



WOMEN III. IN SHI'ISM

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In theory, Shi'ism has a more favorable attitude towards women than Sunni Islam. These favorable differences are largely annulled, however, by some specific Shi'ite practices as well as the social realities of women's lives in Shi'ite communities. Overall, the social position of Shi'ite women throughout the centuries has been more affected by local and cultural factors, rather than religious ones. In modern times, the social role of women has been one of the main points of dispute between Islamic conservatives and modernists.

(1) *Women in Shi'ite thought.* The Qur'ān can be interpreted as saying that men and women are spiritually equal, and this aspect has been emphasized by modernist Shi'ite scholars. Women have a more favorable position in Shi'ite than in Sunni theology and law, mainly owing to the circumstances of Shi'ite history. In addition to the figures of the Prophet Moḥammad and the twelve Shi'ite Imams, there is also the figure of *Fāṭema*, the daughter of the Prophet, wife of the first Imam, and progenitor of the other Imams, completing the pleroma of the Fourteen Immaculates (*čahārdah ma'šum*) in Shi'ite mystical philosophy. As a member of this pleroma, Fāṭema has a redemptive role on the Day of Judgment (Ayoub, p. 19), and women in particular call on her in this capacity.

The presence of a female figure among the Fourteen Immaculates added an



element of the “sacred feminine” to Shi’ite cosmology that is not present in its Sunni counterpart and has been compared to the place of Mary in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity (Thurkill). Indeed, Fāṭema has even acquired some of Mary’s titles, such as “virgin” (*baṭul*) and perhaps even “mother of her father” (*omm abihā*). Almost as important for women is the figure of [Zaynab](#), the sister of Imam Ḥosayn, who, after the events at Karbalā’, stood defiantly before the Omayyad authorities and managed to save the life of her nephew ‘Ali Zayn-al-‘Ābedin and thus preserve the line of Imams. Their actions have provided role models and important precedents for Shi’ite law. For example, Fāṭema’s insistence on her right of inheriting the spoils of Ḳaybar and the land of Fadak from her father in the face of opposition from the caliph Abū Bakr led to improved inheritance rights for women in Shi’ite Islamic law.

(2) *Women in Shi’ite Law*. Whatever advantages may have been given to women in Shi’ite thought were largely removed in practice in the patriarchal societies of the Middle East. The men who carried out the process of deriving the law (*šari’a*) created norms that put Shi’ite women in much the same subordinate social position as Sunni women. The most conservative interpretations of Shi’ite law regards women’s role as being essentially within the house as a domestic supervisor, to provide their husbands with sexual pleasure, to bring up children, and to keep away from men other than close relatives; women are regarded as weak, of poor judgment, not worth any substantial education, too emotional to be trusted with important decisions, and liable, if unveiled, to lead men astray by arousing sexual desires (Majlisi, p. 78; see also ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb, *Nahj al-balāgha* I, p. 129).

Women are of course subject to all of the general obligations of Muslims, although some laws and rituals can only be performed with the husband’s permission (see for example Mofid, pp. 30-31 on fasting and payment of *ḍakāt* and *ṣadaqa*). To detail all differences between the laws for men and those for women or among the various Shi’ite authorities of the past, would extend beyond the scope of this article. The following is just a sample of those laws that are specific to women as described by Shaikh Mofid (q.v.) in *Aḥkām al-nesā’*.

Women are exhorted to dress and behave modestly, to lower their gaze in the presence of unrelated males, and not to speak to anyone other than their husbands or close relatives, except in a few circumstances (Mofid, pp. 55-58). Sunni and Shi’ite law regarding [marriage](#) and [divorce](#) are generally similar and depend mainly on Koranic injunctions. Shi’ite legal text-books always



contain a large section on menstruation since menstrual blood is ritually polluting. The most important regulations are that menstruating women cannot perform the *ṣalāt* prayer, fast or perform the pilgrimage rites, should not enter a mosque or touch a Qur'ān and should not have sexual intercourse with their husbands (Mofid, pp. 18-20). A woman may not go out of the house without her husband's permission (idem, p. 38) or travel without her husband or a close male relative (idem, p. 29). Even a woman learning to read and write was considered reprehensible in classical texts (idem, p. 56).

With regard to **inheritance**, in general women receive half of what men receive. However, Shi'ite law is considerably more favorable to women than Sunni law since sisters, daughters, and maternal relatives and their descendants (cognates) are equally entitled to inherit as brothers, sons, and paternal relatives (agnates). The testimony of a woman is worth half that of a man (and not accepted at all on certain matters), and this 1:2 ratio also applies to such things as blood money (*diya*) (Mofid, pp. 51-53). (For more on women in Shi'ite law, see Ferdows; Madelung.)

There has been considerable discussion among Shi'ites concerning whether women can become *mojtaheds* or not. Most authorities say that they cannot but, in recent times, one woman in Isfahan, Bānu Noṣrat Begom Amin (d. 1982), claimed the rank of *mojtahed* and held *ejāzas*. However, her rank was never fully accepted by many of the '*olamā*'. It is suggested that women may achieve the status of *mojtahed*, in the sense of being able to follow their own independent judgment and not practice *taqlid*, but they cannot act as *marja' al-taqlid* (Fischer, pp. 162-63, 279 n. 18). Zohra Şefati is a current teacher in Qom and is widely considered a *mojtaheda* (Internet 1). Another area where there is considerable controversy, this time between Sunnis and Shi'a, is over the question of the permissibility of the Shi'ite institution of temporary marriage, which Sunnis (and many Shi'ite Iranians) regard as little more than legalized prostitution (see **MOT'A**).

(3) *Lives of Shi'ite women*. Despite the above theoretical considerations, the actual lives of Shi'ite women are governed by the extent that these Shi'ite legal stipulations are balanced by national laws, as well as many local and cultural factors. Many Shi'ite women still live in traditional communities where their theoretical rights in Islamic law are negated by their inability to exercise these rights effectively in a male-dominated religion and society; these women's lives are largely confined to the home. In more modern societies, national laws may negate some aspects of religious law. In Persia, for example, the Family



Protection Law of 1967 led to substantial improvements in the rights of women in such matters as marriage, divorce, and custody of children. These reforms were, however, abolished in the 1979 Revolution, although some elements were later brought back (Paidar, pp. 271-77). Nevertheless, middle-class urban women in Persia today are able to obtain an education and go out to work, leading to a considerably larger social role. Even in traditional communities, however, one can find examples, especially in tribal and village societies, of women working alongside men, unveiled and with great social freedoms.

In terms of religious activities, women largely live in their own sphere, with their own *rawza-kvānis* and *sofras*; women may even be *rawza-kvāns* and perform clerical functions (Kamalkhani, pp. 12-33, 47-70). Each national community has its own distinctive women's religious activities (on Persia, see Kamalkhani; on Iraq, see Fernea and Bezirgan; on Lebanon, see Deeb, 2006). In Persia, an attempt has been made to force a social segregation on women, by having women-only areas in all public places, especially mosques, and by segregating transport. There has been a considerable resistance among Persian women to this trend.

(4) *Women as ideological battleground.* Probably no area of the Islamic world is more of a battleground between the modernists and traditionalists than the social role of women and issues such as veiling. In the 1970s and 1980s, intellectuals such as 'Ali Šari'ati were formulating new ways for women to be both Islamic and modern. Fāṭema and Zaynab in particular served important functions as role models for women during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (see Šari'ati) and in present-day Lebanon (see Deeb, 2009). In the last few decades among Islamicists there are, on the one hand, the traditionalists (such as Khomeini and Kāmene'i), who maintain a conservative position on all aspects of women's lives, along with the neo-traditionalists (such as Moṭahhari), who maintain the same position but use modern and scientific rhetoric; and on the other hand, the modernists (such as Soruš), who are actively trying to adapt the traditional position to modern realities (Mir-Hosseini).

Today there is a lively debate about the social position of women, engaging with the discourses of Shi'ism, modernism and feminism (see Azari; Mir-Hosseini; Nashat; Najmabadi). While older women in Persia use the *čādor*, younger women are now using smarter and more practical alternatives, such as headscarves, wimples, coats, and tunics, and many are flouting the spirit, if not the letter, of Islamic law. Just as in the 1970s, it was debatable whether



women were wearing the *čādor* as a symbol of their Islamicization or as a symbol of their dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime, so to can it be debated today whether young women are pushing the boundaries of the dress code as a symbol of their secularization or as a symbol of their dissatisfaction with the political regime. In both cases the answer is probably a mixture of the two motives.

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