125907 - What to Look for in a Spouse in Islam

the question

I'm Insha Allah planning to get married soon, and the person of interest to me has come back to me stating the below two hadiths apply to both men & women when choosing their spouses. However I see it differently with men given more options in attributes to look for in a wife.

According to one hadith, "The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said that a woman may be married for her wealth, her beauty, her lineage or her religious commitment, and he (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) encouraged marrying the one who is religiously-committed." But are women allowed to marry for the same reasons? If so, why would the prophet mention this hadith in a context that's being addressed to men. Now concerning how a woman can choose her partner i have read a hadith where the Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) mentioned "If there comes to you one whose religious commitment and attitude pleases you, then marry [your female relative who is under your care] to him, for if you do not do that, there will be tribulation on earth and much corruption." Looking at the hadiths above, how come the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) did not mention other attributes to look for in a man from a women's point of view? Or is it safe to assume that the first hadith I mentioned above applies to men and women? But then again I'm confused as to why it's addressed to men?

Summary of answer

Religious commitment is the first and foremost aim, and other characteristics such as beauty, wealth, high position and good lineage and so on are secondary matters. They are not blameworthy in and of themselves, but they are not the basic aims, rather they are complementary qualities. If they are present, then that is ideal, otherwise religious commitment is the basis of all goodness.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Religious commitment is the basis of choosing a spouse

Firstly we should clarify that Islamic Shari`ah only encourages seeking a righteous wife who is religiously committed, and a righteous husband who is religious and good. Religious commitment is the first and foremost aim, and other characteristics such as beauty, wealth, high position and good lineage and so on are secondary matters. They are not blameworthy in and of themselves, but they are not the basic aims, rather they are complementary qualities. If they are present, then that is ideal, otherwise religious commitment is the basis of all goodness.

This is indicated by what is mentioned in the Sunnah of praise for some of these qualities in the wife . For example, it was narrated that Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: It was said: O Messenger of Allah, which of women is best? He said: “The one who when he looks at her he is happy and she obeys him when he commands her, and does not go against his wishes with regard to herself or his wealth by doing what he dislikes.” (Narrated by Ahmad (2/251); classed as hasan by al-Albani in Al-Silsilah Al-Sahihah (1838)

The same applies to the husband. The basic principle is to seek marriage to a righteous, pious man , as described in the hadith in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “with whose religious commitment and good character you are pleased.” If that is accompanied by good looks, wealth and high position, that is a blessing from Allah.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) regarded a man’s wasting his money and not being able to spend on his wife as a reason for not getting married to him. That appears in the hadith of Fatimah bint Qays (may Allah be pleased with her) who said: When my ‘iddah ended, I told him – meaning the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) – that Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan and Abu Jahm had proposed marriage to me. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “As for Abu Jahm, his stick never leaves his shoulder. As for

Mu’awiyah, he is very poor and has no wealth. Marry Usamah ibn Zayd.” (Narrated by Muslim, 1480)

Al-‘Allamah al-Sa’di (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“If there are other (good qualities) as well as religious commitment, that is good, otherwise religious commitment is the greatest of qualities to be sought.” (Bahjat Qulub Al-Abrar wa Qurrat ‘Uyun al-Akhyar fi Sharh Jawami’ al-Akhbar, p. 120)

Seeking worldly characteristics in a spouse

Once the above is clear, we will know the answer to the question that was asked. We know that wealth, good lineage and good looks are things that are desirable in both spouses in most people’s view, both believers and disbelievers. Wanting these things is something that is natural in human beings. Islam does not object to that, rather they are not pointed out because people – by their nature – pay attention to these matters and seek them; they even exaggerate about that and neglect other important things. So Islam came to confirm what people neglect or ignore, even though this is the most desirable quality according to the standards of Shari`ah. This, also, is what distinguishes the attitude of the righteous believer from the attitude of anyone else.

Hence the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, in the famous hadith:

“Women may be married for four things : their wealth, their lineage, their beauty and their religious commitment. Choose the one who is religiously-committed, may your hands be rubbed with dust (i.e., may you prosper).” (Narrated by Al-Bukhari (5090), Muslim (1466)

Imam al-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“The correct meaning of this hadith is that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was speaking of what people usually do; they seek these four qualities, and the last of them in their view is the one who is religiously committed, so seek, O you who are guided, the one who is religiously committed.” (Sharh Muslim, 10/51-52)

And he (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“What that means is that people usually seek these four qualities in a woman, but you should seek the one who is religiously committed.” (Riyadh al-Salihin, p. 454)

Al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“These four qualities are those that are sought when marrying a woman. They are the qualities that men seek in women. So this is speaking of what happens; it is not a command to that effect. The apparent meaning is that it is permissible to seek all of these qualities when marrying, or one of them, but seeking religious commitment is best and most important.” (Al-Mufhim lima ashkala min Talkhis Sahih Muslim, 4/215)

Shaykh Sulayman ibn Mansur Al-‘Ujayli al-Jamal – who is one of the Shafi`i jurists – says:

Some of them quoted this hadith as evidence that it is mustahabb for the woman to be beautiful, and al-Zarkashi disagreed with this understanding by saying that quoting it as evidence that she should be beautiful is strange, because this is a statement of what is usual among people, and it is not a command to marry beautiful women. This is a valid objection. Similarly it is not a command to marry the one who is wealthy, beautiful and of good lineage.” (Futuhat al-Wahhab bi Tawdih Sharh Manhaj Al-Tullab Al-Ma’ruf bi Hashiyat Al-Jamal, 4/118)

Some scholars are of the view that these qualities are desirable according to Shari`ah, and that it is mustahabb for the suitor to seek them in the woman to whom he proposes, but it is stipulated that religious commitment should be the basis – also – and that none of the other qualities mentioned should supersede it. If there is any conflict, then religious commitment should always take precedence.

Ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“It may also be understood from it – i.e., from this hadith – that it is mustahabb for a man of noble descent to marry a woman who is his equal, but if there is a conflict: a woman of noble descent who is not religiously committed, or a religiously committed woman who is not of noble descent,

then religious commitment should be given precedence, and so on with all the other characteristics.

From the word “her beauty” it may be understood that it is mustahabb to marry a beautiful woman, but if there is a conflict: a beautiful woman who is not religiously committed, or a woman who is not beautiful but is religiously committed, yes, if they [the two women] are equal in terms of religious commitment then the beautiful one is better. We may add to this the one who is beautiful in terms of physical appearance and attitude and the one who asks for a low dowry.

The words “Choose the one who is religiously committed” – what this means is that what is fitting for the man who is religiously-committed and decent is that religion should be his focus in all things, especially in matters that will be long-term. So the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) enjoined him to find a woman who is religiously committed, which is the ultimate goal. In the hadith of ‘Abd-Allah ibn ‘Amr, which is narrated by Ibn Majah in a marfu’ report [in which there is some weakness] it says: “Do not marry women for their beauty, for perhaps their beauty may lead to their doom. And do not marry them for their wealth, for perhaps their wealth may make them fall into sin; rather marry them for their religious commitment, and a black slave woman who is religiously committed is better.” (Fath al-Bari, 9/135-136)

Many Shafi`i books quote this hadith as evidence that it is mustahabb to marry a beautiful woman.

It says in Sharh Muntaha Al-Iradat (2/623), which is a Hanbali book: “It is also Sunnah to choose a beautiful woman because of this hadith [meaning the hadith quoted above].”

The matter is broad in scope, in sha Allah, so long as the primary goal of both spouses is agreed upon, which is religious commitment, and so long as the other, worldly characteristics are not blameworthy, rather they are praiseworthy.

Why desirable qualities in men for marriage are not mentioned in the hadith

With regard to the desirable qualities in men for marriage not being mentioned as they are in the

case of women, that is not due to any differentiation between them, rather it is because usually it is the man who looks for a wife and seeks in her the qualities he chooses, and the woman usually thinks of the qualities of the man who proposes to her . So it is more appropriate that the words in the hadith “Women may be married for four things…” should be addressed in terms of what usually happens and is customary, not in terms of the rare exception.

Moreover, Shar`i matters are usually addressed to men, and the scholars of Usul Al-Fiqh have stated that whatever is addressed to men is also addressed to women, unless there is evidence to the contrary, but it is not essential for there to be one text for men and another for women with regard to every Shar`i ruling. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Women are the twin halves of men.” (Narrated by al-Tirmidhi (113) and others, classed as sahih by Al-Albani in Sahih al-Jami’.)

For more, please see these answers: 9602 , 101130 , and 10680 .

And Allah knows best.