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Females Roles and Their Social World in Al-Andalus

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ABSTRACT

This work discusses the social world of Muslim women in medieval Spain. The 8th-12th centuries Islamic society in Spain and its conflict of interest could be fully understood if it is studied in different layers. Previous scholars have already exploited Muslim women studies, but they rarely revisit the medieval Muslim women. This work, therefore, sticks on women world during the period of Al-Andalus (the Islamic Spain). Muslim women in Al-Andalus were commonly portrayed as oppressed and marginalized based on the Western perspective. However, many legal sources indicate the intention of limiting women, but other shows different point of view. Women in Al-Andalus actively participated in many aspects of life, such as political, literate, social, arts, religious and intellectual, and military affairs. Compared to other Muslim women in the Middle East, they had a freedom to conduct what they wanted to do. Its peculiarity had been created due to the Islamic-Christian assimilation in the Islamic Spain.

Keywords: Muslim, Women history, Al-Andalus

Islamic history, especially Islamic teaching, and its influence in its followers, is a field of study attracting many scholars to revisit. Islam as a religion spread significantly across the globe. The new believers merely have a responsibility to follow the Islamic teaching, for instance praying to only one God (Allah) and being the good men. However, many people including non-Muslims still judge Islam by their perception. Regarding to women status, their misconception is caused by the mixture of Islamic rituals and Arabian culture. Some non-Muslims also believe that Islam frequently represses women. They seem to misquote the Sharia law (Islamic law) that the idea how to be good woman is for those who always obeys and stays within her domestic duty.

Those stereotype spreads over the Western countries. Those sentiments are affected by reasonable causes, for instance the terror attacks and the misunderstanding of Islamic values and faith practiced by the followers. The media also frames the social consciousness that the Muslims as terrorists or as the religion that oppresses women (Uzzama 2017). While many legal sources indicate the intention of limiting women, some others depict different pictures. The view of Islam limiting women is derived from prejudice and stereotype, while there is also a dozen of historical facts which indicate the opposite facts. Islam as religion does not oppress women, but the practices are found in

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daily life. The difference between theoretical and practical of Islam due to different interpretation of the Quran and Hadiths. In a nutshell, the oppression of women in Islam depends on many factors, such as political issues, history, and demography. Thus, this paper attempts to redress the position of women based on historical facts regarding the Islamic Era in Spain. Medieval Spain's history presents how the Muslim women played a significant role in Andalusian society. In fact, the practices were significantly different compared to theoretical concepts.

The Islamic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula started in April 711. Tariq ibn Ziyad led 12,000 troops to cross the Straits of Gibraltar in the West and pass the passage of Oxus. After three years, almost all of Spain territory and part of Southern Gaul were part of the Saracen empire (Haines, 2005). Muslim invasion and conquest can be considered amongst many journeys of Muslim's expansion in the first century after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. For the next three centuries and to the collapse of the Cordoba caliphate in 1009, Islam was the dominant culture in Spain. For the fifty years, the Iberian Peninsula was part of the Islamic empire province which centred in Damascus.

Under Islamic realm, the Iberian Peninsula was divided into provinces of Terraconesis, Carthaginense, Baetica, Lusitania, and Gallaecia. Those regions had been the richest and most developed areas of the Western Roman Empire, but for three centuries before the arrival of Muslims, it had been dominated by Visigoth who had first entered the peninsula in the early fifth century. The Muslim invasion of Spain in many ways was a reasonable and necessary sequel to North Africa (Kennedy 2014). Cordoba became the capital shortly after the first conquest and remained as vital areas in terms of the politics during the period. The Muslim conquest of Spain in 711 AD highlighted the culmination of nearly a century of Muslim expansion.

The wars in the Iberian Peninsula occurred in many ways for over the next seven hundred years. But from 711 to 1031 Muslim power was rarely challenged successfully by the Christians. As the Christians attempted to reclaim the unity of the peninsula came closer to being achieved, the term Al-Andalus was restricted to a gradually decreasing territory. Now, the place is known as Andalusia, remaining the last stage of the Moors occupation within the Southern part of Spain (O'Callaghan 1983; 2003). For current perspective, Al-Andalus has managed a particular significance as the mingling of religious cultures such as Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Greek. Unfortunately, religious tolerance was lost when the religious violence pulled apart one another (Shamsie 2016).

Al-Andalus is also known as Medieval Muslim Spain is considered as crucial event in the history of medieval Europe in general. Since the eighth century and between the thirteenth to the twentieth century, this period has been established by emotive language and provided with religious context. The primary cases were Christians forces against Muslims, Christianity opposing Islam, and the faithful against the infidel. In summary, there was the friction between Christianity and Islam that characterized the pivotal Tours battle in 732 AD. Charles Martel's victory over Muslims in somewhere southwest of Paris is considered one of the most defining confrontations of the Middle Ages (Hitchcock 2008). Nonetheless, this battle had not changed the fact of harmonious life established in Al-Andalus for over three centuries.

The most recent research about Islam and migration in Spain began in the 1970s as Spain became a democratic and labour-importing country and the first workers mainly came from Marocco (Rogozen-Soltar 2017). Spain is a case study of how a Western nation has become more accepting in the existence of Islam throughout the centuries. Women, either Muslim or non-Muslim gained exceptional roles and rights in Spain during the Moor reign. Focusing on Spain, the laws contributing to the difference in the practice provided women more freedom. For Islam, it transmitted values towards culture which had a long-lasting effect in Medieval Spain.

Research on Muslim women has increased in the last two decades. However, many questions remain unanswered, particularly about medieval Muslim women. Little attention has been paid to Muslim societies in comparative historical studies of women's property rights. Research about Muslim's women status between the tenth and fifteenth centuries is considered in its early stages

(Shatzmiller 1995). This paper attempts to complete the gap of historical research about Muslim's women in Medieval times.

The conquest of Iberia by Muslims in 711 implemented Islamic law and the implementation towards the majority of Christians affected every member of society. The most privileged members were Muslim males. Christians, Jews, women, and slaves owned smaller rights and privileges under the law with varying degrees. For women, they enjoyed their rights based on their place within society on some levels, namely religious, economic, and marital status. However, as it stated before, the practices of the law were more favourable for women than what was written in books (Dawson & Dawson 2015; Uzzama 2017). It is such an interesting issue about how Muslim women being represented in laws and how they were being treated in the real life. This paradox could be examined by analysing several facts about Muslim women in Al-Andalus using analytical method of history.

A Glimpse History of Muslim Women in Al-Andalus

Research on Muslim women had developed over the last two decades. Today, studies of temporary Muslim women attract more attention compared to the medieval times, which are often being the small subject of chapters in monographs discussing Muslim women (O'Connor 2010). The writing about women in Al-Andalus is mostly derived either by patriarchal narratives or by stereotypes of Islam against the Western assumption in which Al-Andalus is established to form further a political agenda (Shamsie 2016). As mentioned above, every source could represent ambiguous purpose. Some sources portray Al-Andalus as an essentially patriarchal society and the power was exclusively managed by men. Hence, the effort in constructing an accurate portrait of women of Al-Andalus is established by narratives and counter-narratives around Islam, especially women within Islam.

Commonly, Muslim women in Al-Andalus were treated based on the legal system of Islam, namely the *Quran* and *Hadiths*. The laws implemented in Al-Andalus were engaged using Maliki's thought, which depends primarily on the Quran-Hadiths but also considers the common good or welfare in the practice. In addition, the Medieval Islamic society in Spain was also influenced by Persian and Roman law codes that commonly only men were given the whole right. These factors established distinctive implementation of Islam laws in Medieval Spain, where women were treated marginally, yet owned some legal privileges and protections (Shatzmiller 1995; Nasir 2009; Dawson 2015).

Even though the legal system limited women, Muslim women in Al-Andalus obtained the chances to participate in many fields of experiences as men usually held, such as politics, literacy, society, arts, and education. Many scholars studied the poets created by Andalusian women, which means they had more freedom than Muslim women in other Muslim countries (Sidik 2013). Hafsa bint al-Hajj was a Granadan poet and one of the most prolific women poets. She engaged in a love affair with poet Abu Ja'far ibn Sai'd which resulted in political conflict. Hafsa is an example of how female poet provided significant role in society of Al-Andalus. Poetry in Al-Andalus was integral part in society and poetic competitions allowed talented poets to prosper and enjoy the merit of social status. The presence of women in civilized society as Al-Andalus facilitated the activity of women poets, even the number did not approach that of male poets. Furthermore, Al-Andalus also offered women security protection, freedom from key obligations, in exchange for submissive behaviour and limitations on their ability to act as independent persons. They were protected against arbitrary violence of their goods. Muslim women, either married or not also owned property, even wives and daughters inherited less proportion from spouses and parents than their male counterparts.

In the terms of clothing, Muslim women in al-Andalusia dressed in Persian and Syrian styles. They wore loose, sleeved garments, and veiled themselves whenever they travelled. However, this custom was not always strictly monitored, either by the example of the unveiled Christian and Jewish women or because Spain was more flexible and old Islamic features remained longer than in the East.

Contemporary scholars also noted the beauty and the attractiveness of the Andalusian women (Burckhardt 1972).

It is known that many women in Al-Andalus were also poets which did not seem to be restricted by any significant barriers. This indicates the existence of more freedom in the expression and fulfilment feelings of love. Relating the poets, there were several popular Muslim women who versed, for instance Ummayad Princess-Wallada, Mut'a (a slave of the poet Ziryab), and Hafsa of Guadalajara. Women's positions in Spain were more dynamic compared to other Muslim countries. Women in Al-Andalus appeared in intellectual and cultural events of their time, and some other were being fame for their scientific works, or by their competing with men for the palm of poetry. Those roles of women were not insignificant (Viguera 1992). The figures of intellectual women in Al-Andalus are drawn from the *Kitab al-Silah* of Ibn Bashukal, the *Takmilat Kitab al-Silah* by Ibn al-Abbar, and the *Kitab Silat al-Sila* by Ibn al-Zubayr. Those books identify women from different classes of society and different regions of al-Andalus who participated in scholarship between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. They are some names of Muslim women, namely Fatima b. Yahya b. Yusuf al-Maghami, Aisha b. Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Qadim, Khadijah b. Ja'far b. Nusayr b. Tammār al-Tamīmī and Radiyah.

Andalusian women enjoyed their freedom because of the result of Muslims and Christians living together in al-Andalus, which was different compared to Arab countries, regarding lineage, culture, and behaviour. The liberal concept of women's condition arose from circumstances created by Christian customs (Viguera 1992). Furthermore, Haines (2005) argues the relaxation towards women was due to Christian civilization, which grew independently side by side. Muslim women sometimes established the mark in a patriarchal society and were considered as intellectually and socially equal.

The Social World of Muslim Women in Al-Andalus

Al-Andalus was a paradise of tolerant coexistence. Many stories in novels, films, and popular histories, showed Muslims, Christians, and Jews living side by side in harmony and prosperity (Fillios 2008). Muslims in Spain drew to the inceptive nationalist movement in Andalusia. Islam was believed to be a significant element of southern Spain's particular national identity. Starting from the Ummayad conquest of the Iberia peninsula in 711 AD to *Reconquista* in 1492, Islamic influence and political legacy permeated the peninsula. Al-Andalus located themselves in space and time with other Europeans. As a frontier area, Al-Andalus was one of the places with regular commercial and diplomatic contact advantages with non-Muslim lands.

Islamic Spain or Al-Andalus was a heterogeneous and vibrant society. The number of Muslims was about 10% or four hundred thousand by the end of the century. With this number, Muslims were able to construct religious, political, economic, and social predominance in Iberian society for three centuries. They re-organized agriculture to run the economic life and cover the majority of the population. They also introduced Middle Eastern innovations to improve irrigation in the peninsula (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1993).

During the early stage of Al-Andalus, Islamic territory was the result of military expansion and the only sovereignty recognized was Muslim. Later, Muslims settled a basic attitude toward non-Muslims with the solidarity-based, the peaceful and rich moral obligation under non-Muslim authority (Almira 2011). By the time Muslims arrived in old Hispania, the Ummayyads permitted their descendants to marry Iberian families' women from beyond the frontiers to the north. In addition, the most respected Muslims like the Ummayyad princes descended from the caliph of Arabia and Syria, were also visibly their mother's son. They were sometimes fair-haired from their Iberian forebears (Menocal 2007). The blood-mixed descendants of Muslims in Iberian Peninsula represented that al-Andalus was a heterogenous and tolerance society and gave all people a leeway to climb socially.

Regarding women in al-Andalusia, they were varied. Women in Al-Andalus were characterized based to their ethnicity, origins, religion, economic class, and politico-economic levels,

such as Arab, Berber, Muslim, Mozarab, Jewish, upper class, and city women or countrywomen. Their identities determined their roles in the society, traced in the bibliographical documents between 8 AD and 14 AD. Their roles in the political affairs and administration field could be seen in the royal family. As wives, mothers, and daughters of Ummayyad Caliph in Cordova, they had a significant role to construct political development of Al-Andalus (Viguera 1992). The role of women in political affair could be recognized through Women on Court that being mentioned in connection with several distinguished person. Those court women played significant part in crucial events on the political scene, possibly through significant influence over her husband's action. In addition, there was also the prominent influence if some king's mother, as in the case of the petty king of Granada, Abdullah. His mother was omnipresent and influenced his every action (Viguera 1992).

Medieval Shariah cast free Muslim women as adults who for some purposes had diminished legal capacity for Muslim women. Shariah also provided women with minor role in religious matters. However, there was no rule against women learning sculpture, but women could not lead a prayer group if men were present. At the same time, women had more means of expressing religious impulses than written in Shariah. Even though, it was limited to elite women groups (Coope 2015).

Sufism in Islam also offered women a greater role in spirituality than traditional Islam did. Sufism appeared in the late eighth century and provided a constellation of practices. Sufism in Al-Andalus was more open to various religious practices in which was likely shadowed by Christian and Hinduism ascetic practices. Syariah in terms of Sufism could be identified with some writings of Sufism believers. Al-Sarraj's *al-Luma* argues that Syariah is what being taught by the Quran and the prophet Muhammad. The Quran and Hadiths are considered outwardly knowledge, while Sufism is supposed to be inner knowledge (Sajari 2014). Sufism was also available for women, namely the famous Rabi'ah of Basrah. However, women had no official position within Sufi orders, but Sufism continued to be opened to women (Coope 2015).

In addition, Muslim women also participated in *jihad*. *Jihad* could be referred to not merely as military action but also as a religious and constitutional right. Even, many cases indicate that jihad forbade women to participate, but many sources show women's participation in jihad, for instance, black women warriors in the army besieging Valencia (Lourie 2000). Based on Maliki's orthodoxy thought, wives of Andalus to be respected on the battlefield (Almira 2011). Furthermore, Spanish sources show that women considered fighters are occasional topics. However, it is still unclear about the lawfulness of women's defence on the battlefield.

Muslim women in Spain were also admitted into mosques which in many traditional Islamic countries were forbidden. Women were supposed to devote their fate at home. The exception in Spain occurred due to the influence of the Roman Catholic manner in performing the mass, which women were present. Muslim women also appeared at some festivities and dances as well as tournaments. Thus, their position became assimilated to Christian women that time (Haines 2005).

Other accounts point out that women in Al-Andalus also participated in the military. Women in Al-Andalus committed themselves to the defence of their principles and traditions, even putting their own lives in danger. Various sources indicate their participation on the battlefield in Spain and it is known that the Moors tended to push the Christians to areas where women lived as these formed part of their military strategy (Almira 2011).

Muslim Women's Education in Al-Andalus

Today, we recognize that Islamic knowledge not only depends on spiritual knowledge but also includes other disciplines namely medicine, financial management (*shariah*), and Islamic history. Van Brunessen and Allievi (Mateo 2019) examine how Islamic knowledge is produced and transmitted within the European context. The process does not only involve religious specialists and intellectuals with academic authority or authority figures and the organizations, and federations that

institutionalized European Islam, but also the transmission and production of Islamic knowledge in which common Muslim women and men could participate. This is extremely significant within the process of creation and in the specific ways that knowledge appears (Mateo 2019).

In the early stage of Al-Andalus, Muslims introduced some cultural innovations to the Iberian Peninsula. In terms of education, Muslims established alchemy, algebra, Arabic numeral, the zero number, and Aristotelian philosophy (Balbuena). Furthermore, Spanish music was also influenced by Muslims. Despite Muslims being invaders, the Muslim government kept translating ancient languages to improve the pieces of knowledge. The translation schools of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish worked together to improve the civilization in harmony (Uzzama 2017).

Islam was also the origin of schools. During the age of Umayyad and Abbasid caliphate, most Muslims were required to know how to cite the Quran. This obligation also took place in Al-Andalus in Spain. Public schools were free, and the education given was more than scriptures. While between the eighth and twelfth century about 95% of Europeans were illiterate, in thousands of schools in Arab societies both boys and girls were learning to the verses of the Quran. Spain under Islamic rule managed about 80 public schools in Cordova, and in 965 AD Al-Hakam II established 27 new schools for poor children (Khoury 2019). Schools' establishment brought the knowledge flourishing within the peninsula which made Spain under Islam being exceptional to other European countries that the Dark Ages still foreclosing.

Intellectual development in Al-Andalus provided the citizens to earn knowledge including women. Women were allowed to participate in the intellectual class as men to disseminate knowledge to those who needed it. There were some famous names, namely Fatimah bint Yahya bin Yusuf al-Margami, Rasidah al-Wa'izah, Sayyidah bint 'Abd al-Ghani bin 'Ali al-Abdariyyah al-gharnatiyyah and Ishraq (Sidik et al. 2013). Women in al-Andalus also learned *'ilm al-hadith* which led to the appearance of women traditionists like Ghada bint 'Abd Allah bin Hamdun from Cordova. She narrated Hadith from Sa'id bin Uthman al-A'naqi and Ghada.

Based on Gloria Lopez de la Plaza's, both boys and girls from elite families were taught basic Arab literacy. Boys had to study the Quran and Shariah and in rare cases, girl joined them. Some girls also studied with their fathers who were *alims*, and scholars of religious law. From the tenth century, some biographical records listed women scholars who were Quran reciters, they were also experts on hadiths and ascetics (Coope 2015).

Nowadays, Spain is one of the most liberal countries in the world. In Spain, religion can be chosen as an option within the public school system. This means the teaching of Islam is now available in schools where at least ten Muslim students are enrolled. Despite the scarcity of religious education for women, they find their own ways, such as television that is dedicated to the religious training of organized meetings or religious discussions led by women who act as moderators. Spain protects the religious right to express minority religions based on the recognition of pluralism and the normalcy of Islam existence and other religions in the 21st century.

To conclude, there are some misconceptions about the practice of Islam in treating women. In modern countries and throughout history show what were written could be different to the practices about treating women. The Islamic invasion of Iberia Peninsula represented how Muslim women joined men in establishing a harmonious period of Al-Andalus under the realm of Muslim authority. The existence of Muslim women in Al-Andalus unfolds some paradoxical facts which sometimes lead to the misconceptions. While the Western assumptions tend to view Islam as a religion which oppresses and limits women, some records indicating otherwise. Muslim women were able to participate in many fields as men such as education, politics, economy, arts, poetry, religion and even the military. Al-Andalus treated women marginally yet owned some legal privileges and protections. Some women of Al-Andalus were poets who did not seem to be restricted by any significant barriers and indicated surprising freedom in the expression and fulfilment of their feelings of love. Islam Sufism in Spain also offered women a greater role in spirituality than traditional Islam did. In addition, Muslim women also participated in *jihad*, when black women warriors helped the

Islamic armies to besiege Valencia. Intellectual development in Al-Andalus also provided the citizens to earn knowledge including women. They possessed more freedom compared to other Islamic countries. Some scholars argue this was due to assimilation between Islam and Christianity in medieval Spain which established a distinct pattern of society.

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