

## Unit 10: Gender Issues

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Reasons for the traditional standing of women within Islam
- Broad East Asian Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Muslim and Christian practice concerning women
- Equality of male/female spirituality within Islam
- Professions many Muslim women engage in
- Reasons for the popularity of hijab amongst Muslim women
- Militant fundamentalist practice regarding women's roles
- Progressive Muslim views on roles and status of women
- Changes advocated by selected progressive Islamic women's groups
  - Overview, reasons for and impact of prostitution on U.S. Armed Forces personnel

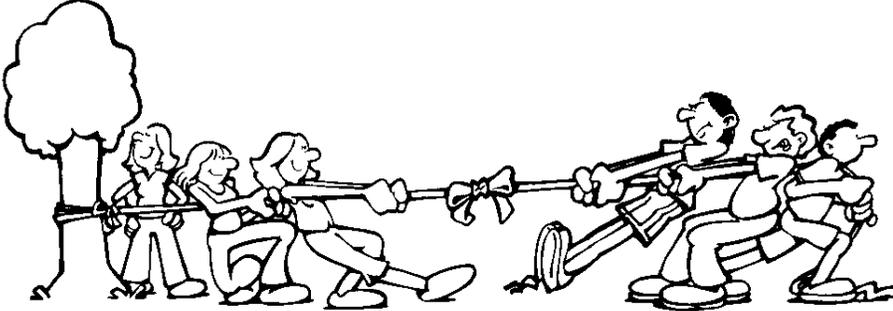
### Identify

- Chador; Sarawi, Huda
- Taliban
- Hadith, Sahria
- Traditional Islamic views of women's roles
- Hijab
- Sati
- Comfort women
- Yin/yang
- Filial piety
  - Nongovernment Organizations (NGO)

## Realize

- Diversity of the role and position of women within East Asia
- Western media slant on women within Islam
- Complementary male/female roles within many Muslim societies
- Exploitation and illegality involved in East Asian sex trade
- Economic nature of prostitution in East Asia
- Double standard still existing for men/women

## Unit 10: Gender Issues



*"Leading Western scholars agree that Mongolian women traditionally have had relatively higher social positions and greater autonomy than women in the...societies of Inner Asia or in China and Korea."*

--Library of Congress Country Studies/Area Handbook--  
Mongolia.

*"On the surface, Korean women often appear docile, submissive, and deferential to the wishes of their husbands and in-laws. Yet behind the scenes, there is often considerable 'hidden' female power, particularly within the private sphere of the household."*

--L. of C. Country Studies--Korea, p. 107

*"On the whole, in the 1980s women were better off [in China] than their counterparts 50 or a 100 years before, and they had full legal equality with men. In practice, their opportunities and rewards were not entirely equal, and they tended to get less desirable jobs and to retain the burden of domestic chores in addition to full-time jobs."*

--L. of C. Country Studies--China.

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### I. Overview

**Variety** Throughout East Asia, gender issues related to the status of women receive various treatments--depending on country, culture or ethnic group.

In Mongolia, women have traditionally held higher social positions and achieved greater autonomy than

women in Islamic societies of Inner Asia or China and Korea.

In Myanmar (Burma), women enjoy a long-standing custom of high status, possessing many of the basic rights of men and taking an active role in business.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and People's Republic of China have proportional representation of women in the workforce, though few women reach high levels of the Communist Party or government.

Across the region, however, a tradition of attributing secondary status to women persists. Brothels, rumored "sex trades," abuse issues, and exploitation of children--especially girls--all through the region paint a dismal picture.

Many scholars see this as a continuing result of aspects of Confucian thought and practice within the region.

## II. Religious Perspectives

**1. Hindu Practice** Throughout the Hindu tradition there seems to be an ambivalent attitude towards women. On the one hand, female gods--Devi, Sakti, Parvati, Durga and Kali--embody traits of energy, initiative and vitality which are active in the universe.



Marriage and family are held in high esteem. Wives and mothers often are praised to excess. Even within the more negative aspects of the class system advocating traditional sex roles, female camaraderie, affection given by spouse, and respect bestowed wives,

mothers and daughters bolstered the woman's position and role.

On the other hand, women often are seen as lustful temptresses, sinful enticements for otherwise chaste men. The lingam (phallic) symbol of Siva seems to promote an attitude of male dominance. Poor Indian women undergo the worst of burdens--poverty, "slavery," and general abuse. Though outlawed, the practice of sati (SUH-tee), where widows would burn themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, still casts a negative shadow. Also, the perception of females as instruments, subject to father, husbands and older sons is still common. (See Denise and John Carmody, Ways to the Center, p. 106.)

## 2. The Confucian Tradition

*"Traditional Chinese society was male-centered. Sons were preferred to daughters, women were expected to be subordinate to fathers, husbands, and sons. A young woman had little voice in the decision of her marriage partner (neither did a young man).*

*When married, it was she who left her natal family and community and went to live in a family and community of strangers where she was subordinate to her mother-in-law.*



*Far fewer women were educated than men, and sketchy but consistent demographic evidence would seem to show that female infants and children had higher death rates and less chance of surviving to adulthood than males. In extreme cases, female infants were the victims of infanticide, and daughters were sold, as chattels, to brothels or to wealthy families. Bound feet, which were customary even for peasant women, symbolized the painful constraints of the female role." (L. of C. Country Studies: China.)*

Author John Hersey, in his novel The Call, elaborates on the practice of foot binding. "A binder had come on her

monthly visit to wash and rebind the feet of a little girl of about eight...

The binder unwound wide bandages and finally the 'golden lilies' were uncovered...The toes had been relentlessly curled back under the soles...sometimes bones were broken, but they mended while bound...

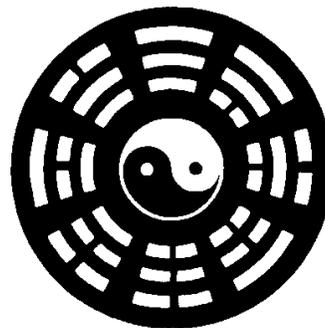


The little girl had been given to believe that she was a person of great importance, to be inspected in this way. She never whimpered, but when the work was done, she sat holding her feet in her hands...When she was fully grown, the binder said, her feet would be very beautiful...she would walk like a willow, the binder said, with seductive mincing steps...so as to cause great excitement among all the young men!" (p. 189)

Confucian practice concerning women--delegating their position to that of subservience to men--stems in part from the following nature of its thought.

#### a. Yin/yang Yin and Yang interact harmoniously.

As part of this balance, traditionally men were associated with "yang," women with "yin." Yin displays qualities of darkness, cold, death, ghosts, graves and fear--often traits acquiring a negative status. The linkage of the feminine with "yin" seems to color women in this negative light as well. Over the centuries, such thought influenced practice towards them.



**b. Family** Filial piety--the relations guiding children with their parents and past generations--delegated responsibilities and importance to eldest sons. Two of the five relationships--father/son and husband/wife--promote social mores of male superiority.

The woman's status becomes one where she obeys and serves her parents, her husband and husband's parents, and produces a male heir. The ideal woman becomes someone who is retiring, silent and fertile. She possesses inner strength and is known for her forbearance and patient sense of restraint.

In South Korea, the cumulative effect of the Confucian tradition led Harvard professor Tu Wei-ming to write, the "blatant insensitivity in deprecating gender equality reflects an East Asian mentality with deep Confucian roots." ("Confucianism," in Our Religions, p. 214.)

**3. Taoist Trends** With its emphasis upon natural simplicity, infinite potential and distaste for confining rules, limiting regulations and excessive laws, Taoism may seem to advocate little more than a mindless submissiveness and lack of involvement in societal issues. However, this school of thought exerted a strong influence on Chinese society--especially concerning the position of women.

In focusing upon the lowly individuals in society (nature's "valleys"), Taoist practitioners upgraded the position of women and curtailed murder of female infants. The philosophical ideals of passivity, adaptability and a sense of yielding all flowed from traditional understandings of "female" virtues.



**4. Buddhist Thought** The equality given women within the Sangha demonstrates the Buddhist ideal for society.



*"The Buddha's equal concern for both sexes..is made clear in a passage where he says that he would not die until the monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen were well trained."* (Dhammapada 11.104, Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism, p. 216.)

Due however, to pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation and uniting with the husband's family, in practice female rebirth became viewed in a less favorable light. During child bearing years, Theravadan Buddhist practice traditionally excludes women from major religious activity.

Some Buddhist women are reasserting their desire for equality. The Venerable Chung Ok Lee, head minister of the Won Buddhist United Nations Office, is working to create a more unified, equality promoting social structure for men and women. Themes addressed in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in Sept. 1995 support such trends. (See Joel Beversluis, A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions, p. 273.)

## 5. Islam



### a. Helpful Outlooks

**(1) Variety** Islam in southeast Asia incorporates practice and thought from ancestral Hindu, Buddhist and indigenous religious belief. Thus, while the Qur'an, hadith, and Sharia give distinct instruction concerning a woman's role and position, there is diversity when implementing this guidance, especially within Southeast Asian Muslim circles.

Customs vary concerning women's dress. Some fundamentalist extremists seek to impose strict Islamic social codes requiring head-to-foot shrouds. They would restrict women to the practice of nursing or medicine alone. Progressive women seek reform in restrictive clothing practices, and in economic, education, and decision-making policies.



No single Muslim position on women exists.

**(2) Western Media Negativity** Our media often portrays Muslim women as victims of Islamic resurgence. Negative treatments of polygamy, divorce by simple repudiation, veil wearing, segregation of the sexes, imprisonment in household tasks, dependence on the husband and lack of legal rights are the focus. The positive, stability enhancing, personally fulfilling dimensions of the discussion are often overlooked.

### **(3) Complementary Roles**

*"Tradition-oriented [Muslim] men and women do not view the social customs and restrictions as repressive, but as complementary to the status and nature of women. They see the restrictions as providing protection for women so that they need not be subjected to the stress, competition, temptations, and possible indignities present in 'outside' society."* (Margaret Nydell, Understanding Arabs, p. 55.)

**(4) Assumption of Male/Female Emotional and Physical Differences** Most interpreters of the Qur'an accept the notion of radical, distinct emotional as well as physical differences between the sexes. (See Dr. Gamal Badawi's The Status of Woman in Islam.)

Three treatments of Islamic women's rights--the traditional, fundamentalist, and progressive--assist our understanding.

## b. Traditional Views of the Standing of Women

The Status of Women in Islam, a pamphlet by Dr. Gamal A. Badawi, published by The Muslim Students Association of the United States and Canada, outlines conventional perspectives on Islam's treatment of women. Dr. Badawi's perspective is instrumental in understanding traditional women's roles. His views seem to accurately portray traditional Muslim positions.



**(1) The Historical Context** Given the dismal status of women in seventh century Middle East society, Islam did much to restore dignity and individual rights.

**(2) Spiritual Equality** Before God, men and women are on equal footing.

*"The Prophet said, 'All people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. An Arab is no better than a non-Arab, nor is a white person over a black person, nor is a male superior to the female. The only people who enjoy preference with God are the devout.'" (Hadith as quoted in Marston Speight, God is One, p. 50.)*

**(3) Social Position in the Home** *"The Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is a sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, beside perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony.*

*Its bases are love and mercy... 'And among His signs is this: That He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect.'"*  
(Sura 30:21, Badawi, p. 16.)



**(4) Economic Position** *"According to Islamic Law, a woman's right to her money, real estate, or other properties is fully acknowledged. This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married..."*

*With regard to the woman's right to seek employment...Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential one. Neither maids nor baby-sitters can possibly take the mother's place as the educator of upright, complex-free, and carefully-reared children. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as 'idleness.'*



*...there is no decree in Islam which forbids a woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her most. Examples of these professions are nursing, teaching (especially for children), and medicine. Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from woman's exceptional talent in any field. Even for the position of a judge...we find early Muslim scholars...holding there is nothing wrong with it." (Badawi, p. 22.)*

**(5) Political Dimensions** Political involvement--election, nomination to political office, participation in public affairs--in some Islamic circles is not limited to men alone. However, throughout the Middle Eastern world and much of Southeast Asia, most Muslim women are ineligible to become heads of state.

**(6) Hijab** (HEHZH-yahb) Analysts often interpret the growing, widespread popularity of hijab (traditional Muslim dress for women, including covering of the head), as indicating a rise of traditionalist Islam.

Judith Miller, in describing the difficulty of assessing the depth of what some depict as the growing Islamic fervor, outlines the following reasons for a woman's use of traditional dress:



**(a) Expense** Cost of cosmetics and trips to hairdressers is greatly reduced by wearing traditional garb.

**(b) Psychological distance** In crowded living conditions, hijab maintains a safe haven--even in the midst of congested conditions.

**(c) Safety** Traditional dress says "This is a devout woman. Leave her alone."

**(d) Mobility** In conservative cultures, the chador (woman's shawl) allows a woman to venture outside the confines of her home.

**(e) Fashion** For some women, wearing hijab is a statement of fashion and generational rebellion. (See God Has Ninety-Nine Names, pp. 469, 470.)

