



Public and Private Realities: Women, Youth, and Family Traditions

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IN JANUARY 1993 MY FAMILY AND I ENDED A FIVE-MONTH STAY IN NORTHERN Yemen and flew home by way of Egypt. In Sanaa, Yemen's capital, we had experienced a largely gender-segregated city where the few women out in public covered all but eyes and hands in black cloth. Then just two jet flights away we found in Cairo a much more diverse (and westernized) society, where some women wore traditional Islamic garb, but teenage girls in mini-skirts waited in line with their boyfriends to buy tickets for the hit American film, "Home Alone II."

This contrast between two countries, both Arab and Muslim, demonstrates one of the key reasons why it is nearly impossible to write a coherent and accurate summary of women, youth, and family traditions in Islam. What the West calls "Islam" is really one billion people living in a hundred different countries. Although Muslims are united in their devotion to Islamic scripture, the Qur'an, and

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Not enough observers of Islam deal with Muslims as living people. Here the author takes us with her in a living encounter with Muslims in another part of the world. This essay illustrates that respect and friendship are important elements in any study of Islam, especially in dealing with delicate issues such as the position of women and other areas of family life.

to the way of the prophet Muhammad, their praxis is as diverse as their many cultures. A second difficulty flows from the first: in these many Islamic contexts it is often a challenge to distinguish whether customs derive from pre-Islamic or non-Islamic culture, from Islam, or from a mixture of these factors. Two other challenges face non-Muslim observers. It is taxing to distinguish the theoretical Islamic ideal from actual practice in a given culture, but doing so is absolutely crucial if one attempts to make any comparative claims, for example, about women's rights in Islam and Christianity. Finally, the western non-Muslim researcher is often hampered in information-gathering as a result of language barriers, simple lack of access to Muslim women and families' personal lives, and the particular perspective of one socialized in a western context.

I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAMILY IN ISLAM

Having acknowledged these difficulties, I will describe briefly the importance of family in Islam with reference to passages in the Qur'an and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), provide some portrayals of the diverse present reality, and conclude by examining why gender issues often become politicized. Most of my concrete examples will come from Islamic cultures I have observed first-hand in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen. This essay does not pretend to cover the topic for all of worldwide Islam, especially as practiced in south and southeast Asia, home to the largest segments of Islamic population.

The combination of nuclear and extended family forms the basic unit of Islamic society.¹ This phenomenon is equally true for Arab Christian culture, but in Islam scripture and tradition more explicitly reinforce this social vision. Anthropologist Andrea Rugh's observations about Egypt outline values shared in many Islamic contexts: "corporateness, the complementarity of social roles, and the ethic of sacrifice to group goals."² Ideally, loyalty to the family and to the entire *umma* (community of all believers) should take precedence over tribal affiliation.³ In order to maintain this family-centered society Islam considers heterosexual marriage the norm, and even an obligation for all who are able:

Marry those among you who are single, or the virtuous ones among your slaves, male or female: if they are in poverty, God will give them means out of his grace: for God encompasseth all, and He knoweth all things. Let those who find not the wherewithal for marriage keep themselves chaste until God gives them the means out of His grace. (Sūra 24:32-33)⁴

¹John L. Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path* (New York: Oxford, 1991) 94. It should be noted that at the September 1995 United Nations conference on women held in Beijing, this principle became a major point of agreement among the delegates from many cultures.

²Andrea B. Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt* (Cairo: American University of Cairo, 1985) 276.

³Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980) 42.

⁴Unless otherwise indicated, Qur'an passages are quoted from the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1988). To save space poetic lines have been merged. In Muslim belief the Qur'an is the actual words of God in Arabic, revealed to the prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel over a period of more than twenty years. Shortly after Muhammad's death in 632 C.E. the revelations were collated into 114 chapters or *sūras*.

Although Islam views the institution of marriage as a mandate from God, the marriage agreement itself is a legal contract that does not require a religious ceremony or clergy.⁵

Fulfilling the roles of marriage and family life certainly does have religious significance, however. The five “pillars of the faith”⁶ for all Muslims are accompanied by four pillars of family life: care of children, control of eros, value-development, and refuge from the world. These goals are to be accomplished through complementary gender roles. The father is expected to serve as protector and financial supporter and as the liaison with the public realm. The mother’s role is to care for home and children, managing their moral and religious education.⁷ Indeed, a popular Arab proverb is translated, “The mother is a school.” Although most of the “Christian” west operated under similar gender role assumptions until very recently, non-Muslims are often critical of what they perceive to be the inherent subordination of women in Islam. Citing the Qur’ān, Fazlur Rahman acknowledges that “men have a functional, not inherent, superiority over women.”⁸ Sūra 2:228 affirms women’s rights but gives males “a degree of advantage over them.” The rationale can be found in Sūra 4:34: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means.” Prescriptive statements in the Qur’ān also favor males in divorce, inheritance, and court testimony. Of course such scriptural provisions have significant practical implications for women’s daily lives, but it is important to note that many passages in the Qur’ān underscore also the spiritual equality of women and men.⁹ The traditional sayings of Muhammad, the Hadīth, present a similar mixture of attitudes on women and family (and ascertaining the authenticity of each of the thousands of sayings is an important and difficult science in Islam). For example, opponents of women’s participation in politics often cite the Hadīth, “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity.”¹⁰ Advocates of women’s rights can point to these well-known sayings of the prophet: “Women are the twin-halves of men,” and “The rights of women are sacred. See that women are maintained in the rights assigned to them.”¹¹

The sheer number of Hadīth detailing proper treatment of women and girls is evidence of the close connections between women’s rights and legislation to

⁵Afif A. Tabbarah, *The Spirit of Islam: Doctrine and Teachings*, trans. Hasan T. Shoucair (Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1978) 351.

⁶All Muslims are obligated to witness to faith in the one God, to pray at least five times a day, to fast during the month of Rama. dān (unless medical conditions preclude such), to practice regular charity, and to make one pilgrimage to Mecca if physically and financially able.

⁷Esposito, *Islam*, 96.

⁸Rahman, *Major Themes*, 49.

⁹See for example 4:124, 16:97, 33:35, 40:40.

¹⁰Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (USA: Addison-Wesley, 1991) 1.

¹¹*The Sayings of Muhammad*, ed. Allama Sir Abdullah Al-Mamun Al-Suhrawardy (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990) 116, 118.

maintain family life. In the centuries since Islam's historical beginnings in seventh-century Arabia, evolving Muslim family law has reflected a combination of forces, from prescriptions in the Qur'an and Hadith to practices initiated by Muhammad to particular cultural patterns, often pre-Islamic. The Qur'an gives women the theoretical rights to arrange a marriage contract and receive the husband's dowry as her own, to own property, and to receive inheritances (at half the rate of males, who are favored because of their greater economic responsibility in Muslim law and tradition). Grounds and methods for divorce are clearly spelled out and favor the male, in both theory and practice, in nearly all Islamic contexts.¹² Although such inequities persist (and often with rationales valid from an Islamic perspective), the rise of Islam nevertheless significantly improved the lives of women in Arabian society and granted rights that in the west were not common until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Recent Islamic observers have noted the presence of at least two major understandings of gender even at the beginning of Islamic history: a "hierarchical and androcentric" vision and one much more "ethical and egalitarian."¹³

The same could surely be said of Islam's Abrahamic cousins, Judaism and Christianity. Not only do all three of these traditions present a mixed picture for women at the level of the scriptural ideal, in historical practice all three sometimes fail to implement the rights theoretically ascribed to women. Paul's authentic letters imply a spiritual gender equality that has often been ignored by Christian church leaders. In Islam, for example, the Qur'an and Hadith guard the right of females to consent to a marriage arrangement, but the right of refusal is often still denied. This gap between theory and practice, as well as the large number of different Muslim contexts, makes generalization difficult. However, across historical and geographical divides, Muslims continue to honor the nuclear and extended family as a central tenet of the faith.

II. DIVERSE PRESENT REALITIES FOR WOMEN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

Most Islamic societies purport to design policies for women and youth primarily to guard the health of the family, but there are wide variations, especially regarding women's dress and rights. In Syria, women not only have the right to vote, but they comprise 25% of the elected Syrian parliament.¹⁴ In Kuwait, on the other hand, only property-owning males of Kuwaiti origin may vote (a restriction that has little or nothing to do with the religion of Islam). In Syria young men and women often dress in western clothing and socialize in coed groups and even in

¹²See Esposito, *Islam*, 94-98 for Qur'an references.

¹³See Dina Le Gall, "A Neo-Modernist Reading of Women and Gender in Islam," *Critique: Journal for the Study of the Middle East* 4 (Spring 1994) 75-76 (a review of Leila Ahmed's 1992 *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*).

¹⁴Bouthaina Shaaban, "As a Middle Eastern Woman, What I Would Change in My Country: Three Views," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (July 1991) 28.

couples. In Saudi Arabia there is a strict dress code for women and a prohibition on unchaperoned activities among young men and women.¹⁵

Yemen, just south of Saudi Arabia, embodies the diversity within one country. As recently as the 1960s north Yemen was ruled medieval-style by a hereditary religious and political dictator. There were no motor vehicles, no electricity, and no public education. Now the capital city Sanaa is crowded with buses, taxis, televisions, and even computers, and is served by an educational system that includes a university with over 12,000 students. Yet so many women remain mostly in the private realm of home and family that men outnumber them 100 to one on city streets. Nearly all women who do go out in public wear a long coat and head scarf, and 50 to 70% also wear a face veil. However, within the grounds of the university young men and women attend classes together and a much smaller percentage of women use face veils. Although a few young people may meet future mates in such a setting, the majority of marriages are arranged by parents, and often for children still in their teenage years. The goal appears to be to locate all young people within a licit nuclear family in order to prevent sexual activity and pregnancy outside of marriage.

Once married, Yemeni young people become part of two very important extended families, often with greater responsibility toward the husband's parents.¹⁶ Family events such as birthdays and holiday meals may be gender-mixed, but from early childhood northern Yemeni girls function mainly in a series of close, intergenerational female groupings, while boys more often play outside with their friends or even accompany their fathers to work and to the mosque. Such sequestering of females both encourages positive personality development and "reinforces traditional ideas and practices."¹⁷ The domestic training young girls receive also prepares them for marriage but helps maintain rigid gender roles for husbands and wives. A young married university student provided insights into the power of women relatives in such a system. She explained that her husband, also a student, had helped her with cooking and cleaning until his mother and sisters criticized him for such "unmanly" activities.

In many contexts (including the United States) easing of strict gender roles has accompanied increased educational opportunities for women. In 1962 northern Yemen had no public education for either gender. By 1992 the percentage of

¹⁵The subject of the veiling and seclusion of women is extremely complex. My library research and field observation both suggest that many aspects of gender segregation in countries such as Egypt and Yemen have non-Islamic origins, for example, in Byzantine and Turkish culture. Veiling and seclusion have often persisted because of a mixture of pre-Islamic tribal concerns, such as codes of family honor and shame, and Islamic recasting of earlier practices in order to guard women's chastity and safeguard marriage and family.

¹⁶An excellent portrayal of such extended family life for Palestinian Muslims is the short story, "The Marriage of Sima," by Kathryn Abdul-Baki in *Fields of Fig and Olive* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991).

¹⁷Carla Makhlouf, *Changing Veils: Women and Modernisation in North Yemen* (London: Croon Helm, 1979) 24.

female students was 29% at the primary level and 20% in the university, and a surprising number of engineering students are women. Yet women who complete the bachelor's degree before marriage often are unable, even with parental help, to find a husband with a similar educational level. Another difficulty is that employment opportunities for women are mainly limited to traditional women's professions such as teaching and nursing. In rural areas women still spend most of their time caring for children, crops, and livestock—including six to eight hours each day for gathering fuel, water, and grass. Ironically, development may have somewhat curtailed these women's freedom of movement. With the addition of paved roads women in northern Yemen have a much greater chance of encountering male strangers and thus have begun to travel less widely and to cover themselves more completely.

As change comes to Islamic societies like north Yemen, the major issues in family law reform continue to be limitation of polygyny and improving women's access to divorce.¹⁸ Since the Qur'ān permits men to have as many as four wives but also demands that each be treated equally, Islamic law scholars have used scripture both to continue and to eliminate the practice of multiple wives. What began as a positive social measure to care for widows in Islam's founding era has become an increasingly rare practice, both because of economic constraints and because of its general unpopularity among women. In Yemen both of these issues are important. But in the debate between the traditionalists and the modernists (most of whom continue to view the Qur'ān and the way of the prophet as normative), there is disagreement over maintaining the "rule of the house," which requires that a wife have her husband's permission to leave the family dwelling. Islamists are also attempting to replace coeducation with gender-segregated schools and to mandate *hijab* (full Islamic cloak and veil) for females past puberty.¹⁹ The response of observant Muslims to such issues in many countries often exemplifies their larger position on the use of the Qur'ān in forming Islamic law and social policy. Traditionalists tend to view the Qur'ān (and the interpretation of the Qur'ān implicit in the first several hundred years of Islamic law) as normative for today's Muslims. Reformers, on the other hand, claim the right to reinterpret the Qur'ān and the Hadīth to arrive at legislation more adapted to modernity. In contrast to traditionalists who accept social legislation from Islam's early years, reformers seek to make a distinction between "the eternal validity of religious duties and the flexibility of much of social law."²⁰ Variations on these two basic approaches are fueling the current worldwide revival in Islamic politics, education, religious observance, and social customs. However, besides focusing attention on tensions between the traditionalists and modernists, it is vital to remember

¹⁸Esposito, *Islam*, 145.

¹⁹Many Muslim authorities today question whether the Qur'ān requires or even recommends gender segregation and seclusion of women.

²⁰Esposito, *Islam*, 147.

that millions of Muslim women are successfully combining faithful observance of Islam, healthy family life, and involvement in education and the professions.²¹

III. THE POLITICIZATION OF WOMEN'S AND FAMILY ISSUES

The potential for political fireworks surrounding matters of women and family in Islam is obvious in the internal strife of such countries as Algeria and in the controversies at two recent international conferences: on population in Cairo and on women's rights in Beijing. There are many reasons for this tendency, the most obvious of which is the tremendous importance of the family unit for Islam as a religion and for a particular national society. But there are also relevant historical reasons, especially for Muslims in Middle Eastern countries formerly colonized by European powers. British rulers in Egypt, for example, aimed their late-nineteenth-century program to civilize Egyptians at the mothers and attempted to "link the inferior position of women in Islamic culture with the backward condition of Egypt."²² Some western Christian missionaries used Christian schools to "liberate" girls by drawing them away from Islam and thus undermining Islamic belief and practice within families. In countries such as Egypt and Jordan today it is not uncommon to find Islamists who view women's liberation as part of a larger Christian missionary/Zionist conspiracy to destroy Islam.²³

Beyond these negative associations, many Muslims also see change in family and women's roles as a negative western influence that will destroy the Muslim family and create the social breakdown they are observing in Europe and the United States. Many consider "women's liberation" the primary cause of all western social ills: drug abuse, gang violence, sexual promiscuity and disease, the rising illegitimate birth rate, the divorce epidemic, and so on. Thus, some Islamic religious and political leaders conclude that keeping women secluded and in traditional roles is the key to maintaining familial and societal health. They then develop corresponding political and legislative platforms and tools such as pamphlets and cassette tapes to advance them. At the other end of the spectrum, in an increasingly secular society such as France, Muslim women's choices are being politicized. In 1994 France's Minister of Education barred the wearing of "ostentatious signs of religion" by high school students, forcing many Muslim girls to choose between wearing a head scarf or avoiding expulsion. French universities

²¹Such women are exemplified by many I have met during ten years of encounter with Muslims in Minnesota. These women (and their spouses) have contributed many insights to this study. I am especially grateful for the editorial assistance of my friend Zehra Ansari.

²²Huda Lutfi, "Islamic Polemical Discourse on the Role of the Contemporary Muslim Woman," *Middle East Council of Churches Perspectives* 9-10 (1991) 56.

²³For references to missionary records see Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Arab Thought," *Women, Religion and Social Change*, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison B. Findlay (Albany: SUNY, 1985) 289-291.

²⁴See Nadia Hijab, *Womanpower: The Arab Debate on Women at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988) 13.

are experiencing similar disputes.²⁵ Similar restrictions on the veil/scarf have in the past been imposed in Muslim countries such as Turkey. Whether in Muslim or secular contexts, such legislation fails to take account of the complex and varied reasons for which women choose a particular form of Islamic dress.

IV. CONCLUSION

The common western assumption that the scarf or cloak worn by some Muslim women symbolizes the subordination of these women points at two phenomena surrounding the topic of women and family in Islam: (1) in some Muslim cultures there is real oppression (depicted only briefly here) of women and children, not because of Islam, but in spite of its constructive theoretical provisions, and (2) non-Muslim observers need to distinguish more carefully between appearance and reality when evaluating Muslim societies. Western researchers who conclude that women have neither status nor power in Muslim societies need to recognize the actual informal power women hold within nuclear and extended families. Women “control those things that are most valued by the men—sex, honor, children, and a happy well-organized household.” They are often the “central figures in the central institution of the society.”²⁶ ⊕

²⁵*The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 20, 1995) 6.

²⁶Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt*, 286.