

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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GENDER IN MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN HISTORY

General features Home to the oldest civilizations in world history, the Middle East also developed early systems of patriarchal inequality, both in law and in custom. A few distinctive features took shape at that point. Gender relations were considerably redefined by the Abrahamic religions, particularly Islam, at various points but especially after 600 CE. The early modern period did not see decisive change, but new reform impulses developed in the 19th century, partly under Western pressure. The contemporary period, since the early 20th century onward, has seen a fascinating mixture of basic shifts – like advances in women’s education; explicit reform efforts; and conservative reaction. The result has been a more varied and fluid experience than some foreign commentary suggests.

Mesopotamia Three developments in early Mesopotamian civilizations were particularly noteworthy, in confirming or extending patriarchal gender relations. First, female infanticide was widely practiced as a means of limiting family and population size; while control over the numbers of surviving children was the main point, the practice also highlighted the preference for boys as heirs and ultimate leaders of the family economy. Second, early law codes, including the code of Hammurabi (c. 1700 BCE) emphasized male superiority in many ways. Women were not allowed to testify directly in court cases. They were penalized by law if they failed to perform their domestic duties; the Code urged that deficient wives could be “thrown into the river”, which in most cases probably resulted in drowning. Punishments for sexual offenses were far more severe for women. Husbands did need to provide for their wives, otherwise a wife could in principle leave the family (though in practice this could be quite difficult). Third, between 1400 and 1100 BCE the practice of veiling was introduced as a mark of status for upper-class women. Initially this probably reflected social more than gender inequality; prostitutes and slave women were forbidden to veil, with whippings imposed for violations. Obviously, however, it was not a measure that applied to men, and it would turn out to have a significant role in the region’s gender history.

Islam New religions brought important changes in gender relations. The rise of Judaism reinforced patriarchy among the Jews: worship occurred separately for men and women, the authority of fathers in the family was emphasized, and men were responsible for religious scholarship. Early Christianity proved more flexible, with women playing prominent roles in many local churches. However it was the rise of Islam that proved most crucial for the region – ultimately extending to North Africa and beyond. Muhammed was eager to improve women’s status as against Arab tradition. The Qur’an inveighed against female infanticide, which undoubtedly declined. Women were given clear property rights in Islamic law, controlling their dowries; they were to share in family inheritance, though with portions only half those allotted to men. They could initiate divorce, though with procedures that were more cumbersome than those available to men (who could principle merely state their intention to divorce). Women as well as men had opportunities to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. While sexual offenses like adultery might be severely punished, in principle this applied to men as well as women, and families were in any event urged to forgive if possible. Men were advised to attend to their wives’ sexual pleasure in marriage. There were however important limitations in gender relations as well, in addition to superior male property and divorce rights. Polygamy was permitted, for men who could support more than one wife. Women worshipped separately, in more crowded spaces; this reflected an ongoing sense that women bore special responsibility for sin. Men monopolized political and religious leadership, including legal scholarship, and though individual women gained some roles as writers and teachers the primacy of domestic roles for women was strongly emphasized. Almost all Islamic schools, in an expanding system, were reserved for males. Further, though it was not strictly a religious requirement, emphasis on veiling and seclusion for women increased, in the upper classes and the cities. Muhammed recommended veiling for his wives, to protect them from being bothered in public, and this was often taken as a wider signal; and the Qur’an explicitly insisted on modest dress, including concealment of jewelry. The Qur’an made the general point quite clear: though women had souls, “men have authority over women because of what God has conferred on one in preference to the other.” According to some interpretations (now disputed) this included authorization to punish wives physically.

The early modern period Gender conditions in the two great Islamic empires of the period were unusual compared to the standards of most other societies at the time. The key was property ownership, even though under Islamic law women received less portions of inheritance. In both the Ottoman and Safavid empires, many women played active business roles, sometimes even serving as tax collectors. At one point in the 16th century, women's property was involved in at least 20% of all transactions in the Safavid empire. Many women could also travel fairly readily, particularly under the early Safavids. Education was a bit less clear. Some women in the Ottoman empire were schooled at home, and girls in the harem of the Sultan or high officials could be trained there, but formal schools were for males. Opportunities may have been a bit greater under the early Safavids, and in both empires educated women contributed to the arts and took on political roles, even dealing with foreign diplomats. There were important limitations. Lower-class women, the vast majority, were largely confined to household and adjacent tasks. Many women were also held as slaves. The extensive harems, particularly for Ottoman sultans, involved separate living quarters and often intense rivalries, though they could also lead to political influence. Mothers of sultans, particularly, had considerable informal power. Conditions for even upper-class women deteriorated under the Safavids by the 17th century, when regulations increasingly confined women to their homes and insisted on veils and concealing clothing; at this point Shi's Islam, predominant under the Safavids, began to take a more consistently conservative approach to gender. Women in the Ottoman Empire encountered periods of restriction as well, under certain Sultans, though there were fluctuations, as well as considerable variety among different religious communities in the multi-cultural empire. It was also true, as had been the case previously in the region, that veiling and considerable seclusion were taken as signs of social privilege. But with the Ottomans, too, conservative influence gained greater prominence by the 18th century.

Western influence and the 19th century Realization of growing Ottoman weakness in the 19th century led to an important series of reform movements and discussions, and while gender was not at their core some significant new themes were introduced. During the Tanzimat reform era of the middle decades of the century, some schools were created for women – like a school for midwives, in 1850, along with secondary schools for teacher training and later a college. Concubinage was abolished at this point, along with the sale of women as slaves. Important debate arose at the end of the century over the practice of veiling, with some men arguing that this was a visible mark of the inferiority of regional traditions, but conservatives insisting on the status quo or even advocating more rigorous requirements. (One book in Egypt, in 1899, called the *Liberation of Women*, saw the abolition of veiling as a precondition to establishing an “advanced civilization.”) The issue became something of a symbol in ongoing disagreements over how to react to Western standards.

The contemporary era Vigorous debate over gender issues has marked the past century – even in the new state of Israel where orthodox Jews insist on gender segregation, opposed by their liberal, secular counterparts. Reform was a crucial feature of Kemal Ataturk's regime in Turkey, in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1923 speech the leader urged that “the road of progress must be trodden by both sexes together marching arm in arm.” Law codes were revised to provide legal equality (though stipulating that “man is the head of the union of marriage”). Women gained the vote in 1931 (local elections) and then 1934 at the national level– well ahead of many countries in Western Europe; 18 women served in the parliament by 1935. Mandatory education for both sexes was established in 1923, though implementation was slow particularly for women and girls' classes emphasized domestic training. Important feminist groups developed to push for further change. Ataturk urged abandonment of traditional veiling, but the issue was controversial, and a significant divide emerged among women, partly along urban/rural lines. Divisions persisted into the 21st century, when a more conservative regime reversed earlier measures against traditional styles of dress. Similar tension emerged in Iran, though they took a different direction. The government abolished veiling in 1937 and opened schools at all levels to women. Women gained the vote in 1963, and quickly gained new positions in the government; while legal reforms created greater equality in areas such as divorce. However, the 1979 revolution strongly reverted to what the (male) leaders saw as Islamic tradition. Economic opportunities for women were reduced, and obligatory veiling reestablished, along the men's rights to take more than one wife. However, unexpected levels of change continued in many ways – most notably, the huge surge of women into universities, where by the 21st century they constituted 55% of the total student body; at the same time the birth rate declined rapidly. Tensions over dress codes and other restrictions, along with the formation of some new women's groups,

created active issues, including a widespread wave of resistance in 2022-3 which the government sought to repress. Tensions showed in other countries as well. Saudi Arabia, long a holdout against change, began to ease restrictions under new leadership, allowing women to drive and attend public events; however, feminist leaders were jailed. In contrast the short-lived Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, saw widespread subordination and mistreatment of women, including rape of non-Muslims. Still, basic changes, like advancing education, birth rate reduction and, on the whole, increasing flexibility in outside the home, however, along with persistence of some other traditions like early marriage, nevertheless set the region apart.

Study questions

1. What are the most distinctive features of gender history in the Middle East/ North Africa? Why has the region resisted easy characterization?
2. What were the main features of the Islamic approach to gender?
3. Why, in the Ottoman empire, might some Christian women be inclined to convert to Islam in order to gain better conditions?
4. What have been the main targets for reform and resistance in the region, during the past century?

Further reading

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