



The Importance of Inspirational Muslim Women

Tasneem Dahduli is the founder of Mosaic, a blog dedicated to recognising extraordinary Muslim women. This month, Tasneem joins SISTERS to explain why she believes it is so important to elevate these women onto the pedestal they deserve.

Identity - it is a big issue for many Muslim girls. They live in two worlds, both of which lie on opposite sides of the spectrum, and they are caught in an endless game of tug of war. Moreover, our society is constantly changing, standards are being lowered and expectations are being raised, making it even harder for Muslim women to form an identity that

merges their religion and the society surrounding it. This identity crisis stems not just from the push and pull of two different worlds, but from the lack of definition as to who a Muslim woman is required to be and what role she should serve in society.

One way to combat this confusion is through the education about

Islamic history going beyond the stories of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, to include the history of Muslims in the years following the Prophetic time, to the present day. Sometimes, looking back on the past can mould our perspective of the present and help us build our future. When there is no understanding of one's history, it is like free falling, trying to put together what is around you to create a base to land on. Those who are not familiar with their past can find it overwhelming when trying to form an identity.

So, how exactly can learning about Islamic history help Muslim women? When we learn about history in school, we are taught from a completely Western perspective. When we were taught about geography, we learnt that for hundreds of years, people thought the world was flat. We are not taught that for over hundreds of years prior to this, the Muslims not only knew (from the Qur'an) that the Earth was round, but they had also made incredible astronomical advancements over a thousand years before NASA existed. When we were taught biology, we learnt that sterilisation and sanitation did not come about until after the Middle Ages. We were not taught that the hospitals in the Islamic civilisation were sanitising and sterilising all medical equipment hundreds of years before it was 'discovered' in Europe. Most importantly, we were not taught that before Mulan, there was the extraordinary Black Knight, Khawla Bint Al-Azwar. Before Florence Nightingale, there was Rufayda Al-Aslamiya. Before Shakespeare, there was the incredible poet Al Khansa'a. Before Chanel, there was Zainab bint Jahsh. The number of incredible stories of Muslim women of the past is mind-boggling, all of which sound like something from the movies.

These stories give Muslim women something to be proud of, models to follow and a presence in history. Learning about women of the past can affect the way we view our present, especially when we feel that our time is so different than theirs. It becomes clear that their personalities and struggles were similar to ours - that no matter how much technology and material aspects of our world have changed, human nature has not. It also challenges the belief that religion is old fashioned and incompatible with our time, that it needs to be modified to accommodate our society's demands. The rulings of Islam are based on human nature, which has remained consistent throughout history, so therefore, are timeless.

Through our textbooks, education and media, we are fed the illusion of modernity - that as time passes, human beings and their societies become more advanced and intelligent. The more modern and technologically advanced a society, the more it serves as the ideal model. Think about how many times we use the word 'modern'. Modern hijab. Modern Muslimah. Modern this, modern that. It is our perspective in regards to time (past vs. present) that makes us view certain concepts as acceptable. When you study the history of the Islamic world, you would be surprised to find that some of the misogynistic views that exist in some Islamic societies today are actually 'modern' in relation to their presence in the Islamic world. Only recently, in the past 200-300 years, have these concepts started to emerge as a result of Western invasion, and with it, the invasion of Western philosophies about women, which contradict those of Islam. So, your 'modern Muslimah' - the successful, educated, strong minded one - is actually old-fashioned and going back to the way Muslim women used to be.

These successful, strong, educated Muslim women are in themselves great examples and role models. Those that are getting places need to be recognised, and those that are striving for success could benefit from a present day role model. This is why I believe that learning about other Muslim women can help us contribute to our identity. There is something about a CEO in hijab that gives you the feeling of limitless possibility.

Imagine what happens when negative perspectives about Muslim women are challenged? Let's start asking questions like, 'Is the percentage of Western women who are extremely successful higher than the percentage of the Muslim women who are at the same level of success?', 'What percentage of successful Western women are, indeed, Muslim?'. I guarantee you will be surprised at the results. You will be surprised to find that there is not much of a difference, or that the difference is not as much as you would have expected. You will be surprised to find that the successful Muslim woman is the norm, and the 'oppressed' Muslim woman is just as outside the norm as it is in other societies. The only difference is that these successful Muslim women are not represented in the media and are not given the recognition they deserve and as a result, appear to be few and far between.

So, instead of waiting for someone else to recognise Muslim women and put them at the forefront of public attention, we should take it upon ourselves to recognise their achievements.

Through Mosaic, I have found that just the pursuit of successful Muslim women can be enlightening in itself. We can take it upon ourselves to provide our future generations with role models, give real world examples, along with past examples of Muslim women and show them that Islam encourages you to have limitless ambition and to always be increasing your knowledge. The more women we recognise, the more we contribute to changing not just the public's perspective, but our own perspective of Muslim women and help create a platform of role models for Muslim women that prove that success does not have to come at the cost of religion. I have had the pleasure of interviewing many Muslim women, from weightlifters and Olympic runners, to CEOs and fashion designers. The wide spectrum of professions that these women are in is a clear indication of the widespread success of Muslim women around the world. Hopefully, one day, together we can break the stereotypes that shackle us and elevate these Muslim women to be the leading models for women everywhere.

Further Reading: For more inspirational accounts, visit Tasneem's blog: www.mosaicofmuslimwomen.wordpress.com

Tasneem Dahduli is the founder and writer behind the blog, Mosaic. Mosaic was created as a platform to recognise the unrecognised, celebrate the accomplished and bring together a wide diversity of women who exemplify the image of a Muslimah. The main goal behind Mosaic is for it to be a source of motivation and a database of role models for young Muslim girls. Besides Mosaic, Tasneem works as an early childhood nutritionist and is currently in graduate school studying international nutrition. She also runs her own photography business and a food and nutrition blog called La Figure et L'Olive.