

33680 - Muslim society and the care of the elderly

the question

How are the elderly treated in Islam? Do they have a special status? Do they receive care that suits their health needs?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allaah.

Islam is the religion of compassion and justice, a religion that teaches perfect morals and forbids bad conduct, a religion that grants man his dignity, if he adheres to the laws of Allaah.

There can be no doubt that Islam has given the elderly a special status, as there are texts which urge Muslims to respect and honour them.

Care of the elderly in Islam is based on a number of focal points, including the following:

1 - Man is an honoured creature and has an honourable status in Islam.

Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And indeed We have honoured the Children of Adam, and We have carried them on land and sea, and have provided them with At-Tayyibaat (lawful good things), and have preferred them above many of those whom We have created with a marked preferment”

[al-Isra' 17:70]

So the elderly, as sons of Adam, are included in this high status, based on the general meaning of this verse.

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2 - Muslim society is the society of mutual compassion and coherence

Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Muhammad is the Messenger of Allaah. And those who are with him are severe against disbelievers, and merciful among themselves”

[al-Fath 48:29]

And Allaah says, describing the believers (interpretation of the meaning):

“Then he became one of those who believed (in the Islamic Monotheism) and recommended one another to perseverance and patience, and (also) recommended one another to pity and compassion.

They are those on the Right Hand (i.e. the dwellers of Paradise)”

[al-Balad 90:17-18]

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) described the believers as being like a single body. He (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “The likeness of the believers in their mutual love, mercy and compassion is that of the body; if one part of it complains, the rest of the body joins it in staying awake and suffering fever.” Narrated by Muslim, 2586.

And he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 13.

And he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “The Most Merciful has mercy on those who are merciful. Be merciful to those who are on earth so that the One Who is in heaven will have mercy on you.” Narrated by al-Tirmidhi (1924); classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Tirmidhi, 1569.

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And he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “The relationship of the believer to the people of faith is like that of the head to the body; the believer is pained by the suffering of the people of faith just as the body is pained by the suffering of the head.” Narrated by Ahmad, 32370); narrated by al-Albaani in al-Saheehah, 1137.

And he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Man is doomed and a loser if Allaah does not put compassion for mankind in his heart.” Al-Albaani said in al-Silsilah al-Saheehah (456): its isnaad is hasan.

3 - The Muslim society is a society of cooperation and mutual support

Ibn Abi'l-Dunya narrated from Ibn 'Umar that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “The most beloved of people to Allaah is the one who brings most benefit to people, and the most beloved of deeds to Allaah is making a Muslim happy, or relieving him of hardship, or paying off his debt, or warding off hunger from him. For me to go with my Muslim brother to meet his need is dearer to me than observing i'tikaaf in this mosque - meaning the mosque of Madeenah - for a month... whoever goes with his Muslim brother to meet his need, Allaah will make him stand firm on the Day when all feet will slip.” Classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Targheeb wa'l-Tarheeb, 2623.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Whoever relieves a Muslim of one of the hardships of this world, Allaah will relieve him of one of the hardships of the Day of Resurrection, and whoever helps one who is financial difficulty, Allaah will help in this world and in the Hereafter, and whoever conceals a Muslim's (fault), Allaah will conceal his (fault) in this world and in the Hereafter. Allaah will help a person so long as he helps his brother.” Narrated by Muslim, 2699.

4 - The elderly person has a high status before Allaah if he adheres to the laws of Allaah.

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The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “No one of you should wish for death or pray for it before it comes to him, for when one of you dies, his good deeds come to an end, and nothing increases a believer’s lifespan but good.” Narrated by Muslim, 2682.

And he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Shall I not tell you who is the best of you? The best of you is the one who lives the longest life, if he is righteous and does good deeds.” al-Albaani said in al-Silsilah al-Saheehah (2498): it is hasan li ghayrihi.

And he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “The best of you are those who live the longest and do the best deeds.” Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Jaami’, 3263.

And he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “No one is better before Allaah than a believer who lives a long life in Islam because of his saying Subhaan-Allaah (tasbeeh), Allaahu akbar (takbeer) and Laa ilaaha ill-Allaah (tahleel).” Narrated by Ahmad, 1404. al-Albaani said in al-Silsilah al-Saheehah (654): its isnaad is hasan.

Al-Tirmidhi narrated (2329) that a Bedouin said: “O Messenger of Allaah, who is the best of people?” He said, “The one who lives a long life and does good deeds.” Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Tirmidhi, 1899.

5 - Respecting the elderly and honouring them are characteristics of the Muslim society

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Part of glorifying Allaah is honouring the grey-haired Muslim.” Narrated by Abu Dawood, 4843; classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood, 4053.

An old man came wanting to see the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and the people did not make way for him. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “He is not one of us who does not show mercy to our young ones and respect our old ones.” Narrated by al-Tirmidhi, 1919; classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Tirmidhi, 1565.

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6 - Ways in which the Muslim society takes care of the elderly

(i) Enjoining good treatment of parents:

This is one of the ways in which the elderly are cared for in Islam, because parents are usually elderly. The command to honour one's parents is accompanied with the command to believe in Allaah alone (Tawheed) and the prohibition on associating others with Him (shirk) in many verses, for example Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Worship Allaah and join none with Him (in worship); and do good to parents...”

[al-Nisa' 4:36]

“And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents”

[al-Isra' 17:23]

It was narrated that 'Abd-Allaah ibn Mas'ood said: I asked the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), “Which deed is most beloved to Allaah?” He said, “Prayer offered on time.” He said, “Then what?” He said, “Then honouring one's parents.” He said, “Then what?” He said, “Jihad for the sake of Allaah.” He told me that if I wanted to ask him more, he would tell me more.

Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 527.

(ii) Enjoining honouring one's parents' friends even after the parents have passed away, and regarding that as part of honouring one's parents.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Part of honouring (one's parents) is to keep in touch with your father's friend.” Al-Albaani said in al-Silsilah al-Saheehah (23030): it is saheeh when all its isnaads are taken into consideration.

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Muslim (2552) narrated from 'Abd-Allaah ibn 'Umar that a man from among the Bedouin met him on the road to Makkah. 'Abd-Allaah greeted him with salaam, made him ride on the donkey that he was riding and gave him the turban that he had been wearing on his head. Ibn Dinar said: We said to him, May Allaah guide you, they are just Bedouin and they are content with something simple. 'Abd-Allaah said: The father of this man was a close friend of 'Umar ibn al-Khattaab and I heard the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) say, "The best way of honouring one's parents is for the son to keep in touch with his father's friends."

Some of the salaf even used to travel in order to keep in touch with their father's friends. Ahmad (26998) narrated that Yoosuf ibn 'Abd-Allaah ibn Salaam said: I came to Abu'l-Darda' when he was sick with the illness that would be his last, and he said to me, "O son of my brother, what has brought you to this land?" or "what has brought you?" He said: I said, "Nothing except to maintain the tie (of friendship) that existed between you and my father 'Abd-Allaah ibn Salaam."

This is one of the forms of elder care in Islam. When the members of the Muslim society visit the friends of their fathers they help to include the elderly in society and put an end to the isolation they feel, which in turn reduces impact of the social and psychological changes that the elderly go through.

This is unlike what happens in non-Muslim societies. From time to time we hear news of what happens to some of the elderly there, and the extent of the isolation in which they are living.

There was an old man who was left dead in his apartment for four years, and his body was only discovered by accident. Al-Jazeera newspaper, issue no. 7751, 7/1414 AH.

In a report from the Ministry of Families, Youth and Seniors in Germany in 1993 CE, it says that there are 440,000 elderly people who are subjected to physical and mental abuse at the hands of their relatives and family members at least once each year.

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There was an old paralyzed woman who died of starvation in her apartment because her son had cut off her water, electricity and gas, until the neighbours found out what was happening... but after it was too late.

And an elderly man died in his flat in London; he had five children but not one of them knew of his death until six months later.

There was an old woman in Germany whose house had a garden which was very beautiful. She took care of it all year round for the sake of only one day each year when her children came to visit her, because she loved them so much but they ignored her. She prepared the garden for them one day and made delicious food for them, then she was shocked when they made excuses and did not come. She wept a great deal and nearly cried herself to death.

In one of the upper-class areas of Tokyo an elderly man was discovered in his apartment one and a half years after he died. And an old lady was found who had died of starvation in her apartment.

Even stranger than that is the elderly man who was over ninety years old, and no one knew that he had died for five days after his death. What is so strange is that he died in a seniors' home in the city of Sabor on the island of Hokkaido, and none of the workers in the home realized that he had died until some of his relatives came to visit him and they found out what had happened.

Praise be to Allaah for the blessing of Islam.

And Allaah knows best.