Betwixt and Between
Liminality and Marginality

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Mind the Gap

Edited by
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Introduction

Mind the Gap

Betwixt and between Liminality and Marginality

Michael Hubbard MacKay and
Zohar Hadromi-Allouche

Anyone riding the trains in the United Kingdom has heard the warning call to "mind the gap" as you carefully step over the space between the train's carriage and the platform. "Your train is arriving. Please mind the gap." This idiom draws attention to the space that is in between the train and the train station. The phrase is tiled on the walls and platforms of London's underground, and the idiom has found its way onto bumper stickers and t-shirts across the world. How does a space betwixt and between the platform and the train garner so much attention?

Like the movement from the train to the platform, we are constantly moving from one space to another (like the capital building to the parking lot),[1] one social context to another (like board meetings to football games),[2] and one time to another (like Christmas day to boxing day).[3] Liminality—the gap between the worlds—articulates, shapes, defines, or serves the development of individuals, societies, and cultures in manifold ways.[4] This volume explores the liminal world of history, race, religion, class, communities, discourse, theology, and politics to develop the academic notion of liminality in multiple disciplines, a generation removed from its original instantiation. It uses a supple notion of liminality to challenge and extend Victor Turner's symbolic anthropology into a kind of liminality that goes beyond social structure and demands an interdisciplinary landscape of ideas and examples to articulate.

This volume does not revive Turner's work, it challenges it as the authors of this volume use it to theorize within their own contemporary scholarship, but it also celebrates its continued influence and recasting into disciplines

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Chapter 11

Agents of Conversion Agency of Women in Early Islam

Keren Abbou Hershkovits

I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.
—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Gender and the status of women in the Muslim world receive much attention from both scholars and the general public throughout the world. The scholarly interest in gender is traced back to at least the 1960s and has gone through several phases, methodological and conceptual.[1] Public interest is also evident. However, it seems that the past few years have seen a surge in this respect. It is indeed interesting, but why do Muslim women engage the curiosity of the public? Several reasons may come up. This interest can be explained partly due to Arab Spring rising, in which women were very much active and as a result demand various demands.[2] Another reason may be that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world or the immigration of millions from the Middle East to the rest of the world due to ISIS usurping various regions and the ongoing war in Syria and other places in the area. All these put Islam in a much more visible place, women wearing traditional attire may have become a source of interest as they become much more visible in everyday lives in new places. The unknown, the hidden, may have contributed to this interest. It may also relate to a general concept, according to which Muslim women are extremely marginalized, bound by social norms, tradition and religious commandments, and in need of a savior.

With interest also come questions and controversies. When reading contemporary studies, dealing with the status of women in early Islam, it seems that most answers repeat the medieval frame of the marginality of women, or alternatively, resonate with modern-day arguments concerning the status of women today. It is continuously debated whether most women were of very low status, mostly treated as a commodity to be enslaved, used, sold, or even

killed when considered useless or shameful, or if there can be a different reading. The other point of view refers to strong rich women, starting with no other than Muhammad's first—and beloved—wife, Khadījah (d. 619), the rich, powerful, and older woman who hired Muhammad and later on proposed to him. Khadījah and women of similar riches or social standing, are at times juxtaposed with the "disenfranchised" point of view or considered as the exception proving the rule (i.e., that women lacked any kind of agency, and that they were nothing but property).[3]

These viewpoints are also used in an even larger debate concerning Islam—did it improve the status of women or worsen it? Do Muslim women need feminism? Or is equality inherently present at the root of Islamic belief? Let us stop here for a moment. None of these readings of early Islamic histories relate the story of those women as their story but rather as the story of a society, a community, and a religion. Is it possible that while trying to "save" women of early Islam, these women were actually forgotten? Anecdotes are used to build the "large picture" or the "narrative." In this process, women were collapsed into one single category, differences were flattened to serve the wish to answer big questions such as "what was/is the status of women" or the "did medieval Muslim women have agency?"

Therefore, I suggest we abandon, at least for a short while, the larger frameworks and consider the stories and women one may encounter in early Islamic texts. I will adopt Caroline Bynum's conception of liminality of women, she argues that for women, liminality is in the continued situation rather than in the reversed. Women stand in liminal status when they act according to the accepted and common rules not necessarily when they push away from them.[4] This chapter will focus on early Islamic community and on narratives of conversion to Islam and will argue that agency and liminality are categories that need to be unpacked and reexamined.

By looking at diverse methods and tools employed by women, when encouraging others to convert, we may also see that they were part of the society, that they were not necessarily bound to one single route, and that there may not be a category of "female conversion" clearly defined and distinguished from "male conversion." While their space was limited, women still exercised some assertiveness and some control over their lives. Such an approach will allow us to discuss questions of agency but from a different perspective not whether or not Islam changed the status of women but rather how are we to understand representation of gender relation against the background of conversion of people in early Islam, bearing in mind that early converts are also role models for later generations.

This chapter will start by discussing the sources pertaining to conversion stories, followed by an analysis of several such stories, depicting several ... in which women acted as (successful) agents of conversion. Last I will

show how these stories may help us consider the above-mentioned questions, reframe them—by looking into sisterhood stories—and at times also answering them, and reconsider the category of agency in early Islam.

THE SOURCES

Narratives depicting the emergence of Islam were transmitted orally and only several decades after the events, were put into writing. The earliest texts available to us are from the late eighth and early ninth century. The chronological distance between events and their literary form were the basis for many critique and revisionist attempts to narrate the events leading to the establishment of the Muslim community and rulership. This mistrust is countered in the past decade with a wave of scholars calling for discarding this general suspicion in favor of other readings, arguing that the much sought-after label of *valid* or *historically proved* is a vain search and probably also the wrong one.[5]

Robert Hoyland, for instance, acknowledges some problematic aspects of Islamic historiography that might compromise their validity.[6] Yet he argues against reading medieval historical texts as depicting a particularly faulty narrative. Rather, he relates the importance scholars, patrons, and readers attributed to these narratives and the measures taken to verify and maintain narratives within the boundaries of what was considered "correct," "reliable," or "true."[7] Hoyland convincingly argues that the modern "obsession" for "facts" leads to some very problematic results. Hence he suggests to employ a different criteria for historicity: "Concentrate more on the manner and style of delivery, the apparent aim of the text and the nature of its intended audience."[8]

I will employ this approach in reading several anecdotes narrating a story of conversion. My main assumption would be that whether or not an actual event took place is secondary to the fact that the author and his readership considered it plausible. By plausible I mean, that such a story is told and retold and no reservations—available to us—are mentioned. When reservations are made, for instance, omissions, or comments, these reservations will be analyzed rather than accepted at face value.

Therefore, the following will not be tracing back historical figures but rather look into several stories of early converts and read the way their story is told and the possible values, norms, concepts, and expectations that construct the story.

I will now turn to several anecdotes narrating a story of conversion, in which the agent of conversion is a woman. By reflecting the story of agents of conversion, I also define the group of women addressed in this study—women who were part of the early Islamic community.

WOMEN WHO PREACHED FOR ISLAM

The first person to convert to Islam was Khadījah, Muhammad's first and beloved wife. Among the first wave of converts, one may find several women, some of them did not make do with their own conversion but also took trouble in persuading others to convert or took measures to ensure and encourage the conversion of others. For instance, the pattern of conversion with family members is abundantly found in Ibn Sa'd's (d. 845)[9] biographical dictionary: for example, Muhammad's daughters[10] converted with their mother. Also 'Umayrah converted with her mother Laylā bint al-Khāṭīm.[11] 'Umayrah's three daughters Ḥabība, al-Farī'ah, and Kabshah also converted with her.[12] An interesting case in point is Su'ād, who wished to give the oath of allegiance on behalf of her fetus.[13]

It is indeed a well-known fact that women were agents of conversion. It is usually argued that they did so by their female character: waiting patiently for their family to see the light, conducting religious life and introducing their family to their new religion, as well as good old emotional extortion, for example, Ruqayqa bint Ṣayfī bin Hāshim (d. c. 659), who, according to Ibn Sa'd, was "the harshest of people towards her son, Mukhāramah [bin Nawfal], before he became Muslim."[14]

Another form for encouraging people to convert was destroying idols. Al-Maqrīzī, a fifteenth-century historian (d. 1442), relates several short anecdotes describing how early believers smashed idols and proved their owners wrong, in one of these anecdotes, there is a woman who took part in smashing and explaining.[15] All in all it seems that women took part in general acts of persuasion to convert.

Some women did more than be present on the scene of conversion when another person converted but rather used more direct forms of persuasion. Preaching to Islam is an interesting category, though at times boundaries of what constituted "preaching" is not clear. One such activity can be part of the Quranic commandment: *al-amr bi-'lma'rūf wa-'lnahy 'an al-munkar*—commanding good and forbidding the evil. There are several such women in early Islam, though not clear if they were actively doing so during the lifetime of Muhammad. Samrah bint Nāhik was a contemporary of the Prophet, who "used to command the good and forbid the wrong," but the information is, as always, very obscure and short. It is not clear why she did so or under what authority. Another figure mentioned calling people to do good is Shifā'ah al-Adaywā'. She was appointed by 'Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb as a market inspector.[16] Both women were active within the Islamic community, that is, they voiced boundaries to a community that has already accepted Islam.

Other women preached conversion to Islam among the pagans, some publicly, others in the confines of their home and family. One such woman

is Umm Sharīk al-'Āmiriyyah,[17] who actively proselytized among Qurayshi women inviting them to Islam. It is told she used to go to the fields and call women to convert. Interestingly, her story does not appear in Ibn Sa'd's biographical dictionary and not in the early chronicles of al-Ya'qūbī's (d. c. 897) *Tārīkh* and al-Ṭabarī's (d. 923) *kitāb al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*.[18] These authors are primarily concerned with whether or not she offered herself to the Prophet Muhammad, and if so, whether or not he accepted her offer. This is of course of great importance for her status as a *ḥadīth* transmitter and relates to the validity of information she transmitted. However, for our purposes, it is interesting that neither Ibn Sa'd, al-Ya'qūbī nor al-Ṭabarī, who are usually the source of much information concerning early Islam (Ibn Sa'd's being the first biographical dictionary discussing early converts to Islam) do not mention her call—her *da'wah* to Islam.

Our informant concerning her *da'wah* is Ibn Ḥabīb in his *kitāb al-muḥabbar*.[19] Ibn Ḥabīb al-Baghdādī (d. c. 860 in Samarā), more or less of the same generation as al-Ya'qūbī and Ibn Sa'd, was a prolific author, known for his knowledge of genealogy and of the times of the *Jāhiliyyah* (the period that preceded Muhammad's prophecies).

It is important to mention her *da'wah* is not mentioned, however, at least Ibn Sa'd mentioned that Umm Sharik was tortured for her belief in Muhammad and his prophecy but was rescued by divine help. The narratives differ as to the identity of torturer but agree that she was deprived of drinking water, and her thirst was quenched with the miraculous appearance of a vessel full of sweet liquid. Seeing that she was so rescued, her torturer realized she was following true religion and converted immediately to Islam.[20]

Both narrations, the one relating a miracle saving Umm Sharīk's life, and the one disclosing information concerning her preaching for Islam, portray her as an agent of conversion. The difference between the two narratives lies in the proactivity assigned to Umm Sharīk, one sees her as a passive figure, willing to suffer for her (true!) beliefs. The other portrays her as an active and assertive person, making her belief known in public and calling others to join her. Let us leave Umm Sharīk for now, we shall return to her later on.

Another case of conversion through preaching or introduction to Islamic basic principles is the story of Umm Sulaym. According to Ibn Sa'd:

> Umm Sulaym believed in the Messenger of Allah, and Abū Anas came. He had been absent and he said: "Have you become a heretic?" she said, "I have not become a heretic, I have believed in this man." I have begun to teach Anas. I told him to say: "There is no god but Allah," and to say: "I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." He did that. His father said to her, "Do not corrupt my son for me." She said, "I am not corrupting him."[21]

Abū Anas was not too happy with what his wife said, however, he soon died and Umm Sulaym swore to living alone until the right person makes his appearance. After a while, a man named Abū Ṭalḥah wished to marry her, but she refused.

> One day she said to him, "Do you think that a stone should be worshipped when it can neither harm nor benefit you? Or what about a piece of wood which you take to a carpenter who carved it for you? Does it help or harm you?"
>
> "What you said has had a profound effect on me." He believed. She said, "I will marry you and will not take any dower from you except that."[22]

Thus Umm Sulaym raised her son as a Muslim in defiance of her husband's instruction and in real danger to herself. Later on she motivated another man to consider his beliefs and contemplate Islam as a better concept. These anecdotes indicate that women, as well as men, were involved in acts of conversion, implementing various tools and methods. The women discussed here are not quiet women, they are not passive and they are not naïve. They make good claims for their choices and are ready to stand up for these choices.

CONVERSION USING REASON

In many anecdotes, women are portrayed as tools, a means to an end. For instance, women were forced to the battlefield to goad warriors to keep fighting.[23] Women were also used as leverage in persuasion of males to convert. For instance, when Muhammad wished to persuade Mālik ibn ʿAwf to convert to Islam, he took prisoner his family (no detail provided) among them his aunt, Umm ʿAbdallah bint Abī Umayyah—oddly enough, this detail is mentioned—and sent word to Mālik: "Inform him that if he becomes a Muslim I will return his family and property to him and give him a hundred camels."[24] Mālik got the message and decided to convert, the reason given by al-Wāqidī is quite intriguing: "Mālik feared the opposition of the Thaqīf against him, that they knew what the messenger of God said to him, and that they would, therefore, imprison him."[25]

The offer to free his family (including the above-mentioned aunt) can be understood as a demonstration of Muhammad's benevolence, or, as al-Wāqidī explains, as a clever maneuver. Mālik is tricked into submitting not for the love of his family (and aunt!) but for saving face, fearing his inability to protect those who rely on him will lead allies to disrespect him. Which should we believe? The text does not give any answer, but we are informed that the deal worked out great for both parties, Muhammad appointed Mālik to be

responsible for those from his tribe who chose to convert, and Mālik, on his part, sent Muhammad a fifth from what he captured.[26]

Another version telling the circumstances of Mālik's conversion tell a different story, and once again, women are involved. According to al-Yaʿqūbī, Muhammad won the battle, and Mālik left for Ṭayy, but then comes a much different set of event. When in camp, with hundreds of women and children held captive, Muhammad is approached by al-Shaymāʾ bint Ḥalīmah, Muhammad's foster-sister.[27] Al-Shaymāʾ asked Muhammad to release all female captives, convincingly arguing that they are all his foster-sisters or foster-aunts. Muhammad treats her with great respect and granted her wish. Then came an old woman and spoke to him about Mālik. We are not informed what she said, only that after her appeal Muhammad gave Mālik safe-conduct (amān), which was followed by Mālik's acceptance of Islam.[28]

So here once again, we have women at center stage not only as pawns. They are aware of their position, and the fact that in a way they are tools in a man's game, but they are not silent, nor are they passive. They take some control into their hands without changing the rules or outwardly attempting to appear in control.

We may look at this narrative as disclosing significant information about Muhammad: his generosity, his mild temper allowing even women to approach and address him, and his great compassion and loyalty to his kin. We can also learn about the way women are staged in this narrative, they could be silent and passive, but they could also be very strong, and, more importantly, they are portrayed as part of the community, they exercised their agency on behalf of tribe's women but also for its leader—Mālik.

Muhammad was well aware which tribe he was fighting against, and yet the narrative does not attribute him the initiative to release members of the tribe due to kinship relations. It takes al-Shaymāʾ's voice to make that happen. Her familiarity with Muhammad makes it plausible that she would approach him. Could other women approach Muhammad and ask for his help?

Bint Ḥātim is yet another woman who found herself in the hands of Muhammad with no rescue in sight; Muhammad waged war against the Ṭayy, the leader, ʿAdī b. Ḥātim (d. c. 686) understanding his tribe is about to lose the war, took his family and fled.[29] His sister, Bint Ḥātim, was left behind and eventually was taken prisoner, along with many of her people. Realizing her brother left her behind, and no prospect of ransom in sight, she decided to take the situation into her own hand.

When she saw Muhammad she addressed him explain that the person that should have been responsible for her safety had fled and left her behind, hence she is obliged to address him herself, she added that she comes from an honorable family and needed Muhammad's assistance to set her free.

Muhammad enquired who was the one that should have been responsible and learned that it was ʿAdī b. Ḥātim, the very person he was fighting against, the one that fled the war as Muhammad's soldiers gained the upper hand on the battlefield, but other than that did not say a word.

On the second day, she tried once again to catch his attention, and once again failed to do so. On the third day, she didn't even try, but then a man approached and told her she should try once more to appeal to Muhammad. This was ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭālib (d. 660), Muhammad's cousin, son-in-law, and one of his closest companions. This time Muhammad heard her and agreed to let her go. Mind you, not talking about conversion, or about ransom, on the contrary, Muhammad encouraged her not to be hasty that she should take her time finding an appropriate escort.[30] Once she found a convoy of her people on their way to Bilād al-Shaʾm, where her brother was supposed to be, she informed so to Muhammad, who gave her allowance, and she left.

Once she arrived and met with her brother, she was furious! But also a woman of advice: "You should join Muhammad, because he is a man of honor!" ʿAdī b. Ḥātim converts and receives much respect,[31] for instance, al-Yaʿqubī mentions him several times as the person responsible of collecting the *zakāt* (the tax Muslim are required to pay) and participated, with great courage, in several important battles.[32]

These narratives, the ones illustrating Mālik's conversion and the one portraying ʿAdī b. Ḥātim's position women in a state of solitude and distress. Some are passive, others are assertive and do not despair, they work with what social norms and values allocate them. Al-Shaymāʾ refers to Muhammad's sense of kinship obligations, a significant emotion of the time.[33] Bint Ḥātim plays a different card, the one of honor and nobility, traits much valued and appreciated, none challenges gender relations. Both women improved their current situation, and along the way help the process of conversion of another person.

"HE IS A NOBLE MAN!"

As it turns out, the concept of honor and nobility works on both directions, Bint Ḥātim mentioned her father's nobility to evoke Muhammad's sympathy, and then used the same concept when consulting her brother to convert to Islam. She was not alone in her form of action.

Al-Ṭabarī informs us that, on the day of the conquest of Mecca in 629, ʿIkrimah bin Abī Jahl was among those whom Muhammad had sentenced to death on account of their opposition to himself and to Islam. ʿIkrimah's wife, Umm Ḥakīm bt. al-Ḥārith, who had already converted, asked for safe conduct on behalf of her husband. When Muhammad granted this protection,

Umm Ḥakīm sought her husband, finding him on a boat en route to Yemen. ʿIkrimah returned, pledged, and converted to Islam.[34]

Most germane to our investigation is Umm Ḥakīm's presentation of the news of safety to her husband: "O cousin, I come to you from the man who is the kindest toward his kin."[35] Hence, Muhammad's protection was read by Umm Ḥakīm as part of his kinship obligations. Notably, Muhammad and ʿIkrimah have no direct familial ties (indeed, al-Wāqidī's narrative neglects to mention such phrasing though the general story has more or less the same details).[36] The factual reality of such relations is of little importance here, though; what matters is that in the view of Umm Ḥakīm, Muhammad provided a stay of execution for her husband in the name of kinship.

We could ask ourselves what was Umm Ḥakīm's incentive to go after ʿIkrimah. A Muslim woman cannot be married to an idol worshipper, hence their marriage would be dissolved upon Umm Ḥakīm's conversion. It is possible that she was not interested in divorce or was worried that she would be forced to unwelcomed marriage.[37]

Umm Ḥakīm is not a pawn, she is proactive—she converted, she addressed Muhammad to her own benefits, and she went on a quest in search of her husband. Indeed, the reason she gave her husband to show him the right path, that is, to Islam and to the messenger of God, is that Muhammad is a trustworthy person. Why would she do that? Did it play in her behalf? We cannot tell that, however, we could tell that not all stories attribute her with any contribution to ʿIkrimah's conversion. Wāqidī and Ibn Saʿd as well as al-Ṭabarī referred to her actions, reiterating more or less the same general phases: Muhammad conquered Mecca, Umm Ḥakīm converted to Islam, whereas ʿIkrimah fled fearing Muhammad's wrath. Later on, Umm Ḥakīm's asked for safe conduct for her husband, upon accepting it, she traveled in his footsteps, persuaded him to return and then he finally converted to Islam.[38]

Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201), the Ḥanbalite jurist, who wrote more than two hundred years after the above-mentioned scholars, narrated a different story: ʿIkrimah encountered a sever storm on sea, which made it clear for him that God does not approve with his leaving Mecca. Hence he went back to Mecca and converted.[39]

In this narrative, only the first part is mentioned, the part of him leaving Mecca and going to sea. The interaction is between a man and his God, ʿIkrimah understood the message sent to him and returned to Mecca. Umm Ḥakīm remained unacknowledged and maybe also unimportant. This version conveys ʿIkrimah's conversion as an act of finding truth and belief rather than being persuaded.

Ibn al-Jawzī's book is very similar in its purposes to Ibn Saʿd's. Both books intend to tell the stories of early converts to Islam, however, as in many other cases, later author tend to erase female involvent and contributions, even in

the cases of early converts who are usually perceived as a unique *ṭabaqah*, a special and particularly pious group.[40]

EXERCISING AGENCY

The clear distinction between men and women is very much present; as already mentioned, women were used as leverage to persuade their male relatives to convert, used as booty, sold, and exchanged hands with very little ability to assert themselves and change their lives. And in many cases, authors tended to disregard contributions recorded by earlier authors.[41] In other words, women are marginalized and in more examples than others are disregarded. In light of that, one should consider the concept of agency, what it actually means and what constitutes agency for medieval Muslim women.

So what is agency? Ahmed Rageb argues that female authority "usually involved a complicated socio-cultural process involving the presence of qualifying reasons and corroborating empirical evidence."[42] Truly, it is hard to come up with many examples of women exercising authority over men, but that does not mean women had no agency, and certainly does not mean women had no power at all. Finding influential women is easier than one may think, starting with Khadījah, and later wives of Muhammad, and continuing all the way through history.[43] Rather, it illuminates the need to redefine what agency means for medieval Muslim women and their contemporaries.[44] According to Joan Scott, a person's ability to navigate the world depends upon his or hers agency, that is, their ability to use force, execute authority, and the social meaning such actions are attributed with.[45] Scott's work and arguments opened up a whole new world for gender studies. It made gender into a historical category. However, Scott's work focused on case studies from European history, moreover, none of the scholars whose work she cites used Middle Eastern examples or societies for constructing their theories. Hence, rather than using acceptable theories or concepts, our first question should be whether or not the available definitions for agency and for examining agency are applicable for women of early Islam.

Traditional conception of agency assumes that agency is found only when women (or men) assert authority and actively resist patriarchal boundaries. That agency is found in places where women attempt at crossing boundaries set up in economic, governmental, or institutional spheres. Such definitions also draw a direct line between free choice and agency, assuming that agency is an action freely committed. Such conceptions of agency led to the inevitable conclusion that apart from a few exceptions, women of early Islam as a rule had no agency. They had very little choice and even less ability to

exercise any free choice. They were forced into marriage, divorced at husbands' whim, and had very little public visibility. They were subordinate, powerless, and generally simply unseen. At this point one has two choices, first, close the book and go look for agency somewhere else. Second option, question these assumptions. In the past few years, several scholars have chosen the latter and suggested different approaches and definitions to agency. In the case of Muslim women there is much more to it. Many studies concerning women in the Muslim world focus on religious aspects and ask what contributions Islam had on women's social status. Such questions distance us from dealing with women as social objects and suggest that religion is by far the most critical criteria in setting social, economic institutional, and so forth categories. It also assumes that Islam is a one single category shared by almost 2 billion adherents of Islam.[46] But is Islam to blame[47] (or to applaud) an appropriate category for the study of gender relations? Is that a beneficial starting point? I would argue that it isn't. As already mentioned by Lila Abu-Lughod, religion is not to blame,[48] people are. Moreover, stressing the victimhood of women under Islam may contribute to giving them a voice and telling their story, but it also puts great emphasis on being victims, being marginal while instances or spaces where females were in a position of power are once again marginalized.[49]

Clare Hemmings and Amal Treacher Kabesh suggest that a search for women who break the rules will rule out many instances where women were very much active in defining their world and path. Such a search will be blind to women who act against other women (is that agency?) or men who empower women (is *that* agency?). It will also be blind to the huge differences between women, what is accessible to each and what may lead to a life-threatening situation. According to Hemmings and Treacher Kabesh, there are several basic assumptions it is best to rid of. For instance, agency should not be identified strictly with breaking the rules or with fighting authority. Nor should it be identified with a counter-response to oppression. Rather, they suggest one should begin by identifying a person's particular position, restrictions, and circumstances. The very attempt at negotiating one's life circumstance should be considered as a form of agency.[50]

Several studies have already demonstrated the need in different categories for agency, which is context dependent and even person dependent. Saba Mahmood[51] argues against the concepts that agency is inherently a free choice. Allen Fleischman defines feminist activity as an act aiming at alleviating the constraints set by gender definition and their affect on women, but not necessarily altering the gender dynamics.[52]

The stories discussed earlier indicate that women were active members of society, they were not only commodity and not only a tool. They exercised some agency, within the boundaries of what they considered useful. True,

they never went out with full-fledged ambition to change gender relations or social structures. But given a set of norms and rules, they acted on their own behalf, harnessing those values and concepts of womanhood to their benefit.

SISTERHOOD ACROSS RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

Anecdote of conversion have an inherent value. The Islamic community benefitted from conversion and it is of importance for later generations to know who converted and when. Thus preserving anecdotes depicting conversion was important. The participation of women in scenes of conversion is not blatantly out of character for medieval community though, as mentioned, did not carry immense interest. However, close reading of medieval texts illuminate other scenes in which women were present and were proactive. They are featured not as followers but as initiators, at times at some risk. There are a handful of anecdotes depicting women offering help to other women, whereas the men featured in the same scene either ignored or refused to help.

Such instances of female comradery appeared across religious and social boundaries, where women reach out to other women, assisting them for the sole reason that they are women. A case in point is the help offered to Zaynab bint Muhammad.

Hind bint ʿUtbah (d. c. mid-seventh century)[53] was a pagan not only that she was very much opposed to Muhammad, particularly after the death of her father, paternal uncle, brother, and son in the Battle of Badr (624). Zaynab, Muhammad's daughter, lived in Mecca with her pagan husband Rabīʿ ibn al-ʿAṣṣ, and did not immigrate with Muhammad to Medina. However, after the battle of Badr, Muhammad asked for her to be allowed to join him. When Hind heard of the planned journey, she approached Zaynab and offered her any help she may need. Be it a riding beast, travel money, or any other need, stating that: "[M]en's quarrels are nothing to do with the women."[54] Though on opposite political and religious camps, Hind found it in her heart to be kind to Zaynab, seeing a shared interest between them—being women in a world of men, being marginalized, in need of comradery. Zaynab, by the way, did not take up Hind's offer. According to al-Ṭabarī, she was not convinced Hind was honest in her offer and worried it was a trap. Hence Zaynab preferred to hide her travel plans from her.[55]

Fāṭimah bt. Al-Aswad needed somebody to help her as well, Muhammad ordered her hand amputated, after she was caught stealing.[56] She tried evading punishment and asked Salama, one of Muhammad's wives to intercede on her behalf but to no avail.[57] After the execution of the punishment, Fāṭimah needed a place to rest and recuperate. This time she got help from the wife of Asyyad b. Hudayr, who is not mentioned by name. All we know is that she gave

her food. Interestingly, Asyyad made a point in telling Muhammad that his wife was helping Fāṭimah, Ibn Saʿd does not inform us why Asyyad thought it required to inform Muhammad nor do we know what was Muhammad's reaction to that. We are only told that after some rest, Fāṭimah tried asking her father to let her come to his household, which he refused and told her that she was not welcomed in his house, saying that she should go to the ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā tribe, due to the great resemblance between them. Eventually Fātima's uncle—who was from that very tribe, took her in. The women who tried to help could not save her or offer long-term security. Nonetheless, they allowed for a short-term help—until male help arrived with a solution.[58]

It is not clear why the father thought Fātima should go with ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā. It is even less clear what this actually meant, as we cannot set clear chronology for these events, it is not clear whether the uncle, Ḥaṭīb bin ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā was pagan or have already converted. His conversion took place in 630 or 632, prior to that he was part of the opposition to Muhammad. Hence, not giving Fāṭimah a place to stay on part of the father might have also meant exclusion from the Muslim community and perhaps apostasy.

The agency exercised in these two cases is of great significance. They do not stand on the same ground as the above-mentioned cases of conversion, not only because no conversion is involved but also because in both cases the helper and the one being helped are on two sides of religious boundaries or status. In both cases, there is no obvious expectation for help, and probably some risk for the helper. Additionally, while conversion stories may relate to authors' wish to present the greatness of early Islamic community, and the moral and honorable qualities of early converts, these two stories are not to be read in that context. These are side stories, in one case we don't even have a name, just the name of the spouse. And yet, both woman *choose* to act, and set priorities to their values.

CONCLUSION

The status of women in late antiquity was, in general very different from their male counterpart's. Their circumstances were probably very much related to their social position, to family ties and blood relations, economic status and so forth very few of which were initiated by them, most were probably imposed upon them.[59] They were married to seal pacts, sent back home when political situation shifted, and in constant need of a male guardian. But even under such extreme constrains, some women found courage and means to alter their position. Some used conversion as a tool to assert themselves, other were deeply involved and committed to Muhammad's message that they made it a point to convert others.

This chapter focused on demonstrating that agency is not always the fight for equality or even a demand for particular rights. At times, agency is the steps a woman took in order to make her life a little easier within the boundaries of gender roles.

NOTES

1. Deniz Kandiyoiti, "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship," in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 127.

2. For instance, women in Sudan demand political rights claiming they have been marginalized for years and that time has come to acknowledge their importance and significant contribution to the society. Michael Atit, "Sudan's Women Demand Power in New Government," *Voice of America News*, https://www.voanews.com/africa/sudans-women-demand-power-new-government (last accessed July 21, 2019). Similarly, the declaration of the Saudi crown prince, Muhammad Ibn Salman, that "Women are absolutely equal" resonated throughout the international media and social networks. Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Crown Prince, in His Own Words: Women Are 'Absolutely' Equal," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/18/world/middleeast/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-60-minutes.html (Last accessed July 21, 2019).

3. Aisha Geissinger, "Feminist Muslim (re) Interpretations of Early Islam," in *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, ed. Herbert Berg (London: Routledge, 2018 [2017]), 296–308.

4. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 27–50, esp. 50.

5. For a survey of the skeptic approach and its criticism, see Aziz Al Azmeh, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014).

6. Robert G. Hoyland, "History, Fiction and Authorship in the First Centuries of Islam," in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam*, ed. Julia Bray (London: Routledge, 2006), 18.

7. Another important point raised by Hoyland is the concept that by the late eighth century, history had a very particular role; the past had "come to acquire legitimating and normative value" for the political, economic, and theological of everyday life. Moreover, argues Hoyland, "history requires the mediation of fiction in its treatment of the past." See ibid., 16–18.

8. Ibid., 35. See also Robert G. Hoyland, "Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions," *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (2007): 581–602.

9. J. W. Fück, "Ibn Sa'd," in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, Consulted online on 14 August 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3343.

10. Ibn Sa'd (d. 845), *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad 'Amr (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khangi, 2001), 10:33.

11. Ibn Sa'd, 10:319.

12. Ibn Sa'd, 10:415.

13. Ibn Sa'd, 10:378.

14. Ibn Sa'd, 10:211–212. Ruqayqah was 'Abd al-Muttalib's niece, it is not clear when exactly she converted to Islam. From the little information available it seems she was among Muhammad's followers and a *ḥadith* transmitter. Mukharama converted on the day of the conquest of Mecca (630), like many of the inhabitants. For his conversion, see al-Ṭabarī, 39:42–43.

Interestingly, and to the point of this chapter, Ibn Sa'd adds that Ruqayqah warned Muhammad against the plans of the Quraysh to harm him. Hence, Muhammad asked 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib to sleep in his bed, and thus be saved. Ibn Isḥāq, the author of the earliest biography of the Prophet Muhammad, attributes the warning to the Angel Gabriel. This is a good example of the reading one should adopt to these texts. Ibn Isḥāq's narrative is a hagiography and accordingly is imbedded with miraculous events and divine guidance. See Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 222. Interestingly, Ṭabarī does not mention Ruqayqa's contribution either. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 6: *Muhammad at Mecca*, trans. and ann. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 142–143. I will return to the difference between early and later sources in their narration of female's activism.

15. I wish to thank Prof. Michael Lecker for kindly sharing with me these anecdotes from a forthcoming edition of the manuscript. For a description of the manuscript, see Michael Lecker, "Idol Worshipping in North Arabia in the Jahillyya," in *The Gods of Yonder: Polytheism in the Land of Israel and Its Surrounding, from the Second Millennia till Islamic Period*, ed. Menachem Kister et al. (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Tzvi, 2008), 250–262 [HEB].

16. See Michael Cook for a legal discussion concerning the validity and permissibility of females as commanders of good. Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 82–83.

17. Abū Ja'far Muhamad Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 860), *kitāb al-muḥabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichtenstädter, trans. Ella Landau-Tessaron (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1942), 82–83. I thank Prof. Landau-Tessaron for pointing out this anecdote.

18. Ibn Sa'd, 10:148–149; Aḥmad bin Abī Ya'qub al-Ya'qūbī, *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qubī*, vol.1 3: "The History (Ta'rīkh) the Rise of Islam to the Reign of al-Mu'tamid," trans. Matthew Gordon, Chase F. Robinson, Everett K. Rowson, and Michael Fishbein (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 695–696; Abū Ja'far Muḥammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, (d. 923), *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 39: *Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and Their Successors: al-Tabari's Supplement to His History*, trans. Ella Landau-Tasseron (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 204, 287.

19. For Ibn Ḥabīb and his work, see Ilse Lichtenstädter, "Muḥammad Ibn Ḥabîb and His Kitâb Al-Muḥabbar," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1939): 1–27. See also Abed el-Rahman Tayyara, "Ibn Ḥabīb's Kitāb al-Muḥabbar and its Place in Early Islamic Historical Writing," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 29, no. 3 (2017): 392–416.

20. Ibn Saʿd, 10:149–152. See also Uriel Simonsohn, "Female Conversion to Islam: A Sample Analysis of Medieval Narratives of the Prophetic Age," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 35, no. 1 (2020): 9–25, esp. 13–14.

21. Ibn Saʿd, 10:395–404.

22. Ibid.

23. See H. Lammens, "Mālik B. ʿAwf," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, accessed October 31, 2021, doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bgu.ac.il/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4863.

24. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad bin ʿUmar Al-Wāqidī (d. 823), *kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (Beirut: Maṭbaʿat jāmiʿat al-Uxford, 1922), 2:972; Faizer Rizwi, *The Life of Muhammad: Al-Waqidi's Kitab Al-Maghazi* (London: Routledge, 2013), 467.

25. Ibid. See Lammens, "Mālik B. ʿAwf," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bgu.ac.il/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4863.

26. Al-Wākidī, 2:955 (Ar.); Rizwi, 467–468 (ENG).

27. Ḥalīmah nursed Muhammad and hence her children as well as other infants she nursed are considered to be related. For breastfeeding brothers see J. Schacht, J. Burton, and J. Chelhod, "Raḍāʿ or Riḍāʿ," in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, consulted online on 9 August 2019, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bgu.ac.il/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0896.

28. Aḥmad bin Abī Yaʿqūb al-Yaʿqūbī, *The Works of Ibn Waḍiḥ Al-Yaʿqubī*, trans. and ed. Matthew Gordon, Chase F. Robinson, Everett K. Rowson, and Michael Fishbein (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 3:665–666.

29. Ibn Hishām, *al-sīra al-nabawiyya* (Cairo: Mu'assasat ʿulūm al-Qur'ān, 1936), 2:579.

30. Ibn Hishām, 2: 80–582.

31. Ibid.

32. See al-Yaʿqūbī 3:683, 741, see also al-Ṭabarī 39:86.

33. Keren Abbou Hershkovits, "Kinship, Expectations, and God," *Hawwa* 15, no. 3 (2017): 293–314.

34. Al-Ṭabarī, 39:17–19.

35. Ibid., 39:17.

36. Al-Wāqidī, 2:850–851; Rizwi, 418–419.

37. It is not clear what were the options available to women of the time. Studying a much later period, Boaz Shushan demonstrates that for fifteenth-century Damascene women, being divorced was not better than unhappy marriage. He based his argument on diary of a local legalist, who described the cases he attended and heard. See Boaz Shushan, "From the Diary of a Muslim Notary, Damascus 1480-1500," *Jamaa* 22 (2016): 7–22.

38. Al-Ṭabarī, 39:17.

39. Jamāl al-Dīn bin al-Farāj Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa*, ed. Khālid Muṣṭafā al-Ṭaṭūsī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Arabi, 2012), 265.

40. For a study reflecting and comparing narratives from different phases, see Doris Decker, "Frauen zwischen Selbst- und Fremdbestimmung. Wandel weiblicher 45 Geschlechterkonstruktionen in religiosen Veranderungsprozessen am Beispiel ruhislamischer Uberlieferungen," in *Doing Gender—Doing Religion Fallstudien zur Intersektionalitat im fruhen Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, ed. Eisen E. von Ute, Christine Gerber and Angela Standhartinger (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 193–223.

41. To that one may also add the tendency of modern scholars, discussing medieval Islamic history not to question the narratives presented by medieval authors, when it comes to gender issues. See Maaike van Berkel, "The Young Caliph and his Wicked Advisors: Women and Power Politics under Caliph Al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932)," *Al Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 19, no. 1 (2007): 3–15.

42. Ahmed Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women in the Medieval Middle East," *Hawwa* 8, no. 2 (2010): 181–216.

43. For instance, Ibn Saʿd mentions that people who wished to pass on information to Muhammad sent gifts and word to the rooms of his wives (the best bet would have been ʿĀi'sha, Muhammad's favorite). See Ibn Saʿd, 10:157. When Abū Sufyān (d. 650), one of Muhammad's opponents wanted to ensure his safety, he asked his daughter, Umm Ḥabība, for her help. Umm Ḥabībah, who was one of Muhammad's wives, turned his request down, it is possible she did that in order to stir him into conversion. See Wāqidī, 2:792–793; Faizer, 390–391.

44. Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women in the Medieval Middle East," 181–216.

45. See Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Culture, Society and Sexuality, Culture, Society and Sexuality a Reader*, ed. Richard G. Parker and Peter Aggleton (London and Philadelphia: UCL, 1999), 57–75, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.bgu.ac.il/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzcwNzkxX19BTg2?sid=14c40763-b6ba-402b-88c7-ec32024cc32d@pdc-v-sessmgr02&vid=0&format=EK&lpid=6&rid=0.

46. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

47. Abdellah Elboubekri, "Is Patriarchy an Islamic Legacy? A Reflection on Fatima Mernissi's Dreams of Trespass and Najat El Hachmi's the Last Patriarch," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 10, no. 1 (2015): 25–48.

48. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

49. Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

50. Clare Hemmings and Amal Treacher Kabesh, "The Feminist Subject of Agency: Recognition and Affect in Encounters with 'the Other,'" in *Gender, Agency, and Coercion*, ed. S. Madhok, A. Phillips and K. Wilson, Asingstoke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29–46.

51. Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–236.

52. Ellen Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening': The Emergence of Women's Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900–1940," in *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker (New York: Routledge, 1999), 89–134.

53. Fr. Buhl, "Hind Bint ʿUtba," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, accessed November 1, 2021, doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2881.

54. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad bin Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), *The History of al-Tabari,* vol. 7: *The Foundation of a Community*, trans. and ann. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 75.

55. Ibid.

56. Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 1996), 33; for the three versions of the punishment, see Gertrude H. Stern, "Muḥammad's Bond with the Women," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10, no. 1 (1940): 192–193.

57. Ibn Saʿd, 10:250.

58. Ibn Saʿd, 10:250–251.

59. Indeed, males were also confined to social norms and obligations, however, they had much more room to act on their own and were much less monitored or restricted to the private sphere.

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Chapter 12

Wife and Leader

Khadījah as a First Follower

Zohar Hadromi-Allouche

Best known for being first wife of the prophet Muhammad, Khadījah bint Khuwaylid is concurrently portrayed in early Islamic literature as the first convert to Islam, first follower of Muhammad, and a distinctly liminal figure. Early Islamic sources (from the eighth to the tenth centuries) depict her as liminal on several levels. As a first follower, she had a crucial, leading, and liminal role in the emergence of the new religious movement, being posited between Muhammad and other followers. Several liminal traits apply to her, in particular, being a trickster figure. As she walks alongside Muhammad through the process of his transformation into a prophet and a leader, she also fills a liminal function for him. As a liminal character, Khadījah demonstrates agency, proactivity, and authority. Later medieval and modern scholarship, however, tends to deny her liminal qualities, leadership, and agency, replacing these with passivity and marginality.

The current study demonstrates the leadership and liminality of Khadījah through her role as a first follower, tracks the shift in the construction of her character, and discusses its causes and implications. The chapter consists of four parts and a summary.

Part one discusses Victor Turner's concept of social drama, Caroline Bynum's narrowing critique of it, and Arpad Szakolczai's argument for the broad applicability of liminality. It then presents Derek Sivers's theory of the "first follower" and highlights its liminal components. Part two establishes the applicability of these theories to Khadījah and her portrayals in early Islamic sources from the eighth to the tenth centuries. It indicates her several levels of liminality, in particular, as a trickster figure (in reference to Margaret A. Mills and Arpad Szakolczai's' works) and a first follower. The final section of this part discusses the underappreciated leadership of first followers and demonstrates how later Islamic medieval sources deny the liminality and