The Islamic View of Women—Ideals and Realities

This article is a revision of a public lecture given by this institute on 4 December 2005.

Kazuko Shiojiri

1. The Ideals of the Qur'ān

THE Islamic world is said to be extremely difficult to understand from the outside. For the Japanese in particular, Islam is considered to be a religion that is hard to grasp. Nevertheless, in the contemporary information age, the number of believers is increasing day by day, despite the "Islam bashing" whereby it is condemned as an extremely bad religion that embraces war and terrorism. Statistics vary regarding the overall number of Muslims—one figure places it at 1.3 billion, another at 1.6 billion. Within the next five to ten years, Islam can be expected to become the largest religious force in the world, with its believers surpassing the total number of Christians.

How should we deal with the fact that the number of Muslims is increasing daily despite the harsh criticism toward Islam that comes from Western Christian society? This is a major theme that requires urgent attention. The *Asahi Shinbun*'s evening edition of 3 December 2005 ran an op-ed piece titled "No progress in the understanding of Islam amongst the Japanese." Getting along with Muslims by looking at issues that face us from a global perspective is a major prerequisite for world peace. Nevertheless, even if we try to develop mutual understanding with the Islamic world, not being able to understand the essence of Islam remains an irritating obstacle.

This article focuses on the Islamic view of women and considers how Muslim women, who are usually perceived as wearing long dresses and veils while seemingly being confined in their homes, actually live in society.

While it is generally understood that Islam advocates male domination over women, the Qur'ān, which is the fundamental sacred text of Islam, teaches that both men and women are free and equal partners who fight for justice together. Islam is a religion that came from the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, and the Qur'ān contains many

58

accounts from the Old Testament. For instance, the description of how Adam, the original human, was born and then a woman, Eve, was created as his partner was incorporated into the Qur'ān without great change from the Old Testament. The only big difference is in the description of Eve: that is, unlike the Old Testament version, the Qur'ān contains no criticism of Eve.

According to the Old Testament story, original sin was a consequence of Eve's actions. Being defeated by the devil's whisper, she took fruit from the tree of wisdom and then enticed her husband to eat it. This is the reason why women must bear the suffering of giving birth. The Old Testament also states that Eve was made out of a part of Adam's rib and that women are fundamentally subordinate to men, but there is no such account in the Qur'ān. Although humans are described as committing a sin ultimately in the Qur'ān, just like the two in the Old Testament, this is not because the woman enticed the man but because they both committed a sin by succumbing to the devil's temptation: in the end, they are expelled from heaven and sent to Earth. At the time, however, God forgives them and they are given the important role as God's vicegerents on Earth, and are taught to prosper by leaving offspring for the next generations.

The reason why women are discriminated against in society, even though the Qur'ān depicts an equal and idealistic view of men and women, is considered to be because the Hadīth, which was compiled some two hundred to two hundred and fifty years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, absorbed the discriminative thoughts and policies against women that were part of traditional convention in the Middle Eastern or Mediterranean worlds.

Details of the Hadīth will be described later but briefly it is a record of deeds and actions of the Prophet Muhammad as well as those of his first generation of followers. It is a collection of oral traditions compiled between two hundred to two hundred and fifty years after the Prophet's death that concern how and under what circumstances he guided the people.

Fundamentally, the Qur'ān only narrates basic principles and rules but does not set down detailed instructions. This means that there was no one who could instruct people with authority after the Prophet had passed away. At the same time, as the Islamic world rapidly expanded, people started to encounter unexpected situations they had never even thought of. Under such circumstances, people would read the Hadīth and judge matters based on how the Prophet acted in similar situations. This is the reason why the Hadīth is considered to be the "second sacred

text" and is used as a guideline for the daily practice of Islamic faith.

As it was possible for distortions and falsities to be absorbed into oral tradition in the two hundred years after the Prophet's death, six of the Hadīth that were compiled by six editors are accepted as the true collection of the Hadīth. Of these, two have been translated into Japanese: one was edited by al-Bukhārī and the other by Muslim. Japan is the only country in the world where the two collections of the Hadīth have been translated almost in their entirety. This indicates that the research standard of Islamic study in Japan is very high.

The Qur'ān does not clearly state from what women were created. It only states that they were created as partners of men to give them peace of mind. On the other hand, the Hadīth states that woman was created from the dirtiest and the most twisted part of Adam's rib; thus, no matter how well-educated, women are completely useless. The description of women in the Hadīth becomes more abusive. For instance, when attempts are made to correct women they break down: the result is that their marriages end in divorce.

Eventually, the Hadīth began including accounts that blamed women for all sins committed in the human world: they were described as being stupid, ignorant, and lacking in reason and ethical responsibility. However, it is clear that the Prophet Muhammad did not discriminate against women. An examination of the facts surrounding the early stages of Islam reveals that the Prophet Muhammad trusted the women around him as human beings and listened to their opinions with respect.

For instance, the Prophet's first wife Khadīja was a little older than him. (She is often said to be fifteen years older than him, but I think she was only two or three years older). She was the president of a trade company: even if we consider this from today's perspective, she was very active in society. Although he was an employee of her company, Khadīja is said to have proposed marriage to Muhammad because he was very talented and honest.

It is also said that when the Prophet received God's words through a revelation for the first time at the age of forty years old, the experience scared him very much and he went home to his wife Khadīja shaking and crying. She encouraged her husband saying, "pull yourself together, this is a revelation from the one God. You are chosen"—she became the first believer of Islam.

Furthermore, the Prophet's last beloved wife, Ā'isha, was only about ten years old when she married him, and was eighteen when he passed away. Despite her youth, she was a great help to the Prophet, and stated her opinions in strategic meetings concerning his religious activities or

in the military meetings conducted during the numerous religious wars that occurred during Muhammad's campaigns. She also achieved a great deal in the battlefield where she accompanied him, and left many traditions in the Hadīth.

It is said that when a male believer asked the Prophet "whom do you most trust?" the Prophet replied without any hesitation, "Ā'isha." Then this believer hurriedly changed his question saying, "No, no, which man do you trust most?" As this anecdote shows, the Prophet trusted the women around him and thus developed his religious activities and missionary work.

Nevertheless, the Qur'ān contains many accounts of male domination over women. It is said that the Prophet complained about how God's words were different from his personal will, which was to treat men and women equally with respect. However, considering the facts related to the early stages of Islamic culture, women played a great role in religious activities.

Under Islamic Law, however, which was established in the ninth century, unmarried women fall under the protection of either their fathers or male relatives. After marriage they can only live as dependants by surrendering their bodies to their husbands and becoming obedient to them. Frankly speaking, under Islamic Law, the purpose of marriage is for a woman to bear her husband's legitimate child in order to maintain Islamic society. While the details of this will be explained later, for example, a modern DNA examination can determine the parent-child relationship with about ninety-eight percent accuracy. In Islamic society, however, it is considered that a man's legitimate child can only be born to a woman who legally married him when she was still a virgin. According to Islamic Law, even if a child's father has been identified biologically, if the child is not the product of a lawful marriage the parent-child relationship is denied.

2. Islamic Law

Islamic Law is called Sharī'ah in Arabic. The term "Sharī'ah" has begun to appear in weekly magazines or newspapers nowadays, even in Japan, and is thus becoming recognized by the general public. Islamic Law is so-called "sacred law," in other words, one that prescribes religious precepts or commandments. This law encompasses God's guidelines and commandments for all kinds of human behavior-its sources are the Qur'ān, Sunnah, Ijmā, and Qiyās.

The Qur'ān is the sacred text of Islam, but it is different from the

sacred texts of other religions in the sense that Muslims believe it to be entirely God's words. In the case of Buddhist sutras, for instance, the first sutras are collections of Shakyamuni's words, but after that, depending on the age, texts written by high ranking priests or scholars who were spiritually awakened were adopted as sutras.

Furthermore, in Christianity, both the Old and New Testaments are considered to be official sacred texts, but in both cases most of the chapters were recorded by particular writers. Even though they wrote the texts following God's inspiration through their faith, the fact is that they were produced by human hands. In Islam, however, the Qur'ān's words are considered to be God's words that were transmitted to people through the Prophet Muhammad without question.

It is natural for non-believers of Islam to think that this is ridiculous and impossible, and that Muhammad probably thought up the words himself even though he was guided by divine inspiration. However, the biographical writings of Muhammad as the Prophet show how he became totally confused because the revelations of God's words were sometimes quite different from his personal intentions. It also seems to be necessary to consider the fact that as the Qur'ān was compiled only twenty years after the Prophet's death, there was no room for other sources and counterfeit texts to be incorporated. Even though one may not be a believer, if Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is God's words, it is important to understand their position as believers and not to say their beliefs are stupid or based on lies.

It becomes extremely difficult to understand other religions or cultures when one denies their sacred texts or doctrines as prevarications. For instance, if one were to say, "Shakyamuni was such a refined prince, it is impossible that he purposely chose a path of suffering, that's just fiction," then Buddhism could not even be established. In the case of Christianity, if one declared, "Jesus revived three days after he died on the cross—that is impossible, ridiculous," then the entire faith would collapse from its foundation.

When considering religious ideas that have captured people's hearts and brought them spiritual salvation throughout history, it is important to distance ourselves from outright denial and try to understand their beliefs and convictions. Therefore, I would like to deal objectively with the Qur'ān and separate myself from questions of belief about whether the Qur'ān truly contains the eternal words of God or not.

It is from this perspective that I state, "the Qur'ān contains the eternal words of God and is a collection of his words and nothing else"—this is not because I believe it myself.

The second source of Islamic Law, the Sunnah, is knowledge that comes from the Hadīth. The Hadīth records the actions of the Prophet Muhammad and the first generation of his followers. For instance, Muslims use water to purify themselves before daily prayers, but what should they do at prayer time in a place that has no water? If one consults the Hadīth at such a time, one can find an episode of how the Prophet used sand to purify his hands while traveling in the desert. Therefore, believers can follow this precedent. Such knowledge is called the Sunnah, while the meaning of *sunnah* in Arabic is "custom."

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the term Sunnah because the conflicts between the Sunnis and the Shī'ites are intensifying and are seen as significant problems in Iraq. In the Islamic world, ninety percent of Muslims are Sunni, and they regard the Prophet's Sunnah as important. The Shī'ites follow 'Alī, Muhammad's cousin, who married the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. They formed a different denomination since they considered 'Alī to be the first Imām, the Savior, and worship his descendants as infallible saviors. In the Islamic world, only eight percent of the believers are Shī'ites. The remaining two percent of Muslims belong to small sects connected to the Shi'ites. Although the Shi'ites are small minority, Shi'a is the national religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Shi'ites have a strong impact on international relationships. Therefore their activities are at the center of world attention.

As the Shi'ite movement is an important key toward the resolution of the current problems in Iraq, it is now the focus of global attention. While these two denominations have various differences in their doctrines, both the Sunnis and the Shi'ites can attend religious services at the same mosque, and can make the pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca). Belonging to different denominations does not affect the place of worship. I would like you to remember that such tolerant and liberal aspects do exist in Islam.

The third and the fourth sources of Islamic Law are interesting: the Ijmā means "unanimity" among Muslims. Originally in Islam there was no main temple or ecclesiastical system. Therefore, each believer has the power and authority to make decisions as a rule, so nothing can be decided without the complete agreement of all believers.

This was not so difficult when the Prophet Muhammad only had a few believers, but when the numbers reach up to 1.6 billion as they do nowadays, it is impossible to achieve unanimity, no matter how well telephone systems or the Internet have developed. In such cases, when

legal scholars from various areas reach agreement, these are considered to be universal decisions. In other words, the agreement of all believers actually means the agreement of scholars of Islamic Law.

However, while an agreement may be reached among scholars, if the general believers do not adopt their decisions, they cannot be disseminated throughout the Islamic world. Thus, although the Islamic world is sometimes criticized for its slow decision-making process, when consensus is reached it becomes deeply rooted in society very quickly. In other words, the Islamic world is not inconsistent all the time, nor does it constantly split into groups without any semblance of order. Nevertheless it may be unavoidable that the Islamic world seems somewhat chaotic when viewed from the outside.

While consensus amongst the scholars of Islamic Law is adopted through the Ijmā, the fourth source of Islamic Law, the Qiyās, is also about scholastic analogy or judgment in specialized areas according to different times, countries, places, and circumstances. Without these analogies and judgments, Muslims would be forced to live under the same conditions as in the Arabian Peninsula of the seventh century. In fact, modern Muslims lead almost the same lives as the Japanese—they travel on airplanes, drive cars, and use the Internet. Without scholastic judgments that are in accord with the time and circumstances, contemporary Muslims would have to lead lifestyles from centuries ago, just like the Amish people in the U.S.A.

Islamic Law certainly has strict moral standards that derive these four sources, the most important one being the Qur'ān. It is "unwritten law" that allows for analogies and judgments in keeping with the times, countries, places, and circumstances.

Sharī'ah, Islamic Law, was decided by God, so it is impossible to change its principles and fundamental rules. Yet it is not codified in the form of a statute but is unwritten law. Within the limits of its principles freedom of analogy is allowed to a certain degree. In Japan, for example, laws are perhaps easier to follow since they are codified in the form of statutes, and revision of the Japanese constitution is currently under discussion. In most cases the law is written in textual form, but unwritten law is clearly different from the understanding of the law in Japan.

The questions, then, are by what standards do modern Muslim base their lives, and on what basis do scholars of Islamic Law make their standards of judgment? Legal scholars make judgments not only by the four sources, but by examining the enormous amount of legal research and collections of judicial precedents while taking into account the needs of the contemporary age.

Let us consider the example of brain death, which is currently a major issue in the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia, for instance, allows organ transplants from brain death patients. The fact that an extremely conservative nation like Saudi Arabia, which adopts Islamic Law as its national law, accepts the idea of brain death is very interesting. Legal scholars in Saudi Arabia have judged that brain death could be accepted according to the Islamic Law.

Consensus regarding this decision, however, has not yet been reached throughout the Islamic world. Egypt, for example, has adopted organ transplants in cases of heart death, but it still strongly resists accepting brain death; legal scholars have not made an official statement concerning this problem.

Therefore, various judgments and decisions under Islamic Law can be made depending on the area or the circumstances. As the law is not codified but unwritten, there is room for new analogies and judgments. To reiterate my point, Sharī'ah is not written law but unwritten law that allows the legal scholars to pass the judgment on cases based on its principles.

The fundamental ideal of Sharī'ah is founded on the view of "what is a human being?" I would like to discuss the Islamic perspective of humans in another forum, but basically it is a biological or natural view. Islam holds that the noblest way of life for a person is not for them to renounce the world and enter monasteries to become a priest, nor to stay single throughout their life. It is for them to lead a normal life, find a companion, have children and raise them, and end their life in old age after sending the next generation out into the world. In other words, this way of life is considered to please God the most, and is normal and natural both biologically and socially. The idea of renouncing the world and becoming a cleric is not found in Islam: therefore it is a religion for lay people.

Many Japanese are interested in Islamic mysticism, Sufism, and you may wonder about its practitioners. Sufis are advised to stay in mosques or at home, or commute to the training hall to practice at the same time as maintaining marriages and raising families. One does not please God if one's family is deprived of their livelihood because one leads a secluded life.

The same is applied to Islamic legal scholars. Currently, universities in various places have established courses in Islamic Law so one can obtain qualifications after graduation. Before this, however, up until thirty or forty years ago, an ordinary learned man who could answer any questions took on the role of legal scholar. In most cases in the Islamic

world, scholars, theologians, or mystics were not considered to be professionals.

Only a small number of scholars worked as national judges, or served a dynasty or a king, and they were professional scholars. Generally speaking, however, people who were well-informed and had strong faith could advise people on their problems on Fridays at mosques. In other words, these people earned their living through different professions at the same time as being Islamic legal scholars. A scholar of the Hadīth, al-Bukhārī, who was mentioned above, earned his living as a peddler selling fancy goods while guiding his disciples on Fridays at the mosques.

The fact that Islamic Law is based on the view of "what is a human being" can also be seen in its guidelines regarding human behavior. Human behavior can be divided into the categories of obligation, recommendation, permission, hatred, and prohibition. Permission is most common category of behavior, and it deals with actions that are neutral and cannot be judged for their value, either good or bad. In general, the law only applies to "obligation" and "prohibition." If an "obligation" is not met, one is charged with a fine, or is sometimes arrested. The same applies if one commits an act that falls under the category of "prohibition."

Behavior that falls under "recommendation" or "hatred" is not subject to ordinary, secular laws. On the other hand, Islamic Law is a religious law under God's commandments, and judgments based on this law are applied to all kinds of human behavior. It teaches that actions which fall under these categories, while not being subject to criminal or positive law, contain rewards or punishments in the afterlife. This is the difference between ordinary, secular law and "God's law."

Regarding the enforcement of these laws, there are four jurisprudence schools which were established by the mid ninth century. The theories of Sharī'ah were fixed by four schools, the Hanafī, the Mālikī, the Shāfi'ī, and the Hanbalī, which are still in force today. Therefore it is sometimes said that this system blocks free judgment within Islamic Law. It is also taught that the gate that allowed for free legal judgment was closed around the tenth century. Consequently Islam is sometimes considered to be extremely backward and non-progressive.

Yet, if the gate of legal judgment was completely closed, Muslims could not fly an airplane or drive a car. In reality, however, Sharī'ah Law is applied in a flexible manner in accord with the times or changes in circumstance: for example, a prince from Saudi Arabia rode on a space shuttle. Thus, such judgments are made flexibly in response to the

requirements of the time, area, and people.

While this may sound contradictory, Islamic legal judgments are very loyal to the tradition on the one hand, but are flexible in accordance with the requirements of the times on the other. As these two principles or aspects have existed without contradiction, Islam was able to develop over the course of one thousand four hundred years.

Sharī'ah Law are commandments that are deeply related to all kinds of human activity, not just to religious ceremonies and liturgies but also to daily life, social life, and economic activities, which includes politics and international relationships, issues concerning international law, and even the rules of war. Therefore a society that upholds the unity of religion and politics is considered to be ideal. As I mentioned before, religiously conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia or Sudan continue to use Islamic Law. Almost all other Islamic nations are based on legal standards, such as constitutions, or family, civil, or criminal law, just like in Japan. Islamic Law still has significant power over people's daily lives in various societies. Almost all Muslims live following the rules of Sharī'ah Law, especially concerning marriage, divorce, raising children, and inheritance.

Considering the fact that the union of religion and politics is viewed as ideal in Islam, one might think that Islamic society is backward. However, the history of the modern civil society of Europe shows that the separation of religion and politics meant the separation of church and state in Christian world. It never meant the separation of religious and political ideals but, rather, the separation of political power from ecclesiastical authority. Until Europe's medieval period, the power of the Pope was extremely strong, a position called the Holy Roman Emperor existed, and the church held great power in politics, to the extent of that it had the right to remove kings or emperors.

The separation of religion and politics today means separating ecclesiastical and political power. Even European countries, as well as the United States, which inherited this modern separation of religion and politics, do not separate religious and political ideals. In the United States, the president places his hand on the Bible when taking the oath. This can be also seen from the perspective of President Bush's political position. Some religious scholars regard it as indicating that "the United States is the largest religious nation in the contemporary world." It could be said that there is no society on Earth, Japanese society included, which is totally unconnected to traditional cultures, religious ideals, or religious concepts. Considering this, the Islamic perspective, which sees the unity of religion and politics as natural, is honest thinking in a way,

and seems to view society directly. It seems that Islamic society express-
es the attitude that religious ideals are important, whether they be
regressive or progressive.

3.   Islamic Law and Women

Even in today's Islamic world, Sharī'ah Law exerts a significant power
over Muslims, especially concerning rules relating to family matters.
Recently, the number of Japanese people converting to Islam is notice-
able. Yet even if one person were to become the only Muslim in a family
or the only Muslim at their workplace, they need to follow everything—
marriage, divorce, raising children, and inheritance—in accordance with
Islamic Law. No matter where converts to Islam may live, even if it is in
an area where there are no other Muslims, the Sharī'ah is an important
standard for them and is a commandment that comes from God.

   In areas such as marriage, divorce, raising children, and inheritance,
families have to follow precepts that affect women much more than
men. These precepts have various aspects in times of marriage, divorce,
and raising children, and there are strict rules especially for women.

   In this sense, Islamic Law is deeply related to the life of women. In
general, the Islamic world's sexual morals for women are strict to the
extent of appearing abnormal. Veils and long-sleeved ankle-length
dresses are said to be the major symbols of Islamic women. As religious
revival movements are on the rise globally these days, almost all Mus-
lim women wear scarves and stop using makeup as soon as they convert
to Islam.

   In fact, however, there are many Muslim women in the Middle East
who use makeup and dress with elaborately colored and designed cloth-
ing. New converts to the religion who live in relatively remote places,
such as Japan, seem to become especially dogmatic, some even fanati-
cal, about wearing traditional Islamic clothing in an attempt to protect
the Islamic way of life. As a result, whether women wear veils or not
has currently become a major factor in determining if they are Muslim
or not.

   Looking at this phenomenon, you might think that strict rules, such as
forcing women to wear veils, must appear in the Qur'ān repeatedly. It is
generally believed that God ordered women to wear veils or long dress-
es in order for them to be discreet and to protect their chastity, yet only
one account relating to veils appears in the Qur'ān.

   "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze
and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and

ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms"[1] (The Qur'ān: Chapter 24, section 31). In other words, this rule teaches that women's beauty or bodily decoration should not be emphasized, excepting those areas that appear naturally. Concerning the section, "they should draw their veils over their bosoms," the Qur'ān does not provide detailed instruction on how to wear a veil.

Such expressions appear in many other religions too, but I imagine that not many people carry out religious rules to the letter. Perhaps such accounts should rather be seen as spiritual guides. In other words, the veil expresses a woman's determination to protect her heart and chastity.

When the idea that a woman who does not wear a veil is not true Muslim becomes a social trend of the times, this places a stronger requirement on women to wear veils or traditional Islamic clothing. Throughout the history of Islam, the contemporary age is probably the time when believers must adhere to such rules to the strictest extent.

In fact, the reason why women hide their bodies by wearing a veil or black mantle is not to protect their own chastity but for men to avoid being tempted by women: in other words, it was actually adopted as a tactic to protect men. These rules have been connected to the traditions and conventions of each society throughout history and they developed in a context which was originally unrelated to Islam; their repetition made them even stricter, thus causing women to suffer.

For instance, as in the case of "honor killings," the rules of Islamic Law and the customs and conventions of various areas are linked. There are several cases where something that did not result from an original teaching of the Qur'ān was appropriated as God's order, and it then became a primary factor in the oppression of women.

"Honor killing" is linked to the strict sexual morals of the Islamic world. Although the Qur'ān teaches that faithfulness and chastity must be followed equally by both men and women, it is applied to women more strictly than to men. In particular, the chastity of young single women is closely scrutinized by those around them.

Let us take the case of a daughter of a family engaged to a man. If she had to talk to other men for work-related purposes in the course of conducting some business, or was said to have cast a flirtatious look at another man, someone could report this to her parents saying, "your daughter was dating other man even though she is engaged to someone else." In this case her father or other male relatives might kill her to protect their family's honor before the facts are investigated. These cases occur often even today.

It is said that more than three hundred women per year become victims of "honor killings" in Pakistan. About twenty to thirty years ago, there was a case where a princess related to a Saudi Arabian royal family had an illicit affair with a young man. Consequently the two were arrested and executed in public. This story became a movie titled *The Death of a Princess*. Someone happened to be at the execution scene and took photos with a small camera. Then a BBC journalist obtained the film and wrote an article. I heard that a movie was made based on that article. The story starts when a young princess, who was less than twenty years old at the time, becomes the second wife of an old man from a royal family who is her father's age. She feels unhappy in her marriage and falls in love with a young man who was working at their country villa. This is an illicit love affair and they committed adultery. The punishment for adultery is almost as strict as the death penalty, and so the princess disguised as a male tries to escape but she is caught and arrested at the airport. The two are taken to a public execution place and she is shot to death, and the man is beheaded.

Also, in the case of Afghanistan, which was under Taliban rule until a few years ago, I once saw a TV news report of a woman who had been arrested for working as a prostitute and was then taken to a public execution site. The official punishment for adultery is to cast eighty to one hundred stones at the accused, or whip the accused with eighty to one hundred lashes. This is an extremely strict punishment, and is almost the same as the death penalty. If a woman is pregnant and is subjected to this punishment, both she and the baby would die.

In the Qur'ān this punishment applies to both men and women, and the judgment of adultery is strictly formulated according to Sharī'ah Law to avoid using this penalty. But this extremely harsh punishment is actually applied relatively easily to women thus oppressing them. Therefore, even nowadays, tragedies concerning young women in connection to marital issues are not over.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned before, Sharī'ah Law introduces various ways and conditions to protect women's lives. There is an interesting case concerning the length of pregnancy. Normally, the period of pregnancy is about forty weeks. In legal terms, however, this period is defined from six months up to as long as seven years. This rule was enforced around the ninth century, so you could imagine that such a rule might not be applicable these days. However, when I stayed in the United Arab Emirates about two years ago, one day I read an article in a personal advice column of a newspaper.

A wife who had not been touched by her husband for four years dis-

covered that she was pregnant. The article concerned the question of whom she should consider to be the father of the child. One might suppose that she would be whipped one hundred times. However, the answer from an Islamic legal scholar stated that since the period of pregnancy is defined from between six months to five years under Islamic Law, and as it had only been four years from when her husband touched her last, he was the father of the child. The fact that her husband had not touched her for as long as four years was considered to be an abuse on his part. The scholar's recommendation was that she should apply for divorce. In reality, however, it is extremely difficult for women to apply for divorce, and wives need to pay an enormous amount of compensation to their husbands. Nevertheless, the scholar recommended divorce in that case. This shows that the idea of the pregnancy period for women is still in effect.

The reason for this is that if a young wife gave birth to a child six or seven months after marriage, the relatives would be angry, thinking either that she and her husband had premarital sex or that perhaps she had committed adultery before marriage. However, since God's Law states that six months is long enough for the period of pregnancy, so long as the couple are happy with the situation the child is recognized as legitimate.

This idea could also save the lives of both mother and child in cases where a husband is away from his family on business for a long time and the wife becomes pregnant after two years of marriage. Thus, Islamic Law, which is often described as severe and inhumane, does have various ways of protecting women. At the same time, when a husband sues his wife for adultery, Islamic Law requires four adult men to be witnesses. Since adultery or illicit love affairs occur in private, it is almost impossible to obtain witnesses. Furthermore, if the testimony of a witness were to be a lie, they could then be accused of committing perjury and the case for adultery could not be established. Therefore Islamic Law does have various ways to protect women accused of adultery. Also, I would like to note that there are different avenues and interpretations regarding the protection of mothers and children after birth.

In reality, however, despite the flexible response of Islamic Law in such cases, conventions such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), whereby female genitalia is removed and the parts sewn together immediately after birth, are still being conducted in some areas of the Islamic world. This is performed in order to protect their virginity completely until they are married. In this cruel custom, the sewn parts are cut and untied just before marriage. Some women die because of infection or

poor sanitary conditions at the time of the FGM operation, while others experience major problems in childbirth. Such terrifying practices did not exist in the original rules of Islam but became adopted as God's Law and are being conducted under the name of Islamic Law.

Therefore, in the Islamic world aspects that had no relation to Islam have been incorporated under the name of Islamic Law, thus oppressing and torturing women even more. However, it is also true that the role of men and women were fixed in the teaching of the Qur'ān: the role of a woman is firstly defined from a biological perspective, and then from the perspective of wife and mother.

Generally speaking, Islamic society is still very patriarchal on the surface, but the bond between mother and child is considered to be very strong. It is true that there are many rules for unmarried women, and many women spend their lives obeying their fathers, living with the fear of being killed if someone suspects them of conducting an illicit love affair. However, once such helpless women get married and bear a son, their influence starts to increase exponentially. Fundamentally, in Islamic societies women are considered to have grown up after giving birth, and the idea that mother and child have a special bond through the mother's womb is a deeply rooted notion. Even today, the idea of young people respecting their elders is well established. For instance, even a spoiled son will stand up and give up his seat if his father enters a room. He would never smoke in front of his father.

For example, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has a different mother to his seven brothers including three former kings, who are called "the Seven Sudeirī." The mother of the seven brothers was from the Sudeirī tribe of Saudi Arabia, and the brothers formed the strong wing of the royal family and exercised great power. Although Islamic society is seen as conservative and patriarchal from the outside, it actually centers on the mother's will inside the home. For instance, even a middle aged man with a dignified beard who may be an important person in the government will nestle up and say "Mama" and kiss their mother on the cheek. These men listen to their mothers obediently.

4. The Role of Women

Even in conservative Islamic societies, extremely conventional forms of abusing women, such as honor killings or FGM, are being quickly resolved. Nowadays such cases rarely occur, especially among city dwellers. Furthermore, in fact, there are many more women who are working out in society than we might think.

One reason for this phenomenon is that the roles of men and women are clearly distinguished. For example, in Saudi Arabia, men and women are completely segregated in society. For men, the Middle Eastern world seem to be consist of "societies without female faces, places where no one knows if women exist or not."

In this sense, however, it could be said that women have even more chances. Foreign women who are not Muslims share tea with Muslim men without any problems. We can also go into a woman's room and chat with them freely. In other words, non-Muslim women have the chance to see the wider world in Middle Eastern society. Even now the majority of people who study Middle Eastern affairs are men, but I always think that with regard to the Middle Eastern/Islamic world, women should be scholars and should be sent as delegates of trading companies.

In Saudi Arabia, the worlds of men and women are completely separated. This means they need people who work within the world of women. It is there we can see women working in various professions—there are doctors, school teachers, bankers, stock analysts, clerks, hairdressers, and nurses. If is often said that women do not work in Saudi Arabia, yet half of its population are women and they work in the midst of society. In particular, those who are highly educated have important jobs. Many of them studied abroad and returned, and these highly educated women do not stop working even after marriage.

The case of Japanese women is the opposite: even if they complete a university course at graduate-school level, many stay at home against their will if they do not have anyone to look after their children. In my case, I stayed home and worked as a housewife for about sixteen or seventeen years: I was thirty-eight years old when I re-entered graduate school. The structure of current Japanese society confines highly educated women to the home, no matter how much they want to study or be out in the workforce. Although the Equal Employment Opportunity Law has been enforced and Gender Equality policy is discussed, they are, in effect, mere slogans with little substance and not many women can receive the benefits that they supposedly offer.

On the other hand, in almost all cases highly educated women in the Islamic world continue to work. One reason for this comes from the great disparity between the rich and the poor—just like in the time of "Oshin" in Japan, some women from poor backgrounds work as babysitters for wealthy families. ("Oshin" was a fictional TV drama that depicted the life of its eponymous heroine, a poor woman who lived in the pre-war and past-war periods.) In other words, there are women

from lower income classes who help with housework and look after the children of highly educated upper class women. Since this twofold structure exists in society, the numbers of working women, either rich or poor, may be twice or three times more than formal statistics indicate. This twofold structure due to the gap between the rich and the poor must be resolved quickly, but I would like to focus on the fact that women in Islamic society are more socially active than we imagine.

Despite being oppressed under the strict rules of Sharī'a Law, traditions, conventions of their local communities, and different thinking within each family, the fact that Muslim women are performing a great role in the society cheerfully and actively cannot be overlooked.

It is not an overstatement to say that traditions and religious standards are protected by women in the Islamic world, just like here in Japan where almost all traditional events, including those related to food, rites of passage, seasonal ceremonies like the Boy's Festival or Girl's Festival, and memorial services for ancestors, are carried out by housewives. As evidenced in the changes in the Islamic style of clothing, the role of women in the Islamic world could be considered to be increasing in importance in the midst of the universal movement of a religious revival of Islam.

If we take the biological and natural human existence as given, then the Islamic idea of women as birth givers may be a more natural way of thinking. My feminist friends scold me when I say something like this, but in as much as women are the ones who give birth to children, this thinking should be natural.

I intend to keep studying how the role of women in the Islamic world will change along with worldwide transitions and together with the roles of Japanese women.

Note

[1] The Qur'an Chapter 24, Section 31. http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/024.qmt. html Translated by Yusfali. Copyright: THE ISLAMIC COMPUTING CENTRE, 73 St. Thomas's Road, London N4 2QJ U.K. (accessed 25 June 2006).