

THE FAMILY IN MIDDLE EAST

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Postclassical Middle East : Islam and Family

Basic features The family was deeply valued in Islam, with few of the tensions that cropped up in Christianity and especially Buddhism. A variety of the principles and rules specified by Islam were directed at family life, including regulation of sexual behavior. At the same time, Islam adapted to some prior traditions in the Middle Eastern region, though some of these adaptations were not carried into other Islamic domains. Families should encourage individuals to see themselves as part of a wider community, ultimately extended to the whole Islamic faith.

Extended family Extended family forms were emphasized, based on patrilineal descent, often with co-residence of many generations. In principle and often in fact, older family members were greatly valued. It was considered a gift of Allah to be able to care for an older parent or relative. Extended families were seen as providing the greatest stability and affection. As the Qur'an said, "Your Lord has commanded that ...you be kind to your parents. If one of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect...and act humbly to them in mercy."

Children In contrast to Christianity, Islam held that children were born in innocence. (This was the basis for the efforts to prevent infanticide or the sale of children.) The Qur'an emphasized the importance of providing for children if a marriage dissolved or if parents died, insisting on appropriate treatment for orphans ("clothe them, and speak kindly to them"). Young children were considerably indulged, with little gifts and treats and ample opportunity for play. Expressions of grief at the death of a child were common – beginning with the Prophet himself, who wept openly at a funeral. Parents had the responsibility of developing children's spirituality. Mothers launched the inculcation of basic precepts, while fathers would introduce the child to the mosque. During the postclassical period Islam promoted a network of what today would be called primary schools, *Maktabs*, which focused mainly on promoting memorization of passages in the Qur'an. This might or might not include some training in literacy. But there is no question that literacy gained ground during these centuries, possibly reaching the highest levels in the world at that point (some estimates go as high as 30% of the population). While girls had far more limited educational opportunities, and often depended on home tutoring for any instruction, a few clearly benefited and even became teachers in their own right. (One male scholar reported having several dozen, very skilled, female teachers.) Physical discipline was common in the schools, though some Muslim educators cautioned against its negative effects and urged greater attention to children's individual aptitudes. For boys who did well in school, and with paternal support and encouragement, an array of secondary schools, or *madrasas*, existed in the major cities, where further success could lead to jobs as government or religious officials or, more rarely, to further achievements in scholarship. The variety options should not distract from the fact that for most children, particularly in the countryside, participation in the family economy represented the most important obligation.

Slavery and the family Slavery remained important in the Islamic Middle East, with many people purchased or captured from various parts of Europe and Africa. At the same time, Islamic authorities struggled with the dilemma of ownership of people, particularly when the slave were themselves Muslims. Manumission was encouraged, and efforts were extended not to disrupt the nuclear family by selling off a parent or child. As in the classical period, slaves themselves did various jobs, even in the bureaucracy and military, which could also provide opportunities for some family life.

Gender Muhammed took explicit pride in the reforms he introduced in Arab tradition, toward the greater valuation of women, beyond the efforts against infanticide. Arranged marriage continued to be the norm,

with the family of the bride contributing a dowry; but in contrast to many other societies, wives continued to have ownership rights, for example if the marriage dissolved. And girls had property rights as well as boys in any family inheritance – though their portions were only half as large. Still, property considerations gave women a level of security in family life that was arguably absent in Christianity, with particular implications for widowhood. Divorce was also possible. Here too, however, arrangements were unequal. Men could divorce fairly readily (and sometimes did), while the procedure was far more cumbersome for women. Finally, Islam allowed for polygamy (up to three wives), if a man could support them (this was not a relevant option for most ordinary families). In the wealthiest households, including those of many Islamic rulers, wider networks of concubines often developed. All of this adds up to a mixed picture. The patriarchal family remained clearly intact: as the Qur'an noted, "Man has authority over women because of what god has conferred on the one in preference to the other."

Veiling Gender patterns in Islamic families in the Middle East were further complicated by the spread of the practice of veiling and the promotion of considerable family seclusion for respectable women. This was not at base a requirement of the faith itself. Muhammed had urged veiling for his wives, to prevent them from being bothered in public, even as he encouraged considerable independence in other respects. Veiling itself long predated Islam in the Middle East. During the postclassical centuries it unquestionably became increasingly common in many families – though not the peasantry, where women's physical labor remained vital – and was widely associated with piety.

Sexuality Islam did not introduce the tensions into sexuality that were so prominent in Western Christianity. There was no special premium placed on chastity, and indeed extensive reproduction was encouraged as a religious obligation. As the Prophet said, "when one of you has sex with your wife, it is a rewarded act of charity". To be sure, individuals might choose to avoid sexual entanglements. A number of pious women, particularly in the more spiritual Sufi movement, chose that path, but there was no wide institutionalization of the practice. Sexual pleasure was a valid enjoyment, and husbands were urged to make sure of their wives' satisfaction (including recommendations of foreplay). Only anal intercourse or sex during menstruation were clearly forbidden. At the same time, Islam was even more explicit than Christianity in its efforts to confine sexuality to marriage. Premarital sex and extramarital sex were both strongly forbidden. Harsh punishments, included stoning, awaited adulterers (both male and female), though in fact Islam urged forgiveness and reconciliation when possible. Rape was frequently handled through efforts to arrange marriage with the rapist. Though in principle Islam insisted on the need for consent to marriage, in fact it accommodated the regional tradition of frequent child marriage, particularly for girls – another way to discourage premarital sexual activity. While some Islamic references cautioned against too much sexual zeal for both husbands and wives, Islamic rules against contraception and abortion were less severe at that point than was true for Christianity. Still, there was no question that the primary purpose for sexual activity should be procreation, within the marriage.

Conclusion Islam generated a powerful framework for family life, with many features that proved impressively durable. The framework was different from that of the other missionary religions, though with many features shared particularly with Christianity; and there were important accommodations to some prior traditions.

Study questions

1. How did the Islamic approach to kinship compare to that of Western Christianity?
2. Why do many Muslims, and many historians of Islam, argue that Islam provided a far better family framework for women than Christianity did?
3. What were the main complexities in the Islamic approach to sexuality?

Further reading

Avner Gil'adi, *Children of Islam: concepts of childhood in medieval Muslim society* (St. Martin's, 1992)

Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo* (Princeton University Press, 1992)

Judith Tucker, "Gender in Islamic History," in Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European Expansion* (Temple University Press, 1993)

Adel Wahad Bouhdika, *Sexuality in Islam* (Routledge, 2007)

20th Century Middle East

Childrearing Many Middle Eastern families, particularly in the cities, sought to combine some new messages about the importance of individual children with older values. A study of postwar Lebanon for example showed the impact of messages from United Nations agencies and other sources about dealing with children as individuals; the growing importance of schooling might promote similar emphasis. But family also taught children the value of the family as a collective entity, the necessity of honoring elders and other kin, the need to subsume personal inclinations in favor of family service. While Middle Eastern families continued to indulge small children, discipline for older children often stiffened; corporal punishments remained common in schools, without parental objection.

Gender Considerable division developed over gender issues in Middle Eastern families, in part because of the variety of official policies. Atatürk's Turkey, in the 1920s, while firming up male authority in family law ("Man is the head of the union of marriage", with the right also to determine where the family lived), also gave women equal rights to divorce and abolished polygamy. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, long upheld requirements for concealing clothing and the necessity of obtaining permission of a male relative to travel and make other public decisions; this pattern began to ease only in the 21st century when, among other things, women were famously finally allowed to drive. The Iranian revolutionary regime also imposed many restrictions on women after 1979, arguing that a woman "should be the preserver of tradition, the family". But family decisions were equally important. Rural families, in places like Egypt, continued to insist on veiling in public, and some urban women decided on veiling as a demonstration of cultural solidarity; but others opted for more Western style clothing. The steady spread of female education – even in Saudi Arabia, allowing many women to study abroad – was a persistent source of change. Many women also became adept at using traditional Islamic law to argue for protection of certain rights. On the other hand, relatively low regional rates of female participation in work outside the home showed the continuing hand of tradition.

Marriage Changes in marriage were gradual, but they picked up speed, overall, from the late 20th century onward. Marriage age rose on average, as more women acquired education and joined the labor force at least for a time. Polygamy also declined – in part because of high urban housing costs. Arranged marriage also waned, even in conservative societies like Saudi Arabia, though parental authority and kinship ties remained important. Inevitably, gaps in family types increased between city and countryside, but urban populations grew rapidly. Divorce rates were low, particularly because women faced legal barriers (often, despite Islamic law). In Egypt women could petition with divorce only with a husband's permission until 2000, except in cases of abuse or alcoholism. But there was a perceptible increase in divorce rates after 1980, while they remained well below Western levels.

Conclusion Overall, family patterns evolved noticeably, despite the important role of traditions including Islamic law. The balance was somewhat similar to that of South Asia, though with different specifics; but in some respects, as in the continued reliance on child labor, Middle Eastern families changed more substantially.

Further reading

Judith Tucker, *Women, Family and Gender in Islamic Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: gender and sexual anxieties of Iranian modernity* (University of California, Press, 2005)

Fatma Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, eds, *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: tradition, identity and power* (Columbia University Press, 1994)

Bahara Doumani, ed., *Family History in the Middle East* (State University of New York Press, 2003)

Kathryn Yount and Hoda Rashid, eds., *Family Life in the Middle East: ideational change in Egypt, Iran and Tunisia* (Routledge, 2011)