

The title of my presentation today is “How does Islam define women’s roles against our cultural backdrop.”

**NEXT SLIDE:**

Growing up, I had a vision of the ideal woman. She would be intelligent, funny, modern, powerful, strong, and use her skills and talents to achieve great professional accomplishments. I didn’t know what she would look like.

**NEXT SLIDE:**

All I knew was that I didn’t want to grow up to be June Cleaver. As some of you may know, June Cleaver was a character from a popular 50’s sitcom, “Leave it to Beaver”. She played a housewife, who took great care of her husband and children. However, whenever I looked at her image, she appeared fussy, domesticated, and old-fashioned.

Knowing how I felt about June Cleaver, I assumed my ideal woman would not worry about daily household tasks. Instead, she would travel abroad and do humanitarian work and she might even win the Nobel Peace Prize. Now, this vision of mine wasn’t wrong: it just needed to be prioritized a little bit. Whereas, I had visions of gaining the accolade of society, I should have been having visions of gaining blessings from Allah. Where I was seduced by the promises of the present world, I should have been first and foremost seduced by the promises of the hereafter. So, I knew that I needed to delve deeper into what Islam said about the perfect woman and what her role was in today’s society.

**NEXT SLIDE:**

To find my answer, I went to the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran says the best woman, or best man for that matter, is “ "Whoso acts righteously, whether male or female, and is a believer, We will surely grant him a pure life; and We will surely bestow on such their reward according to the best of their works" (Ch. 16, Verse 98).

Thus, it is our duty and the most important thing we can do, as Ahmadi Muslim women to attain righteousness. This does not mean that you should not strive in the pursuit of scholarly or professional goals or that if you work outside the home, you will not attain righteousness. Far from it. This just means that the main purpose in our life is that we are here to become righteous women and everything else falls secondary to that goal.

So, how do we go about accomplishing this goal? What are we supposed to do and more specifically, how do we pursue this goal in our adult life, once we're married? Now, to keep this topic simple, I'm going to break this down even further. When we're married, how does our relationship with our husband affect our pursuit in gaining Allah's blessings?

**NEXT SLIDE:**

In a hadith related by Hazrat Umm Salamah, she narrates that Hazrat Mohammad (SAW) stated that, "If a woman dies and her husband is pleased with her, she will enter Paradise" (Tirmidhi).

**NEXT SLIDE:**

Also, another hadith related by Hazrat Abdullah bin Abi Sufa stated that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said, "I swear by the Being who holds the life of Muhammad in his hands, that no woman shall be deemed to have done her duty by her God unless she has done her duty to her husband (Ibn Majah).

We can see from these two hadith that a woman's path towards righteousness is intrinsically connected how she acts towards her husband. Now, this is no simple matter. Marriage is hard work. It is easy to be distracted by the rest of our busy lives and not give our full attention to the matter of our marriage and when our relationships suffer, we risk our chance to gain righteousness through this way.

**NEXT SLIDE:**

Hazrat Khalifatul Masih II stresses this lack of focus on the institution of marriage by stating, "The Islamic law has only distinguished between two sets of rules. One pertains to God Himself, and the other to our fellow beings. Marriage therefore falls into the second category and may be considered to be its chief proponent. The Islamic law has made the most of it, but there are many people that do not seem to understand [the law] fully. Neither do they try to benefit themselves by it. Their case is like that of a baby who would be quite willing to barter a precious diamond for a base coin. I wish people could only realize the importance of marriage."

In our goal to becoming the most righteous women we can strive to be, how do we take advantage of this union between husband and wife? The answer can be found within the Holy Quran, which says quite simply,

**NEXT SLIDE:**

“Of His signs is that He created mates for you of your own kind that you may find peace of mind through them, and He has put love and tenderness between you, in that surely are signs for a people that reflect.” (30:22)

We need to treat each other as friends and not as someone who didn't put the toilet seat down or who never wants to talk about his emotions. If we want to become truly righteous women, we need to care for our husbands with kindness and love and we will have fulfilled our duties towards them.

Hazrat Masih Maud and Hazrat Amma Jaan's marriage is one perfect example of such a union. Hazrat Musleh Maud said of their marriage that it was *“as if they shared one heart beating in both their chests”*. This was the perfect example of two individuals who were emulating the directive set within the Holy Quran.

An anecdote is related from Hazrat Amma Jaan's life, that “Hadhrat Amma Jaan<sup>(ra)</sup> tried her best to please her respected husband and as such soon one day tried to make a favourite dish of his, sweet rice. Due to inexperience she added about four times as much sugar as was required and due to it already being mealtime, she did not have a chance to start again. When the Promised Messiah<sup>(as)</sup> saw her obviously upset over this cooking disaster he kindly tasted it and remarked that it was fine and he liked it this way! “

As this anecdote illustrates, Hazrat Amma Jaan was trying her best to care for her husband and Hazrat Masih Maud did his best in caring for his wife, by sparing her feelings. This is what our marriages should be like, but sometimes we have trouble following through. Sometimes, we are swayed by cultural influences, which may put us off from cooking our husband breakfast or bringing him a cup of tea. We think that these actions are examples of “servitude”. If someone's friend is visiting over and asks for a cup of coffee, she'll run to give it to her. If you substitute that friend for her husband, she may say, get it yourself. Now, why is that? Why does the fact that it is her husband make the wife rethink her actions?

**NEXT SLIDE:**

So, let's take a moment to look at a clip from one of my favorite childhood shows, The Cosby Show, which perfectly illustrates this dilemma.

We see two points of view represented in this scene. One is an attitude, portrayed by Elvin, that the wife bringing coffee to her husband is an example of servitude. The second viewpoint is portrayed by Claire, who lets Elvin know that marriage is give and take. Islam shows us the truth of the matter, that marriage is a commitment between friends and not a competition or a tit-for-tat.

Now, let's move on to the second aspect of the role which Islam has prescribed for women. Islam has split the sphere of activities between men and women.

#### **NEXT SLIDE:**

Women's primary sphere of activity is within her home. Again, this does not mean that she cannot work outside the home, but the environment inside the home is her primary concern. The man's sphere of activity is outside the home and again, that doesn't mean that he can't help his wife with some of the household tasks.

#### **NEXT SLIDE:**

Hazrat Khalifatul Masih V has reinforced this assignment of roles in his Khutba from November of 2011, "I give the examples of these old saints and holy people to give a lesson to new couples, for such families for such husbands and wives where problems arise, that they should ponder. In particular girls and ladies should reflect upon this. They should take great heed that first of all their responsibility is to take care of their homes." (Khutba, Nov. 8, 2011).

Many of us may recognize that it is our responsibility to take care of the homes, but we may not value the work or respect this sphere of activity, which can lead to problems. If we do not fully respect the role assigned to us by Allah, then how can we fulfill it and thus, walk on the path towards righteousness?

At the beginning of this presentation, I showed you a picture of June Cleaver. She was the antithesis of what I wanted to grow up to be. I thought the word 'housewife' was derisive and that other people thought that the work inside the home was unworthy. In fact, when I was young, I remember classmates asking me what my mother did. I said that she stayed at home and they would reply, "Oh so she does nothing". Their response was influenced by society. How

wrong they were. I grew up to realize that the work my mother did at home was more important than any other thing she could have done.

**NEXT SLIDE:**

It is this attitude which pervades our culture and is in fact, discussed in a 2010 New York Times article, titled "The stigma of being a housewife" that states "Their daily chores of cleaning, cooking or raising their children have always been ignored by national accounts. (If a man marries his housekeeper and stops paying her for her work, G.D.P. goes down. If a woman stops nursing and buys formula for her baby, G.D.P. goes up.)" In today's society, we quantify everything. How much money do you get paid? The more you get paid, the more valuable you are to society. Yet, Islam has shown us through the hadith, "Paradise lies under the mother's feet", that the value of our role in the home is priceless.

**NEXT SLIDE:**

When everything is measured and thus given a value, how do we measure the worth of a woman who gives all her soul and heart to the nurturing of her home and family? And if we don't value it, then who will?

If Allah has entrusted us with the care of our homes, then we must trust Him that it is just as important a role as the role which has been entrusted to men. However, if we are a little low on trust and are still haunted by the voices of today's society, then let me give you a little insight into how important our tasks inside the home are and the far reaching consequences they bear.

**NEXT SLIDE:**

In Way of the Seekers, Hazrat Khalifatul Masih II has written that "A child should be kept neat and tidy and, should be properly cleaned after stools...Let the child have a clean body. Its impact on his mind will be great."

**NEXT SLIDE:**

Again, Hazur writes, "A child should be fed at fixed hours. This will breed the habit of self-control and save it from a number of evils."

This one habit leads to

- "a. Punctuality
- b. Self-control

- c. Good health
- d. Cooperation.
- e. Frugality.
- f. It will develop the inner strength to resist temptation."

**NEXT SLIDE:**

"A child should be given a variety of foods. It should have meat, vegetables and fruit, for dietary habits affect morals and a variety of food is necessary for a variety of morals."

All of these little things show that what tasks we might view as mundane or unimportant, are in actuality, of great consequence. When I do the laundry or I clean the dishes, just to see another stack of dishes pile up and I sigh and think that I'm wasting my brain power, I should shift my perspective. What I am doing is creating an environment, which is clean and offers routine and stability and will breed an amazing amount of positive traits within my children for the future. Allah did not entrust this role to us in vain; the care of the home was not just a throw-a-way. It is a vital and important part of our lives which we need to focus on as much as we focus on the other aspects of our lives. When we fully respect the role that we have been given and give it our due attention, then we can fulfill that role as Allah has asked us to. When we fulfill that role and our children and husbands are pleased with us, then we are walking on the path towards righteousness. It is righteousness which we strive for and may we all succeed in that goal of ours.