

THE ROLE OF LOWER INCOME WOMEN IN THE FORMATION OF EARLY ISLAMIC SOCIETY (632-750 CE)

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This project has focused on the earliest period of Islamic history due to the absence of pre existing research on the area. Gaps in primary sources have however meant a reliance on later sources to shed light on earlier periods.

To many in the West, the concept of women having rights over their own bodies, and a say in what happens to them is a modern feminist concept. However, the influence of women's voices concerning their reproductive rights was one of the areas in which they had the largest influence, both in terms of direct involvement in law creation, as well as the advent of Islam representing new laws that favored their rights. The banning of female infanticide and the recognition of women's full personhood under Islam was a huge leap forwards for women, but the direct influence they had came around providing knowledge and guidance on the female body. Men at the time had little understanding of the female anatomy, and therefore left it to trusted women in the community to legislate and explain women's bodily circumstances, such as the length of time necessary for a women to remain single after her husband passed and her ability to her pregnant following this. At the time, this was seen as a huge amount of trust being put in women, being directly responsible for ensuring the integrity of the family line



Childbirth as portrayed in Zenanname (Book of Women)

Courtesans were a particular group of female slaves who were trained as entertainers. Whilst their presence flourished later on in Islamic history, they still remained present earlier on, although their social prominence was not as strong. Courtesanship was quite unique in its ability to give women the room to gain better conditions for themselves, almost solely based on their abilities, and they often ended up being highly educated.



Famous courtesan Mah Laqa Bai dancing in the court of Raja Rao Rambha Bahadur – courtesans have played a prominent role in many cultures throughout history

Whilst it is difficult to apply the modern concept of social mobility to a historical period, the existence of both courtesans and concubines often presented the best opportunity for lower income women to have slightly more control over their own future. Whilst still a form of slavery, women could expect to be bought by 'better' masters by furthering their skills, and if they conceived children, those children would be free, and could eventually lead to their own freedoms. In later periods of Islamic history, the majority of leaders were in fact the children of concubines.



'Hagar and Ishmael' – This famous painting depicts Hagar, concubine of Abraham and Ishmael, the first born son of Abraham, conceived with Hagar