

**Emma Miljković**

University of Belgrade

Faculty of Philology

ema.miljkovic@fil.bg.ac.rs

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**Saeed Safari**

University of Belgrade

Faculty of Philology

saeed.safari@fil.bg.ac.rs

**FEMINISM AND LIBRARIES IN THE MODERN  
ISLAMIC COUNTRIES:  
EXAMPLES OF IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA AND  
AZERBAIJAN**

**Summary:** Bearing in mind the importance of the libraries not only in education but in enlightenment in general, this paper has the aim to show the different standards in usage of the libraries in the modern Islamic world. As the example have been chosen three countries with majority of the Muslim population, but with completely different attitude toward women and usage, as well the management of the libraries. The usage of the libraries could be used as paradigm for the position of women in these countries.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Libraries, Islamic Countries.

## Introduction

According to Professor Dr. Darko Tanasković, the *ayats* of Qur'an that determine the legal situation are the most numerous ones related to women, while there are significantly fewer from at least equal major areas as worship, justice, commerce and community management. Obviously, regulating the status of a woman in the newly formed community of believers was one of the Prophet's priorities<sup>1</sup>. When a woman is mentioned in the Qur'an in a favorable context, she is only spoken of as a pious, obedient wife and responsible mother whose greatest earthly role is the birth and upbringing of good Muslims, while the woman out of that context has not been mentioned.<sup>2</sup>

The entire Qur'anic *Surah* is dedicated to women and is called "Women" (ar. *An-Nisa*'). Among other things, this *Surah* gives men the right to punish their wives by beating if they think they deserve it by their disobedience, where disobedience is considered to be a woman's denial in fulfilling marital duties according to man wishes. This puts the woman directly in a lower and subordinate position compared to the man, who is given the freedom to judge his wife's behavior on his own and then to punish her for it.<sup>3</sup>

Much can be deduced regarding the status of a woman in Islam by the female dress code. The clothing that a woman is obliged to wear, to follow the Shariah rules, has been considered as protector of her virtue and innocence, by concealing her feminine attributes that could encourage men to awaken illicit lust. Women's beauty and sexuality are a potential source of confusion. Very often,

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1 Darko Tanasković. *Islam: Dogma i život* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruka, 2018), 353.

2 Tanasković, *Islam: Dogma i život*, 350.

3 Tanasković, *Islam: Dogma i život*, 345, 346

covering women for those reasons is accompanied by confinement and restriction of their freedom. Their freedom of movement is minimized, only in the presence of a close male relative.<sup>4</sup> A woman can be exposed only to the views of her closest male relatives and her husband.

Marriage, according to Shariah law, is in principle a life-long contract between a man and a woman, which they enter with mutual consent. *Mehr* is a mandatory part that a man needs to provide in order to commit to marriage at all. It is a deposit that belongs directly to the woman and in a way protects her and provides her property security in case of divorce, death of spouse and alike. Since it is the man's duty to take care of the woman, he is the one who provides the income and manages the property, and if the woman finds herself in some disadvantage, *mehr* is what gives her independence and financial security because it does not enter into common property, it is already permanently in the possession of the woman<sup>5</sup>.

In Islam, divorce is considered a necessary evil, and it is only allowed if there are good reasons for doing so. Women are not sufficiently protected in the case of a divorce which is something mostly decided by the man and in that matter the woman depends on the man's will. However, what most often leads to misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims is the notion of polygamy, which is justified and allowed in the Quran, but it is mentioned only once, when it is emphasized that a man is allowed to take more women, but not more out of four, and only if all of them can be treated equally and given equal attention, rights and gifts. In practice, however, it is precisely the inability to treat everyone equally that causes many problems. Women are thus oppressed and sidelined.

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4 Tanasković, *Islam: Dogma i život* 373-374,379

5 Tanasković, *Islam: Dogma i život*, 361-362

However, this is only one indication that a woman in the Quran is worth less than a man. The issue of inheritance and testimony is no less an indicator.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to the distribution of inheritance, male heirs have a double share compared to women. If a woman does not give birth to child or preferably children, half of her inheritance belongs to her husband and only a quarter to her. The same can be applied to the testimony system, where the testimony of a man is worth as much as the testimony of two women. It is clearly emphasized that a woman is not worth as much as a man, but that she represents half of his value (Ibid). All these differences that are shown in the Quran, depending on the country we are researching, are differently interpreted, so the real situation is that the women in some Islamic countries are in a better position than women in some other, also Muslim countries.

In that sense, the conditions for education, in which the usage of libraries plays one of the most important roles, are not regulated on the same basis throughout the modern Islamic world. Although it might seem at the first glance that it depends on the (non)usage of the *Sharia* law, it is not really the case. That is the reason why for the purpose of this research had been chosen three Islamic countries, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Republic of Azerbaijan which have completely different policy of women education and their involvement in the educational process, management and usage of libraries as the precondition for better education.

### **Libraries in Iran**

Iran has a long tradition in developing libraries, which historically could be grouped in three eras:

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6 Tanasković, *Islam: Dogma i život*, 366.

1. Libraries in Ancient Persia: the most important one was the Academy of Gundishapur in western Iran (Sasanid Empire 500 AD);
2. Libraries in Islamic Period: they were mainly Seminary (school of theology) and Mosque Libraries (between 8th to 14th centuries)
3. Modern Libraries since 1960s: four groups of libraries were established: (Private libraries, Public Libraries, National Libraries, Digital Libraries).<sup>7</sup>

As emphasized in the paper under the title „The libraries on the Silk Road“, Iran as a homeland for ancient civilizations has a long tradition in preserving the written works and the history of writing in the Persian Empire dates back to four thousand years ago. Library and librarianship in Iran has developed through the history, based on documents, in Achaemenid Empire, the Apadana Palace Library contained thousands of Clay tablet, used as a writing medium, which could indicate the old tradition of Iranian librarianship. The most well-known library of the ancient Persia belonged to the Academy of Gondishapur, also known as the Jondishapur University, in the era of Sasanian Empire. After Islam, libraries were based in the islamic schools, such as Nezamiyeh, Madrese, Beyt Al-hekme, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Despite of such a long tradition, women are involved in libraries only in the modern era. In Islamic Republic of Iran (where the principles of the *shari`a* law are legally respected), women are

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7 Saeed Safari, “Iranian Libraries along the Silk Road,” у MELISSA - *Museums, Ethics, Library and Information Science, Studies, Archives*, ур. Александра Вранеш, Љиљана Марковић (Београд: Филолошки факултет, 2018), 41-47.

8 Safari, *Iranian Libraries along the Silk Road*, 43.

equal with the men in their right for education and usage of the libraries.

Before taking specifically about the women and libraries, the general situation of women in Iran will be examined. Even more, the director of the National Library of Iran is a woman. Also, there are not any limitations for education of the female children, on the contrary, the women in Iran are highly educated and are keeping managing positions at the government, universities and in public and private sectors.

Iran before the Islamic revolution in 1979 was semi-secular country, so women got some high ranking positions in the government as well as active role at the society, (like the minister of Education –Farokh Parsa was a women. The very first Persian women newspaper which was published during 1911 to 1912 named ‘Danesh’ (znanija). the newspaper was published after constitutional revolution (1905-11) which let to establishment of the parliament. The editor-in-chief was a woman, named Mrs dr Kahal<sup>9</sup>.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, women got some restrictions, because of the Islamic Shia rules (which is to some extent different with the *Shari's* law). The limitation is mostly limited to *Hijab*, which is considered as a “dress code in public” otherwise, women kept their rights for serving an active role at the society, like to educate, to work, to be in high ranking positions at the government. Women were involved in government, and today three women in the cabinet are acting as Vice President (Vice for Legal affair, Vice for Protection of environment, Vice for

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9 Pari Sheikholeslami, *Zanan-e Rooznamehnegar va Andishmandan-e Iran* (Tehran: Zarrin Publication, 1972), 172-173.

women and family affair)<sup>10</sup>. Women in Iran could be elected as ambassadors, University Rectors and some other state directors or managers.

As for the women and libraries, there is no limitation for using libraries. As for the study rooms/saloons, there are some which women are separated, but mainly are used by both males and females. There are some “Libraries Only for women”. These libraries are run and use only by women and men are not allowed to use them, as an example:

- “The Specialized Library of vice presidency for women and family affairs”; (<http://women.gov.ir/>).<sup>11</sup>
- “The library of women research center”; (<https://cws.ut.ac.ir/>)<sup>12</sup>.

The “Women Only Library” also could be find in religious cities such as Qom and Mashhad, which are center of religious studies in Iran. To highlight the role of women in leadership at libraries, we need to know that at the moment (2019), the director of National Library is a woman, who is a professor at university as well: Ashraf Borudjerdi, PhD (<http://www.nlai.ir/>)<sup>13</sup>.

In overall, we can conclude that gender is not a limitation for using libraries in Iran, however, women sometimes (NOT always) are separated in study/ reading rooms which means they have their own special space for using the library.

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10 Government I.R.Iran, “Government of I.R.Iran,” <https://dolat.ir/>.

11 Vice President of Women and Family Affairs, “Government of I.R.Iran, <https://women.gov.ir/>.

12 Center for Women and Family Studies, ”University of Tehran,” <https://cws.ut.ac.ir/>

13 National Library of Iran, “Ministry of Culture,” <http://www.nlai.ir/>

## Libraries in the Kingdome of Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, the women are not equal in their right regarding the education and usage of libraries. There exist exclusively women libraries, and they still can not use the one that are used by their male colleagues.

In Kingdom of Saudi Arabia every aspect of life has been regulated according to *Sharia* law. As Islam is the official religion of the country putting emphasize on the importance of knowledge both males and females are encouraged to study. The Wahabism as form of Islam practicing in Saudi Arabia, has resulted in segregation in education as well in gender sex segregation in almost aspect every aspect of life. However, the things has begun to change in the last years. In Saudi Arabia, there have been many improvements on the field of women education and inclusion of the economic life of the country. However, those changes have not been fast, and many things has to be done before it could be said that some form of gender equality has been reached.

As stated by Nouf Alsuwaida<sup>14</sup> in her article “*Women’s education in Saudi Arabia*”<sup>15</sup>: “*more recently Saudi Arabian woman have been labeled as homemakers irrespective of their educational backgrounds, career interests, and qualifications. The professional world only slightly accommodates for their interest, as women are largely restrict to teaching and social work position in all female settings. The true propose of academia is to prepare citizens for productive lives, but Saudi society blatantly ignores women’s contribution to the advancement of humanity. Unfortunately, educational philosophy favors the gender binary, and society avoids change with a constant*

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14 New Mexico State University, USA.

15 Alsuwaida, Nouf. “Women’s Education in Saudi Arabia.” *Journal of International Education Research (JIER)* 12, no. 4 (2016): 111–118.



*implementation of Institute instant institutionalized norms. Today, Saudi Arabian women are relentlessly pursuing higher education; their transformational efforts would be even more worthwhile if the government was inclined to help them. According to the ministry of higher education (2010) , women in today's world are seeking to become active members of society where their roles are defined in terms of what they can offer for their country's economic, social and cultural development”<sup>16</sup>.*

*According to the official site information, The Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman<sup>17</sup> University in Riyadh is one of universities in The Kingdome of Saudi Arabia dedicated today to the education of females. The University had been has been established in 1970 and was the first educational college for girls. After that, that various colleges has been established successfully until it reached the number of 102 colleges ranging from University, intermediate and community colleges distributed to 72 Saudi cities including 600,000 female students. In Riyadh only there have been 6 colleges such as College of education for literally sections, College of education for scientific sections, College of teacher education, College of social work, College of home management and College of Art. In 206 The Royal decree was issued to establish the first University for girls under the supervision of ministry of higher education comprising the six colleges that are currently located in Riyadh after restructuring them, in addition to establishment of several new colleges to serve development of the women education. In 2007 the University has*

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16 Nouf Alsuwaida, “Women’s Education in Saudi Arabia,” *Journal of International Education Research (JIER)* 12, no. 4 (March 2016): pp. 111-118.

17 Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman has been a sister of the founder of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia king Abdul Aziz Bin Abdulrahman.

*been activated through appointing doctor al Jawhara bin Fahad al Saud as the first rector (<https://www.pnu.edu.sa/>).<sup>18</sup>*

During her professional stay in Saudi Arabia, Marta Deyrup, Ph.D<sup>19</sup>, has visited the Library of the Princess Nourah University, and describes it as such:

„On Wednesday, I was driven across campus to the new library to meet the departmental heads who had attended the seminar. This was first time of my not only meeting these women but seeing them as well. I could only hear in the background female voices talking and working together while I was teaching. Once I got beyond that door, I saw a magnificent towering atrium—six or seven stories high—made of glass, marble and steel. The images I posted last time give a sense of the architectural style and grandeur. This recently completed library had not yet been opened by the minister of education and everything was new and untouched. The building was empty of students. Most striking was the fact that there were no books to be seen except for a shelf of inspirational works on women in the Islamic world, which could be checked out. The library’s

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18 “Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University”, <https://www.pnu.edu.sa/en/pages/home.aspx>

19 Marta Mestrovic Deyrup is Professor/Librarian at Seton Hall University. She has written and lectured extensively on information literacy and was the co-recipient of a three-year university grant to implement information literacy across the curriculum. She is a library representative on the University’s core curriculum committee. Marta is the editor of *Digital Scholarship* (Routledge: 2008) and the author of many professional publications. She received her MLS from Rutgers University and PhD from Columbia University. <https://members.educause.edu/marta-deyrupt>; Marta Deyrup currently works at the University Libraries, Seton Hall University. Marta does research in Information Science and Slavic Literatures. Her most recent book is *A Librarian’s Guide to professional publication*. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marta\\_Deyrup](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marta_Deyrup)

collections are stored and are retrieved by a robotic delivery system, much like the one at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Princess Nora's library spaces are earmarked for future activities like graphic design, academic computing, medical models, and so forth. I felt disoriented as I had in Las Vegas, though probably less so, since the UNLV was redesigning an existing space rather than creating a new one and you still felt the presence of print books like ghosts in the background. Meeting my colleagues and talking to them as professionals in a space designed and demarcated as "female" was a surprise. The experience was positive, clannish, intimate... I am not sure how to describe it."<sup>20</sup>

### **Libraries in the Republic of Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan is the example of the completely secular Islamic state, which can be explained by the fact that for the decades they were part of the Soviet Union and still had Russian schools and educational system. There are no gender limitations in Azerbaijani libraries, or other educational institutions. As in Iran, in Azerbaijan women are posted in many leading positions in the educational institutions, like libraries, schools, universities, etc. The libraries in Azerbaijan are divided into two groups: public and non-public ones.

The most important one, is the National Library of Azerbaijan (az. *Milli Katabxana*) founded in 1922, but officially started with its work in 1923. This library is the biggest and the most modern one in the whole region of Caucasus. When the library was created 5000 copies of literature were donated to the library from the fonts off Imperial technical society's Baku branch and Baku public

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20 Marta Deyrup, "A Librarian's Visit to Audi Arabia", February 21, 2015, "<https://blogs.shu.edu/riyadh/>

society. Since that time, the has been developing rapidly. From the beginning the library was open for both male and female users and the first to Reading Hole in the library was open in 1927, again with no gender limitations. Right now there are 24 departments in the library and almost half of the head departments are women. The fund of the library consists of 4 604 133 items.<sup>21</sup>

Since this paper has been written in the time of pandemia of COVID19, it is interesting to mention one project of the National Library of Azerbaijan, dedicated to the great woman, medical doctor, scientist Zarifa Aliyeva, accomplished at those difficult times in spring 2020. The National Library presented an electronic database “Zarifa Aliyeva” in virtual mode (access available via the link)<sup>22</sup>. The project has been accomplished in the honor of birthday of prominent ophthalmologist, academician Zarifa Aliyeva, on 28th April 1923.

Electronic database “Zarifa Aliyeva” prepared by the staff of the National Library is dedicated to the life and work of this distinguished Azerbaijani scientist. The database contains documents on the life and activity of the Zarifa Aliyeva, books, scientific articles, books and articles about her, works of the academician in world libraries, a copy of books of Zarifa Aliyeva in fiction, documents on perpetuation of Zarifa Aliyeva’s name, photo albums, video galleries and other documents. Zarifa Aliyeva, a prominent Azerbaijani scientist, doctor of medical sciences, professor, honored scientist, full member of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Azerbaijan, has made a significant

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21 National Library of Azerbaijan, “National Library of Azerbaijan”, <http://anl.az/>

22 Electronic database Zarifa Aliyeva, “National Library of Azerbaijan”, <http://anl.az/el/emb/ZE/index.html>

contribution to the development of medical science in the country. Her scientific-pedagogical and public activity had a strong impact on the growth of a new generation of doctors and the development of ophthalmology in Azerbaijan. As stated in the announcement of the project, the glorious life of academician Zarifa Aliyeva, a great woman who gave light to the eyes and warmth to the hearts, is a lesson of life and morality, a school of perfection and wisdom for every citizen of Azerbaijan. According to the public information available at the website of the National Library of Azerbaijan<sup>23</sup>,



Front page of the electronic database “Zarifa Aliyeva”,  
National Library of Azerbaijan

23 National Library of Azerbaijan, “National Library of Azerbaijan”, <http://anl.az>

nowadays, the traditions she left behind are worthily continued by her students and relatives and the project has been described with the following hashtags: #homecare #SayNotoCovid #creativeaz. Overall, this can be considered as a good example of the importance and value of women in the field of librarianship in the republic of Azerbaijan.

## Conclusion

In this article, we reviewed the background history and the general situation of libraries with the focus on the role of women in the three Islamic countries of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan. By comparing some of the available information, it can be concluded that the role of women in the management of libraries and the use of them in these three Islamic countries relatively depends on their presence at the community level. In Iran and Azerbaijan, it is possible for women to participate in the management levels of the society, and therefore, this is clearly visible in the management of libraries and free use of them without gender limitation, in Saudi Arabia, however, the possibility is limited to the women only libraries.

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**Ема Миљковић**

Универзитет у Београду  
Филолошки факултет  
ema.miljkovic@fil.bg.ac.rs

**Саид Сафари**

Универзитет у Београду  
Филолошки факултет  
saeed.safari@fil.bg.ac.rs

## **ФЕМИНИЗАМ И БИБЛИОТЕКЕ У МОДЕРНИМ ИСЛАМСКИМ ЗЕМЉАМА: ПРИМЕРИ ИРАНА, САУДИЈСКЕ АРАБИЈЕ И АЗЕРБЕЈЦАНА**

**Сажетак:** Услови за образовање, у којима коришћење библиотека игра једну од најважнијих улога, нису регулисани на истој основи у савременом исламском свету. Иако се на први поглед може чинити да то зависи од (не) употребе шеријатског закона, то заиста није случај. То је разлог зашто су за потребе овог истраживања одабране три исламске земље, Иран, Саудијска Арабија и Азербејџан, које имају потпуно различиту политику образовања жена и њихово укључивање у образовни процес, управљање и коришћење библиотека као предуслов за боље образовање. У Исламској Републици Иран (где су законски поштовани принципи шеријатског закона), жене су изједначене са мушкарцима који имају право на образовање и коришћење библиотека. Штавише, директор Националне библиотеке у Ирану је жена. Такође, не постоје никаква ограничења



у образовању женске деце, напротив, жене у Ирану су високо образоване и држе руководеће положаје у влади, универзитетима, у јавном и приватном сектору. Са друге стране, у Саудијској Арабији жене нису једнаке у правима на образовање и употребу библиотека. Постоје искључиво женске библиотеке, а оне још увек не могу да користе ону коју користе њихове колеге мушкарци. Азербејџан је пример потпуно секуларне исламске државе, што се може објаснити чињеницом да су деценијама биле део Совјетског Савеза и још увек имале руске школе и образовни систем. Не постоје полна ограничења у азербејџанским библиотекама или другим образовним установама. Као и у Ирану, и у Азербејџану су жене постављене на многим водећим позицијама у образовним установама, као што су библиотеке, школе, универзитети, итд.

**Кључне речи:** феминизам, библиотеке, исламске земље.