from the chains and shackles of mankind, whose ruling and legislating necessitates nothing but the oppression of one group by another and the exploitation and oppression of one sex by the other. This is not the case of Islam which truly liberated women and gave them an individuality not given by any other authority.

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