Carolyn Moore
Women in the Qur'an

For this paper, I chose to focus on women in the Qur'an. This topic is one of controversy, as there is a Western perception that Islam is a sexist religion. People arrive to this conclusion because of the harsh inequality of men and women in certain Muslim-dominant regions of the world; most namely, Saudi Arabia. Many who are uninformed may see the veil as oppressive, polygamy as unjust, or some of the Qur'anic passages to be misogynistic. In this paper I will argue that the Qur'an actually raised the status of women by equalizing the genders. I will use specific Qur'anic verses to support my argument.

The view of all people and genders as equal can be seen from the very beginnings of man in the Garden of Eden. In the Qur'an, both Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit that Satan tempts them with (The Qur'an, Al-A'Rāf 7.19-22). This starkly contrasts the Biblical story, which places blame upon Eve. In the Qur'an, God mercifully forgives them, and people are seen as inherently good rather than born with original sin (Class Lecture, 2/7/17). This is a case where the Qur'anic treatment of women surpasses the Bible's—a reality often overlooked in Christian-dominant societies.

One specific verse which points to the equality of all people is Al-Hurjurāt, verse 13. The interpretation in English goes as follows:

O people! We have created all of you out of male and female, and we have made you into different nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him, not one belonging to this or that race or nation

I point to this verse for a number of reasons. Firstly, I believe that God referring to Himself as "We" can be interpreted as His being a spirit without gender barriers. This, in its own

right, is somewhat equalizing as God is normally referred to with masculine pronouns. In addition, the verse itself points to the humanity of all people, regardless of sex or race.

This is not to say that the Qur'an is completely modernized. As Sumbul Ali-Karamali writes, "The Qur'an recognizes the economic and social status of men was superior in the seventh century to the status of women, but it does not treat men as the superior sex in terms of humanity or ability" (Ali- Karamali, 125). There are many verses which refer to women as property and condemns women more severely than men for certain sins such as "indecency" (adultery). It is important to consider context when framing these verses, as even those that seem sexist improved the status of women at the time the Qur'an was written.

Overall, the introduction of Islam first to Mecca and Arabia and then to the rest of the Middle-East was a breakthrough for the equal treatment of all people and genders. The common Western perception that Islam is sexist is flawed as seen in the verses of Qur'an—many of which favor the equal treatment of women more explicitly than Biblical verses.

Carolyn Moore
Saudi Women and Social Media

For many non-secular societies, ones' identity and religion are tied closely together. In Saudi Arabia, the founding place of Islam, this is certainly true. The ideals of the Islam as well as Islamic law (Shari'a) reign supreme in Saudi Arabia— one section of which mandates all citizens be Muslim (International Religious Freedom Report, 2004). Additionally, this religiously-influenced government demands the complete segregation of genders in daily life other than interaction with family members. Consequently, a patriarchy developed within this segregated society which can be measured through the lack of equal educational and occupational opportunities for women. In "Veiling and Blogging: Social Media as Sites of Identity Negotiation and Expression among Saudi Women" by Hala Guta and Magdalena Karolak, we gain insight into the lives of seven young Saudi women who have used social media in order to express themselves in a country which does not allow them to do so in the public sphere.

The authors collected three categories of data throughout their in-depth interviewing process. First, they inquired about the societal rules and boundaries which govern the daily lives of women in Saudi Arabia. One woman explained that by discussing controversial issues publicly she not only faces rejection on the individual level, but she also brings shame to her entire family. Because identity is formed by family and adherence to religious and societal norms, these women must constantly self-censor in public. In order to avoid this confrontation, they often use anonymous Twitter and Facebook profiles to express their socially unacceptable opinions.

The second series of questions focused on how they use the internet to work around these societal rules. Most of the women had multiple accounts on each social media site so that they

were able to conceal their identities on one (or many) of them. None of the seven women used a real photo of themselves on their private profiles, and all used nicknames or modified family names. Once the identities of these women were concealed, they are able to navigate the internet freely—in some cases even making male friends for the first time. In this way, the protection of the internet enabled them to safely fight against their patriarchal society.

Finally, the authors inquired whether or not social media has had any impact on societal change at large in Saudi Arabia. The women were adamant that the ability to make friends with (and speak about) the opposite sex has been an important advantage of using social media. One of the participants even mentioned that her male cousin met a woman through Facebook who he later married instead of partaking in a traditional arranged marriage. The most significant impact that social media has had on social change, however, is that it is enabling women to speak their minds somewhat publically for the first time without fear. All of these breaks from the norm are evidence of social progress being made through social media use.

It is important to note that the domination of men in religious settings is not unique to Islam in Saudi Arabia. Chapter 11 of "Religion in Sociological Perspective" by David Yamane and Keith Roberts outlines how US religions also operate under a hierarchy of religious power based on gender. The authors detail how women have been "excluded from positions of power," in most religious institutions, and how religions often "stigmatize women and legitimize male dominance" (Roberts & Yamane, 2016). For Christian women in the US, this often looks like exclusion from ordination or other higher religious positions in the church. In Saudi Arabia, however, this religiously-based exclusion expands to include basic democratic freedoms and rights (such as the right to drive or show skin in public). The chapter mentioned women's groups as resources for female empowerment within Christian communities. In the same way

that American women turn to each other for support in finding their place within their religious communities, many Saudi women have turned to social media as a site for navigating their own identities.

It is clear from the chapter and the article that, in many cases, men and women are not on equal footing in their religious communities. Just as women's groups have become a resource for Christian women in the US, social media has become a resource for Saudi women to navigate their identities and express themselves without fear of rejection. It is clear that while there is still much to be done in terms of liberating Saudi women from an oppressive society, some positive change has come about with the help of social media.

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