Women's rights in the Islamic world

For his day, the Prophet Muhammad was a feminist. The doctrine he laid out as the revealed word of God considerably improved the status of women in 7th century Arabia. In local pagan society, it was the custom to bury alive unwanted female newborns; Islam prohibited the practice. Women had been treated as possessions of their husbands; Islamic law made the education of girls a sacred duty and gave women the right to own and inherit property. Muhammad even decreed that sexual satisfaction was a woman's entitlement. He was a liberal at home as well as in the pulpit. The Prophet darned his own garments and among his wives and concubines had a trader, a warrior, a leatherworker and an imam.

The religion of the Prophet Muhammad gave women roles as leaders, scholars, and even military advisers. Women owned property independently and had a voice and vote in political affairs centuries **before** the spread of women’s rights in the West.

There are some aspects of the Quran that some would perceive today as being inequitable. The Quran allots daughters half the inheritance of sons. It decrees that a woman's testimony in court, at least in financial matters, is worth half that of a man's. Under Shari'a, or Muslim law, compensation for the murder of a woman is half the compensation for men. In many Muslim countries, these directives are incorporated into contemporary law. For a woman to prove rape in Pakistan, for example, four adult males of "impeccable" character must witness the penetration, in accordance with Shari'a. However, to upend traditions that have grown to disadvantage many Muslim women, many activists seek to show that Islam’s foundational texts have been misinterpreted.

Men in some Muslim societies cite the Islamic faith in defending “honor killings” of women and marriage for child brides. In the West, many commentators proclaim Islam inherently sexist, and some governments ban the veils traditionally worn by many Muslim women. **Amid this turmoil, growing numbers of female Islamic scholars cite the Quran to argue that Muslim women are marginalized not by the true tenets of their faith but by patriarchal cultural practices.**

Some of the most important architects of institutionalized Arab misogyny weren't actually Arab. They were Turkish -- or, as they called themselves at the time, Ottoman -- British, and French. T**hese foreigners ruled Arabs for centuries, twisting the cultures to accommodate their dominance. One of their favorite tricks was to buy the submission of men by offering them absolute power over women.** The foreign overlords ruled the public sphere, local men ruled the private sphere, and women got nothing; academic Deniz Kandiyoti called this the "patriarchal bargain." Colonial powers employed it in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and in South Asia, promoting misogynist ideas and misogynist men who might have otherwise stayed on the margins, slowly but surely ingraining these ideas into the societies.

**Another possible reason for the current sexism in the Middle East has to do with tribal customs and NOT Islam.** A close examination of the rights that remain denied to female citizens of these states leads to the idea that despite supposedly modern advancements, urbanized tribal units with a strict adhesion to tribal values are simply incorporating ancient tribal customs into modern law and using religion as the excuse. Women in these states are frequently denied the right to pass on their nationality to their children, or to marry without the consent of a legal guardian as an enforcement of a **“tribal” tradition rather than an Islamic one**. Although tribal customs have a place in city life for those of Bedouin origin, it seems clear that they must coexist with and assimilate into the requirements of modern urban life. Tribal mores evolved for a reason, and do, in some ways, protect the health of communities, however it seems that the cost of retention is higher on women than it is on men.

While there is still inequity for women in the Middle East, there have also been advances.

Saudi Arabia now grants women the right to obtain a driver’s licenses without permission from their legal guardians. The Islamic kingdom in 2018 became the last country in the world to allow women to drive. Women won't need a male guardian in the car with them either.

It will bring an end to one of the many reasons that the strict Islamic country is subject to regular international ridicule and rebuke. In other Arab nations, women have long been allowed to drive, but that doesn't mean they enjoy the same rights as men in all social spheres.

Male guardians

The concept of male guardianship implies that women shouldn't make important decisions regarding their own lives, and that they need protection when out and about in the world. In Saudi Arabia before 2019 every woman had to have a male guardian — her father, brother, husband, uncle or even son — who had to give his approval before the woman could travel outside the country, get married or divorced and be released from prison. This did not change if her guardian was abusive. Mohammed bin Salmon has changed this law if the woman is over 21.

In Iran, a husband can also ban his wife from traveling internationally or working, if he believes that his wife starting a job is "incompatible with the interests of the family or with his or his wife's dignity," according to the country's civil code.

In 2016, Bahrain's ministry of justice ended regulations stating that women younger than 45 were not allowed to go on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca without a male guardian.

Political participation

In Saudi Arabia, women won the right to vote only in 2015. That was also the year they were first allowed to run for "elected office" in the absolute monarchy. The first woman had been appointed as a government minister just six years earlier.

Some women in Syria were allowed to vote as early as 1949, the remaining restrictions were removed by 1953. In 2015, 12 percent of the members in the national parliament (voted in amidst the country's ongoing civil war amid very low turnout) were women. Hadiya Khalaf Abbas, who is currently the speaker of the parliament, is the first woman to have ever held the position.

In Egypt, women gained the right to vote in 1956, in Tunisia in 1959 and in Mauretania in 1961.

In Iran, women gained suffrage in 1963, after a referendum found a majority of the Iranian people in favor of women's right to vote. A six-point reform program called the White Revolution was passed, which included suffrage and allowing women to run for office.

Dress code

The Quran instructs women to "guard their modesty," not to "display their beauty and ornaments" and to "draw their veils." Saudi women typically don a billowy black cloak called an abaya, along with a black scarf and veil over the face; morality police enforce the dress code by striking errant women with sticks. The women of Iran and Sudan can expose the face but must cover the hair and the neck.

**In most Islamic countries, coverings are optional**. Some women, including some feminists, wear them because they like them. They find that the veil liberates them from unwanted gazes and hassles from men. The dress code in Saudi Arabia is governed by Sharia law. Women must wear a loose black garment called an abaya and a headscarf when they leave the house.

In Iraq, women in urban areas wear modest western clothing, but the "Islamic State" (IS), and other Islamist fundamentalists before it, has tried to impose strict rules on what women are allowed to wear. When IS was controlling the city of Mosul, women there had to wear a Burqa, a garment covering the entire body and face with a mesh screen over the eyes.

In Iran, women are officially supposed to wear either a chador (a black, shapeless garment covering the whole body), or a headscarf, long pants and a long-sleeved, lightweight coat called a manteau. In conservative, often rural areas, these rules are strictly observed. But on the streets of big cities like Tehran, women wear shorter manteaux and pull their headscarves back to show their hair.

In somewhat more westernized countries like Tunisia and Egypt, there is no official dress code for women, but dressing modestly, covering knees and shoulders, is expected.

Marriage and divorce

In Saudi Arabia, a man can have several wives, but a woman cannot have several husbands. Marriages are often arranged by family. In 2005, forced marriages were banned, but marriage contracts are still between the husband-to-be and the father of the bride, not the bride herself. A man can divorce a woman by saying "I divorce you" (Talaq) three times, or indeed by sending a written note. That process was recently outlawed in India. For a woman, it's a slower and much more difficult process in which the husband has to consent to the divorce. Also, women getting divorced automatically lose custody for daughters who are older than nine and sons who are older than seven to their soon-to-be-ex-husbands.

 In Syria, a country with secular as well as religious courts, marriage contracts are also signed by the future husband and the father of the bride. A woman can apply for a divorce through the judicial system. In order to be granted one, she has to prove that her husband either abused her or neglected his duties as a husband.

Morocco recently updated their family law, built around the Moudawana, or family code. It now allows divorce due to "irreconcilable differences" for both men and women. But there are still traditional rules as well. The case of 16-year-old Amina Filali made headlines in 2012 when she killed herself after being forced to marry her rapist, who evaded prosecution this way. However, her case ultimately led to Morocco repealing the law allowing rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims.

Honor Killings

Each year hundreds of Muslim women die in "honor killings"-- murders by husbands or male relatives of women suspected of disobedience, usually a sexual indiscretion or marriage against the family's wishes. Typically, the killers are punished lightly, if at all. In Jordan a man who slays his wife or a close relative after catching her in the act of adultery is exempt from punishment. If the situation only suggests illicit sex, he gets a reduced sentence. The Jordanian royal family has made the rare move of condemning honor killings, but the government, fearful of offending conservatives, has not put its weight behind a proposal to repeal laws that grant leniency for killers. Jordan's Islamic Action Front, a powerful political party, has issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, saying the proposal would "destroy our Islamic, social and family values by stripping men of their humanity when they surprise their wives or female relatives committing adultery."

There is NO mention of honor killings in the Quran. This is strictly a tribal custom. In fact, this practice used in Islamic countries actually contradicts Islam.

Female Circumcision

Female circumcision, also called female genital mutilation, is another case in point. It involves removing part or all of a girl's clitoris and labia in an effort to reduce female sexual desire and thereby preserve chastity. FGM is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and in Egypt, with scattered cases in Asia and other parts of the Middle East. The World Health Organization estimates that up to 140 million girls and women have undergone the procedure. Some Muslims believe it is mandated by Islam, but the practice predates Muhammad and is also common among some Christian communities.

FGM is also NOT in the Quran.

Child Marriages

Globally more than 700 million females living today were child brides. Annually, the Middle East contributes 700,000 child brides to its total of 40 million child brides. Although the number of Syrian child brides has decreased, there has been an increase in the number of child brides in all Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities that have seen internal displacement and are otherwise facing conflict. In Iraq, 15% of marriages were child marriages in 1997, but this rose to 24% in 2016. About 5% of those in child marriages in Iraq were younger than 15. In Yemen, which does not have a minimum legal age for marriage, two-thirds of marriages involve child brides, including 44% under the age of 15.

These countries often cite the example of Mohammed when excusing this practice.