The Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures

Article · January 2005

CITATIONS
26

READS
1,490

2 authors, including:

Rula Jurdi Abisaab
McGill University
47 PUBLICATIONS **129** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

in the United States are fearful of these changes, and continue to argue that the man is the natural family provider with female labor outside the house devalued. In this context, several legal injunctions issued by clerics and muftis encourage Muslim men across sectarian lines to participate in housework and childrearing activities. Muslim women in all sects and denominations may find themselves torn in these discussions. Often as a result of American discrimination and social marginalization, they have tried to preserve a united front with their male counterparts in defining what constitutes proper female behavior in Islam. Some consent to male paternalism and gender inequality, reject premarital sexual relations, and submit to spousal control as a confirmation of their Islamic identity in the face of delegitimization. It is not surprising that many Muslim women describe veiling, in any of its various manifestations, as liberating in ways hard for Western feminists to comprehend. The extensive legal and informal debates on the veil confirm not its normative appearance in Islam, but rather the challenges Islam faces as well as the fluidity of sectarian translations of Islamic ritual, attire, and sexual modesty.

Both Sunnī and Shīʿī Muslim women put great emphasis on making their marriages work, accommodating differences with their spouses and resorting to divorce only when all communal and familial reconciliatory approaches fail. Marrying outside the faith is discouraged, but it occurs often enough to be a source of concern for American Muslims. Among the thorny issues facing Muslim families of various sects and social classes is validating female virginity, prohibiting premarital relations, and controlling the extent of socialization among young Muslim women and non-Muslim men. Illustrative of the experiences of many American Muslims, Maryam Qudrat Aseel (2003), of Sunnī Afghani background, notes that in her culture the struggle with familial authority is much more intense in the case of young girls. Boys are free to do as they please, with no accountability, while girls are not. Aseel confirms the strong sectarian character of her Islamic upbringing in which girls are expected to marry not only a Sunnī Muslim, but one who is Tajik or Pashtun Afghani.

The practice of polygamy, itself banned by United States law, is found in very small numbers of American Muslim families, especially among some members of the Nation of Islam and other African American sectarian movements. Some Shīʿīs practice mutʿa (temporary marriage), though it is generally discouraged. On the whole, an increasing number of Muslim women want greater control over the conditions of their marital contracts, with the resulting increase in detailed premarital agreements. The rights accorded to women under American civil law seem to have made less urgent the call raised in many countries for reforming Islamic law on marriage, polygyny, and divorce.

American Muslim women of all sects and classes, mainstream and heterodox, continue to struggle over access to and manipulation of public space. Many feminist Muslims support gender commingling in religious congregations, whether in the mosque or Sufi circles, during prayer or in other religious performances. Sunnī, Twelver Shīʿī and Ismāʿīlī women have sought leadership roles within their American communities and religious circles, invoking Qurʾānic verses, traditions from the ḥadīth, and/or the sayings of imams and other religious leaders. But there are limits to the goals and scope of female leadership in any classical religious establishment, including the various branches of Islam. A select number of women from all the main branches of Islam in America have embraced a feminist approach to the textual sources of Islam and advocated reforming positions in relation to women's status and gender relations. This approach has contested male-dominant views of women's rights in Islam, emphasizing female education and political leadership. Feminist Islam attempts a hermeneutical manipulation of religious texts to empower women not through open protest or dismissal of the foundational scriptures, but rather by reinterpretation of the verses and the law. Sunnī and Shīʿī women, immigrants and American-born, are struggling to be responsive to the traditions that have formed them and their communities. At the same time they are learning how to work together to challenge the bias that pits Islam against the West and to find their place and their voice as American Muslims.
—-Rula Jurdi Abisaab

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN

&

ISLAMIC CULTURES

Suad Joseph

General Editor

Sectarianism and Confessionalism: United States

2005 EWIC Volume II

"Family, Law and Politics "

By Rula Jurdi Abisaab

The EWIC Public Outreach Project is funded by the generous support of the

Henry Luce Foundation

EWIC Online subscriptions available from:

BRILL

http://www.brillonline.com/

http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewic

Women from among the roughly six million Muslims living in the United States represent diverse sectarian, ethnic, cultural, educational and class backgrounds. Thus it is difficult to generalize about one gender structure in Islamic communities, or what constitutes normative roles for women, informing their self-image, religious beliefs and practices, and their relations with men. It is important to distinguish among members of any of the branches or sectarian groups of Islam between those who are self consciously practicing Muslim women, either in mosques or other institutions, and those who are secular and generally non-practicing. Sometimes secular Muslim women of diverse sectarian backgrounds are actually more active and collaborative in professional circles or groups as a way of networking than are those who are more religiously observant. This entry highlights some sociological and historical features pertaining mainly to religiously observant women.

Under the rubric "Muslim" and "Islamic" lie numerous diverse and at times antagonistic groups and sects. Differences in religious consciousness and what is considered the right approach to Islam have varied from one wave of immigrants to another. South Asians Muslims in a locale such as New York or California differ from Arabs in Michigan or Ohio in the way women shape their identity and the level at which they participate in Islamic associations. With Black American Muslims the picture becomes even more complex. While Black women traditionally associated with the Nation of Islam have put great emphasis on the racial and national implications of the movement, other African Americans, such as those of the Ḥanafī madhhab , for example, are more concerned with following what they understand to be orthodox Sunnī beliefs and practices.

Much of the Islamic literature in the United States today tries to reduce this multivocal and heterogeneous mix of American Islam and to point to the reality of Muslim women as one uniform body. The political dynamics of life in a secular society dominated by a still white protestant middle-class ethos has helped create a uniform and non-gendered image of American Islam, which does not match reality. Both in academic scholarship and in journalistic representations, the "Muslim woman" – either a convert or one born and raised in the American context – is seen as the "other," someone with somehow false or inferior claims to American Western culture. This neo-Orientalist discourse functions to clinically remove the Islamic experience from its natural historical habitat, the American West, and identifies it anachronistically with a Third World whose qualities seem more appropriate for Islam. This artificial removal of the Islamic from the West is internalized by Muslim women and men themselves, in their defense of their religion, and upheld as a definitive trait of their identity and history. American Muslim women across sectarian lines have used a fixed binarism of Islam versus the West to describe ethos, religion, and even behavioral patterns in their communities.

Within and across the various groups that make up Islam in the United States – Sunnī, Shīʿī, Sufi, and heterodox movements – there are important differences in ritual, doctrine, and interpretation of Qurʾān and ḥadīth that have direct bearing on women's status, self-image, and gender relations. Around one fifth of American Muslims are Shīʿīs of Twelver, Ismāʿīlī, and Zaydī branches. In urban areas these groups maintain their separate mosques and centers, but in smaller towns Twelvers and Zaydīs often participate in Sunnī places of worship. Sunnī and Shīʿī women generally differ in terms of female role models and spiritual guides. Sunnīs tend to identify with the "mother of the faithful" image found in the Prophet Muḥammad's wives, particularly Khadīja and ʿĀʾisha. Khadīja is depicted as an assertive and able businesswoman, and ʿĀʾisha as a political activist and an important source of some of the ḥadīth and law pertaining to women. Sunnī women have embellished the lives and feats of the Prophet's wives to confirm Islam's support of female leadership and educational and professional ambitions.

Twelver Shīʿī women emphasize the role and position of the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima, tracing the imamate through her and her husband ʿAlī. Fāṭima's centrality to the early imamate tradition historically has given Shīʿī women a superior spiritual and social position as compared with Sunnī women, particularly with respect to inheritance and leadership in public religious activities. Ismāʿīlī women especially tend to underscore the esoteric and symbolic nature of Islamic rituals such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and testimony, arguing that inner faith is more important than outward, exoteric manifestations of worship or verbal adherence to Islam. Ismāʿīlīs today debate the possibility that the Agha Khan's daughter may become the leader of the movement, since he seems to have favored her over his sons. The Druze branch of the Ismāʿīlīs, often referred to as "Unitarian," make up a small minority of American Muslims. They consider mainstream Muslims to have diverted from the true spirit of monotheism. Depending on geographical region and class, Druze women may favor a greater association and even marriage with Christians over Muslims. In general, however, marriage outside the sect is discouraged.

Sufi movements such as those of ḤaẓratInāyāt Khān and Idries Shah have competed with mainstream Islam in attracting women converts from Christianity and Judaism. Among Sufi groups that embrace puritanical or traditionalist restrictions on social life, women's roles and experiences have differed little from those manifest in major Sunnī and Shīʿī groups. In a few cases, female Sufi groups have succeeded in transcending gender inequality and seem to have been empowered by an escape from a Sharīʿa-based regulation of their activities. In Angels in the Making , Laleh Bakhtiar discusses the lives of women who joined the Sufi movement in the United States, showing that Islamic mysticism can be therapeutic and helpful in preserving the mental health of (especially young) Muslim women. It functions as an alternative to Western psychoanalysis for a range of psychological disorders.

American Muslim women generally believe that Islam affords equal rights and opportunities for both genders, but that roles for men and women are complementary rather than identical. The economic burdens facing working- and middle-class Muslim families, both native and immigrant, and the apparent need for the income of wives as wage earners, have reconfigured gender relations in a manner that has encouraged decision-making and certain social freedoms for women within an Islamic frame of reference. Meanwhile, many Muslim groups