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# The Role and Activities of Women during the Abbasid Caliphate

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## ABSTRACT

The era of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE) represents a complex and paradoxical period in terms of the social and cultural status of women. This study adopts a historical–analytical approach to examine the roles and activities of women during this era. The findings indicate that, contrary to the common image of Abbasid women as being confined to royal harems, they played active roles in various scientific, literary, economic, and even political spheres. In the field of scholarship, women such as 'Aliyah bint al-Mahdi engaged in poetry and literature, while other women attained expertise in the transmission of hadith and Islamic jurisprudence. Economically, women played significant roles through commercial activities, charitable endowments (waqf), and the management of estates and properties. Within the Abbasid court, influential figures such as al-Khayzuran and Zubaydah exercised considerable political influence and took leading roles in philanthropic and public works, including the construction of caravanserais and hospitals. Nevertheless, these activities occurred within the constraints imposed by the harem system, mandatory veiling practices, and the gradual intensification of women's social seclusion. In other words, the role of Abbasid women combined hidden influence with a limited yet undeniable presence in the public sphere. This article demonstrates that despite prevailing religious and social restrictions, women in Abbasid civilization were not merely passive subjects but rather influential actors across various layers of society.

**Keywords:** *Abbasid women, Abbasid Caliphate, social roles, harem, al-Khayzuran.*

## Introduction

The Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), as an era of translation and the transmission of the scientific and philosophical heritage of Iranian, Greek, and Indian civilizations, underwent profound institutional and discursive transformations. Alongside bureaucratic developments, the urbanization of Baghdad, and the spread of Mu'tazilite rationalism, gender systems were also redefined. The central problem of the present article is to examine what concrete roles and activities women performed within this structural context at the scientific, literary, economic, and



political levels, and to what extent these roles correspond to the dominant Orientalist image of “absolute seclusion” (1).

An examination of biographical compendia, bibliographical works, and historical reports, such as al-Ṭabarī's *History*, al-Mas'ūdī's *Meadows of Gold*, and al-Iṣfahānī's *Book of Songs*, indicates that this image requires serious reconsideration. On the one hand, the institution of the harem, with its inner-quarter (*andaruni*) structure, strict spatial segregation, the prevalence of female slaves and concubines, and increasing restrictions on women's dress, created intensified mechanisms of surveillance and control over women (2). On the other hand, there is considerable evidence of women's agency in extra-familial spheres: attendance at the teaching circles of jurists and hadith transmitters, issuing legal opinions, drafting endowment deeds, managing endowed properties, engaging in commercial transactions in the marketplace, commissioning and even composing poetry, and, in some cases, exercising influence in courtly relations (3) and political decision-making, as in the cases of al-Khayzuran and Zubaydah. This duality raises a theoretical issue in the historical sociology of women in Islamic civilization: how can one speak simultaneously of increasing restrictions and the significant presence of women in the public sphere?

The present study, using a historical-analytical method and emphasizing the distinction between “normative structures” (juridical and ethical texts) and “concrete actions” (historical reports), seeks to identify, classify, and explain patterns of women's participation in Abbasid society. The analysis of this issue, in addition to re-reading Abbasid social history, contributes to theorizing the relationship among religion, power, and gender in premodern Islamic societies (2).

## Research Foundations

Classical historiography of Abbasid civilization has largely focused on the scientific, philosophical, and literary achievements of men, while the position of women has been represented marginally and often through general statements about the harem and seclusion. However, a systematic examination of primary sources from the eighth to thirteenth centuries CE presents a more complex picture filled with apparent contradictions: on the one hand, the expansion of the harem institution, strict spatial segregation, and restrictions on women's dress; and on the other hand, women's presence in scholarly gatherings, endowment and commercial activities, and even political influence within the court. The main problem of the study is to determine what objective and tangible roles and activities women performed during the Abbasid Caliphate in the scientific, literary, economic, and political spheres (4), and to what extent these roles were shaped by variables such as social class, ethnic origin (Iranian, Arab, or Turkish), and the type of relationship with the institution of the caliphate. The central question is: what were the most important patterns of female agency in this period, and what effect did the harem system have on the possibility or quality of women's social presence? How did the role-taking of court women (5) differ from that of women of the middle and lower classes, and which Abbasid caliphs provided the greatest context for women's participation? It appears that Abbasid women were not entirely passive subjects, but actors with limited yet effective agency in both hidden and, at times, visible layers of society (6). With the consolidation of the Iranian-Abbasid bureaucratic system, restrictions on women increased, but at the same time, opportunities emerged for informal influence within the context of the inner quarters and the harem. Moreover, a meaningful distinction can be expected between the roles of court women, who had access to sources of power, and ordinary women, who relied on scholarship, trade, or endowment activities (7).

The main objective of the study is to provide a historical–analytical re-reading of the position of Abbasid women beyond Orientalist and traditional-juridical stereotypes and to classify patterns of women’s activities in four domains: scholarship, literature, economy, and politics. In addition, explaining the relationship between the harem structure and female agency, as well as identifying the impact of ethnic and class origins on the degree of participation, are considered subsidiary objectives. The research background shows that studies such as *Women in the Islamic World* and *Women and Gender in Islam* have mostly adopted a macro-level perspective and focused on later centuries. In Iran, Azarnoush and Baghdadi have addressed the Abbasid period, but they have neglected a coherent analysis of female agency (8). The main gap is the absence of an integrated study based on primary sources that distinguishes the four domains of activity and considers the variable of class (7). The present research is conducted using a historical–analytical method and library-based sources, including al-Ṭabarī’s *History*, al-Mas’ūdī’s *Meadows of Gold*, al-Iṣfahānī’s *Book of Songs*, Ibn al-Nadīm’s *al-Fihrist*, and Ibn Qutaybah’s *‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār*, as well as reliable contemporary studies. The data will be processed through qualitative content analysis and categorization based on the four scientific, literary, economic, and political domains. The study seeks, by distinguishing between normative structures (juridical and ethical texts) and concrete actions (historical reports), to present a balanced and documented image of women’s social position in one of the most sensitive periods of Islamic civilization (9).

## Research Method

The present study is conducted using a historical–analytical method and relies on library-based sources. Primary data are collected from first-hand sources of the Abbasid period, including al-Ṭabarī’s *History*, al-Mas’ūdī’s *Meadows of Gold*, al-Iṣfahānī’s *Book of Songs*, Ibn al-Nadīm’s *al-Fihrist*, and Ibn Qutaybah’s *‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār*. Reliable contemporary studies in the field of women’s social history are also used. The method of data analysis is qualitative and based on content categorization; accordingly, historical reports related to women’s activities are classified into four domains—scientific, literary, economic, and political—and are then examined and interpreted through a critical approach and by distinguishing between normative structures and concrete actions.

## Findings

In the field of scholarship and education, Abbasid women had a presence that went beyond the common perception. Biographical and prosopographical sources mention women who attended the teaching circles of jurists and hadith transmitters, transmitted hadith, and even reached the level of issuing legal opinions. Among them were Āmina bint al-Ḥusayn and Fāṭima al-Naysābūriyya, from whom many male students learned hadith. The informal educational system in homes and mosques made learning possible for women from the urban middle and upper classes. However, with the consolidation of Hanafi and Shafi’i juridical structures in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE, this scholarly presence was gradually restricted and pushed back into the private sphere and toward the education of women by other women. In addition, trained singing slave-girls (*qiyān*) were skilled in reading, writing, music, and poetry, but they had no position in the formal scholarly hierarchy and largely functioned as cultural commodities in the court and aristocratic households (10).

In the sphere of literature and poetry, Abbasid women were not only consumers of texts but also producers of them. The most prominent figure was ‘Ulayya bint al-Mahdī, the daughter of Caliph al-Mahdī and sister of al-Hādī and Hārūn al-Rashīd, who left behind a poetic corpus and was also regarded as a literary critic. Her poems included panegyric, elegy, and satire, and sources such as *al-Aghānī* repeatedly refer to her literary intelligence and talent.

In addition to her, other poetesses such as 'Akrafa and Shāriya, who were poet-concubines of the court, were also active (11). What is important, however, is that women's literary production was generally recorded through male narration, and their direct voices have rarely reached us. Court literary circles during the periods of al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim sometimes admitted women poets, but this presence was always accompanied by surveillance and moral judgment. Women's poetry often had romantic or elegiac themes and generally avoided political and philosophical subjects, which itself reflects the limitations imposed on their sphere of action (12).

In the economic sphere, there is considerable evidence of female agency. Abbasid women had the rights of ownership, inheritance, purchase and sale, endowment, and management of their own properties, and they used these rights in concrete ways. Zubaydah bint Ja'far, the wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd, not only built caravanserais and water reservoirs along the route to Mecca but also managed extensive estates and devoted their income to charitable activities. Surviving endowment documents from the Abbasid period show that charitable women endowed mosques, hospitals, and schools and sometimes served as trustees of the endowment themselves. At the popular level, women engaged in the marketplace in the buying and selling of textiles, perfumes, and jewelry, although juridical reports indicate repeated restrictions on women's presence in the marketplace and the requirement of being accompanied by a male guardian. Social class was the principal determining factor: courtly and wealthy women engaged in extensive economic activity through agents and administrators, whereas poor women were mostly involved in small-scale domestic occupations such as spinning and weaving (13).

In the political sphere, women's roles were mainly informal, hidden, and based on kinship or concubinage relations with the caliph. Al-Khayzuran, the mother of Hārūn al-Rashīd, is considered the most influential woman in Abbasid political history. After the death of al-Hādī, her elder son, and Hārūn's accession to the caliphate, she played a direct role in court decision-making, and historical sources report that she advised Hārūn on the appointment and dismissal of governors. Zubaydah also played a key role in the succession conflict between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn (14). Conversely, women of the harem, using their close relations with the caliph and eunuch servants, were involved in palace conspiracies and political assassinations. However, no woman attained an official position in the caliphal system, such as vizierate, governorship, or judgeship, and their power was always defined in the shadow of male authority. Interestingly, women of Iranian origin in the Abbasid court, particularly those connected to the Barmakid and Nawbakhtī families, were able to acquire more political influence than Arab women, which indicates the difference between patterns of power in the Iranshahri tradition and the Arab-tribal tradition (15).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that women during the Abbasid Caliphate, contrary to the common Orientalist stereotype of absolute seclusion and complete passivity, possessed limited but real and identifiable agency in scientific, literary, economic, and political spheres. Their presence in hadith and jurisprudential circles, poetry composition, management of endowed properties, commercial transactions, and even influence in courtly relations presents a complex and dual image of women's social position. However, this presence was conditioned by three main factors. The first was social class, which was the most important determining variable; courtly and wealthy women had far greater opportunities than ordinary women and slave women. The second was ethnic origin, since women of Iranian origin, due to the Iranshahri bureaucratic tradition and the earlier experience of power in the Sasanian court, demonstrated greater political and cultural influence. The third was the type of relationship with the institution of the caliphate, which was defined through marriage, motherhood, or concubinage. The harem system

was also a two-sided phenomenon: on the one hand, it functioned as an instrument of control and surveillance over women; on the other hand, it provided a space for the development of informal female power networks and the circulation of information. One of the most important conclusions is that there was a meaningful gap between normative structures, namely juridical and ethical texts that emphasized restriction and veiling, and concrete actions, namely historical reports of women's presence in the public sphere. Ultimately, Abbasid social history without consideration of women's agency would remain incomplete and one-sided, and a critical re-reading of primary sources through a gender-based approach is not merely a theoretical choice but a methodological necessity for the historiography of Islamic civilization.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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