

Hajj, Women's Patronage of: Contemporary Practice
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Women's participation in the Hajj has risen dramatically in the last forty years, particular among younger, better educated, and more urbanized groups. The trend is remarkably uniform at the global level and across virtually every region and nation. Between 1968 and 1993, the proportion of women among all overseas pilgrims increased from about 34 per cent to 43 per cent. In several countries—Indonesia, Singapore, Lebanon, and Palestine—women comprised the majority of Hajjis year after year.

Nonetheless, large disparities remain in female Hajj rates not only between countries but within them. Variations in women's pilgrimage are closely related to differences in education, income, and culture. Female education is a strong predictor of women's pilgrimage. Even primary school education—in either secular or Islamic institutions—expands young women's horizons and opportunities sufficiently to encourage high levels of pilgrimage. Income also promotes pilgrimage for women as for men, but women's rates are especially high in communities with strong traditions of female land ownership and with local commercial networks that are dominated by women merchants.

Patriarchal cultures continue to suppress women's pilgrimage, but patriarchy's effects vary enormously in different ecologies and economic environments. The greatest contrasts appear between cosmopolitan maritime zones, inland agricultural economies, and isolated mountain regions. Women Hajjis are most common in coastal regions with strong traditions of maritime commerce. Lower pilgrimage rates prevail in inland agricultural regions with provincial capitals and villages often sending more women than richer metropolitan centers. Women are least likely to make the Hajj if they live in nomadic or mountainous regions, particularly if they belong to minority ethnic and tribal communities.

In Turkey, women regularly comprise the majority of Hajjis in the western coastal regions around the Sea of Marmara and along the shores of the Aegean Sea. These areas have the highest income, the greatest levels of female literacy, and the largest numbers of European immigrants. In Central Anatolia, female pilgrims are most common along the Mediterranean coast and least common near the more mountainous and isolated districts of the Black Sea. Eastern Turkey has by far the lowest frequency of women Hajjis, particularly the Kurdish provinces in the southeast where poverty, illiteracy, and ethnic segregation combine to severely limit women's abilities to engage in any type of travel except for permanent migration to big cities and foreign countries where job prospects are more promising.

In Pakistan, ethnic and economic differences create contrasting environments for women who want to make the Hajj. In the booming towns and villages of Punjab in northeast Pakistan, most pilgrims are women, particularly where Islamic primary and secondary schools for girls are widespread. Female pilgrimage is also common in the southern cities of Karachi and Hyderabad where educated northern Indian migrants are most concentrated. The lowest levels of female pilgrimage appear among the tribal societies of the Pashtuns in the northwest and the Balouchis in the southwest along the mountainous borders with Afghanistan and Iran. Pilgrimage is least popular for both men and women in the rural districts of Sindh where feudalism, tribalism, and poverty are the most intense.

In Indonesia, women Hajjis frequently make up the majority nationwide with particularly high rates in the capital city, Jakarta, and in the maritime trading centers of the Outer Islands. Female pilgrimage closely follows historical routes of international commerce—along the Makassar Straits in western and southern Sulawesi and eastern Kalimantan, near the Straits of Malacca in eastern and central Sumatra, and in the smaller islands of Nusa Tenggara to the east of Java. Female Hajjis are also dominant in Western Sumatra where the Minangkabau community retains long traditions of matrilineal inheritance, including land ownership.

Nigerian women have vastly different opportunities to make the Hajj depending on their ethnic background. Women are the majority of Hajjis among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, especially in central Lagos and Ibadan where female business networks control much of the retail trade. Yoruba men frequently delay their own pilgrimages until they have first saved enough money to send their mothers to Mecca. Only then do they make the journey themselves and whenever possible they also take their wives and daughters. In contrast, the Hausa regions of northern Nigeria have consistently lower levels of female pilgrimage even in the wealthier cities. In central Nigeria—also known as the Middle Belt—where Christians and Muslims live side by side in relatively equal numbers, there are competing pilgrimage campaigns to Jerusalem and Mecca which boost female Hajj participation as well. This is the center of Nigeria's most violent and tenacious religious conflicts, and the pattern of dueling pilgrimages merely aggravates the problem.

Many aspects of the Hajj help to break down gender biases by strengthening the equality of the sexes and highlighting women's contributions to the development of Islam. Women are explicitly prohibited from veiling or covering their faces during the pilgrimage. They usually wear normal loose-fitting dress rather than the distinctive white towels that men don for the major rituals. At night, women sleep in rooms with their families or with other women, but throughout the day they are in close and casual contact with strangers from every corner of the world—both men and women—in ways that would be discouraged in daily life back home.

One of the most emotional and symbolically charged rites of the pilgrimage is the *sa'y*, in which Hajjis reenact the drama of Hagar, the wife of Ibrahim and the mother of Isma'il. Imitating Hagar's desperation after being left alone in the desert with her infant son, pilgrims run back and forth between two hills searching for water. Afterwards, like Hagar, they drink from the blessed well of Zamzam which the angel Gabriel revealed to her just as she was tempted to abandon hope of survival. The famous Iranian writer, 'Ali Shari'ati, portrays Hagar as the central heroine not only of the Hajj but of monotheism in general. For Shari'ati, Hagar is an icon of struggle, faith, and liberation that every pilgrim should emulate during the Hajj and in their own communities where they should continue her fight for equality and justice.

References

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