Women and Family Life

Throughout the Islamic Empire, marriage was considered a sacred institution and, for men, a duty. Men usually married for the first time around the age of 20, while women were sometimes as young as 12. Families generally arranged the marriages, with the husband's family giving the bride a dowry, which was hers to keep.

According to the Quran, men were allowed to have up to four wives, while women could have just one husband. However, the husband had to treat each wife equally and be able to afford to take care of all of his wives. This meant providing each wife with her own quarters, her own cooking and sleeping areas, and her own slaves. Most Islamic men had just one wife at a time.

After the death of Khadija, Muhammad himself practiced polygamy—having more than one wife. He was allowed as many wives as he liked, and at one time had nine wives. Although he married most of his wives for political reasons, he also married for love. Muhammad was the first Muslim to create a harem, or restricted place, for his wives. The wives were separated from other people so that they could not be held to blame for impious or scandalous behavior.

Each wife lived in her own small apartment. When male visitors came to the house, a curtain called the hijab was put up to prevent them from seeing Muhammad's wives. But the hijab gradually came to mean more than a curtain. Eventually it became the custom followed by Muslim women of wearing a veil, head covering, and modest dress in public, including covering their arms and legs. Hijab, meaning modest attire, is still worn by most Muslim women today. The word hijab also refers to the veil and head covering itself.

The Quran made other important changes in the life of Arab women. Not only could they now keep their dowries even if their husband divorced them, but the Quran stipulated that a man must treat his wife kindly. Islamic law also allowed women to inherit and own property, separate from male family members. The first duty of women throughout the empire was to care for the home and their families. At home, some women had their own small businesses, especially spinning or dyeing cloth. Because they could not bring their goods to the marketplace, they had to hire men to sell their goods on their behalf.

Wealthier women had more freedom than did ordinary Muslim women. In some cases, they were able to attend school and take up a profession. Some wealthy Muslim women, for example, practiced medicine and operated as merchants. These wealthy women had slaves who took care of their household chores for them.

Men were under no restrictions to remain at home. For entertainment, they could go to the public baths, play chess with their friends, or hang out at the local tavern. Although alcohol was forbidden, taverns served a fermented liquid called nabidh, made from raisins or dates. At the tavern, the men might be
entertained by music or poetry recitations. However, at home there were restrictions on whom men could socialize with (particularly in the homes of non-relatives). Women usually had more freedom than men to socialize in private homes.

For children, education began at home. From an early age, children were taught to memorize passages from the Quran. As they grew older, the Quran and the Hadith were used to teach them to read. Later, boys would receive more formal lessons at mosques, schools, or Islamic centers. During the Abbasid Dynasty, boys usually began attending mosque schools at around the age of seven—as long as their families could afford to pay a small tuition.

Wealthier boys continued their education longer. They might attend seminars, discuss poetry, and read classic works of Greek that had been translated into Arabic. These lessons prepared the wealthy young men for positions of importance. The empire's first universities were founded in the 10th century under the Abbasid Dynasty.

Two Abbasid caliphs, Al Mahdi and Al Hadi, were responsible for the construction of a large number of libraries and centers of education in Baghdad. Scientists and scholars from all over the empire went to the capital to teach and learn in the universities (also known as "houses of knowledge") and madrasas (Islamic schools).