



Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate

By Leila Ahmed

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Are Islamic societies inherently oppressive to women? Is the trend among Islamic women to appear once again in veils and other traditional clothing a symbol of regression or an effort to return to a “pure” Islam that was just and fair to both sexes? In this book Leila Ahmed adds a new perspective to the current debate about women and Islam by exploring its historical roots, tracing the developments in Islamic discourses on women and gender from the ancient world to the present.

In order to distinguish what was distinctive about the earliest Islamic doctrine on women, Ahmed first describes the gender systems in place in the Middle East before the rise of Islam. She then focuses on those Arab societies that played a key role in elaborating the dominant Islamic discourses about women and gender: Arabia during the period in which Islam was founded; Iraq during the classical age, when the prescriptive core of legal and religious discourse on women was formulated; and Egypt during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when exposure to Western societies led to dramatic social change and to the emergence of new discourses on women. Throughout, Ahmed not only considers the Islamic texts in which central ideologies about women and gender developed or were debated but also places this discourse in its social and historical context. Her book is thus a fascinating survey of Islamic debates and ideologies about women and the historical circumstances of their position in society, the first such discussion using the analytic tools of contemporary gender studies.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This survey examines the historical roots and contemporary condition of Islamic discourse on gender.
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Review

""A pathbreaking survey of Islamic discourse."-"Publishers Weekly""

""A meticulous historical analysis of the discourses on women and society in Islamic countries."-"Ethnic and Racial Studies"

""A signal contribution to the question of Islam and gender as well as a solid overview of the history of gender in the region."-Judith Tucker

"This thoughtful and thought-provoking book should be required reading for anyone who is interested in the complexity of women's experience."-Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

""Refreshingly balanced and brilliantly insightful, this book is a major scholarly contribution to the history of women in Islam. It is must reading for any social science or humanities course on the Middle East or Islam." -- Eliz Sanasarian "International Journal of Middle East Studies"

""This book stands out as particularly original, insightful and sensitive. Concentrating on one of the nearly taboo topics of Islam, its treatment of women, the author examines the patrilineal traditions in the Middle East that preceded Islam and discusses objectively the ways in which Islam both improved and curtailed the freedoms of women in its earliest days. . . . A highly original and important book."-"Foreign Affairs"

""ÁAhmed" ably portrays the circumstances of women from the medieval period into modern times by synthesizing various materials. The outcome will allow the general reader a far richer notion of women's society as a whole." -- Sherifa Zuhur "Middle East Journal"

""ÁAn" exemplary case of in-depth historical survey. . . . Women's studies in general and Middle Eastern studies in particular are much enriched by Áthis" work, which should be included in the readings of all who wish to gain a sound understanding of Muslim women and politics in the Middle East." -- Haleh Afshar "Third World Quarterly"

""I would not hesitate to recommend this book as a good source of information."

""This is an important book that deserves to be recieved beyond its primary audience of feminist readers."-Lamin Sanneh, D. Willis James, "Christian Century""

""An inspiring tour de force. . . . This courageous and provocative study is a formidable historiographical milestone on whose strengths we must learn to build."

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""This is a book that had to be written. This is a book that must be read. No other general survey of women and gender in Islam exists. I am deeply grateful to Leila Ahmed for giving us this book."-Catharine R. Stimpson

""[Ahmed] ably portrays the circumstances of women from the medieval period into modern times by synthesizing various materials. The outcome will allow the general reader a far richer notion of women's society as a whole."

""Ahmed's book is a significant contribution. . . . Its ambitious scope, its lucidity, and its committed vision all make it a work that will be stimulating and informative for specialists, students, and general readers alike."-Barbara D. Metcalf, "Middle Eastern Studies"

""[An] exemplary case of in-depth historical survey. . . . Women's studies in general and Middle Eastern studies in particular are much enriched by [this] work, which should be included in the readings of all who wish to gain a sound understanding of Muslim women and politics in the Middle East."

""A masterful discussion of women's condition in the Muslim Middle East. She highlights the crucial historical arguments over women by skillfully incorporating excellent secondary sources on the early period and provides her own interpretations of certain key primary sources later on. . . . An important contribution."

""A provocative exploration . . . Leila Ahmed provides a sensitive, phenomenological rethinking of this timely subject. . . . this perceptive book marks a step toward addressing the deficiency . . . of objectively valid studies of Arab women."-Kevin F. Dwyer, "Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science""

""Clearly one of the book's enduring strengths is Leila Ahmed's genuine, as opposed to academic, concern (a distinction often lost on writers of Islam) that Muslim women, for too long the subject of inflated homilies or hollow gender confrontations, strike up their own debate--on grounds designed to suit rather than stifle."

""A remarkable "tour de force," conceived, presented, analyzed, and articulated with unusual clarity. . . . An impressive social history of mores and attitudes toward women. . . . Because of the book's exceptional breadth and depth of discussion, I enthusiastically endorse Leila Ahmed's "Women and Gender in Islam" as "a classroom text, as a reference work, and as an exemplar of what feminist cultural history can be."

""While providing a wonderfully comprehensive survey of her subject, [Ahmed] shows how Western chauvinism has harshly - and unfairly - judged women's status in Islamic societies. She exposes this bias with force and eloquence and, in the process, makes a brilliant case for the liberation of Islamic women on their own terms and in their own time, free from Western constructs or dictates."-Susan E. Davis, "New Directions for Women"

""With impressive scholarship, lucid style and a theoretical approach elegantly in command of both feminist and Islamic perspectives, Leila Ahmed . . . helps unravel the mysteries of gender and women in Islam. . . . The passion Ahmed feels for the plight of Middle Eastern women is matched only by her commitment to a style of scholarship that is parsimonious, sober, rigorous and dispassionate. . . . The thematically rich arguments of her book are centered on debunking the Islamic and colonialist myths about Muslim women, as well as correcting what she feels are erroneous assumptions made by some Western feminists."

From the Back Cover

In this book Leila Ahmed adds a new perspective to the current debate about women and Islam by exploring its historical roots, tracing the developments in Islamic discourses on women and gender from the ancient world to the present.

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