

Women and the challenges of the modern world

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We usually define the modern world in terms of technological advancement, large-scale industrialization, quick means of communication, easy & fast access to information and emergence of globalization.

The age of globalization has brought many challenges to us. I am going to bring to your attention five of these challenges we face.

1. Identity

The first great challenge I see is the challenge to identity. Man is an unique being. Allah says in the Qur'an: "*Does man think he will be left alone? Was he not just a drop of split-out sperm, which became a clinging form, which Allah shaped in due proportion, fashioning from it the two sexes, male and female?*" (Al-Qiyamah 75: 36-39) Here Allah refers to, first and foremost, the balance and beauty He has bestowed on human beings. Our body is made in proportion and made most beautiful. Second, Allah tells us that gender is part of our physical identity.

Allah says further that though men and women have different characteristics, what makes each of them distinct from one another is their conscious ethical behavior. "*People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into nations and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In Allah's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most aware of Him: Allah is all knowing, all aware.*" (Al-Hujurat 49: 13) Here Allah makes it clear that gender, colour, ethnic origin may help in identifying a person, but more important is excellence in *taqwa* or Allah consciousness.

The real identity of Muslim women therefore is their gender role with excellence in *taqwa* or moral conduct. However, the age of globalization, which sees the domination of a

single culture, has introduced a lifestyle which not only threatens gender identity but also challenges ethical values. The fashion mafia of the modern world has introduced a trend in which gender identity is often confused. Men and women are persuaded to adopt hairstyles, and wear dresses and ornaments which do not help in maintaining separate identity for men and women. The irony is that those who maintain their natural identity are called 'backward' while those who imitate the other gender, in the name of liberty, are called 'modern'. This confusion of identity was disliked by our Prophet (SAW). He said that men should not try to appear like women; they should not wear women's dress.

Muslim women, particularly our younger generation, have to watch for this challenge. It goes beyond physical appearance. This behavior pattern shows a lack of confidence and pride in one's natural constitution as a man or a woman. It also betrays unconscious acceptance of male superiority: when a woman is dressed like a man and acts like a man, it shows her lack of confidence in her female identity.

Please do not misunderstand me. When I talk about the challenge to our identity, physical appearance is only a small part of it. The real identity of a Muslim woman according to the Qur'an is her moral conduct. Allah tells us that pious men and women obey His commands in their prayers, spending, social dealings as well as in their speech and even in their manner of walking. Modesty is their distinction. Fashion shows, the glamour of stage performance, projected as an integral part of modernity, has emerged as a challenge to our identity, modesty and ethical pride.

(to be continued)