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This article discusses women and Islam in the Oxford Islamic Studies Online selections, including Leila Ahmed's *A Quiet Trespass*, Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men*, and an article by Soraya Altorki, Zayn Kassam, and Fawziyya Moghadam is reprinted from *The Oxford Islamic Studies Online*.

### TEXT

*This entry contains three subentries:*

- ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN
- WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE
- WOMEN LIVING UNDER MUSLIM

### ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN

The Qurʾān, Islam's holy book, change



***A Quiet Revolution:  
The Veil's  
Resurgence, from the  
Middle East to  
America***

by Leila Ahmed



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the pre-Islamic (*j hil yah*) period. Before marriages were practiced, and matrilineal families remained with her tribe and the male relatives were quite common. Many women selected their husbands. Women were neither veiled nor secluded in wars alongside men. As Leila Ahmed notes, this does not necessarily indicate the greater power of women, but it does correlate with women's enjoying greater freedom allowed under Islam" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 100) and limited the number of female spouses. In early Arabian Muslims gradually moved away from the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide. The dowry (*mahr*), which in pre-Islamic times was the guardian (*wal*), was now made payable to the bride given the rights to inherit property (4:11).

## WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE QURAN

The creation of the female is attributed to the first verse (4:1) from which the other is created and Allah created you from dust, then from a little clay. Thus, the Qur'an grants both sexes equal spiritual status. Men and women are equal in actions, and moral behavior (33:35). However, such equality is not reflected in the social status. The Qur'an greatly advanced women's status: women to inherit (4:7), but only half that of men; women were considered legal persons (long before men) but two women's testimonies counted as one man's and women were given the right to economic independence and "have preference over women" because of their upkeep (4:34). In Islamic law, women are equal as specified in the Qur'an, is implied in the prohibition forbidden to men (4:24). Men are allowed to marry more than they are treated equally, followed by the fact that if they cannot do justice to that number, they

concubines as they can afford ("their ri  
any of the women of the ahl al-kitāb (p  
may marry only Muslim men (again, not  
stipulation). Conjugal relations are forb  
otherwise, conjugal relations are perm  
subject to a graduated set of measure  
to beating, depending on how the ter  
conflict arise between the couple, the  
appointed to attempt a reconciliation  
forswear their wives must wait four m  
their minds; however, if divorce is dete  
must wait a term of three menses to e  
which case the husband is recommend  
nonetheless proceed, the wife is entit  
mutually agreeable, while she nurses (c

## WOMEN IN MUSLIM CULTURE.

Contemporary Muslim scholars such as  
one should distinguish between Islam  
in which Islam was revealed, institutio  
to regulations pertaining to piety, eth  
are considered duties of worship ( *ib d*  
(*u l*) of the faith, and include cardinal b  
of Muḥammad and obligatory practice:  
pilgrimage to Mecca. On this religious l  
sight of God. Evidence for this is found  
4:1, 4:32, 9:71–72, 24:12, 30:21, 33:35  
only distinction between women and r  
Islam as a culture refers to the ideas ar  
changing social, economic, and political  
but also interact in social relationships  
contracts, trade, fight, arbitrate disput  
these constitute the *fur* (the branch

On this cultural level, women have not  
inequality has evolved largely as an art

patriarchal authorities after the Prophet administrators, most jurists, and some patriarchal “readings” of the Qurʾānic supplied by the expansion of Muslim territories, where patriarchy was already organization. Such authorities justified commentaries on certain verses of the with local practices, which were then in the earliest Qurʾānic commentators, account found in Gen 2:20–22 in which hence making the creation of the female contrast to the Qurʾān's more egalitarian that blame the woman for Adam's downfall woman's responsibility in the Qurʾān, rational and more morally reprehensible differentiation then became the basis schools. Thus, a number of nineteenth government bureaucrats, intellectuals minority of *ulam* (religious scholars), support later categorical claims that ju

Qurʾānic verses do assign women's testimony to unilaterally divorce their wives; deny after they reach a certain age; permit respecting inheritance. However, stipulated principles adduced by jurists may be in cultural, and economic context of those gender inequality is no longer legitimate. Muhsin argue that “each new Islamic intended by the particulars... which were seventh-century Arabian] context” (M

Contemporary woman-friendly scholars the holy text itself. For instance, Allāh will not be changed until they change contemporary scholars, this verse, as v Prophet stating that “as for matters o

Muslims to use their intrinsic endowment, it would be offensive to human reason. Islam enjoins the spiritual equality of all Muslims and cannot be accused of misogyny or maltreatment of women, justified on the basis of God's self-revelation. Centuries employed a number of legal mechanisms pursuing the welfare of Muslims, including

1. public interest (*al-maslahah al-mursalah*) to "make permissible what are forbidden" through the application of discretion (*istihsan*) in real life. The meanings of a term also suggest that men are preferred over women (*qawwam na*), and men are a support to women, and the term understood as "beating," may also be used. In addition, such scholars argue, it must be placed a limitation on itself; for instance, a man (female) orphans under one's care, not does the Qur'an make polygyny condoned (4:3) but explicitly asserts such treatment

Many Muslims claim that the Qur'an mandates veiling and seclusion. However, this is tendentious. Of the seven Qur'anic verses revealed at Mecca (7:46, 17:45, 19:17) refer to veiling Muslim women. The seventh verse asks male guests to address the Prophet's wives something of them. Although the verse is general, some Muslims argue that what is required is chastity, inheres all the more for Muslim women less chaste. The *ijab* in the verse is clearly head-covering, and may have led to the medieval Islamic commentators couplet describing Muslim women's clothing (24:30–31), including scarves (*khumr*) over their bosoms (*jaysh*) at times to emulate the cultural tradition of Byzantine and Persian upper-class women.

his *Asb b al-nuz l*, and others maintain should cover both head and bosom wa free women and slaves. The story is to slave for wearing such a scarf. Thus, so to distinguish free women from slaves, contemporary times has eliminated th

In contemporary times, the veil has ma exhorted to take it on as a sign of thei their proud identity as Muslims in a pos of faith may be understood in part as a ever-globalizing American culture, pre British identification of Muslim backwa women has, in a reverse move, made v signifier of all that is forward in Islamic mind and her morals rather than for th allowed women to enter the public spl previously male-dominated spaces, wh boardroom. With steady increases in v more women enter the legal and publi barring women from assuming equality apparent than in countries such as Iran parliament question attitudes and law Pakistan, where challenges to legal reg being vigorously voiced.

The Qurʾān does not support or asse can women be judged less rational, mo the basis of the Qurʾān. Certain *ad th* Prophet regarded women as incapable the veracity of a number of these trad later generations to justify restrictions: *ad ths* offer evidence that the Prophe opinions seriously. Ibn ʿanbal, founder that at least one woman, Umm Waraq prayers for her household by the Prop

demonstrate women's important and the story of an older woman who corre second caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb o women prayed in mosques unsegrega transmittal of *ad ths* (Ibn Saʿd, the fa hundred cases of women who perform distinguished women, especially in the behaved autonomously in early Islam. available are Khadījah, the Prophet's f his youngest daughter; Zaynab, his gra granddaughter; and ʿĀʾiṣḥah bint ʿAb known to give sanctuary (*jiw r*) to mer and engaged in commercial transaction period patronized large-scale architect encouraged to seek knowledge, which home, and women have been identifie Islamic history. The Prophet's favorite medicine, history, and rhetoric and is n a source.

As to politics, the Qurʾān refers to wo pledged the oath of allegiance (*bay ah* of women choosing to make such pled; did, occurred at al-ʿAqabah, al-Riʿwān women to serve as officials (*mu tasibs*) jurisprudence upholds the qualificatior women's involvement in politics as wel century, among the most notable beir queen Sayyidah al-ʿUrrah (eleventh ce Sultānah Sulṭāna (both thirteenth ce (seventeenth century), and various fer contemporary period in Pakistan, Bang

## ROLE AND STATUS IN VARIOUS

The seclusion and confinement of won significant change until the early twen

modify personal status law have been  
Empire (1917), Algeria (1984), Egypt (1913, 1939, and 1976), Iran (1967, 1975, and 1979), Iraq (1951 and 1976), Kuwait (1982), Morocco (1974), Sudan (1915, 1927, 1932, 1933, and 1975), Tunisia (1956, 1957, 1964, 1969, and 1975).

Before the early twentieth century, the family in the hands of patriarchal kinship systems, of which conceptualized the law based on state interventionist behavior in Islamic civil law, was the very risky enterprise of tampering with the core of Muslim (masculine) identity. Though the family unit were central to the construction of the state, however, the state's reluctance began to change under the pressure brought to bear by women's movements and women in countries such as Egypt and Morocco as a result of pressures to modernize the economy.

In the past, inquiries into the role of women in the content of sacred texts, assuming that these texts governed people's behavior. In reaction to this "essentialist" approach, scholars stressed the relevance of conditions in the social and cultural context for understanding women's subordination. This approach suggested that neither the "sacred texts" nor the state are themselves sufficient to explain the conditions of women in a given time because they ignore the social, economic, and political agenda in this area.

For instance, the state has broadened its role in the process weaning them away from traditional practices that controlled them and redirecting their activities. Various times in this century exemplify the risks of such moves: risks the growing disenchantment of many women who generally view such developments to be a threat to their identity. An attempt to conciliate such groups by e



women's public presence. Post-1979 F  
provide relevant examples of such con

In balancing the conflicting demands o  
generally followed a cautious policy of  
marriages more difficult or abolished th  
Syria); permitted wives to sue for divo  
especially in cases of cruelty, desertion  
women with the right to contract the  
find housing for a divorced wife during  
minimum marital age of spouses; limite  
in marriage against their wishes; provi  
their wishes to abrogate their marriag  
rights of women in regard to child cust  
marriage contracts limiting their husba  
ex ante grant to his wife of the right to

## ASSESSMENT.

The Qurʾān improved women's statu  
emphasizing the ontological and spiritu  
certain social and economic regulation  
conditions prevailing at the time of the  
inequality, have lapsed. The Qurʾān it  
interpretation of women's roles and st  
status law, achieved through recourse  
gradually moved in the direction of ger  
backsliding has occurred as a consequ  
patriarchal control over women's dres  
the law in a platform that includes a so  
confrontation with the state (itself at

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Soraya Altorki Updated by Zayn Kassab

## WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Although women and men are assigned the same spiritual rewards in the Qurʾān, the requirements of ritual purity have all too often been applied to both aspects of Islamic religious life. These requirements have often been applied in the real world, and neither are women's responsibilities nor their religious lives have not been sufficiently addressed in a truly balanced description of women's lives. In recent years, changes in this century have radically altered the landscape, opening new opportunities for women.

## WOMEN AND BASIC ISLAMIC OBLIGATIONS

Although women are expected to perform the five pillars of Islam (pray, fast, or touch (or recite) the Qurʾān during menstruation), the exemption during menstruation (*ad th*), the exemption during menstruation (just as the devaluation of their legal testimony denotes their mental deficiency). Women are considered ritually impure than men, not only by menstruation but also by their contact with young children, who are considered ritually impure while pregnant or nursing a baby, many times, either totally or partially. Days of menstruation and exemptions must be made up for later.

Congregational prayer is said to be two prayer performed alone, and *ad ths* from women from praying in the mosque. St their homes. In the Prophet's day, wor behind the men, and, according to *ad* theoretically, all contact between the ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–644), w mosque with their own imam. Previous the mosque as well, but ʿUmar forbade 1111), women were banned from the r the Prophet. Al-Ghazālī justified this r that widespread moral deterioration n women, encouraging women not to le.

Ethnographic studies from a number o women are commonly regarded as the their presence in public is considered a exclusion of women is thus considered dignity of religious ceremonies. For inst mandatory for men, but not for wome young boys were allowed to be preser Although many mosques have segreg. areas, separate rooms, or balconies, m male spaces to which a proper woman resurgence that has swept the Muslim involvement of women, has helped cha constructed mosques provide consid ones. However, the actual spatial arrar women's marginality to life in the mosc cannot see or hear the imam or preach

In the pilgrimage to Mecca, on the oth Islamic law stipulates that women not integration of the sexes also occurs du that at the loci of most intense holines where gender barriers collapse.

Women have always played a role in the history of Islam. The role of *ʿĀʾiṣḥāh*, Muhammad's youngest daughter, is so important that Muhammad is said to have brought Islam to his people through her. Muhammad is said to have received his religion from a woman. Muhammad's wives were women, although later Muslims often viewed women as weak and women for unholy ends. Literacy was a rarity in medieval Muslim society. Throughout the Middle Ages, families have been favored with a private education for women, but women were excluded from formal education. In the 19th century, patrons or even supervisors of education were rare. Taymūrīyah of Syria (d. 1328) lists two women, both descendants of the Prophet, such as her great-great-great-granddaughter Naʿīmah, who was known for her wisdom, as well as piety. Although women were excluded from crafts, and housekeeping skills opened up opportunities for women and since independence secular education was available to boys throughout most of the Islamic world, women fell behind. Occasionally, women have become scholars through their writings alone, but this was rare in Islamic education. *ʿĀʾiṣḥāh* *ʿAbd al-Raḥmān* Khayrī, the Iranian *mujtahid* and scholar, was a student of Nasser's revamping of the Islamic University of Cairo, which opened in 1962, and graduates in the 1970s. She was a teacher in religion classes in public schools in Cairo and trained women as preachers in 1988. Women were excluded from men, so it is assumed that these women were trained for religious needs. In Iran, religious schools were established in 1976. However, private education was available for women who serve as Qurʾān reciters and as leaders of women's gatherings to come together in prayer among the *Shāhīn*.

Mysticism is by definition a sphere that values holiness and receptivity to spiritual inspiration and certification. It is therefore not surprising that more women than men have the more legalistic and ascetic life. The most famous Sufi woman is Rabi'ah bint al-ʿAdriani, who introduced the concept of selfless love and devotion. She inspired mystics to the present day, and her influence on male colleagues. She is listed alongside other women in the *Encyclopedia of Islamic Mysticism* biographical dictionary, because “Rabi'ah bint al-ʿAdriani, who loved God, she is a man and one cannot any more say that Rabi'ah is not unique in Sufi tradition.” In the brief biographies of some 124 Sufi women (1988: 838), who was described by Dhahabī al-Najībī (d. 1145) as his age. The great mystic Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and claims that the most perfect contentment is found in the company of women.

In spite of its greater hospitality to female mystics, the Sufi tradition in its praise of women. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1105) considered women on the path except as assets or obstacles to the spiritual path. The Sufi tradition recommends marriage, in imitation of the Prophet Muhammad. Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) held that the evils in the world had been caused by women.

Celibacy and rigorous fasting were practiced by many Sufi women, aiding in the training of the soul and spirit. These practices were tools for women to avoid ritual impurity and maintain uninterrupted access to God through celibacy, preventing menstruation.

Sufi *shaykhs* were the most effective spiritual guides, often served as popular counselors and spiritual guides who touched the feminine world more than male scholars. Some Sufi *shaykhs* in the Middle Ages admitted women into their orders, although their particular practices, such as the distinctive Sufi ritual of chanting the *dhikr* movement, was controversial. Women were encouraged to practice fasting and celibacy as a pious act. Annemarie Schimmelpenninck (1988: 838) and claims that the most perfect contentment is found in the company of women.

fourteenth century who was head of a *ḥaḥḥ* retreat house for women was estimated to be a prominent woman (*ḥaḥḥ*, Zaynab Fāḥḥiyya, fourteenth century), and according to *shaykhs* and scholars of the law, most women practiced abstinence and worship in *ḥaḥḥ* hospices. In the later medieval period only women who were widows or whose marriage were free to devote themselves to the *ḥaḥḥ*.

Moroccan and Algerian orders frequently had female leadership, and in many countries women's practices complement those of men. In contemporary Egypt, the propriety of female membership in the face of reformist criticism of female membership by the Supreme Council of Religious Affairs sponsored body. Women nonetheless participate in many Egyptian *ḥaḥḥ* orders. Some women inherit from both men and women, or as heirs of their fathers who were *shaykhs*. In this latter case, the children of the deceased's eldest son, although actual heirs, are the daughter. In some Egyptian orders, women inherit but in many orders, and in society at large, women do not expose herself by rising to join a *dhikr* house, but more often women participate silently. In some cases, women do participate in *dhikr*, they are often in contained movements. This is in marked contrast to assemblies in Iran, in which the women participate more than the men. Women seem to be cautious about saying, on the one hand, that they are more free, but on the other hand, dictate that they suppress all public expressions of their freedom.

In Egypt, and probably in other places, women who have entered into the spirit, they may be called "female" and "female" become meaningless categories. The freedom in interpersonal relations between men and women is shocking to the society at large. *ḥaḥḥ*'s way in which men and women mingle and avoid saints'-day celebrations because

by the dense crowds.

## SAINTS AND SPIRITS.

Whereas ordinary mosques are usually traditionally open to women. Saints are recognized as *walīs* (friends of God). They intercede with God on behalf of the faithful, and miracles are reported from their tombs or reputed tombs become sites of pilgrimage. For devotees and other troubled individuals, saints are champions of the downtrodden, and because they require no education, women are frequently found at themselves able to plead with the saints. In fact, that saints' shrines in Morocco are more than a sacred religious space where prayers are made and where intruders. This is not the case in Egypt where it is considered appropriate to pray for the majority. Women are indeed very much present in Upper (southern) Egypt, where women feel free to sit in the vicinity of the tombs. In some special rooms are designated for women. In Cairo, the country's most important shrine of the Prophet does not allow women to enter after sunset.

Some shrines cater specifically to women. In Iran and Iraq, Muslim saints' shrines are designated as *Shaykhān*. In Iran and Iraq, *Shaykhān* women visiting these shrines are of prestige similar to those performing the *mawlid* (mawlid) that commemorate particular deaths, form the major focus of devotion. In Iran, a festival to another, setting up hospitals. In Iraq, the *mawlid* of Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī in Baghdad is one of the vast mosque associated with his tomb. The shrine is inhabited by a crowd of men, women, and children of both sexes. The activities at saints' shrines are often. Frequently the presence of women is considered in light of considerations of modesty and because



from visiting tombs. The practice of sa  
however, who rely on the same type o  
Regardless of this criticism, the visitati  
component of the religious lives of wor

Women in many countries participate  
North and East Africa and the *bori* of V  
assumption that both physical and em  
anger must be appeased through the  
dances peculiar to the spirit in questio  
functionaries, and the power and weal  
Although the cults are non-Islamic in o  
and their effects on humans make Islai  
introduction and spread of such cults. I  
troupes singing praises to the Prophe  
those of great Muslim saints. Women  
criticism of the *z r* cult in Egypt has bee  
women are aware of it.

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEVELO

Religious re-formers of all types have c  
spirit cults as un-Islamic. The hue of ille  
of Islamic religious life that have traditi  
*The Emancipation of Women* (1899),  
urged that women be educated in ord  
supposedly perpetuate among the yo  
(d. 1935) urged in his journal, *Al-man r*  
religious life, as they were in the days c  
century, independently founded Islam  
task of providing religious education fo  
literacy and crafts. The Muslim Brothe  
Egypt, had a women's auxiliary, the Mu  
level of its male counterpart. Zaynab a  
Association in 1936 as an Islamic respo  
there are approximately fourteen tho

and many of them offer religious classes. Community-operated mosques offer religious lessons, and many are themselves women, although male

The university-centered Islamist movement that began in the 1970s has garnered the support of many female propagandists. Women in the movement wear the hijab that covers the entire body except the face, which is an anomaly when it appeared in the early 20th century as the aggressively religious woman. The movement attracts educated, often in the most prestigious fields of engineering, and the sciences, and the professions, and an education and career in the public sector. Whereas other women are frequently criticized for being honored and even feared. By the late 1990s, middle-class women who do not want to participate in public activities. Boutiques offer Parisian fashion standards, thereby subverting some

Despite the high visibility of female participation throughout the Muslim world, it espouses a conservative view of women's social roles, idealizing their innate gender differences that make women doubly burdened when they take on jobs out of economic necessity, and feel degraded. The Islamist movement also encourages women to emulate their counterparts did in early Islam. The concept has been particularly effective in Iran, where the nationalist movement through symbolic modesty, time employment and educational opportunities since the Revolution and modesty norms. The rank-and-file of the Islamic movement is largely male. Zaynab al-Ghazali of Egypt gained prominence as an Islamic activist.

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Valerie J. Hoffman-Ladd

## WOMEN LIVING UNDER MUSLIM LAWS

Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLML) is a transnational network of Muslim and secular feminists. The network advances the human rights of women in Muslim-majority countries. Transnational feminist networks exist in many parts of the world. In 1984, in response to concerns about women's rights movements in the countries from which

The group came together on the initiative of Helie-Lucas, a citizen and lecturer at the University of Algiers. She was at a time of transition in Algeria, from the rule of Boumedienne (who had died in December 1979) to restructuring under Chedli Bendjedid. The group was concerned about patriarchal family law that alarmed many Algerian feminist movement.

In July 1984, nine women—from Algeria, Mauritius, and Tanzania—set up an Action Committee on Muslim Laws to critique patriarchal family law. By 1985, the committee had evolved into a network of solidarity and support, and Helie-Lucas was the central figure in the network. Individuals and groups associated with the network include Shaheed and Khawar Mumtaz of Pakistan.

Baobob, Malaysia's Sisters in Islam, and

Since the first planning meeting in July 1993, WLUMML has engaged women from all over the world who are active in their local and national movements. WLUMML meets periodically to reach consensus on a Plan of Action and to coordinate activities for the next five to seven years. WLUMML has been successful in its dissemination on discriminatory laws and campaigns on specific cases that include a variety of publications.

WLUMML typically engages in grassroots and international conferences. The UN's World Conference on Women in Vienna, Austria, in 1993, was the first WLUMML conference it attended, and it did so largely to raise awareness of Islamist violence against Algerian women. WLUMML also participated in a conference on population and development in Cairo in 1994, and other feminist networks in criticizing Egyptian and Christian and Muslim fundamentalist positions on reproductive rights in the conference.

The Koranic Interpretation by Women project, which entailed an independent reading and interpretation of existing Islamic laws. The multi-year project was a proactive, culminated in a 1997 book—*For Women's Rights: An Interpretation*—to increase awareness of the misapplication of Islamic law to deal with interpretation and jurisprudence. The project also produced a controversial “Sūrat al-Nisā’” (Qur’ān) project on women in society; and recommendatory project produced *Knowing Our Customs in the Muslim World*. In November 1997, WLUMML launched through a Web site called *Fundamental Human Rights*, a joint initiative with the Association for Women's Development (AWID). WLUMML also coordinates periodic electronic dispatches, which serve as alerts—in English and French—pertaining

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