Patriarchy and Islam

Gema Martín Muñoz. Professor of Sociology of the Arab and Islamic World, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

The Mediterranean in addition to being a crossroads of civilizations and cradle of multiple events has also been a space embracing patriarchal societies and the place chosen by the One God to manifest himself in his three consecutive versions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Linked to this, and as the 14th century North African protosociologist Ibn Jaldun first observed, the Mediterranean basin has equally been the setting of the dialectic between the tribe and the city, identified respectively with two different rival forms of life: the nomad-rural (umran al-badawa) and the urban-sedentary (umran el-hadara).

All these elements (religion, patriarchy, tribe, city) and their interaction have contributed to determining the dominant family order in the Mediterranean, the basic cell of socialization of the patriarchal structure between men and women from a very early age. And this should help us understand that it is basically social, economic, political factors which have influenced and determined patriarchal family relations, and that, moreover, such a framework is not the exclusive preserve of Muslim societies but rather the anthropological evidence shows that this has been the predominant social form for millennia throughout the Mediterranean area.¹

In fact, the patriarchal order prevailing in the region preceded the birth of Islam, and even this, in accordance with what is established in the Koran, introduced elements that weakened the patriarchy as well as a social citizen model aimed at destroying the tribe which, however, Islamized societies eluded in many ways.

The Koran pays great attention to individual and family relations which must govern all the members of the umma (extraterritorial community formed by all Muslims) establishing a close link between religion, family and community as basic pillars of social cohesion.

The existence of a text that, while creating a new religious creed, legislates and regulates the society that adopts it, has offered the fundamentalists of all eras the foundation on which to base themselves to reject social transformations and consecrate the immobility of the personal status of women, giving rise to the controversy about the true role that the sacred text concedes to women and is the object of an acute controversy in the Muslim world, particularly current today.

For some, those Koran suras in which the will to correct abuses which women were subjected to in pre-Islamic society is expressed show

¹ Germaine Tillion, La condición de la mujer en el área mediterránea, Barcelona, Península, 1993.
the radically different character of Islam with respect to the iron pre-Islamic patriarchal structure, this being reason enough to interpret and legitimate modern understanding of equality between the sexes. This will is expressed in the Koran text when it establishes the consent of the woman to matrimony, in its manifest will to discourage the practice of polygamy and repudiation, in declaring her right to property, education, and even in the opinion of some to work in accordance with the hadiz: “Men have a part of what they have acquired; women have a part of what they have acquired.” To this would be added the “feminist” behaviour of the Prophet and his wives, one of them even coming to actively participate in politics.

For others, the relationship of superiority and inferiority that the Koran establishes with respect to the man and the woman (“men are a grade above women” II, 228) has been enough to consecrate the situation of discrimination, reclusion and segregation to which the Muslim woman has been condemned and it is desired should go on being condemned.

The truth is that in the Koran, revealed over 20 years (612-632), we see two very differentiated stages: that of Mecca – city of the Prophet – and that of Medina – where he had to take refuge and win supporters to spread the new message. And it is in the first Meccan suras where the most innovating dispositions with respect to the woman are condensed, corresponding to the most “revolutionary” and militant period in the preaching of Islam, while the later and most conservative suras, the Medinese, correspond to the second period of settlement and government.

In accordance with the chronological sequence, the Muslim lawyers resolved this apparent contradiction through the concept of naṣṣ (abrogation) considering that the second revoke the first. Today the conservative Muslim sectors cling obstinately to this traditional interpretation, while the reformists call for the inversion of the priorities.

In fact, Arab tribal society Islamized while it tried to preserve the profoundly patriarchal structure predominant in the region for millennia giving priority to those Koranic prescriptions that best fit the prevailing social and family model. This model is perpetuated secularly in the name of a Tradition that achieved its immutable status through its definition of “Islamic”. Later, now in the modern era, it will be institutionalized at multiple levels of society (legal, educational, political, economic...) in the framework of some nation-states of neo-patriarchal conception, where the patriarchy extends through-

2. In this sense, it is believed that for the rooted pre-Islamic patriarchal society the prohibition of institutions such as polygamy and repudiation would have meant an extreme measure, and perhaps for this reason Islam does not prohibit them but regulates and hinders them, as well as warning against them. Repudiation is defined in the Koran as “the legal act most hated by God”; with respect to polygamy it is affirmed that equal treatment must exist in all senses on the part of the husband towards his wives, “something which is known to be impossible.”

3. One of them, the Sudanese Mahmud Mohamed Taha, was condemned to death and executed by President Numeiri because of his reformist methodology.
out the social structure in such a way that the power of the father at the heart of the family is translated to society, becoming the power of rulers, and to religion, where power belongs to God. Thus, God, the father and the ruler share many characteristics in patriarchal societies. As Hisham Sharabi affirms: “Both between the ruler and the ruled, and between father and son there are only vertical relations: in both scenarios the paternal decision is an absolute decision, transmitted, both in society and the family, through a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion.”

From Countryside to City

Without doubt, traditional society and family behaviour are being transformed in many aspects as a consequence of the processes of modernization experienced through this century. However, given the perpetuation of patriarchal culture in the modern Arab state, these changes have taken place outside any conceptual framework and any legal reform, being basically the inevitable product of what we could call “socioeconomic imperatives”: rural exodus, emigration, consumption, town planning, globalization... In consequence, both the depth of the social changes and their spatial scope cover a highly differentiated panorama and with great disparities according to whether we are dealing with the urban or rural sphere, one class or another, one country or another.

Perhaps the greatest difference is in the enormous distance between the countryside and the city. It is in a city where the step from the extended family to the nuclear family, from the numerous to the reduced family is taking place, and it is where the traditional status of the woman is changing and the patriarchal hierarchies are being eroded because it is where the three main factors of social change are being developed: education, access to salaried work and birth control.

Fruit of the industrialization and modernization of economic activity, since the seventies the Arab city has favoured the decline of the old “large family”, substituting it with more reduced groupings where the couple and their children are the cell of reference. Thus, in the 1976 census Egyptian nuclear families represented 77.5%, in Syria 52% and in Jordan between 60% and 70%.

The participation of the woman on the remunerated work scale is another undoubtedly very important factor but it is not being as determining as that of town planning and that of schooling, given that the indexes are still weak, above all in the case of married women and because it is professional work, for which a university qualification or diploma is needed, which has emancipating effects on the woman.

As we have seen, the urban family is the most exposed to change, but it is also that which, consequently, is diversifying most, the result of the different levels of rupture with the traditional model.

The extended neo-patriarchal family, the paraconjugal family, the conjugal family and the single parent family (formed by widows and their children) are the four great types of family that exist today in the city. In the first three, the economic and cultural factor has great weight when differentiating themselves when managing their fertility and their relationship as a couple.

Without doubt, the importance of the economic and educational factors stand out when marking the distances that separate the distinct types of family. In fact, this reality only makes the distance that separates one class or another deeper, adding itself to those already existing between the urban and rural world. Depending on whether you belong to the modern urban, traditional or the urban-rural population (the latter two categories being in the majority compared with the former) patriarchal family behaviour will be more or less altered.

The problem lies in the great disconnection, if not confrontation, between these different social divisions that the city encompasses, the consequence of an accelerated and uncontrolled urban explosion (in its three rural quarters fifty years ago, Arab populations are today mostly urban representing 52% of the total population).

Thus, the phenomenon of urbanization has been linked to the constitution of great metropolises (normally the capital) where the bulk of the urban population is concentrated, without having created the necessary planning conditions and where the growth has not been linked with advances in agriculture or in industrialization or in economic development. Therefore, urbanization has been the cause of the rupture of social relations in the city, where highly differentiated models are experienced. The city, therefore, does not manage to become a pole of integration of the national space.

The Harem and the Veil

The reclusion of the woman goes back to Greek gineceo, was continued in the Byzantine period and was imitated by the Abbasid caliphs as an aristocratic sign to differentiate the women of the court, whose space was the palace, from the plebeians who went to the street to undertake tasks inappropriate for the nobility, such as shopping, market... It was later that the harem was interpreted as a means to protect feminine chastity.

Harem (harim) comes from an Arabic root which means “sacred”, “inviolable”, “prohibited”. If harem is understood as the classical conception of the institution that, forming part of the harem, designates the chambers reserved where women reside, we could say that its existence has been and is almost anecdotal. The development of an enormous literature on the influential and powerful harem of the Great Turkish Ottoman Sultan, in the court of Istanbul, and the disproportionate representation of the harem by European Orientalism (travellers, painters...) has inflated an institution that responds more to the exoticist Orient recreated from the West than to the reality of some Arab and Muslim societies where harems have always been infrequent.

Another question is whether the notion of harem is interpreted as a quality characteristic of the woman that converts her into something prohibited to all those men outside the traditional family. Then we can say that it still prevails.

This concept that defines the wife as hurmat al-rayul (the sacred thing of the man) is directly related to the question of safeguarding the family honour. Honour comes from the legitimacy of the man, which makes the virginity of the daughter, sister or wife its best guarantee, from where comes its sacredness and its location in the private space rather than the public.
In a family conception in which the group or the community predominate over individuality, virtue is inexorably at the service of the honour of the group. This is why in the traditional society the woman only acquires identity through masculine intermediation (belonging to a clan or lineage in which she is “the daughter of”, “the wife of” or “the mother of”).

In the rural environment, the families and the respective kinship are known by all the inhabitants of a community and function as protectors and guardians, which is why in these reduced urban spaces the veil has never been a garment to wear often among women. In fact, the veil has traditionally been a garment of the city. The great urbanization weakens patriarchal social controls of protection of the honour of the woman because urban anonymity does not allow her to be automatically identified as “daughter of” or “wife of”, as happens in small towns; and as it is a social model where the legitimacy of the person outside the group is not recognised, the femininity exhibited in the urban anonymity is reduced to a sexual object. Therefore, the veil emerged in the city as a symbol of negotiation of frontiers between the private and the public space and as a social regulator that gives access to the woman to the latter.

However, far from the superfluous interpretation that associates the veiled woman with submission and the unveiled with liberation, the world of dress is today a diverse world full of symbols that have to be decoded correctly and that, normally, particularly have to do with the different spaces and with the different generations. In this way, between the haïk or niqab veil (traditional) and the hijab veil (modern Islamic version) there is a sociological language that expresses the difference between the new generation and the preceding one, between those who study and go out and the secluded, between those who affirm and those who submit. For example, the girl who today voluntarily puts on the hijab rejects the traditional veil of her mother because it is a symbol for her of ignorance, superstition, exclusion; in other words, all that which has been thrown off thanks to studies, to education: the hijab permits them to also make visible their rupture with the elders, and through this affirm that their submission to God comes before their submission to man.

In this sense, one should bear in mind that in Muslim civil society it is not only the feminist currents, following the western model, which are carrying out a process of rupture with respect to traditional society, but that, from Islamic cultural self-affirmation, a new generation of women are transforming their own role in society and their space of action.

The social profile that characterizes these women, some of them integrated into the militancy or Islamist sensibility, is mainly urban youths; (the city and its accelerated process of urbanization has de-structured the community order of which the traditional relations between men and women form part, opening the social space to the initiative of new groups where the young play a key role weakening the authority of the patriarchal and elder

6. The hijab is a scarf that covers the head but not the face. This is a substantial difference from the traditional patriarchal veil which seeks to make the woman invisible in the public space. Moreover, not all women who use the hijab are Islamist militants, many wear it as a symbol of Islamic cultural affirmation and identity, a phenomenon that reaches a highly numerous generation of youths.
groups of society) and educated youths (they have appropriated knowledge and achieved intellectual autonomy to reinterpret their role in accordance with "true Islam").

Therefore, the process of re-Islamization experienced today in Arab societies should not be given to easy interpretations, as far from meaning a simple traditional "turn-back" or a "manipulation of women by men", we are dealing with a phenomenon in which women, making use of the achievements of modernization, invest in its two main public spaces: the urban and the academic, and based on this make their difference with respect to the preceding generation.

Their access to the public space is linked to the voluntary use of the hiyab, which is above all highly charged with cultural self-affirmation which makes them feel they are contributing to a mission of reconstruction of their own culture, and allows them to play a social role that they would only have with difficulty in their reduced traditional environment.

Consequently, their adoption of the hiyab is not done as a symbol of traditional transmission of the religion but rather as a sign of their re-appropriation of Islam as cultural identity. The veil, therefore, reappears with strength as a phenomenon characteristic of the great cities and of the women with training and studies.

From the surveys and interviews carried out with the new veiled women of Islam, it emerges that among the variety of arguments in favour of the use of the hiyab (professionals, feminists, nationalists or anti-imperialists) the religious argument stricto sensu almost never comes alone nor occupies the first place in the discourse of these women. In fact, it is above all their will "to be present in society" which, in practice, is linked with the wearing of the hiyab.

It is above all their will "to be present in society" which, in practice, is linked with the wearing of the hiyab.

Another important factor is that this "exit" and public "visibility" happens without conflict, either physical or moral, despite the fact that their mothers are normally traditional women dedicated to the domestic space and maternal tasks. The opposition to family authority is difficult to exercise when this rupture with tradition is done in the name and in favour of Islam. This gives these women a legitimacy which is difficult to confront in a family environment where Muslim values nourish and legitimate the social model. In this way, social change, itself object of resistance and scandal, filters into the customs more easily because it is done in function of a practice considered legitimate.

All this takes us to bear in mind that as these women access the public space a transformation takes place that forces the frontiers of the private space; and the more women develop strategies of individual life the more they will cast doubt on the prohibitions to go into the exterior space and the more they will forge their own identity redefining the relations between men and women.

---


The truth is that given the weak support in Arab countries for the feminist movements that call for rights of women following the western model, one can wonder if the path from Islamic militancy for being more pragmatic will not in the end be more efficient.

In any case, all this only shows the complexity of the social dynamics currently underway in Arab and Muslim societies and the inappropriateness of the widely held vision of the Muslim world as an immobile universe where everything happens through an Islamic determinism inclined to fanaticism and regression.
Meriam Bouderbala, without a title.