

**FAMILY LIFE  
IN  
ISLAM**

**FATIMA HEEREN SARKA**



# FAMILY LIFE IN ISLAM

BY  
FATIMA HEEREN-SARKA



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## INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR

Fatima Heeren-Sarka was born in 1934 and has lived most of her life in Munich and its suburbs. She became interested in Islam after meeting her husband, who was already a convert, and so greatly was she impressed by his faith that in 1960, she too embraced Islam. Both being eager to migrate to a Muslim country, they finally had the opportunity to come to Pakistan late in 1962 where they lived, first in Dacca and then in Karachi, until just after the Indo-Pak War broke out in September 1965, circumstances compelled them to return to Germany. Until February 1976, Fatima Heeren was Secretary at the mosque in Munich. At present she is hard at work on a German-language translation and commentary of the Quran.

Fatima Heeren and I have known each other intimately ever since we first exchanged letters in early 1963 and we have been corresponding regularly ever since. She is one of my most faithful and devoted friends.

At a time when good Islamic literature relevant to contemporary life is so desperately needed, writings dealing with the family—the foundation of our society—and specifically the crucial role of the Muslim woman in promoting Islamic regeneration—have been very much neglected. What sparse material does exist on this subject has been written exclusively by men. This beautifully expressed, warm-hearted presentation of family-life in Islam by a devout European woman, is unique in modern Muslim literature. May the author's profound love for Islam inspire her in the near future to enlarge this pamphlet into a full-length book.

MARYAM JAMEELAH

Rajab 21, 1396  
(July 20, 1976)

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## **FAMILY LIFE IN ISLAM\***

At a time when values tend to be turned upside down, family life as the very heart of society was attacked just as much as many other handed-down traditions. About ten years ago, when it became fashionable for young torch-bearers of "modernism" to live in communes, share sex, children and earnings, many people feared that this might mean the end of family life. Fortunately, this is not so. In the end, the overwhelming majority of young women still dream of having a wedding ring on their finger, living in a comfortable flat as Mrs. So-and-So and bringing up their children in an orderly home, just as young men prefer to introduce "her" with the words "this is my wife" instead of "this is my mate or comrade." Neither socialism or any other "isms" were able to uproot what has been implanted into human nature from time immemorial.

If dangers for family, and particularly matrimonial, life could be overcome successfully in the West, they were even less able to gain ground in the Muslim world. There family life with all its aspects, concerning not only husband, wife and children but all other relatives too, is so firmly established by tradition as well as by religious law that it could not be seriously damaged.

Now one may say that a happy and healthy family life cannot be guaranteed by law. It is true that it

\* This is the text of the speech delivered by Fatima Heeren-Sarka, a German convert and Secretary of the Islamic Centre, Munich, at The International Islamic Conference, London, on April 8, 1976.

depends so much on the good-will of all concerned that the best laws remain written phrases where this good will is missing. Here, however, as in all other spheres of the Islamic way of life, the ruling factor is the fact that Islam is not a religion in the Western sense of the term but truly **THE WAY OF LIFE** for those adhering to it. Islam means on the one hand, the complete submission to the Will of God. And on the other, it is the conscious acceptance of man's vicegerency on earth as ordained by God.

Submission to the Will of God, if applied to family life, means accepting the desires inherent in man's nature and living up to them; the desire for a companion with whom one can share love, mutual confidence, kindness, self-sacrifice and solace; the desire for children, the desire for parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and all other relatives whom one can trust and who may either grant protection or be granted protection; the desire for a peaceful and cherishing home, the desire for a good education; the desire for help in the hour of need and the desire for doing good or receiving good, just as the events may demand.

The conscious acceptance of man's vicegerency on earth means seeking the best possible means for a successful vicegerency. And here again, family life provides the most promising basis for our activities. A good and healthy family life grants us the right approach to life, helps us to see matters in the right perspective, gives us the most useful education, not only as far as our future profession is concerned but also for the handling of life itself. When we are grown up, it gives us a safe home that enables us to take part in



society to its greatest benefit and when we become old, it grants us our livelihood just as we used to grant it when we were still able to do so.

To people completely engrossed in the way of life prevailing in the West today, this may seem incredible. Why not leave children in the nursery and depend on their education at school—after all, what a lot of taxes are paid for this purpose? And why feel responsible for relatives in need or old family members since they certainly must be insured against troubles of all sorts and there are homes for old people where they cannot disturb the young? There are so many more useful and lucrative things to do instead of looking after children and caring for old or sick family members.

Yet, incredible though it may sound, in the Muslim world these responsibilities are still shouldered by the majority of families. This is due to the Islamic injunctions which have not at all become obsolete in the course of modern techno-industrial developments but are taken quite seriously by the Muslims up to this very day. And why is this so? I think it is so because the Muslims honestly believe in their accountability for their conduct here on earth on the Day of Resurrection, because they are fully aware of their role as God's vicegerents and because they feel contentment in fulfilling their religious duties, thus achieving God's good pleasure which is the main aim of their very existence.

Non-Muslims may wonder how a religion can still exercise such a powerful influence over people in modern times that at least in this sphere Western examples are rather shunned instead of being imitated, contrary to the usual trend in most other fields.

It is the firm structure of Islamic family life resting on the following four pillars that makes these values so enduring and enables them to outlive current Western practices. They are based on Quranic regulations and the traditions from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) handed down from generation to generation:

1. Family life as a cradle of human society, providing a secure, healthy and encouraging home for parents and the growing children;
2. Family life as guardian of the natural erotic desires of man, leading this powerful urge into wholesome channels;
3. Family life as the very breeding place for human virtues like love, kindness, mercy;
4. Family life as the most secure refuge against internal and external troubles.

An ever valid and never obsolete aspect of Islamic family life is, however, that the strength of all four of these pillars is made up by the system likewise of giving, sharing and taking, just as our age and the everyday conditions may request. And it must not be forgotten that the benefits of family life are based not only on blood relations but encompass the world-wide family of Muslims — the Islamic brotherhood.

Let us look more closely now at each of these four pillars.

If the family is to be a wholesome cradle for human society, it means that the children as the perpetuators of the human race must find there warmth, patience, and every possible advancement in their all-round education. For this purpose, they must have a mother

who considers the care for her children, not as a part-time job but as one of her foremost duties. And they must have a father who—as Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his book, *IDEALS AND REALITIES OF ISLAM*, puts it so beautifully; “According to the patriarchal nature of Islam, the father is an *Imam* for the family on whose shoulders rests the religious responsibility of the family. He must uphold the tenets of faith and his authority symbolizes that of God in the world. The man is in fact respected in the family precisely because of the sacred total functions he fulfils. . . . The rebellion of Muslim women in certain quarters of Islamic society came when men themselves ceased to fulfil their religious function and lost their virile and patriarchal character.”\* This is the noteworthy opinion of a world-renowned Iranian scholar.

With a home where mother and father are aware of their important role and realize that the world of tomorrow will be what they make of their children, the foundation of society will remain intact.

As for the education of the children, I think it should consist of the following four phases : the foundation of faith covering the period from birth up to the twentieth year, that is the time when the child leaves home, the Islamic milieu must be created in the family. As modern psychology teaches us, this milieu exercises its most important influence on the child during the first years of life. It is so many great and small things that make up this Islamic atmosphere. The foremost condition is that parents love and respect each

\* *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1966, pp. 110-111.

other, that they are—according to Islamic ideals, patient and extend cherishing care to the children. But it is also important that the children can listen to beautiful recitations from the Quran—there are excellent recordings nowadays—that they realize when it is Ramadan, the month of fasting, when the great festive days are celebrated and also that Muslim friends and relatives come on visits or are visited. And they must hear words like Allah and Muhammad uttered in a loving voice. This is what in fact most of us are doing anyhow. But in order to create a real Islamic atmosphere, it is also necessary that the home where Muslims live is furnished with some typically Islamic items, at least. I don't mean the usual cheap sentimentalities but true undiluted culture. The children should see some really beautiful examples of Arabic calligraphy on the wall, perhaps a fine, hand-knotted oriental carpet here and there and other things which cannot be found in a Western household. And the Muslims should, at least at home, wear their traditional national dress as used in their homelands and take their shoes off, even if only upon entering the drawing room. Thus they will keep a close contact with their own heritage and the children will definitely feel that they are Muslims which will fill them, not with humiliating feelings of inferiority but with confidence and a natural spontaneous pride for their people. I am particularly emphasizing this point since I am a German convert living in a European environment.

The second phase I would call the phases of emotional attachments. We know from our psychologists how the consciousness of children is formed by listening

at an early age to horror stories and thrillers on radio, television and at the cinema and how it may, on the other hand, become creative imagination by relating enchanting tales. Here lies such a wide field for parents endowed with creativeness and good-will. They will again study the stories of the former prophets as told in the Quran, read many beautiful *Hadith* about the last Prophet, Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the heroes of Islamic history. By combining all their love, intelligence and imagination, they can create the most interesting and inspiring tales and according to my experience, it is particularly the period of childhood from the second to the fifth year when little boys and girls are most eager to listen to such stories. The mother may tell them to the child while in the midst of her housework and in many cases, very stimulating discussions can follow since the child always has his questions and wants to express his own views. In this way the child's character can definitely be formed in the right way and high moral standards established which will *inshallah* continue throughout his life.

The third phase established on the first and second, is that of fulfilment of Islamic duties. It is only natural that a child wants to imitate his praying parents. Therefore he is given a small prayer-rug and though at first, he will keep patience for a few minutes at most, in due course, he will learn how to pray and become accustomed to a daily rhythm and routine as envisaged by Islam. Similarly is the case of keeping fast. At first the child will not be able to stand this for more than a few hours. But slowly he will manage a half a day and even a whole day. Here, it is very

important that *Sahar* and *Iftar*, the meals before beginning the fast and after breaking fast, are really celebrated a bit. How proud will the child be if he is allowed to rise early in the morning for the first time in order to have breakfast with his parents! What a satisfaction will it be for him if he really managed to keep fast for a whole day! I think many parents will be pleased when the child himself pleads for being allowed to keep fast again instead of having to be persuaded almost against his will to join the grownups. Also there will always be opportunities for giving alms. The child should be given a nice bright coin so that he himself can spend it, thus learning that some money should go to the needy or into the collection box of a mosque instead of being wasted selfishly buying toys or sweets. In regard to the pilgrimage (*Haj*), the child should be told how Muslims from all over the world gather at the holy places at Mecca for the important purpose of being closely knit together into one brotherhood, worshipping their Creator as the servants of the Almighty Allah have done in an uninterrupted chain since the time of Abraham.

By this stage, the child will be keenly conscious that he is a Muslim and therefore a firm foundation has already been laid down on which the fourth phase of his Islamic training can rest.

This is the phase of *Jihad*. The adolescent, now about fifteen years old, has already learned that life on this earth means trial and that only those can successfully emerge from this examination who submit to the Will of God in profound reverence and humility. It is, however, inherent in the nature of man and particularly



young and energetic people that they want a real aim in life, something for which they can strive. There is, of course, a variety of ordinary aims in daily life, like not forgetting our religious duties, passing school exams, recovering from an illness, seeking employment in a job of our choice, finding a loving husband or wife and raising worthy children. All of these, however, are individual achievements, and however essential they may be, healthy ambition of our youth must be directed towards some higher ideals. If not guided into the proper channels, it will easily fall prey to demagogic persuasion and aspire for false idols like the prevailing "isms" ranging from nationalism to communism.

*Jihad*, the struggle for the cause of Islam, offers so many opportunities that every Muslim will find a field of action suited to his inclinations and abilities. The struggle may be waged—in the hour of crisis—with the sword or with the pen, with the shovel as with the scalpel or even with a sewing machine or a cooking-pot. Jihad is the struggle against all evil forces attacking Islam from without or within. Whether such attacks are being waged in order to ridicule Islam, to undermine its beliefs or weaken its traditions and customs, to destroy its political power—they must be combatted with the utmost vigour because they are out to destroy the very roots of our heritage.

A family where this spirit is constantly kept alert will be our best guarantee for a sound Islamic society because it enables all family members to assume their vicegerency to the best of their ability. And this is one of the most important aims of family life.

It was essential to devote special care to the explanation of this first and foremost pillar of family life concerned with the aspect of child-rearing since upon this depends the future of humanity at large.

We now come to the second pillar, that of family life as the guardian of the innate erotic urges of man. I have not used the word "sex" since this has been misused so badly that it tends to distort rather than to describe what I wish to say.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has said: "Marriage is a part of my Sunnah. Whoever runs away from my path, is not one of us." In the Quran Sura II, Verse 187 men are told: "They (your wives) are your garments and you are their garments . . . So now associate with them . . ." Islam, being the complete way of life, always takes into consideration the natural disposition of man and enjoins marriage. And it tells us in a few beautiful words how husband and wife should, like garments, cover and protect each other, how they may find filfilment in each other in their physical and emotional urges, in their desire for children and in mutual exchange of love and tenderness. I would like to add a few personal words here since as a convert to Islam, I am sometimes asked how I feel about the approach of Islam towards matrimony.

What I can really appreciate is how well the custom in Muslim families of so-called arranged marriages usually works. During my stay in Pakistan as well as from numerous former students and other Muslim friends whom I have become acquainted over the last fifteen years, I could always observe that family life in

arranged marriages is far more enduring and stable than in the average Western family. It seems that where parents or relatives with insight and experience propose marriages, they do so, taking into account family background, education, ambitions, likes and dislikes and so many other factors. And though nearly all Muslim marriages are conducted without courtship, and it is never tried out beforehand to find out whether or not the partners are sexually compatible, as it is now customary in the West, most marriages in Muslim countries are far more successful than here.

Secondly, there is the delicate matter of polygamy. Before the Registrar in Germany married me to my European-Muslim husband, he warned me of the four wives which would be permissible to him if we should ever live in a Muslim country. Though a bit astonished at first, I soon learned that just because having more than one wife is allowed in Islam, it is practised very seldom. And since this legal concession to the polygamous inclinations undoubtedly inherent in men or to extraordinary circumstances like chronic illness or barrenness of the first wife, on the other hand, Islam has completely prohibited sexual relations outside marriage. I think this is a very wise decision. If a Muslim for any reason simply cannot help desiring another woman, he is not forced by this urge to resort to a sinful act but may quite legitimately enjoy its fulfilment, provided he is prepared to shoulder the responsibilities of supporting an additional wife and her children. That, in my opinion, is the main point. Hardly any man will, merely for the sake of his greediness, support more than one wife and her children. He will certainly

think more than twice before he acts while in permissive societies like ours, lacking such sensible rules, it is so easy just to jump into bed and run away afterwards. Instead of preserving the other woman's human dignity, nothing but misery and degradation is in store for her and perhaps even for her innocent child. There are so many examples before us that no further comments are required on this subject.

Thirdly, in matters of divorce, I hold the Islamic solution to be far superior to others I know, as, for example, that of Roman Catholicism. If for any reason, seldom as this may happen in practice, husband and wife consider it impossible to live together any longer, there are no loathsome fetters compelling them to keep their union by force. If a wife cannot tolerate her husband when he takes another wife, she can always ask for a divorce and is not forced to endure what is unbearable for her. They may separate in peace, and each of them may seek fulfilment with somebody else. Is it not more in conformity with human dignity in these matters that no lies are required? If a husband finds he cannot put up any longer with some bad habits or other undesirable things in his wife, there is no need for him to torture her by ill-treatment—he simply separates from her. And the same applies to the wife. In this way, human society will be far more clean and healthy; homes will not be made places of misery for the children and none of the spouses is condemned to life-long unhappiness. There are a number of laws and regulations concerning divorce which I consider most sensible, be it in respect to the financial position of a divorced woman and her children or in other

respects, but this would lead us too far from our main topic to discuss these here. As Abu Daoud relates, the Prophet has said: "Of all permissible things, divorce is the most hateful in the sight of God." And I think this very strong tradition is also responsible for the fact that divorce, as necessary as it may be in certain cases, is so rare in good Muslim families.

And fourthly, I want to say a few words about the status of women in Islam. In Sura 2 Verse 228, of the Holy Quran we read: "And they (women) have rights similar to those of men but men are a degree above them." Those who want to find fault with Islamic regulations, consider this detrimental to the dignity of women. But I am of the opinion that this one verse includes all that is essential for my happiness as a woman. It grants me all rights for which I aspire—the right to education, for my own property, for being the guardian inside the home and even the right to work outside the home if circumstances demand this, to name only a few aspects. But most important of all, it grants me the right to depend on my husband, be it in matters of my livelihood or in regard to any important decisions that have to be taken for the benefit of the family. On the husband, however, rests the great responsibility of caring for his family and finding, by consulting his wife and making use of all his wisdom and good judgment, the best possible solutions. Does it not lie in the very nature of a woman that she wants a powerful, just, wise and considerate husband who is capable of making such decisions? This, I think, is the ideal family life as envisaged by Islam. In such an atmosphere, both partners will find fulfilment physically,



emotionally and in all other matrimonial matters of which rearing the children takes primary importance.

In regard to the third pillar, that of human virtues like love, kindness and mercy, I would like to allow the Quran to speak for me: "We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents. In pain did his mother bear him and in pain did she give him birth . . . At length when he reaches the age of full strength and attains forty years, he says: 'O my Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for Thy favour which Thou hast bestowed upon me and both my parents and that I may work righteousness such as Thou mayest approve and be gracious to me in my progeny. Truly I have turned to Thee and truly do I bow to Thee in Islam.'" (Sura 49, Verse 15). And furthermore we are told in Sura 17, Verses 23 and 24: "Thy Lord has decreed that ye worship none but Him and that ye be kind to parents . . . And out of kindness, lower to them the wing of mercy and say: "My Lord! Bestow on them Thy mercy even as they cherished me in childhood." What a spirit of mutual kindness, this lowering of the wing of mercy on us while we are helpless! And later on, our protecting tenderness to our children and our elders when they are in need of it! If we are good and patient, understanding and sympathetic in our behaviour towards our family members, thus bringing forth the very same virtues in them as well, we are sure to carry these virtues forward into the mainstream of human society as well. A tender and considerate father will also be good to those whom he meets outside the home just as he will be strict and uncompromising when he has to protect his family or his fellow men



against evils that are out to undermine or destroy those virtues.

And to round off the argument, the fourth pillar grants us within the field of family life a secure refuge against troubles and dangers. At a time when people tend to mistrust each other, when everybody is thinking only of himself, it is considered unbearable to be burdened with the worries of others. Only those fortunate enough to be certain that there is for them at least one place of refuge where we may be offered good advice, encouragement, sympathy, a helping hand or at least our bed and a piece of bread, are assured that at home they will be defended and protected against the outside world and where we know that other family members look for the best within us—not the worst—which is so essential if we are to develop our finest qualities. Thus the family is a marvellous institution for the needy as well as for those who are able to help. No other social institution has so far shouldered similar responsibilities as successfully as the family.

The more perfect a society has become in the eyes of a superficial observer, the more heart-rending may all its utterly impersonal social achievements appear in the sight of those who know the cherishing care and warmth of a truly Islamic family life.

Fatima Heeren-Sarka  
8891 Tandern  
Bergstr-6  
WEST GERMANY

## MUSLIMS AWAKE !

While the evils of atheism and materialism, supported by all the forces of modern technology, are working day and night to destroy us—spiritually, culturally and politically—rather than hold fast to faith in Allah, unite and combat our real enemies, we foolishly choose to tread the path of an alien civilization, hoping thereby in vain to attain social prestige and the comforts and pleasures of this transitory world in utter forgetfulness of the eternal Life Hereafter and thus totally neglect our duties as Muslims to Allah and our fellow-beings. This is not the way to “Progress” but can only result in our failure, degeneration and doom, both individually and collectively! Muslim brothers and sisters! Follow the path of the Quran and Sunnah, not as a set of dead rituals but as a practical manual of guidance for our conduct in daily life in private and in public, put aside sectarian and political controversies and let us all cooperate and work together in harmony for the cause of Allah in Islamic movements in whichever country you happen to live, do not waste valuable time in useless things and *inshallah*, Allah shall crown your life with great achievements here and supreme success in the Hereafter.

MARYAM JAMEELAH