

**An Exploration of Gender Roles, Sexuality, and Psychosocial Cultural Dynamics in the Umayyad Caliphate of Medieval Islamic Spain: An Analysis of Normative Constructs, Social Stratification, and the Evolving Perceptions of Feminine and Masculine Identities in the Society of Al-Andalus**

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### **Abstract**

This paper delves into the multifaceted society of Al-Andalus, a beacon of cultural and intellectual prowess in medieval Islamic history, with a specific focus on the constructs of gender roles and sexuality. It aims to unravel the complex interrelations between cultural diversity, religious doctrines, and societal norms that shaped the perceptions and realities of women's roles and sexual practices in Al-Andalus. Utilizing a range of historical, literary, and architectural analyses, this study explores how these elements collectively influenced and were influenced by the social and cultural identity of Al-Andalus. The research highlights the nuanced and dynamic nature of gender roles, challenging stereotypical perceptions and underscoring the instrumental role women played in both the public and private spheres. The paper also examines the impact of architectural designs and urban planning on societal interactions and norms, particularly in spaces like harems and public baths. By offering a comprehensive view of gender and sexuality in Al-Andalus, this study not only contributes to a deeper understanding of medieval Islamic societies but also provides a critical perspective on contemporary discussions about gender and sexuality. The findings reveal that Al-Andalus, often celebrated for its intellectual and cultural achievements, was also a society where gender roles and sexual practices were complex, diverse, and integral to its social fabric.

*Keywords:* Al-Andalus, Gender Roles, Medieval Islamic Society, Harems, Architecture

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## **Introduction**

Al-Andalus, also known as Muslim ruled Spain, existed from the 8th to the 15th century in the Iberian Peninsula. The study of its historical and cultural context is essential for a comprehensive understanding of society, gender, and sexuality in the medieval Iberian Peninsula. The society of Al-Andalus was shaped by its religious and cultural practices, which were heavily influenced by Islam. Islam played a significant role in shaping the cultural practices related to sexuality in Al-Andalus, as evident in various aspects such as literature, philosophy, religion, medicine, architecture, and law (Álvarez de Morales, 2010, pp. 43-48).

The historical and cultural context of Al-Andalus provides valuable insights into the society, gender, and sexuality of the medieval Iberian Peninsula. The influence of Islam on the cultural practices related to sexuality is evident in various aspects such as literature, philosophy, religion, medicine, and law. By studying this we gain a deeper understanding of the societal attitudes and norms surrounding gender and sexuality in Al-Andalus. The cultural context of Al-Andalus plays a significant role in shaping societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality, highlighting the importance of studying historical and cultural contexts to understand societal issues better. It provides a lens through which one can analyze and appreciate the complexities of human experiences and the impact of cultural and Islamic influences on societal perspectives.

This essay explores how the Islamic culture and religion of Al-Andalus uniquely shaped its gender roles and sexuality from the 8th to the 15th centuries. It argues that the interplay

between Islamic doctrines, cultural diversity, and societal norms in Al-Andalus resulted in a complex and dynamic manifestation of gender identities and sexual practices, challenging conventional perceptions and significantly influencing the socio-cultural fabric of the medieval Iberian Peninsula

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a nuanced approach, examining gender roles and sexuality in Al-Andalus during the Umayyad Caliphate, guided by the principle that "Gender is not the study of what is evident, it is an analysis of how what is evident came to be" (Mikdashi, 2012). The focus centers on the interplay of gender and sexuality within specific historical and cultural contexts, acknowledging the interconnectedness between individual and societal dynamics. Analysis in this research avoids normative biases and broad generalizations, aligning with the understanding that "the ungendered body does not exist" (Mikdashi, 2012). Recognition of the complexity of influences extends beyond religious factors, echoing the notion that "Islam may not be the most important factor, or even a particularly important factor when studying gender in Muslim majority countries or communities" (Mikdashi, 2012). Through this multifaceted methodology, the aim is to provide a historically informed understanding of gender dynamics in medieval Islamic Spain, while being attentive to broader socio-political, cultural, and psychological influences shaping these norms.

### **Gender Roles and their Societal Impacts**

Gender roles and their societal impacts have been subjects of interest, especially in regard to Al-Andalus. By applying a psychoanalytical lens to the topic, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding gender roles in different societies and how they developed. In the context of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, we find an insightful perspective

on how these gender roles and societal norms are transmitted and perpetuated across generations. According to Bussey & Bandura (1984), a significant portion of learning occurs through modeling, where individuals emulate behaviors they observe in others, especially those who are considered role models. This process of learning by observation plays a critical role in the formation and reinforcement of gender roles. Children, from a young age, are exposed to various models in their family, community, and through media, from whom they learn and internalize gendered behaviors and expectations. In the context of Al-Andalus, much of this media comes from oral literature and glorified heroes (Gilmore, 1983). These learned behaviors manifest in societal norms and cultural practices, thus continuing the cycle of traditional gender roles.

### ***The Social and Political Role of Women in Al-Andalus***

**Women's role in Andalusian marriages.** In the historical context of women's rights in society, the ability for women to choose their own partners has been a significant departure from traditional gender stereotypes. In many societies, women were expected to adhere to arranged marriages, where their partners were chosen for them based on societal and familial considerations. This was not the case in Al-Andalus. While many argue that women were still in the passive role (Coope, 2017), men could be married off at the discretion of their fathers (Martínez-Almira, 1987). Women had the ability to choose their own partners (Coope, 2017). It is important to note, women did not have the sole ability to choose for themselves. While their input would be taken into account, it was ultimately the choice of the father and mother (Coope, 2017). Despite that, this shift challenges gender stereotypes that restrict women to passive roles in relationships and allows them to play an active role in determining their own happiness and fulfillment. Al-Andalus' increasing acceptance of and respect for women's liberation is something that was rare in the Middle Ages.

**The influence of women on public and private spaces in Al-Andalus.** In the rich history of Al-Andalus, the Islamic-controlled region of Spain, women played a crucial role in shaping public spaces. Contrary to the prevailing notion that women were confined to the private sphere, they actively participated in both public and private domains. Women in Al-Andalus had diverse occupations, ranging from artisans and merchants to teachers and physicians, contributing to the social and economic fabric of their communities. Their influence extended beyond their professional pursuits and encompassed various aspects of public life, including architecture, calligraphy (Díez-Jorge, 2019), and religious leadership. Through their active engagement, women in Al-Andalus left a lasting impact on the social, cultural, and religious landscape of the region (Powers, 1979).

***Women's various jobs in Al-Andalus.*** Women in Al-Andalus held a wide range of professions that contributed to the social and economic development of the region. They were not confined to the domestic sphere but actively participated in various jobs that were essential for the functioning of society. Women worked as artisans, producing exquisite crafts such as textiles, ceramics, and jewelry (Sánchez-Crespo, 2019). They also played a significant role as merchants, engaging in trade both locally and internationally, thereby contributing to the prosperity of the region (Sánchez-Crespo, 2019). Furthermore, women in Al-Andalus excelled as educators, passing on knowledge through teaching in schools and religious institutions (Sánchez-Crespo, 2019). Their involvement in these diverse occupations had a profound impact on society, fostering economic growth, transmitting cultural traditions, and empowering women to assert their influence and agency in public spaces (Díez-Jorge, 2019). The society of Al-Andalus truly would not be able to function without the involvement of women.

***Women's influence on architecture.*** Women in Al-Andalus played a significant role in the development and influence of architecture in the region. Through their involvement in various aspects of architectural design and construction, they left their mark on the physical landscape. Women's influence can be seen in the intricate geometric patterns and decorative elements that adorned buildings, such as palaces, mosques, and private residences (Díez-Jorge, 2019). Specific examples of architectural structures influenced by women include the Alhambra in Granada, renowned for its intricate carvings and exquisite tile work (Díez-Jorge, 2019). These architectural expressions not only showcased the artistic talents of women but also reflected their cultural and societal contributions to Al-Andalus (Díez-Jorge, 2019). The impact of women on architecture in Al-Andalus demonstrates their active influence in shaping the built environment and their significant contributions to the region's rich architectural heritage.

***Women as religious leaders.*** Women in Al-Andalus also held significant positions as religious leaders, further highlighting their active participation in shaping religious practices in the region. While men traditionally held prominent roles in religious institutions, women in Al-Andalus defied societal norms and exerted their influence as scholars, teachers, and even Sufi mystics (Sánchez-Crespo, 2019). They contributed to the spread of religious knowledge and played a crucial role in the spiritual guidance of their communities (Sánchez-Crespo, 2019). Their influence extended beyond the confines of the private sphere and greatly impacted the religious landscape of Al-Andalus. Women's active engagement in religious leadership not only challenged traditional gender roles but also contributed to the richness and pluralism of religious practices during this period.

***Women in Baños (bathhouses).*** Baños (bathhouses) played a significant role as public spaces where people from various backgrounds came together for hygiene, relaxation, and

socialization (Powers, 1979). They served as centers of communal activities, providing opportunities for individuals to engage in conversations, establish social connections, and exchange ideas (Powers, 1979). Moreover, these baths transcended boundaries of class, gender, and religion, fostering a sense of community and cultural exchange (Powers, 1979). Although important, this was not seen to be as vital as their Middle Eastern counterparts. Women were allowed to be in public spaces and socialize with other women (Sánchez-Crespo, 2019). In the Ottoman Empire, this was not the case. This however should not discount the importance that Baños (bathhouses) hold. The significance of Baños cannot be understated, as they played a vital role in shaping social dynamics and promoting social cohesion in Al-Andalus.

**The political role of women in Al-Andalus.** In the diverse history of Al-Andalus, the political role of women stands out as a profoundly influential and often underappreciated aspect. From the secluded yet powerful confines of harems to the visible and active participation in the corridors of power, women in Al-Andalus were pivotal players in the intricate game of politics. Their roles varied from influential advisors within the harem, such as the esteemed mahdāt, to formidable leaders like Tarub, Al-Zahra', Subh, and I'timad al-Rumaykiyya, who directly influenced the course of political events. This exploration not only sheds light on their political engagements and influence over key decisions, but also highlights the broader implications of their actions on the social, economic, and political fabric of Al-Andalus. Through examining these dynamic figures and their legacy, we gain a deeper appreciation for the complex role women played in shaping the history of this remarkable period.

***The political role of women in harems.*** Harems played a significant and multifaceted role in the complex political landscape of Al-Andalus, serving as a unique platform for women to exert their influence. Within the confines of harems, women actively engaged in political affairs,



leaving an indelible mark on the region's history. These influential women held sway over rulers' decisions and actions, shaping policies and strategies with their astute judgment and remarkable insight (Rubiera-Mata, 1987). The women within harems were not mere spectators but active participants in the political realm, wielding their influence behind the scenes and directly shaping the course of Al-Andalusian history. One notable example of these influential women were those who held the prestigious title of mahdāt, meaning "mother of the ruler." As mothers of rulers, they possessed immense power and influence, both within and beyond the harem. Their close relationship with the ruler granted them unparalleled access and the ability to shape his decisions and policies (Rubiera-Mata, 1987).

***Female Leaders in Al-Andalus.*** In the rich tapestry of Al-Andalus's political history, a myriad of influential women emerged as key players in shaping the destiny of the region. These remarkable figures defied societal norms and carved their path to power, leaving an indelible mark on the political landscape. One such luminary was Tarub, a jariya (slave-girl) who served the esteemed Abd al-Rahman II al-Awsat. Tarub's extraordinary influence and intimate relationship with Abd al-Rahman II granted her considerable sway over his decisions, effectively positioning her as a force to be reckoned with in the corridors of power (Mourtada-Sabbah, 2003).

***Tarub, Al-Zahra', Subh, and I'timad al-Rumayakiyya.*** In the political history of Al-Andalus, there were several influential women who played significant roles in shaping the region. One such influential figure was Tarub, who served as the jariya (slave-girl) of Abd al-Rahman II al-Awsat. Her influence and close relationship with Abd al-Rahman II allowed her to exert significant political power and influence over his decisions. Another notable female leader was Al-Zahra', the wife of Abd al-Rahman III al-Nasir li-Din Allah. Al-Zahra' held

considerable influence and was involved in political affairs during her husband's reign. Lastly, I'timad al-Rumaykiyya, the wife of al-Mu'tamid, the King of Seville, had a significant impact on political decisions during her husband's rule. These influential women in Andalusian political history demonstrate the important role that women played in shaping the political landscape of Al-Andalus. (Mourtada-Sabbah, 2003).

***Subh's political influence on Hijaba rule.*** A significantly notable woman in Al-Andalus was Subh, the wife of al-Hakam II al-Mustansir bi-llah and mother of Hisam II al-Mu'ayyad. Subh, a key political actor, played a pivotal role in the transformation of the Caliphate's power structure. Her influence was instrumental in the transition from direct Caliphal rule to a system dominated by chamberlains, known as hijaba rule. This shift marked the beginning of the Caliphate's decline, as authority increasingly shifted from the Caliph to these chamberlains. Subh's involvement in political affairs significantly altered the power dynamics within Al-Andalus, contributing to the gradual erosion of the Caliph's authority (Mourtada-Sabbah, 2003). Subh's actions in Al-Andalus were crucial in the escalation of civil unrest, which eventually destabilized the region. Her influence was a significant factor in the fragmentation of authority and the rise of party kingdoms, characterized by various factions competing for power. Subh's engagement in political maneuvering and her sway over key decisions led to a period of factionalism and the decline of centralized control. The period marked by her influence was crucial in the eventual disintegration of the Umayyad Caliphate and the emergence of muluk al-tawa'if (party kingdoms) (Mourtada-Sabbah, 2003).

***Women and property rights.*** The property rights of women in Al-Andalus provide insight into their social patterns and the acquisition and control of property throughout their lives. In Al-Andalus, women had the ability to own and control various forms of property, including

jewelry, clothes, houses, fields, and wealth. The ownership and control of property were intrinsic to a woman's identity and extended from birth to death and throughout different stages of her life, including before, during, and after marriage. The existence of these property rights highlights the economic agency and independence that women enjoyed in Al-Andalus. By examining the property rights of women, we gain a deeper understanding of the social and economic dynamics of this period (Shatzmiller, 1995).

### ***The Psychosocial Influence of Men in Al-Andalus***

In the historical context of Al-Andalus, the absence of male figures had a profound impact on individuals and their understanding of masculinity. The lack of present fathers or paternal figures created a significant void in the lives of individuals, particularly in terms of masculine role models (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). This absence forced individuals in Al-Andalus to establish a preoedipal attachment to masculinity, seeking alternative means to understand and embody masculine traits and behaviors. This attachment to masculinity became crucial in shaping their psychological development and sense of self. Without a paternal figure to model after, individuals in Al-Andalus had to navigate the complexities of masculinity on their own, often relying on societal norms and cultural constructs to define their understanding of what it meant to be a man (Gilmore, 1983).

**Preoedipal attachment.** The frequent conflicts and wars during the middle ages often led to the absence of male figures as they were called to serve in military campaigns or were involved in political endeavors. These societal conditions influenced the availability of male role models, further exacerbating the impact of absent male figures on the development of masculinity in Al-Andalus (Gilmore, 1983). In the absence of male role models, individuals in Al-Andalus sought to establish a sense of masculinity by relying on preoedipal attachment. This

psychological attachment is deeply rooted in the early stages of childhood development and centers around the formation of gender identity. Without proper guidance or the presence of a father figure, individuals in Al-Andalus turned to societal constructs and cultural norms to form their understanding of masculinity. This resulted in the establishment of preoedipal attachment to masculinity, where individuals sought validation and affirmation of their male identity from external sources (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). The impact of absent male figures and the establishment of preoedipal attachment to masculinity in Al-Andalus represents a crucial aspect in understanding the intricacies of gender and identity within this historical context. An exploration of the historical, socio-cultural, and psychological factors that contributed to this phenomenon provides valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the formation of masculinity in Al-Andalus. It becomes essential to examine and analyze the psychological repercussions of absent male figures and their implications for contemporary society.

**Psychological repercussions.** The absence of male figures in Al-Andalus had profound psychological repercussions, emphasizing the importance of establishing a preoedipal attachment to masculinity. Without male role models, individuals in Al-Andalus experienced uncertainty in their gender identity development (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). The establishment of this attachment filled the void and served as a framework for understanding masculine traits. Socio-cultural factors shaped this attachment, including societal norms, cultural practices, and religious beliefs. Understanding these factors provides insights into the complexities of masculinity in Al-Andalus (Gilmore, 1983).

***Machismo.*** Machismo, a concept deeply ingrained in the culture of Al-Andalus, played a significant role in understanding masculinity, particularly in the context of absent father figures. Defined as a cultural ideal of male dominance, aggression, and hypermasculinity, machismo in

Al-Andalus is uniquely characterized. Being macho or demonstrating macho qualities is a profound concern for men in Al-Andalus, often surpassing the importance of politics (Gilmore, 1983). In the absence of father figures, this concept gained even more prominence. Individuals sought to compensate for the lack of male role models by adopting exaggerated masculine behaviors and attitudes (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). In Fuenmayor, Spain, for instance, machismo does not translate into physical aggression or violence. Instead, as described by the locals, “a macho is a virile, sexually potent stud; like a bull or a billy-goat, he unhesitatingly obeys the commands of the testicles (cojones). ‘He conquers, he ravishes the female.’” (Gilmore, 1983). Another instance of this noted by Gilmore (1983) comes from a conversation in a Fuenmayor Bar,

A macho in Fuenmayor does not fight or beat his wife to defend his honor; in fact, he does not beat anyone at all. Such behavior- would be incomprehensible, solecistic, and would be ridiculed. Rather, responding to queries about machismo, Fuenmayor men refer immediately to a zero-sum sexual contest cosmology in which phallic potency strives manfully to overcome female reticence. A macho, declared dreamily, “is a man who would instantly make love to a shove dressed it like a woman.” Once, in a fly-specked bar, a young man indicated flies copulating on the counter and remarking half-seriously, “You askek macho? That fly is macho”

This emphasis on virility and sexual potency as defining features of machismo brings about the origins of machismo which will be spread throughout Latin America after the fall of Al-Andalus in 1492 (Gilmore, 1984).

***Gender Identities in Al-Andalus***

Sexuality and gender played a crucial role in communicating social identity in Al-Andalus. The symbolic nature of gender presentation in medieval Europe cannot be understated, as individuals used their sexuality and gender expression to convey various aspects of their social standing, religious identity, and cultural affiliations. Questions of sexuality, including the acceptance or rejection of certain sexual identities, became a means for expressing dissent over Islamic rule as well as solidifying a sense of cultural unity among different Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. Understanding the intricate interplay between sexuality, gender, and social identity is essential in unraveling the complex fabric of medieval Al-Andalus.

**Eunuchs.** Eunuchs, a distinct sexual identity in Al-Andalus, played a pivotal role in the societal landscape of the region. Sought after in the slave trade for their castration, they were primarily imported from Christian territories and served as slaves in the Islamic caliphate. The preference for Christian eunuchs as slaves to the caliph stemmed from their perceived loyalty to their new Muslim masters, which granted them significant political power within the Caliphate. In fact, their presence and influence within society were instrumental in establishing a hierarchical structure, as they often occupied positions of wealth and power within the upper echelons. The significance of eunuchs in Al-Andalus extended beyond their mere existence as a sexual identity. They were not only symbols of power and prestige but also agents of cultural exchange between Christian and Islamic realms and Female and Male realms. By occupying positions of wealth and power, eunuchs challenged the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, blurring the lines between the gender binary. Their presence forced society to grapple

with the complexities of gender and power dynamics, ultimately leading to a reevaluation of societal norms and expectations (Kotis, 2020).

**Ghumaliyyats.** Ghumaliyyat, a term used to describe young enslaved women who would masculinize, were another sexual identity in Al-Andalus that challenged gender norms. These women would dress and behave as men, and some even took on male names. Ghumaliyyat occupied a unique social space in the hierarchy of Al-Andalus, as they were a rare example of women who were able to gain a measure of freedom and autonomy by "masculinizing." The very existence of ghumaliyyat in Al-Andalus was significant in the shaping of sexual culture, as their presence and behavior challenged established gender and social norms of the time (Kotis, 2020). One notable example of a ghumaliyyat in Al-Andalus was Fatima. Fatima, a young enslaved woman, defied societal expectations and embraced her identity as a ghumaliyyat. She adopted a masculine appearance, donning men's clothing and styling her hair in a short, cropped manner. Fatima's decision to masculinize herself was not merely a superficial act, but a conscious choice to challenge the gender norms that confined her. By taking on a male name, she further solidified her new identity and asserted her right to self-expression (Kotis, 2020).

**Homosexuality.** Homosexuality, as a sexual identity in Al-Andalus, was perceived as taboo by Christians, who held strong religious beliefs against same-sex relationships. The topic of sexuality, including homosexuality, became a contested ground in Al-Andalus, with differing attitudes and beliefs among the various religious and cultural groups present in the region. Homoeroticism played a significant role in shaping societal attitudes toward same-sex relationships, with depictions of same-sex desire found in literature, poetry, and art. These portrayals both reflected and influenced societal perceptions of homosexuality, contributing to the complex landscape of sexual identities in medieval Al-Andalus (Kotis, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

The exploration of gender roles, sexuality, and psychosocial cultural dynamics in Al-Andalus during the Umayyad Caliphate reveals a complex and multifaceted society. This period, marked by Islamic influence and intercultural exchanges, showcased a unique blend of tolerance, innovation, and social evolution. The roles of women and men in Al-Andalus, far from being monolithic, were dynamic and integral to the socio-political fabric of the time. Women's participation in various spheres from politics to architecture, and men's grappling with masculinity in the absence of traditional paternal figures, highlight a society in flux, continuously reshaping its understanding of gender and identity. The aim has been to illuminate the societal norms, religious influences, and cultural practices that shaped Al-Andalus, offering a window into not just a historical era but the enduring human endeavor to comprehend gender and sexuality. The legacy of Al-Andalus serves as a testament to the rich complexity of human experience, molded by varied cultural influences and an unrelenting spirit of exploration and adaptation.



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