**Background Reading: What Roles did Women Play in the Development of Islam?**

In Arabia, women did not traditionally have property rights or inheritance rights. Instead women were viewed as property themselves - of men such as a father or husband. If a man divorced a woman, for example, he would keep her dowry (the money and property from her father that she brought with her into the marriage). Lower status for women eventually led to a culture in which baby girls were seen as less valuable than baby boys. Tragically this often led to female infanticide, the killing of an unwanted baby girl.

The Qur’an, the sacred book of Islam, established between 651 and 652, changed much of this. While women were still under the direction and control of men, they began to be treated with more respect, had some legal rights, and were considered equal before Allah. Now if a man divorced his wife, he would have to return her dowry to her. Infanticide was strictly forbidden and women gained more influence within the home. In early Islamic society, women sometimes had influence outside the home as well. Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife, had been a successful businesswoman, for example. Muhammad’s kind treatment of his wives served as an example that may have improved the lives of Muslim women.

For the most part, however, the Qur’an reinforced a society where males dominated. Men were permitted to have as many as four wives, as long as they were able to support them and treated them equally. Women, on the other hand, had to be faithful to one man. This was important because in this society land was passed through the males, and the identity of a boy’s father couldn’t be questioned. Legally, women were not treated equally. For example a woman’s testimony in court was not given the same weight as a man’s. Restrictions for women even included what they wore - such as being veiled in public. Long before Muhammad, women in Mesopotamia and Persia covered their faces as a sign of modesty. They were also accompanied by a servant or chaperone outside the home so as not to attract the attention of men from other families. When Muslim Arabs conquered this region, Islamic society adopted the practice.

Over time, Islamic society became more structured and more male-controlled. A woman’s primary role was to be loyal to and care for her husband and family. However, women were highly protected, and in some ways more respected, under the Qur’an than they previously had been.

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