

THE ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

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INTRODUCTION

A consideration of the role and status of women in the religion of Islam is a complex undertaking as Islam encompasses many diverse cultures and each of these cultures has had a unique cultural response to the religion. Thus, the scope of the topic necessitates a very generalized treatment of the subject matter here.

For the sake of cohesiveness, emphasis has been placed upon similarities rather than diversities in the woman's role in societies under Islamic influence. This paper is presented in three parts:

- I. Islamic history and the role of the women before Islam and at the inception of Islam. Concentration in this section rests in the social system.
- II. Material from interviews with three Persian women.
- III. Conclusion

SECTION I

The concepts of the Islamic religion are found over a large geographical area. From the Middle East, the place of its origin, Islam spread to Africa, Europe, Asia, and today can be found to some extent world-wide. The shape the Islamic faith has taken in each of these cultural areas has been influenced by what the existing cultural situation was at the time of the introduction of Islam. There are, however, certain characteristics of Moslem communities which make it possible to study them as one unit. It is this unit that will be used in considering the status of women relative to Islam.

The cord that binds all Moslem countries together is seen partly in the fact that the religion of Islam includes a complete legal and social system. Some have even said that this system is a complete civilization in itself. It is based upon the three main texts, the Koran (the revelations of the prophet Muhammad), the Hadith (sayings of the prophet), and the Sunna (customary actions of the prophet). It is these three texts which dictate the proper life style for the Moslem and which results in a similar status of women throughout Moslem countries. Islam itself makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular and one finds that the religion has been the fundamental motivating force in Moslem countries (Hamady 1960:155).

---In attempting to discover the status of women in Islam, both now and traditionally, one must first understand a little of the theoretical and historical background of the religion.

Islam originated in Arabia in 610 A. D., when the prophet Muhammad first revealed his visions to the world. Muhammad had received visions which commanded him to reveal to his people a higher faith and a purer system of life. The central point of this new faith was the omniscience of the one God, Allah. This was a revolutionary idea to the Arabs, because at that time, Allah was only a deity in the Arabian pantheon, one of a number. The Arabic word islam means resignation and the Moslem resigns himself to the omniscience of Allah (Levy 1957:1-3).

It is necessary to have some understanding of the cultural system Muhammad was born into in order to understand how his religion grew and how it affected the status of women. The population of Arabia at the birth of Islam was made up of a number of warring tribes. These tribes were tied together by kinship and the blood tie was the strongest unifying factor of the tribe. The concept of tribal aristocracy was very strong in the tribes with leadership being held by the shaykh or tribal chief who was elected by the male heads of each family unit. When Muhammad began to reveal his visions, he was somewhat hampered by this existing social stratification as he himself was from a lower class family. He was, then, very interested in doing away with this aristocracy and establishing all men as brothers. The reader will note that he was interested in making all men brothers. Little attempt was made, as will be shown, to include women in this brotherhood (ibid. 53-91).

Evidence of the exact place of women in Arabia prior to

Muhammad is scarce. There is some evidence that polyandry was practiced in the time before Muhammad, and that the government was perhaps a matriarchy. There is no evidence, however, that women held any positions of power at the time of Muhammad. As a matter of fact, the direct opposite was probably the case (ibid:92). The general status of women is shown in the fact that the practice of female infanticide was found and the general feeling was that it was humiliating to beget daughters. This is perhaps tied to the fact that for many of the tribes raiding was a way of life. Thus, very few men lived long lives and when a baby girl was born she was simply one more to feed and to protect (Bishai 1968:57-59). Whatever the reason for the practice, Muhammad did denounce it as a proclamation of Islam (Levy, op.cit.:92).

The basic theoretical framework of Islam viewed women as inferior beings. This is perhaps illustrated most clearly in the marriage customs, both before and after Islam. The marriage practices of pre-Islamic Arabia included marriage by capture. Once the women were captured they were treated with consideration; however, the very existence of marriage by capture reduced the general status of women to that of chattels (ibid.). Also, one should perhaps consider the definition of the word "consideration," as all sources for this were male. "Consideration" in this context could simply mean treatment of the women as the prized possessions of men. In the early Muslem era, the women of Arabia were either under the control of their nearest male kinsmen or of their husband. A woman's

husband had complete authority over her and he was responsible for her honour. She was, according to Islam, his legal property (ibid.:92-95).

Besides marriage by capture, marriage by purchase or contract was also practiced. The woman in this arrangement was still regarded as the property of her husband. Women in pre-Islamic times could not own property. Muhammad, however, said that all women were to be permitted to inherit a portion of what their parents left. The male, Muhammad said, received a portion equal to that of two females. This again is an indicator of the status of the women both in pre-Islamic times and during Muhammad's life. Muhammad did bring about a definite reform when he allowed women to handle their own property, but it is still clear that he adhered to the view that the female was a lesser being. This is shown in his statement, "Men stand superior to women in that God hath preferred the one over the other..." (ibid.:98). Thus, the traditional Moslem view is that they are creatures who are incapable of and unfitted to take care of themselves. They are, however, a part of the Islam community and may receive the reward of heaven in the same manner as a man (ibid:99). This shows a sort of duality in the Islamic view of women. Women are good enough for paradise, but in life they are inferior to man and incapable of taking care of themselves.

Perhaps Muhammad's greatest change in the area of social structure was in the relationship between the sexes. To begin with, he restricted the number of wives which a Moslem man might have. Before that time, a man had as many wives as he

could afford. The Koran states that a man might marry two, three, or four wives at one time. This rule, however, applied to free women and placed no restrictions upon the number of women as female slaves the man was allowed. One wonders, however, just how great a reform in the status of women this was when Muhammad himself dispensed with all limitations and allowed himself to marry "any believing woman if she gave herself to the prophet" (ibid.:100). Muhammad also stated that it was meritorious to marry numerous wives and that these wives should preferably be free women and virgins (ibid.). No mention was made, however, of whether the male was to be a virgin as well.

Both custom and Koranic law played a part in whom a man or woman could marry. In pre-Islamic times endogamy was practiced and marriage of parallel cousins was the preferred marriage. Islam has perpetuated this practice, and if a man gave his daughter in marriage to his brother's son while she was still a minor, she could not claim annulment. The male, however, could dispute the arrangement (ibid.102-103).

The preliminaries to a first marriage were, for the most part, similar in most Moslem lands. The general rule was that a man kept his females veiled and in seclusion, a concept which will be dealt with in more detail later. The marriages, then, were all arranged as male and female had little chance to meet. Traditionally, a young man would tell his mother or a near female relative that he wished to marry. The mother and other relatives would then call upon the family

of a girl they felt was suitable for their son and the match was made. Usually the girl was kept ignorant of the proceedings and could be promised by her parents to anyone. The young man then went to officially ask the girl's father for his daughter's hand in marriage. During this visit the brideprice was set and prayers said before the couple were officially betrothed (ibid. 108-109).

The actual terms of the marriage were arranged by a wali. The wali was usually the girl's closest male relative and it was his duty to see that the match was desirable and to collect the brideprice from the prospective groom (ibid. 110-111).

Muhammad said that a woman cannot be given in marriage unless she has given her consent; however, as Levy states, "no young woman well brought up ever refuses a match agreeable to her parents" (ibid. 108). The female slave, however, was given to anyone in marriage that her owner wished. She did not have the luxury of having to say yes (ibid. 111).

The central feature of the marriage was a contract and included the price that must be paid for the bride. The mahr (brideprice) is paid to the family of the woman only if she is a free woman. If she is a slave it belongs to her master. The amount of the mahr is higher if the woman is a virgin (ibid. 114). In Morocco, if a bride was found not to be a virgin after she claimed to be one, she was sent away and in some instances, she was killed by her father or brother because she has brought shame upon them (ibid. 115).

The Koranic regulations on marriage clearly state that

the wife is placed entirely under the domination of her husband. If she is not under the domination of her husband, she is under the domination of her nearest male relative. She spends her life being dominated by men (ibid.).

One also finds concubinage and prostitution as a part of the Islamic social system. Concubinage was for female slaves and not free women. Islamic law places no bounds upon the number of concubines a man could have except that they must be Muslim, Jewish or Christian women who are not already married. Prostitutes were regarded as dishonorable and Islam officially does not approve of them. However, let it suffice to say that public prostitution has never been abolished (ibid. 119).

In matters of adultery, the Koran says that four witnesses must be produced. The Koran makes no distinction between male and female in its statements on adultery and demands a severe punishment if it is proven that adultery has occurred (ibid.). However, the position of a woman as subjected to her husband in a marriage situation makes it impracticable that she would have the opportunity to commit adultery. And, the relative ease with which a man can take wives and female slaves makes it improbable that he would commit adultery as there would be no need.

The Koran devotes much space to the subject of divorce. Much of this is concerned with the actual procedures of the divorce itself. No justification for divorcing a woman is demanded of the male and he has traditionally been able to divorce his wife at will. This privilege was not for the

wife, however (ibid. 121).

The subject of veiling and the seclusion of women in Islam is perhaps the best known of Islamic traditions. As with many of the other customs, this practice varied from place to place and from time period to time period. Among Muhammad's people, veiling was the general rule and thus, Muhammad commanded his wives and daughters (as well as the wives of the believers) to protect themselves and wear long veils. His reason was, apparently, to protect the women's body from the eyes of any male other than her husband or close kin.

As has been indicated, the custom of veiling varies from culture to culture. One finds certain societies where the women have never been veiled, such as the Tuaregs of Algeria. The custom of the veil and of the seclusion of women has been determined to a large extent by the economic situation of the people who are involved. If the subsistence level is low, the women must engage in the manual labor required to sustain the culture. If the subsistence level is high and allows for a certain amount of leisure, then the luxury of veiling the women and of secluding them can be indulged in. There are, of course, exceptions to this and space does not permit a total accounting of the Moslem communities which do and do not require the wearing of the veil. However, veiling and the seclusion of the female was probably the norm as opposed to the exception and shows once again the Moslem ideal of supremacy of the male over the female as stipulated in the Koran (ibid. 127-130).

Women are not now allowed to enter the Mosques to pray alongside the men in most Moslem countries. Traditionally, this was not the case and Muhammad himself probably had no objections to women in the Mosques. However, in the translation and interpretation of the Koran after the death of Muhammad it was decided that women could not enter the Mosque. Again, there is variety in how this is actually handled in Moslem cultures. Women in some Moslem lands do attend prayers in the mosque, but often this is only at festivals. If they do attend prayers in the Mosque, they are separated from the men by a grille. In Moslem lands where the men pray in the open, the women simply have to stand to one side and listen (ibid. 130-131).

SECTION II

Insights into the position of the modern Moslem women were obtained in an interview held with three Persian women who were in the United States as students. The interview was held informally over a cup of coffee in the Campus Activities Center coffee shop. An unexpected participant in the interview was a young American man who was a friend of the girls. They asked that he be allowed to stay for the interview, and I feel that this may have been detrimental to my purposes as some uneasiness was expressed by the women when questioned about areas dealing with male/female relationships.

Suzie is a 23 year old woman who has been in the United States for three years. She is an undergraduate student in the College of Business Administration, and her brother, Bill, is also a student at Wichita State University. Lucy is a 23

year old woman who has been in the United States for about 3 years. She is a graduate student in Biology and is in Wichita because her male cousin is also here. Debbie, who has been in the states a little under a year, represents the only married woman of the 3. She has been married a little over a year and her Persian husband is a student at Wichita State University. She herself is a student in Continuing Education. Her field is education.

Before giving the material gathered in this interview, a few words of caution should be given. My position in the University as student assistant with the International Program gave me my introduction and entrance into discussion with these women. It also put me in a position of formality that can never be fully overcome. Thus, there may have been areas which these women were reluctant to discuss with me. I felt, however, that despite this problem they were open and honest in their expressions. Also, Iran is a highly stratified society with a fairly rigid class system. All three of these women come from what would be considered the highest (economically and educationally) class and thus bring with them certain values that do not fully represent the total of Persian womanhood. These points should be kept in mind when considering the following information.

Iran is today enjoying a prosperity such as it has not known for some time. This economic situation (which rests on the importance of oil in today's world) has, my informants felt, favorably affected the role of the women in Iran. All three women said that they never felt any discrimination in

work roles, nor that there were any particular areas that were not suitable for women. However, in discussing the actual type of work generally done by women, they said that employment as teachers, saleswomen and secretaries were the usual occupations of women. Suzie stressed the point that secretarial positions were for girls of very low status. It was not considered a respectable job because, as Suzie put it, "Secretaries, everyone knows, must take care of their boss". This implies a sexual relationship that the male boss demands of the secretary. It also implies that most executive positions are held by men. The male secretary is quite common in Iran and is considered a proper job for a man. The profession that all felt was held in the highest esteem for a woman was that of teaching. However, only one of the girls, Debbie, was going to become an educator. Lucy felt that she would face no sex discrimination when she returned to Iran to work.

Today, as the girls were quick to point out, women do hold positions of authority in the government. The actual amount of power held by these women, however, was difficult to surmise. The girls felt that all of these politically powerful women had risen to their positions solely on their own merits. As a matter of fact, it was pointed out that some of these women had husbands who possess only third grade educations. When questioned further, I discovered that this was probably true because Persian men did not wish to marry a woman who is more educated than he is; and most of these women were highly educated. They had to

marry whomever they could.

In matters of education, Lucy felt that women in Iran were much superior to men. This, she felt, explained the lack of sexual discrimination in the job market.

In discussing the social and kinship organization, I came closer to understanding how the Persian women actually view themselves. Descent is reckoned bilaterally, but it is the relatives of the woman who hold first position in the social organization. Family obligations to the wife's family, especially the mother and father, take up a good deal of a young married couple's time. They would be expected at least two or three times a week for dinner at the wife's parents' home and at least once at the home of the husband's parents. The families are extremely close and embrace the extended family unit. Suzie expressed horror at the American system of care homes for our elderly and all three said that no such thing existed in Iran. Nor, as Lucy pointed out, do the children ever live away in apartments. They live with their family unless they are married. Single women in Iran are not considered odd, as is sometimes the case in the United States. There is no word for spinster in Persian.

The traditional Islamic marriages were, as has been discussed in Section I, arranged. Today, however, my informants felt that young people are more and more choosing their own mates. This, they felt, was true only of the higher class. In the lower class families, marriages are still arranged. When a marriage has been decided upon by the boy and girl, both Suzie and Lucy said that they would go to the oldest

member of the family, male or female, to ask permission. However, Debbie, the only married one, said that they did not do this. They simply decided to marry and then informed their parents. Marriage, all three felt, was the only happy position in society for them.

The protective and jealous nature of the Persian male is an area that is perhaps strongly tied to Islam. All three girls pointed out that it was the males' duty to protect them which accords with the traditional Islamic idea that women were to be protected as the property of men. If a man is not publicly jealous, the society looks down upon him. This includes protection of all female relatives as well as wives. The women themselves said that they would feel hurt if their husbands did not show public jealousy. Debbie recounted a particular incident in which her husband, Ralph, and his sisters had gone for a ride. The car stopped at a stop light and another car pulled up next to them. The man in the car next to them used some language which Ralph felt should not be used in front of his sisters. He jumped out of the car and gave the man a sound beating. All three girls said that this was not an unusual occurrence in Iran. When I posed the following hypothetical situation to the girls, their answers indicated the idea that men were supposed to become jealous but the women were not. If, I asked, they were at a party and their husband/boy friend was neglecting them in favor of another woman, what would they do. All three stated: nothing. It would be in very bad manners to start something of a personal argument in front of people other than family.

Debbie indicated that she would not even say anything to her husband in private; she would simply feel hurt in silence.

Children play a dominant role in the life of women in Iran. All three girls felt that children were the most important thing for a woman. An interesting reaction to the question of a barren woman was that if a woman was barren, she would feel somehow that it was her fault. All three girls obviously know that biologically, the man can be at fault (Lucy is a graduate student in Biology), yet they still said that if they could have no children they would feel at fault.

Divorce in Iran is no longer legal when done in the traditionally Islamic way. They must go to court now and the man must show cause for the divorce. When a divorce occurs, the women return home to live with relatives. If a woman is going to remarry after the divorce and she and her first husband have a child over five years of age, the child will go with the father. When younger, children are usually awarded to the mother. The rate of divorce, I was told, is very low and it is not a socially acceptable state for a woman. All three informants stressed that women feel it is their failure and suffer tremendous guilt when a divorce occurs, no matter what the circumstances causing the divorce are.

The relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is interesting. Usually, as was stressed by Suzie, these two do not like each other because each is jealous of the affections of the husband/son. However, the

daughter-in-law never shows this dislike; she shows respect to her mother-in-law by not being herself, by being phony. In other words, she becomes in the presence of her mother-in-law whatever her mother-in-law wishes her to be.

None of the girls could remember any clubs or groups, women's or men's. Thus, according to them there is a lack of sodalities and one finds that the family unit is the strongest organizing factor in their lives. In trying to discuss Islam with the girls I found them reluctant to talk about this subject. About the only thing they would say was that Islam was fading away and that the family unit was supreme. They did consider themselves Moslems but not in the traditional sense of the religion.

In discussing the actions of women at various social functions, Suzie emphasized that women do not discuss personal problems with other women. These things, I was told, are for the ears of family members only. At social functions women do dance but only unmarried women. When a woman marries, she does not dance at parties.

In comparing American women with Persian women, all three felt that American women were much rougher than Persian women. They felt that Persian women were more feminine. When asked to define what feminine was, they said that they felt Persian women did more to make a man feel like a man; that is, to feel superior.

Toward the end of the interview, Suzie's brother Bill joined us and expressed some sentiments about women's liberation. He said that Persian women would accept women's libera-

tion, but would accept it much more realistically. When questioned as to his meaning, he indicated that Persian women will never do certain things which their husbands do not want them to do. This he felt was much more logical.

In closing this section, it is interesting to note that Suzie quoted a Persian proverb that she felt showed the status of women in Iran. She said that, "Behind every successful man, there is a woman". Sounds familiar!

SECTION III: CONCLUSION

The role and status of women in Moslem countries has changed greatly from what it was at the birth of Islam. Many of the countries are beginning to allow women freedom to work and to have a life style that is similar to that of the male. Saudi Arabia is perhaps the country where the most traditional Islamic religion is practiced today. There, many of the women remain secluded and veiled as tradition dictates. However, even in Saudi Arabia we see the influence of Islamic tradition waning, or at least adapting to a changing social structure. The growth of nursing is an indicator of the improving status and education of women. In the past, no upper class Moslem women would consider a position which required her to see another man besides her husband naked. Today, many of Saudi Arabia's upper class young women are becoming nurses. Arabia is not entirely free from the idea that nursing is an improper occupation for young women, but we see more and more young women receiving Bachelor of Science degrees and moving into professional nursing. An interesting indication of how this is affecting the general status of women is seen in this quote from ARAMCO Magazine: "An Egyptian village girl studying at Ain Shams University might arrive in a long peasant dress but she soon saves enough pocket money to buy a miniskirt and blouse to wear in her free time. She learns Ping-Pong, decorates her room with pop-star posters, dresses up to go out. Fine feathers do not, of course, make fine birds, nor

miniskirts make modern women, but new clothes and new ways do indicate new attitudes and ideas". (ARAMCO 1974).

This example illustrates that much of this change has been a change of attitude as well as change in outward appearances.

Even with all of this change that is occurring, one can find definite attitudes today that, if not exactly the same are at least fundamentally the same as the traditional Islamic attitudes. For example, the three Persian women are all in Wichita under the guidance of a male kinsman. It is doubtful that they would be here without him. How far removed from complete male dominance is this? The attitudes all three girls expressed concerning divorce and sterility point out that for them, at least, the purpose of women is to have children. The area that perhaps shows the strongest Islamic influence is in the matter of the protective male. Surely this is an outgrowth of the idea that women are the property of men.

It must be said, however, that all three Persian women seemed very secure and happy in their role. To them, the role of apparent second to the man was a very good one and a pleasant way to spend their lives.

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