



# Women

## Arab Women: An Introduction

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**W**henever mentioned in American textbooks, Arab women wear veils, share a husband with three other wives, and are uneducated, oppressed and kept out of sight. "The mosque and the veiled woman are symbols of Islamic culture," says a widely used American text in world history. Western books on the modern woman note that "even in Arab countries some women are coming out from behind the veil." The authors of such statements - and there are many - don't know Arab women, Arab history, or Arab customs.

Such characterizations ignore the fact that Arab countries are lands of contrasts - the very rich and the very poor, the very traditional and the very westernized, the educated and the uneducated. Many predominantly Muslim Arab countries have a considerable Christian minority. Thus any generalization about Arab women is faulty and misleading.

### A Historic Perspective

Women's Rights in Ancient Egypt. Throughout the world, contemporary women have encountered difficulties in obtaining equal rights and opportunities. In ancient Egypt, however, men and women were equal before the law. Herodotus wrote in 445 B.C., "The Egyptians have reversed the ordinary practice of mankind. The women go to the market while the men stay home and weave." Another historian observed, "The wife lords it over the husband and the men agree to obey the wife in everything!" Egyptian women ruled as pharaohs and were high priestesses and scribes; they paid taxes, bought land and were addressed as "citizeness." As a completely independent legal personality, the ancient Egyptian woman could execute a will, and retain her own name upon marriage. Moreover, all landed property descended through the female line, from mother to daughter.

Women's Rights in Islam. There is no basis in Islam for the subjugation of women or their relegation to a second-

ary role. Far in advance of women's emancipation in Europe, Islam made revolutionary changes in the lives of women in seventh century Arabia. Before Islam, Arabian women had very few rights and the birth of a girl was considered a calamity. Islam elevated the status of women. The Qur'an addressed men and women alike. All have the same religious obligations and duties. Muslim women have full legal rights. A Muslim woman keeps her name after marriage, may own and sell property in her own name, and is free to enter any contract, or sue others in court without her husband or father's approval.

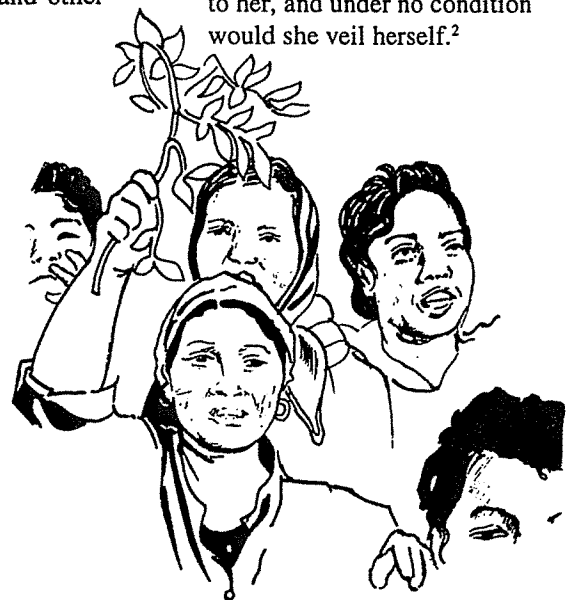
The Islamic marriage contract may be individually tailored. Muslim women write into it whatever provisions are desired regarding the possibility of divorce, property disputes, child custody, and other matters of concern before marriage. The Quran envisages a marriage based on affection, mutual trust and compassion. The Prophet Muhammad taught that the best among believers are those "who are kindest to their womenfolk."

In the first two centuries of the medieval Arab Empire, several prominent women such as Al-Khayzuran, Ulaya, Zubayda and Buran were influential

in state affairs. Many made generous donations to charitable and educational works - endowing schools and colleges. Others, like Zubayda, wife of caliph Harun Al-Rashid (786-908), constructed wells and cisterns for pilgrims along the 900-mile road between Baghdad and Makkah.

### The Veil and the Harem

The custom of veiling predated Islam in Arabia and the Mediterranean region, but it was by no means universal. Aisha Bint-Talhah, an eighth century noble beauty "of proud and lofty spirit," was married three times. When her second husband criticized her for not wearing a veil, she replied that the public had the right to see God's gift of beauty to her, and under no condition would she veil herself.<sup>2</sup>



The veil may have had its origin in the context of protection rather than subjugation of women, its purpose being to shield her from the prying and covetous gaze of the unworthy or to identify her as free-born. Only women of upper class families could wear the veil, a status symbol. Under Western influences, the veil was discarded by many Arab women during the first half of the twentieth century. It reappeared in a different form in the late 1960s. The new version, which is referred to as "Islamic dress," has gained wider acceptance among many educated and professional women. It consists of a long dress, or long skirt with a long-sleeved blouse, and a head cover. Today in the West, "the veil" is used to describe everything from modest scarf covering the hair, to full face veil. In discussion of this article of clothing, it would be helpful to define exactly what is being discussed. Nadia Hijab provides the following distinction between the old and the new veil:

"The difference . . . is not just one of form, but also of content. The black face and body veil that Shaarawi removed (Egyptian feminist of the 1920s) did symbolize seclusion, which in fact only the wealthy classes could afford to practice. The Islamic headdress on the other hand, is used by student at universities, . . . and by women who are out at work. It serves in this sense as a useful off-limits sign: it tells the public, particularly the male public, that although a woman has left the house to study or work, she is respectable and does not expect to be harassed. It is a useful mechanism for societies in transition."<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the history and significance of the veil, a final word comes from Lebanese poet, philosopher and artist Etel Adnan regarding her aunts of an earlier generation: "One of my aunts was veiled and one of them wasn't, but nobody knew who was more formi-

dable than the other."

"Harem" is derived from the Arabic word "Haraam" meaning forbidden. Composed of a family's womenfolk and dominated by the mother or grandmother of the eldest male, the harem was simply the women's quarters of a home. Even today we have a section of a house that is either at all times or on occasion as defined by the women of the household, "haraam" – meaning "off limits to the men."

### The March of Veiled Women and the Nationalists

The veil has always created a sense of sisterhood among its wearers. Early Arab feminists used it to their advantage. Still remembered is the 1919 "March of Veiled Women" in Cairo. Organized by Huda Shaarawi who later organized the powerful Egyptian Feminist Union, the veiled women protested British colonial rule, and successfully foiled a British plan to exile four Egyptian nationalist leaders, including Huda Shaarawi's husband. Four years later, Shaarawi along with Cessa Nebarawi made a public statement for the waiting press when they cast their face veils in the sea upon their return from an international conference in Rome. (They continued, however, to modestly cover their hair.)

Inspired by the struggle of veiled Egyptian women against Western colonialism, women in other Arab countries joined in the struggle for independence from colonial rule. Contemporaries of the early Egyptian feminists, Amelia Sakakini and Zalikha Ishaq Al-Sharabi in 1921 formed the first Palestinian Women's Federation and organized demonstrations against the Brit-

ish imposition of the mandate over Palestine. *The Battle of Algiers*, a film classic, revealed the role Algeria's women played in the war of independence. Jamila Buhayed, imprisoned and tortured as a young member of the underground, became the "Arab Joan of Arc" and a symbol of courage to millions of women in the Arab World. Somalia's Howarr Tacco, a woman of her people, was killed in an anti-colonial demonstration. In the capital, Mogadishu, there is a statue erected showing her death by an arrow shot from the bow of a Somali soldier in the service of colonialists. Over the past five decades, women have been active in the Palestinian resistance movement. Several hundred have been imprisoned, tortured, and killed by Israeli occupation forces since the uprising, "Intifada," in the Israeli occupied territories began in 1987.