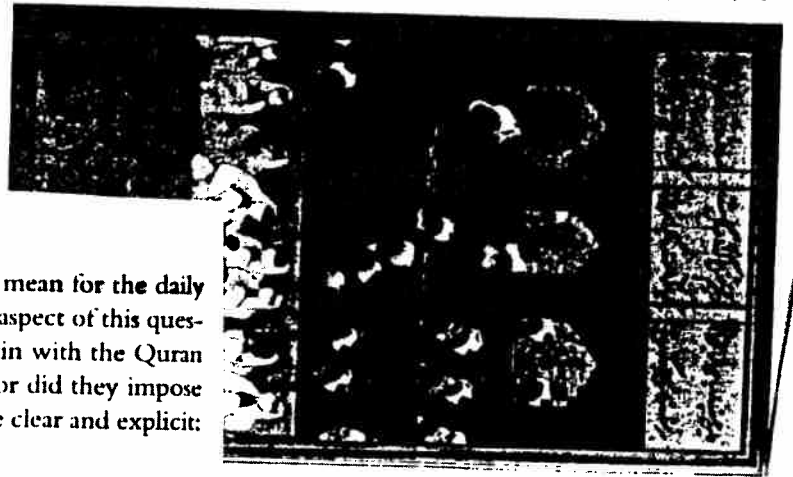


More specifically, the Quran provided a mix of rights, restrictions, and protections for women. The earlier Arab practice of female infanticide, for example, was forbidden. Women were given control over their own property, particularly their dowries, and were granted rights of inheritance, but at half the rate of their male counterparts. Marriage was considered a contract between consenting parties, thus making marriage by capture illegitimate. Within marriage, women were expected to enjoy sexual satisfaction and could sue for divorce if they had not had sexual relations for more than four months. Divorce was thus possible for both parties, although it was far more readily available for men. The practice of taking multiple husbands, which operated in some pre-Islamic Arab tribes, was prohibited, while polygyny (the practice of having multiple wives) was permitted, though more clearly regulated than before. Men were limited to four wives and required to treat each of them equally. The difficulty of doing so has been interpreted by some as virtually requiring monogamy. Men were, however, permitted to have sexual relations with consenting female slaves, but any children born of those unions were free, as was the mother once her owner died. Furthermore, men were strongly encouraged to help orphans, widows, and slaves.

Such Quranic prescriptions were but one factor shaping the

lives of women and men. At least as important were the long-established practices of the societies into which Islam spread and the growing sophistication, prosperity, and urbanization of Islamic civilization. As had been the case in Athens and China during their "golden ages," women, particularly in the upper classes, experienced growing restrictions as Islamic civilization flourished culturally and economically in the Abbasid era. In early Islamic times, a number of women played visible public roles, particularly Muhammad's youngest wife, Aisha. Women prayed in the mosques, although separately, standing beside the men. Nor were women generally veiled or secluded. As the Arab empire grew in size and splendor, however, the position of women became more limited. The second caliph, Umar, asked women to offer prayers at home. Now veiling and the seclusion of women became standard practice among the upper and ruling classes, removing them from public life. Separate quarters within the homes of the wealthy were the domain of women, from which they could emerge only completely veiled. The caliph Mansur (ruled 754-775) carried this separation of the sexes even further when he ordered a separate bridge for women to be built over the Euphrates in the new capital of Baghdad. Such seclusion was less possible for lower-class women, who lacked the servants of the rich and had to leave the home for shopping or work.

Such practices derived far more from established traditions of Middle Eastern cultures than from the Quran itself, but they soon gained an Islamic rationale in the



Women and Men in Early Islam

What did the rise of Islam and the making of the Arab Empire mean for the daily lives of women and their relationship with men? Virtually every aspect of this question has been and remains highly controversial. The debates begin with the Quran itself. Did its teachings release women from earlier restrictions, or did they impose new limitations? At the level of spiritual life, the Quran was quite clear and explicit: men and women were equal.

Those who surrender themselves to Allah and accept the true faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable, and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of Allah—on these, both men and women, Allah will bestow forgiveness and rich reward.¹⁶

But in social terms, and especially within marriage, the Quran, like the written texts of almost all civilizations, viewed women as inferior and subordinate.

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them.¹⁷

COMPARE & CONTRAST
HAD QURAN &
HADITHS INFLUENCED
WOMEN IN ISLAM.

writings of Muslim thinkers. The famous philosopher and religious scholar al-Ghazali clearly saw a relationship between Muslim piety and the separation of the sexes.

It is not permissible for a stranger to hear the sound of a pestle being pounded by a woman he does not know. If he knocks at the door, it is not proper for the woman to answer him softly and easily because men's hearts can be drawn to [women] for the most trifling [reason]. . . . However, if the woman has to answer the knock, she should stick her finger in her mouth so that her voice sounds like that of an old woman.¹⁸

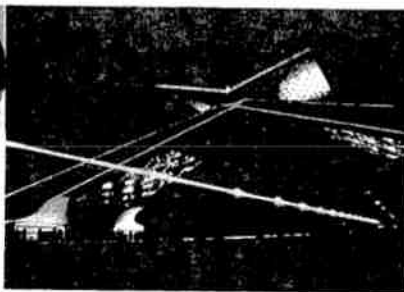
Other signs of a tightening patriarchy—such as “honor killing” of women by their male relatives for violating sexual taboos and, in some places, clitorrectomy (female circumcision)—likewise derived from local cultures, with no sanction in the Quran or Islamic law. Where they were practiced, such customs often came to be seen as Islamic, but they were certainly not limited to the Islamic world. In many cultures, concern with family honor, linked to women's sexuality, dictated harsh punishments for women who violated sexual taboos.

Negative views of women, presenting them variously as weak, deficient, and a sexually charged threat to men and social stability, emerged in the *hadiths*, traditions about the sayings or actions of Muhammad, which became an important source of Islamic law. A changing interpretation of the Adam and Eve story illustrates the point. In the Quran, equal blame attaches to both of them for yielding to the temptation of Satan, and both alike ask for and receive God's forgiveness. Nothing suggests that Eve tempted or seduced Adam into sin. In later centuries, however, several *hadiths* and other writings took up Judeo-Christian versions of the story that blamed Eve, and thus women in general, for Adam's sin and for the punishment that followed, including expulsion from the garden and pain in childbirth.¹⁹

Even as women faced growing restrictions in society generally, Islam, like Buddhism and Christianity, also offered new outlets for them in religious life. The Sufi practice of mystical union with Allah allowed a greater role for women than did mainstream Islam. Some Sufi orders had parallel groups for women, and a few welcomed women as equal members. Within the world of Shia Islam, women teachers of the faith were termed *mullahs*, the same as their male counterparts. Islamic education, either in the home or in Quranic schools, allowed some to become literate and a few to achieve higher levels of learning. Visits to the tombs of major Islamic figures as well as the ritual of the public bath provided some opportunity for women to interact with other women beyond their own family circle.

Islam and Cultural Encounter: A Four-Way Comparison

In its earliest centuries, the rapid spread of Islam had been accompanied by the creation of an immense Arab Empire, very much in the tradition of earlier Mediterranean and Middle Eastern empires. By the tenth century, however, little



Are Women Second-Class Citizens in Islam?

The status of women in Muslim countries has long been looked to as evidence of "Islam's" oppression of women in matters ranging from the freedom to dress as they please to legal rights in divorce. The true picture of women in Islam is far more complex.

The Qur'an declares that men and women are equal in the eyes of God; man and woman were created to be equal parts of a pair (Chapter 41 Verse 49). The Qur'an describes the relationship between men and women as one of "love and mercy" (30:21), so that men and women are to serve as "members of one another" (3:195), as "protectors, one of another" (9:71). They are to be like each other's garment (2:187).

Men and women are equally responsible for adhering to the Five Pillars of Islam. Chapter 9 Verses 1-72 states, "The Believers, men and women, are protectors of one another; they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, pay *zakat* and obey God and His Messenger. On them will God pour His mercy: for God is exalted in Power, Wise. God has promised to Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein." This verse draws added significance from the fact that it was the last Qur'an verse to be revealed that addressed relations between men and women. Some scholars argue, on the basis of both content and chronology, that this verse outlines the ideal vision of that relationship in Islam—one of equality and mutuality.

Women have been assigned second-class status in Muslim society

based upon a misinterpretation of the Qur'an's Chapter 4 Verse 34, which says "Men are the guardians of women, (on the basis) that God has granted some of them merits greater than others and (on the basis) that they spend of their property (for the support of women)." However, contemporary scholars have noted that the "guardianship" referred to in this verse is based upon men's socioeconomic responsibilities for women. It does not say women are incapable of managing their own affairs, controlling themselves or being leaders, nor does it say that all men are superior to, preferred to or better than all women.

Another justification of second-class status for women may have been derived from the Qur'anic stipulation (2:282) that two female witnesses are equal to one male witness. If one female witness errs, the other can remind her of the truth. Over time, this was interpreted by male scholars to mean that a woman's testimony should always be given half the weight of a man's. Contemporary scholars point out that the verse specifies witnessing in cases of a written transaction, contract or court case. At the time the Qur'an was revealed, most women were not active in business and finance, and a woman's expertise in these fields was likely to have been less than a man's.

Another area in which gender discrimination has been apparent historically is in the matter of divorce. The Qur'an, however, guarantees women equality with respect to the right of divorce. The Qur'an also restricts the

practice of polygamy. Chapter 4 Verse 3 commands, "Then marry such of the women as appeal to you, two, three or four; but if you fear that you cannot be equitable, then only one." A corollary verse, 4:129, states, "You will never be able to treat wives equitably, even if you are bent on doing that." Contemporary interpreters have argued that these two verses together prohibit polygamy and that the true Qur'anic ideal is monogamy.

The 20th century has brought numerous significant reforms for women's rights in both the public and the private spheres. In the overwhelming majority of Muslim countries, women have the right to public education, including at the college level. In many countries, they also have the right to work outside the home, vote and hold public office. Particularly notable in recent years have been the reforms in marriage and divorce laws. ④



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Are Women Second-Class Citizens in Islam?

Assignment: Read the following article and answer the questions in complete sentences.

1. How does the Qur'an declare that men and women are equal? Give specifics.
2. Describe how the Qur'an professes equality and mutuality between men and women.
3. How has the misinterpretation of the Qur'an's Chapter 4 Verse 34, created second-class status for women? What does it say and how can this be misinterpreted? Explain.
4. What does the Qur'an reveal about the "weight" of women's judgment? How can this be misinterpreted?
5. What does the Qur'an reveal about divorce and polygamy? How can this lead to gender discrimination?
6. How does religion in the US restrict women's rights or discriminate based on gender, historically and presently? Explain.