

FROM THE MINBAR

THE MUSLIM ELDERLY: SOCIAL & RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITY

Khutbah delivered by Imam Dr. Zijad Delic at SNMC on April 13th, 2012 corresponding to Jumadal Awwal 21st, 1433 H.

BACKGROUND

Indeed all praise is for God, Lord of the worlds. Peace and blessings of God be upon Muhammad (S), his family, Khulafai Rashidin, all his Companions, and all those who follow in their footsteps until the Last Day. All praise is for God! We praise Him. We seek His help and ask for His forgiveness. We seek God's refuge from evils of ourselves and from our evil actions. I bear witness that none has the right to be worshipped except God, alone, having no partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad (S) is His Messenger.

My dear brothers and sisters in Islam ~ *As Salamu 'Alaikum Wa Rahmatullahi Wa Barakatuhu.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's modern age, we don't have to be deaf, dumb or blind to see the lack of social responsibility within our modern society. Seniors are being mistreated and robbed of their rights, pensioners are being robbed of their own possessions and earnings, women are being abused, raped and murdered in the streets of our so-called modern cities, spouses do not act responsibly and faithfully, families are breaking down, divorce is on the increase, the rise in single parents is a reality, the children often do not exhibit responsible attitude...we blame each other for all of these and no many of us take responsibility. These are some of the problems which our modern societies, of which Muslims are an integral part, face. And if we continue with this ethics of 20th century, I am doubtful that we will live a life of happiness in the 21st century.

BACKGROUND

By the end of the last century and the beginning of 21st century, the world has witnessed a remarkable interest in the elderly and their conditions. Many local, national and international conferences and symposiums were held to deal with the issues and challenges seniors encounter. In 1982, the first initiative to care for the elderly was introduced as the United Nations declared the ninth decade of the 20th century "the decade of the elderly." In 1983, the World Health Organization adopted the slogan "Add Life to Years." In addition, the UN conference held in Madrid in 2002 adopted a plan of action to solve the problems of the elderly in various countries around the world. The outcome of these conferences, however, was just sweet promises and plans without any actual application. Even at home, here in the country of plenty, we often only talk and do not do much to "Add life to Years" of the most disadvantageous of the society - seniors. It seems that this large segment of Canadian population and their needs and rights are ignored and are not on the radar of governments' support.

Statistics Canada reports that seniors are one of the fastest growing population groups in Canada. In 2011, seniors made up 14.4% of the population,



almost 5 million. It is estimated that by 2021, about 18.5% of the population will be over 65. Canada Median Age is 39.7 years,, and is growing; Muslim Median Age is 28.1 years. Seniors (65+) of Canadian Muslim community make up to 5% of the Canadian Muslim population.

Analyzing the statistics and different reports on seniors and listening to the political discourse in Canada these days and the ways the seniors (elderly) are treated lately, make me wonder how I will be treated when my time comes to enter the stage of seniority.

It seems that as a nation we have stopped caring for an important segment of our population – our elderly – people who have once served this country diligently and wholeheartedly. And now when they have given almost all they had and need to be taken care of, they find themselves on the margins of the society. I am not speaking here merely about the material level of care. Social, spiritual and emotional support of the elderly has to be part of the equation as well.

This article will highlight teachings and attitude of Islam related to treating the elderly, and give glimpses of how the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) put the theory into practice.

The Domain of Social Responsibility in Islam

Islam considers social responsibility to be one of its fundamental objectives. It extends to all of humanity: believers and nonbelievers alike – man, women, children, youth, seniors... Allah says: *"O humanity! We have created you from a male and female and made you nations and tribes so you could come to know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah are the most righteous."* (Al Hujurat 49:13)

Prophet Muhammad (S) was a pioneer in this field of the elderly and their place in the society. He taught the lessons of caring for the elderly irrespective of gender, color, or religion, and he himself set a great example in practicing the principles he taught. Simply put, he walked the talk!

ELDERLY & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Elderly and Social Responsibility in Islam

Muslims would rarely send their parents to "old people's homes." Why this is so? Because, the challenge of caring for one the parents in this most difficult and vulnerable time of their lives, is considered an honor, a blessing and an opportunity for great spiritual growth. Simply put, it is not only social but also a religious responsibility.

Islam considers the elderly to have a right to be cared for in repayment for the sacrifices that they have made to ensure the prosperity of the generation that they raised and nurtured.

In Islam, the responsibility to take care of the elderly starts with the children. God says in the Qur'an the following: *"And we have enjoined on man/woman to be good and dutiful to his/her parents." It further explains that "If one of them or both of them attain old age in your lifetime, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them, but address them in terms of honour. And lower unto them the wing of submission and humility through mercy and say: "My Lord, bestow on them Your Mercy as they did bring me up when I was young."* (Banu Israel/Al Isra 23:17)

In Islam, serving one's parents is a duty second to prayer, and it is their right to expect it. It is considered despicable to express any irritation when, through no fault of their own, the old become difficult. When Muslim parents reach old age, they are treated mercifully, with kindness and selflessness. That's what the Qur'an and the life of Muhammad (S) teach us.

In Islam, it is not enough that we only pray for our parents, but we should act with limitless compassion, remembering that when we were helpless children and we were totally dependent on our parents for everything from food, shelter, love, etc. Our parents sacrificed and selfishly preferred our needs to theirs. Mothers are particularly honored.

If the elderly do not have family to take care of them, then they are the responsibility of the community/society. The exhortations of the Muslim textual references on this subject are innumerable. The discrepancy is not in the text of our faith...it is between our faith and deeds just as discrepancy is not in the laws of Canada but rather between the laws and the ways we act. One

This Issue 'From The Minbar' presents:

⇒ **THE MUSLIM ELDERLY & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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tradition of the Messenger Muhammad (S) will suffice in this regard. He totally disapproved of not caring for the elderly of the community/society: "Those who do not care about the elderly do not belong to the community/society."

Even though Canadian seniors are in much better position than most of the world's seniors, still we have to do much more to make their lives comfortable. It is not enough to only help them grow old. We have to ease their conditions as Frank A. Clark stated: "We've put more effort into helping folks reach old age than into helping them enjoy it."

Here are several challenges that the elderly in Canada face and from the human, social and faith perspectives, we, as a nation, must find time and resources to deal with these challenges: age of retirement; pension and benefits; state of poverty of many of them; since they are aged, illness factor is more serious; less mobile and dependent on others to go around; since families are spread across, more of them live without their children and families so there is no much help from the close family members; loneliness they feel if and when their spouse dies (over 2 million of them live alone – mainly women) is another factor that adds to their difficult conditions; health care is another challenge they face in the country of plenty, etc.

All Canadians – Muslims, people of other faith traditions and those who do not subscribe to any faith at all – need to start owning up to our responsibility towards our elderly as human beings...after all caring for the elderly is an act of heart. Anyone who possesses a pure heart can see that it is a self-perpetuating cycle. He or she who respects will gain respect in the long run if death does not overcome us before the old age. Reality is that all of us will age. Likewise our elderly have given us their time and the wisdom and paved the road for us and the least we can do for them is to be kind if not generous like them.

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.

WHOLE-COMMUNITY

Muslim Senior Citizens Are the Whole Community's Responsibility. Why Muslims should care for elderly? Caring for the elderly in Islam is based on a number of focal points, including the following:

1 – Man is an honored creature and has an honorable status in Islam.

God said: "And indeed We have honored 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 children of Adam, are included in this high status, based on the general meaning of this verse.

2 – Muslim community is the community of mutual compassion and coherence

Muhammad (S) described the believers as being like a single body. He (S) 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." (Muslim)

3 – The Muslim community is a community of cooperation and mutual support

Muhammad (S) said: "Whoever relieves a Muslim of one of the hardships of this world, God will relieve him/her of one of the hardships of the Day of Resurrection, and whoever helps one who is in financial difficulty, God will help in this world and in the Hereafter, and whoever conceals a Muslim's (fault), God will conceal his/her (fault) in this world and in the Hereafter. God will help a person so long as he/she helps his/her brother/sister." (Muslim)

4 – The elderly person has a high status before God if he/she do righteous actions

Muhammad (S) said: "The best of you are those who live the longest and do the best deeds." (Saheeh al-Jaami')

5 – Respecting the elderly and honoring them are characteristics of the Muslim community and A Sign of Reverence for Allah

Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari (r.a) reported that Muhammad (S) said, "It is out of reverence to God to respect the white-headed (aged) Muslim." (Abu Dawud)

In this hadith, Muhammad (S) considered respecting the elderly a way to show reverence for the Almighty. He linked reverence for the Creator and His creatures with respect of the All-Powerful and the weak elderly. The hadith implies all kinds of respect and care for the elderly: Health care, psychological care, social care, economic care, ending illiteracy, providing education, and other forms of care that the international community calls for today.

In another Hadith, Muhammad (S) renounces those who do not venerate the elderly and considers them alien to the Muslim society. Once an old man came wanting to see Muhammad (S) and the people did not make way for him. The Messenger (S) said: "He/she is not one of us who does not show mercy to our young ones and respect our old ones." (Tirmidhi)

6 – Respecting Elderly is A Duty of the Young

It was reported by Anas ibn Malik (r.a) that Muhammad (S) said, "If a young man honors an elderly on account of his age, Allah appoints someone to honor him in his old age." (Tirmidhi)

The Prophet here advises the young of the Muslim community, who will be tomorrow's elderly, to honor the elderly. Continuous application of this Prophetic advice helps bridge the gap between generations and spreads an atmosphere of love and understanding between the young and the old. Consider here also the generalization in the Prophet's words: "If a young man honors an elderly;" the hadith requires honoring the elderly regardless of their color or religion.

In another hadith Muslims are told to be merciful to all people, Muslim and non-Muslim: Anas ibn Malik (r.a) narrated that Muhammad (S) said, "By Him in Whose hand my soul is, Allah does not bestow His mercy except on a merciful one." They (the Companions) said, "All of us are merciful." The Messenger replied, "Not only that each of you

has mercy upon the other, but to have mercy also upon all people."

7. Ways in which the Muslim society takes care of the elderly

a) 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 honor one's parents is accompanied with the command to believe in God and the prohibition on associating others with Him (shirk) in many verses, for example God says: "And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents" [Al-Isra' 17:23]

b) Enjoining honoring one's parents' friends even after the parents have passed away, and regarding that as part of honoring one's parents. Muhammad (S) said: "Part of honoring (one's parents) is to keep in touch with your parents' friends."

This is one of the forms of elder care in Islam. When the members of the Muslim community visit the friends of their parents they help to include the elderly in community 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.

EXAMPLES WITH ELDERLY

Abiding by these morals was characteristic of Muhammad (S) during his lifetime. Remember how great his words to Abu-Bakr as-Siddiq (r.a) were on the day of Conquest of Makkah. That day, Abu-Bakr brought his father Abu Quhafa, a very old man then, to embrace Islam before Muhammad (S) at the Ka'ba. Muhammad (S) told Abu-Bakr, "Why did you not keep the old man at home so that I would have come to him there?" (Ahmed)

Muhammad (S) was then a victorious leader and a conqueror of Makkah, whilst Abu Quhafa was an old man who embraced Islam after fighting it for twenty years. Despite that, Muhammad (S) showed him great respect and felt that it would have been more appropriate if he – the great victorious Prophet - had gone to the old man's place.

This is the rank of the elderly in the eyes of Muhammad (S)). Moreover, he would not approve of prolonging congregational prayers which he loved and valued highly. This was for the sake of not exhausting the old and the unprivileged. This indicates that the Messenger (S) had a comprehensive view of the meaning of mercy, was broad minded, and had a clear discernment of the nature of Islam.

In fact, he was basically sent as a mercy to people and not for making things difficult for them or causing them to suffer. All these facts could be perceived if we ponder on one unique incident narrated by Abu Mas'ud Al Ansari. He said, "A man came to the Messenger of Allah (SAWS) and said, 'O God's Messenger! By God, I keep away from the morning prayer, only because so and so prolongs the prayer when he leads us in it.' I have never seen God's Messenger more furious in giving advice than he was at that time. He then said, 'Some of you make people dislike good deeds (the prayer). So whoever among you leads the people in prayer should shorten it because among you are the weak, the old and those with urgent needs.'" (Muslim)

CONCLUSION

In short, Canadian Muslim community needs a natural support system for elderly. What we normally would have if we had a full-fledged Muslim community with all the components like the extended family, like living geographically close to each other, all worshipping together. We should be close enough to know when our brothers or sisters are in pain and when they need our help. Seniors of all backgrounds are our collective responsibility.

AN ACTION ITEM

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