THE NUBIANS OF WEST ASWAN

VILLAGE WOMEN IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

Anne M. Jennings

The Nubians of West Aswan

Village Women in the Midst of Change

Anne M. Jennings

Photograph credits: Ahmed Abdel Razzik for the photograph on page 41;
Anne M. Jennings for all others

The Nubians
of West Aswan

Women and Change in the Developing World

Series Editor
Mary H. Moran, Colgate University

To Hamdi, Ahlam, and Ahmed

*In the hope that their grandchildren
will find something of value here*

▲

Illustrations

▲

Acknowledgments

▲

Contents

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com

▲
Introduction

Islamic societies have been represented by many social scientists as classically male-dominant—that is, societies in which men have appropriated all powers of economic, political, and social decision-making. This has occurred, they contend, within the context of the public/private dichotomy used by many anthropologists to characterize Muslim culture. According to this model, Muslim women pursue domestic matters that keep them in or near the home (the so-called private sphere), whereas Muslim men concern themselves with the political and economic life of the community (the so-called public sphere). Women's decisionmaking is, ideologically, as circumscribed as they themselves are and affects only the private sector of society. Men's decisions, on the other hand, because they affect the public sector, ramify throughout the entire society.

This model of asymmetrical access to economic, political, and social decisionmaking powers in Islamic society is based, I believe, upon incomplete ethnographic information. Because women are, in many places, physically constrained, it has been assumed that their ability to influence others is equally constrained. Because they may be legally and formally subordinate to males, the model presumes women's social, economic, and political disenfranchisement as well. While it is true that men are accorded formal positions of authority and status within Muslim societies, it is also true that women possess informal means by which they can effectively influence the behavior of others. It is only recently, however, that social scientists have begun to focus upon the realities of Muslim women's lives.

The popular press in the United States often presents a picture of the status of women in Muslim society very similar to the one presented by Cherry and Charles Lindholm in 1980:

> Muslim society considers women naturally inferior in intelligence and ability—childlike, incapable of discernment, incompetent to

1

testify in court, prey to whims and fancies. In tribal areas, women are prohibited from inheritance . . . and in marriage they are purchased from their fathers like a commodity. (Lindholm 1980: 46)

Such statements are generally a result of the fact that the ordinary U.S. citizen has had little exposure to information about Muslim societies, and what she or he has been exposed to is mainly ideology rather than reality. As a graduate student at the University of California, already very interested in gender studies, I read such statements in both the popular press and the anthropological literature, and began to wonder how it was that women could live under such adverse conditions. I looked in vain for any account of the benefits women must receive for helping to maintain a system that was apparently so detrimental to their well-being, and decided to do field research in an Islamic society in order to find out. My research among the people of Nubia was an attempt to see beyond the ideology of male dominance, and to discover what living as a Muslim woman really entails.

The task was daunting, as women in the Nubian community I studied are in fact formally subordinate to men. Women's subordination is mandated by Islam in certain of its legal and religious texts, and by a complex of traditional values that are regarded as Islamic by the villagers. This meant that I, as a female researcher who was not seeking to challenge Nubian views of Islam, had to accept the restrictions placed upon my behavior—restrictions that my informants believed were Islamic.

These restrictions are rooted in two traditional institutions. The first is the considerable paternalism toward women that can be found in the Islamic religion itself. Although the Prophet decreed that men and women are equal in faith, the more often quoted quranic passage appoints men as "guardians over women, because of that in respect of which Allah has made some of them excel others, and because the men spend of their wealth" (Surah 4, verse 35). Intrinsic to this sacred injunction is the obligation placed upon men to take care of women, and upon women to obey men. The need to protect women, some have argued, stems from their valuable and important positions as wives and mothers (various informants, personal communication); others state that women must be constrained because they are weak-minded and without moral sense (Maher 1978; Mohsen 1967). A third hypothesis, advanced by Mernissi (1987), states that the institutions that restrict women's behavior are strategies for containing the powerful sexuality of women, which if left

uncontrolled would deflect men from their higher goal: total involve-
ment with God. Whatever the rationale, the injunction is met by plac-
ing women under male guardianship throughout their lives. In most
Muslim societies, a woman remains a member of her father's lineage
even after marriage, owing him ultimate obedience. This is why it is
her kinsmen who take responsibility for her, regardless of her mari-
tal status. When her father dies, the duty of protecting and control-
ling her falls primarily to her brothers, although her husband is
expected to share part of this obligation.

In addition to the paternalistic bias of religious doctrine, the
concept of honor shapes male/female relationships, encouraging
male dominance in many Muslim societies. Male honor

> is realized critically and importantly through the chaste and dis-
> creet sexual behavior of womenfolk in a particular man's life: pre-
> marital chastity of the daughter and sister, fidelity of the wife, and
> continence of the widowed and divorced daughter or sister. These
> are basic principles upon which a family's reputation and status in
> the community depend. (Youssef 1978: 77)

This combination of the need to protect and provide for female kin,
as stipulated by the Quran, and the desire to preserve personal and
family honor has led to the consolidation of control over women
almost exclusively by male members of the kin group, and the per-
petuation of the status of women as economic dependents (Youssef
1978). In addition, the Quran also maintains the subordinate legal
status of women to men by sanctioning polygyny but not polyandry,
by stipulating that females may inherit only half of what males may
inherit, and by giving lesser weight to women's testimony in a court
of law.

A woman's status as a jural minor and her economic dependen-
cy make it appear almost impossible, in many cases, for her to have
any freedom of choice regarding basic life decisions. Her parents
decide whether and for how long she may go to school, and they also
arrange her first (and sometimes subsequent) marriage; ideological-
ly, her husband can prevent her from going out of the house, from
working for wages, and from keeping or spending what money she
does earn. A woman can be threatened with repudiation or with her
husband's marrying a second wife if she is disobedient or if she does
not bear sons.

It cannot be denied that these are conditions that adversely
affect women's lives, and can be formidable obstacles to overcome
when used against them. But the "plight of the Muslim woman"

seems to be the only aspect of her life shown to us in the West, and because of this, we tend to think of her as hopelessly oppressed. Rarely do we learn of the Islamic laws that support women's rights: inheritance and property rights, a dowry system that represents a source of financial security for the woman, and custody of children for a certain amount of time upon divorce (Fluehr-Lobban 1993)— all of which are reportedly improvements over pre-Islamic conditions for women in some societies. In reality, women manage household affairs, enjoy respect in everyday life, and have historically been public agitators for social change and national liberation movements (Ahmed 1992; Fluehr-Lobban 1987). Modern laws guarantee women the right to vote, equal rights to education, and equal pay for comparable work in several Islamic countries. My argument is that, contrary to the popular model of the oppressed Muslim woman, and in spite of the very real obstacles outlined above, Muslim women are not the passive tools of men, obediently enduring ignorance and confinement. Instead, they are themselves actors, concerned with influence, persuasion, and the negotiation of social order to their own advantage (Nelson 1974; Morsy 1978; Rosaldo 1980). Women throughout the Islamic world lead productive and rewarding lives; while most work very hard, they appear to be no more oppressed than are women in non-Muslim societies. Their subordination to the dictates of a patriarchal system just takes a different form.

The image of women in Islamic society is a subject that has captured the imagination of Western travelers for centuries (Burton 1855, 1964; Doughty 1953), but few anthropologists have concerned themselves with the empirical reality of women's status until recently. The most commonly accepted anthropological model of Islamic society is that it is one of sharply divided sexual domains: the private or domestic sphere, and the public or extradomestic sphere (Bourdieu 1973; Cunnison 1966; Geertz 1979; Rosen 1978; Saunders 1980; Tapper 1978). The private sphere is considered the woman's domain and encompasses the house and garden. It is associated with intimate human relationships, the love of close kin, and domestic pursuits. The public sphere is associated with all that happens outside of the home, in the marketplace and the mosque. It is the area of business and political activity, social relationships with nonkin, and is the male domain (Deaver 1980; Makhlouf 1979; Nelson 1974).

Because of the dichotomy between male and female spheres, male anthropologists have found it difficult to collect firsthand data concerning the life of the Muslim woman, and have been dependent

upon information given them by the males of that society. Thus, most descriptions of the status of Muslim women by male investigators have been presented in terms of idealized behavior norms (Zeid 1966; Bourdieu 1966; Rosenfeld 1960). Men have been described as active agents of the political life of the community, making the major decisions that affect the whole society, whereas women have been depicted as passive: While women have been accorded respect within their own domain, this very restriction to the women's sphere was said to prevent them from affecting the wider community (Douglas 1970; Fox 1969; Maher 1974; Vinogradov 1974).

Although most Islamic societies are characterized by separate gender domains, this model has been shown in recent years to be oversimplified. In addition, it has led to unfortunate characterizations of the male and female domains in value-laden terms. Several investigators described the public sphere, prohibited to women, as broad and expansive, while the private sphere, which is closed to men, was described as narrow and restrictive (Nelson 1974). Domestic duties were considered to be of less importance than public duties; female activities and pursuits, and even females themselves, were said to be devalued in Islamic society (Asad 1970; Antoun 1968; Dwyer 1978; Mohsen 1967).

Others, concerned with the subject of the status of women in cross-cultural context, have referred to these characterizations in their models. Michelle Rosaldo (1974) and Sherry Ortner (1974), building, in part, upon the literature about Muslim societies, maintained that women were devalued because of the universal division of societies into public and private realms. These realms are themselves hierarchically placed: "The family (and hence women) represents lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns, as opposed to interfamilial relations representing higher-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concerns" (Ortner 1974: 79), resulting ultimately in lowered social status for women. Peggy Sanday (1974) and Karen Sacks (1974) argued that women can achieve full social equality only when they can participate in labor in the public domain, an analysis that implies that the status of Muslim women is low because of the dichotomy that prevents them from acting in the more highly valued arena.

Such models have been challenged by female scholars who have actually done fieldwork in Muslim societies. These investigators contend that popular characterizations of Muslim women contain inaccuracies about such subjects as veiling, polygyny, and women's work inside and outside of the home. In addition, there has been a great

deal of discussion in the literature concerning the appropriateness and accuracy of the use of the terms "public" and "private" as descriptions or characterizations of gender domains (Ahmed 1992; Altorki 1977; Davis 1983; Joseph 1978; Makhlouf 1979; Mukhopadhyay and Higgens 1988; Wright 1981).

Field-workers who have lived in Islamic countries emphasize that there is no "typical" Muslim society in which it is possible to observe "the" status of women. Anthropologists who have been able to penetrate the veneer of ideology report a wide variety of gender role behaviors in the Islamic world. The customs of seclusion and veiling, which were practiced in the Middle East and parts of Europe before the advent of Islam, are examples of this. The seclusion of women, although an ideal in the Muslim world, is chiefly dependent upon social class and wealth; even within the same society, class and geographical distinctions can be observed. In Morocco, for example, total seclusion is practiced mainly by wealthy townspeople (Maher 1974). The man who wants to keep his wife totally secluded must hire someone else to do the shopping and other outside activities that he has no time to do himself. Villagers are generally too poor to do this and need the help of their wives in the fields, anyway. Nomadic women in Morocco, on the other hand, like their counterparts in other areas of the Muslim world, are neither secluded nor veiled; and while the townswoman who must venture out-of-doors loses some status because of this, most female nomads do not (Beck 1978; Cole 1975; Cunnison 1966; Mohsen 1967). The veil is used to provide a sense of seclusion when a woman must leave her home for some reason. The nomad camp, filled only with family members, is, ideologically, considered still "home" for the woman. The men she encounters there are all relatives, thus she need not veil herself from them. The same sense of being among family can also be found in many small villages, so a village woman need not always veil herself there, either. The towns and cities, on the other hand, are filled with strangers, against whom a woman should take appropriate precautions.

The contemporary veiling of young, mostly lower-middle-class women, however, is a more recent phenomenon with more complex behavioral meanings and several explanations. Recent studies have indicated that it can be explained as an expression of anti-Western sentiment, as a revival of cultural-religious heritage and genuine religious feeling, as a political symbol of Islamic activism, or as a means of protection in the urban jungle (El Guindi 1981; Fluehr-Lobban