

The **ISLAM** Project
MODULE GUIDE

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WOMEN AND ISLAM



University Students
Istanbul, Turkey

Recent events have brought heightened attention to Islam, but not necessarily deeper understanding. The Islam Project can help to change that by raising public awareness, offering information, and bringing people together in dialogue. The Project uses as a springboard *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet* and *Muslims*, two important documentaries that can help members of your community better understand Islam and the people who practice it. This module, which includes clips from both films, briefly explores the experience of Muslims living in the United States and Malaysia.

FACILITATING A DIALOGUE

Discussions are most productive when people feel safe, comfortable, and challenged. That balance can be difficult to achieve when the topic is religion or politics or prejudice, so you may want to consider finding an experienced facilitator for your event. If you plan to facilitate the dialogue yourself, think about how you will ensure that the tenor remains respectful and everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

In planning an event, be clear about what you hope to accomplish. This module can:

- Help participants **learn** more about Islam and those who practice it.
- Provide participants with an opportunity to **listen** to each other, hear diverse voices, and gain new insight.
- Inspire participants to take the **lead** in their community by resolving to act. Below are suggestions for meeting these goals. Choose the ones that best meet your needs.

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LEARN

For some people, providing basic information will be an appropriate and useful starting point.

In this module, viewers will hear that:

- During Muhammad's lifetime, many of his policies on women were significantly different from those of surrounding cultures, including forbidding female infanticide, giving women legal rights in marriage, permitting women to divorce, and protecting women's inheritance rights.
- Khadija, Muhammad's wife, was a wealthy, powerful, working woman. She serves as a role model for many Muslim women today.
- In Islam, a man can marry as many as four women but only if he can "do justice" to each one — that is, care for each equally.
- For many Muslim women, the wearing of hijab (hair covering) is about service to God, not about subservience to men.

You may want to review these points, especially with groups for whom this is new information. You also might ask whether these points confirm or contradict participants' previous ideas and discuss where their ideas came from. What have been their sources of information on Islam? Are there more reliable sources, and, if so, what are they?

LISTEN

When we listen actively to others' stories, we're more likely to understand them rather than judge them.

What can you learn — about sexuality and gender relations, for example — from what people in the films reveal?

What challenges do the women featured in the clips face as Muslims and how do they meet those challenges? How do their challenges differ from the challenges faced by Muslim men? Do their challenges differ from women who are not Muslim? If so, how?

Thinking About Sexuality

What do the women portrayed in these film clips think Islam teaches about sexuality? How are their thoughts similar or dissimilar to your own ideas about sexuality?

For further discussion:

Harlina Halizah: "I don't think it is fair to say that Islam restricts your sexual desire. . . . It is more directing it toward a more purposeful kind of life." What are your beliefs about expressions of sexual desire and what factors shape those beliefs?

Some Muslim women have explained that covering one's body is freeing because it prevents others from making them into sexual objects. Others have described such modesty requirements as restrictive and sexist because they are based on the assumption that women need to be obscured so as not to arouse male desire. What do you think Nadia Bazy and her family believe about *hijab*? Note: The *American Muslim Experience* module contains more material on *hijab*, including comments from an American Muslim woman who has chosen not to wear *hijab*.

Thinking About Gender Relations

What do these Muslim women think Islam teaches about gender relations? How is this similar or dissimilar to your own ideas about appropriate gender relations?

For further discussion:

Harlina Halizah asked for her husband's permission to become a specialist in obstetrics. To Halizah, is this an example of subservience or partnership?

Harlina Halizah: "I don't need to be liberated. I was born a free person." Do you agree? What would you define as the criteria for being "liberated"?

Zainah Anwar: "We found that it is not Islam that discriminates against women, it is not the verses in the Qur'an, it is the way that these verses have been interpreted by men, living in patriarchal societies who wish to maintain their dominance, and their superiority and control over women." How is what Anwar describes similar to the approach taken by feminists in other religions, such as Christianity and Judaism?

LEAD

The film clips can help people think of ways to lead their community to action.

Daisy Khan uses her own journey of reconnection with her faith to help other young women grappling with similar questions and issues. Are there women in your own community who might be willing to share their experiences publicly? How might you provide a venue for those women to provide information to both Muslims and non-Muslims?

Zainah Anwar helped establish Sisters in Islam to challenge traditional understandings of Islam without abandoning Islam. Are there things your community could do to improve services for Muslim women without requiring them to compromise their religious beliefs or practices?