

Introduction

From its inception in the early 7th century up to the present day, women have played a vital role in shaping Islamic history. However, their voices have often been left out of standard historical narratives, silenced by a lack of primary sources as well as an assumed belief by male historians that they were not part of the development of Islamic civilizations. Looking past this bias, scholars may find many valuable sources to uncover the significant contributions of women to Islamic history, revealing their work alongside men throughout the centuries.

Women in Early Islam

Indeed, biographies of the wives of the Muslim prophet Muhammad are an excellent example of the significance of women in the development of Islamic history. Khadija, Muhammad's first wife, was the world's first Muslim. She embraced the belief in one sole deity and the message of the Qur'anic revelations in 610 C.E., even before Muhammad understood himself to be a prophet of God, making her the "mother of believers" in the Islamic faith. Her model as an ideal wife, mother, and companion has made Khadija the most revered woman in Islamic history.

Moreover, Muhammad's wives who survived him (after his death in 632 C.E.), such as 'A'isha and Umm Salama, became important transmitters of *hadith*, or traditions of the Prophet. The *hadith* stand, second only to the *Qur'an*, as authoritative texts for Muslims searching for answers to daily questions. Upon his death, the companions of Muhammad, including his surviving wives, compiled stories of his saying and actions, to assist Muslims in understanding how to live pious lives in the model of the Prophet. Because of their unique access to him, Muhammad's wives became particularly important figures in hadith transmission, solidifying their historic contribution to Islamic law.

Women such as Khadija and 'A'isha, as well as Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, became key public figures in the earliest years of Islamic history. However, within the context of Arabian society, patriarchal social structures and attitudes continued to regard women as subordinate to men in many realms of public life. For example, when 'A'isha challenged the fourth Caliph, 'Ali, for control of who would rule over the Islamic community at the Battle of the Camel in 656, the ensuing *fitna*, or crisis of Muslim fighting Muslim in warfare led to a tradition that women should not engage in politics. Although women continued to play supporting roles in subsequent wars, the notion that a woman could lead or advise an army was discredited after the Battle of the Camel.

Women in Later Islamic Empires

Nevertheless, women continued to play vital roles in political life in various Islamic empires as the centuries wore on. For instance, royal Ayyubid women in 13th century Egypt and the Levant were known as important public figures, using their wealth and position to endow schools, hospitals, and other charitable institutions. Moreover, wife of the Ayyubid sultan Salah al-Din, Shajarat al-Durr, became the co-founder of the Mamluk dynasty, albeit her reign as an independent queen was a short one. Ottoman women in the harem of the Sultan in Istanbul were also known for their political engagement. Even

from within the walls of their home, the women of the Ottoman harem chose to whom the sultan would marry and with whom he would have children, maintaining the dynasty for nearly 700 years.

Women also became important figures in the mystical movements of Islam, known collectively as Sufism. Indeed, one of the most important founders of Sufi thought was Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. This 8th century woman from Basra is largely recognized as the first person to express the now-standard Sufi belief in holy love. Her poems, dedicated to a mystical union with God, alongside her model as saintly person, have made her one of the most revered Sufis of history. Like al-'Adawiyya, countless women in Islamic history have turned to Sufism to give them spiritual strength, as well as religious community and authority. Pilgrimages to Sufi shrines became important journeys for women, particularly those unable to afford a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Women in Islamic Society

However, the majority of women in the era of the great Islamic empires lived their lives predominantly in the private sphere. Within the context of Islamic faith, women are esteemed as wives and mothers, and it was as such that historical sources present most women. Moreover, as the Muslims expanded out of Arabia, conquering societies with strong patriarchal restrictions on women's movement in public, such as the Safavid empire of Iran and the Byzantine empire of the Levant, notions of veiling and seclusion became more widespread among Muslims. Viewed as markers of high social class, these restrictions were most feasible for families that did not need women's labor or income.

In some eras of Islamic history, women's positions appear quite subordinate to men's. For instance, the Abbasid period saw the disappearance of women from public records and events, as the ideal of secluding women became more fashionable for men who wanted to demonstrate their power. Concubinage and expansive harems became the rule for political leaders, and women's social value was viewed as lower than that of men by many in power. Women were largely excluded from religious authority, despite the Qur'anic declaration that men and women were equal in the eyes of God and the role of the female Companions in transmitting the *hadith*. Patriarchal values became increasingly codified in the *sharia*, or Islamic law, as well as in the daily life of Muslim women.

Although they became less apparent in the historical record as the Islamic conquests spread, women in the Islamic empires continued to be vital members of society. Their responsibilities of bearing and raising children, providing food and clothing for their families, and instilling religious and social values within their households made them fundamental partners with men in the development of Islamic civilizations. Moreover, women in Islamic history gained strength from a legacy of strong and influential women in the founding years of their faith, as well as a tradition that, although culturally patriarchal, granted them ultimate equality in the eyes of the deity in which they believed.