**Gender Relations in Islam**

Although many readers might consider the relationships between men and women a private matter, in fact in each religion – and empire – that we have studied some official doctrines attempted to regulate gender relationships. In general, they placed women under the authority of men and granted men more legal rights than they accorded to women. Although they often gave women greater importance than men in the private realm of house and hearth, they vested more public power and responsibility with men. Islam also follows this general pattern. The **Quran** states:

 *Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. God is high, supreme* (4:34)

Women are considered sexually seductive, and the Quran therefore urges **the Prophet** to:

 *Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; to cover their adornments (except such as are normally displayed); to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands, close relatives, and the very old and very young.* (24:31)

As witnesses in legal matter, the testimony of two women equals that a single man (2:282). Similarly in matters of inheritance, “A male shall inherit twice as much as a female” (4:11)).

Despite these regulations that apparently limit the status of women, some modern scholars assert that Islam actually introduced “a positive social revolution” (Tucker p.42) in gender relations. Compared to what came before, Islam introduced new rights for women and gave them greater security in marriage. Islamic law, **shari’a**, safeguarded the rights of both partners in marriage through contractual responsibilities: it insisted on the consent of the bride; it specified that **dowry**, or bridal gift, go to the bride herself and not to her family; and it spelled out the husband’s obligations to support his wives and children, even wives that he might divorce. Although men were allowed to take up to four wives, the Quran added, “But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry one only or any slave-girls you may own. This will make it easier for you to avoid injustice: (4:3); so, in practice, only one wife was normally permitted.

These scholars note also that in the life of **Muhammad**, three women played exemplary roles: his first wife **Khadija**, who supported him economically and emotionally when the revelations he received brought him scorn from others; **Aisha**, the most beloved of the wives he took after Khadija’s death; and **Fatima**, the daughter of the Prophet and wife of the fourth caliph, **Ali**. Nevertheless, these women drew their importance from their service to prominent men, and were criticized when they asserted more independent roles.

Other scholars, on the other hand, have argued that Islam made the plight of women worse than it had been. These scholars argue that in pre-Islamic **Arabia**, women could initiate marriage, they could have more than one husband, they could divorce their husbands, they could remain in their parent’s home area and have their husbands come to live with them, and they could keep custody of their children in case of divorce. In pre-Islamic Arabia, some, like **Allat, al-Uzza, and Manat** were worshipped with great honor, suggesting there was considerable respect for females.

Of those scholars who feel that the position of women declined under Islam, some put the blame on Islam itself, but others suggest that the teachings of Islam were actually comparatively liberal. These scholars argue that it was contact with the **Byzantine** and **Sasanid Empires** that reduced women’s status. They argue that tribal, nomadic Arabia had treated women with relative equality, but the neighboring empires, with their settled, urban civilizations, **veiled** women and kept that mostly at home under male domination. The Arabs adopted these practices. In effect, this group of scholars is also saying that the more liberal Quranic rules regarding women were reinterpreted after contact with societies outside Arabia. Whatever the rules of the Quran, in practice gender relations varied widely in different parts of the world of Islam.

**Ibn Battuta** (1304 – 1368), a famous **Berber** (North African) traveler whose adventures took him to much of the known world, learned his concepts of gender relations in the Arab heartland of Islam. As he traveled, he was often astonished, and sometimes shocked, by the status of women in other Islamic countries. In the **Turkish** and **Mongol** regions between the Black and Caspian Seas, wives of local, ruling **khans** (**sultans**) owned property. When the senior wife appeared at the khan’s residence, Ibn Battuta observes, the khan (sultan)

advances to the entrance to the pavilion to meet her, salutes her, takes her by the hand, and only after she has mounted to the couch and taken her seat does the sultan himself sit down. All this is done in full view of those present, and without any use of veils. (Dunn, p. 168)

In the Maldive Islands, in the Indian Ocean, Ibn Battuta was even more scandalized:

 *Their womenfolk do not cover their hands, not even their queen does so, and they comb their hair and gather it at one side. Most of them wear only an apron from their waists to the ground, the rest of their bodies being uncovered. When I held the qadiship (****qadi*** *= judge) there, I tried to put an end to this practice and ordered them to wear clothes, but I met with no success. No woman was admitted to my presence in a lawsuit unless her body was covered, but apart from that I was unable to effect anything.* (McNeill, p.276)

In Mali, West Africa, female slaves and servants went publicly in to the ruler’s court completely naked. When Ibn Battuta found a scholar’s wife chatting with another man, he complained to the scholar, but the scholar quickly put Ibn Battuta in his place:

 *The association of women with men is agreeable to us and a part of good conduct, to which no suspicion attaches. They are not like the women of your country.* (Dunn, p. 300)

Ibn Battuta left immediately and never returned to the man’s home.

**More on Islamic Dress**

Most Muslim women today do not wear a full face veil. It is more common to see women in **hijab**, loose clothing topped by a type of scarf worn around the head and under the chin. Women don't share a common style nor have the same reason for wearing hijab. For many it reflects the belief that they are following God's commandments, are dressing according to "the correct standard of modesty," or simply are wearing the type of traditional clothes they feel comfortable in.

What constitutes modest clothing has changed over time. Like most customs, what women wear has reflected the practices of a region and the social position of the wearer. The veil itself predates Islam by many centuries. In the Near East, Assyrian kings first introduced both the seclusion of women in the royal harem and the veil. Prostitutes and slaves, however, were told not to veil, and were slashed if they disobeyed this law.

Beyond the Near East, the practice of hiding one's face and largely living in seclusion appeared in classical Greece, in the Byzantine Christian world, in Persia, and in India among upper caste Rajput women. Muslims in their first century at first were relaxed about female dress. When the son of a prominent companion of the Prophet asked his wife Aisha bint Talha to veil her face, she answered, "Since the Almighty hath put on me the stamp of beauty, it is my wish that the public should view the beauty and thereby recognized His grace unto them. On no account, therefore, will I veil myself."
As Islam reached other lands, regional practices, including the covering of women, were adopted by the early Muslims. Yet it was only in the second Islamic century that the veil became common, first used among the powerful and rich as a status symbol. The Qu'ranic prescription to "draw their veils over their bosoms" became interpreted by some as an injunction to veil one's hair, neck and ears.

Throughout Islamic history only a part of the urban classes were veiled and secluded. Rural and nomadic women, the majority of the population, were not. For a woman to assume a protective veil and stay primarily within the house was a sign that her family had the means to enable her to do so. Since nomad women rarely veiled, in the early stages of those Islamic countries with nomadic roots, women often were allowed to go unveiled, even in town.

The veil did not appear as a common rule to be followed until around the tenth century. In the Middle Ages numerous laws were developed which most often placed women at a greater disadvantage than in earlier times. In some periods, such as under the Mamluks in Egypt, repeated decrees were issued, urging strictness in veiling and arguing against the right of women to take part in activities outside their home. One commentator, Ibn al-Hajj, claimed this was a good thing because a woman in Cairo would "go out in the streets as if she were a shining bride, walking in the middle of the road and jostling men." He cautioned shop keepers to be careful when a woman came in to buy, "for if she was one of those women dressed up in delicate clothes, exposing her wrists, he should leave the selling transaction and give her his back until she leaves the shop peacefully..."