

## The Role And Contribution Of Women In Andalusian Muslim Civilization

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the extent of the role played by women in the Islamic history and civilization of al-Andalus. Its purpose is to highlight the great capability of the Andalusian women in various aspects of life. The writer uses the document analysis method to examine in detail written documents regarding the role and contribution of the women involved. Results of analysis find that Andalusian women played a major role in political and administrative, literary and intellectual aspects. For example, contributions to politics and administration were made by women such as Sabihah wife of Caliph al-Hakam al-Mustansir, Fatimah bint Amir al-Muslimin Abi 'Abd Allah ibn Amir al-Muslimin al-Ghalib bi Allah wife of one of the Nasrid rulers, I'timid al-Rumaykiyyah wife of Seville ruler and 'A'ishah wife of Nasrid ruler in Granada. The field of literature received contributions from women such as Walladah bint khalifah al-Mustakfi, Maryam bint Abi Ya'qub al-Ansari, Safiyyah bint Abd Allah, al-Abadiyyah, Buthaynah bint al-Mu'tamid, Umm al-Kiram bint al-Mu'tasim bin Samadih and Ghayat al-Muna. And among the women who contributed largely to the intellectual field in al-Andalus were Fatimah bint Yahya bin Yusuf al-Maghani, Maryam bint Abi Ya'qub al-Ansari, Rashidah al-Wa'izah, Umm Shurayh al-Muqri, Sayyidah bint 'Abd al-Ghani and also Ishraq.

**Key words:** Andalusian women, Muslim civilization, women.

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### INTRODUCTION

Throughout Islamic rule in al-Andalus, the Muslim ummah had successfully developed an Islamic Civilization highly esteemed to this day. The Muslim Rulers of al-Andalus worked in cooperation with all levels of society to develop the civilization, including with women groups. Women in al-Andalus generally can be divided into categories of Arab women, Berber women, indigenous women, Muslim women, Mozarab women, Jewish women, *khassah* women (aristocrats) or 'ammah women (commoners), city women or rural women. On the whole they had a better status than women in the east (counterpart under Islamic rule) in terms of freedom, position, fate and participation in society. The freedom that al-Andalus women enjoyed did not only lie in the expression of feelings and opinions, but also in matters related to love. Some opinions state that this freedom enjoyed by them came from their own lifestyle, because they lived in al-Andalus side by side with Christian women. The lives of these two groups of different faiths created a mixture of descent, culture and social interaction (Viguera, 1992). Andalusian women, as mentioned in most sources, had a high status because of their special role in enhancing culture and developing society. The excellence of these women was based on two factors. First, the tolerance of the environment found in al-Andalus, whereas the second factor was the political stability and progress of the greater capital city of al-Andalus which encompassed Cordova, Seville, Valencia, Granada, Sargossa and Ronda, in fact, of the whole al-Andalus since the 8<sup>th</sup> Century until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century AD (al-Kazbari, 1999).

#### **Role and Contribution of Andalusian Women:**

As with their counterpart in the east, Muslim Andalusian women, had the opportunities to involve themselves in many fields ventured into by men, whether it was in politics, administration, social, literary and arts, as well as intellectual fields. Many scholars made the poetry of Andalusian women poets as proof of the extraordinary and high level of freedom enjoyed by Andalusian women, so much so that it is said that they had more freedom than Muslim women of other Muslim countries.

According to bibliographical records between 2 H/8 AD and 8H/ 14AD Centuries, there were about 116 educated Andalusian women. Of this number, two were categorised as intellectual scholars, three were renowned as practitioners in science and the rest were involved on account of their relationship with several well-known families. The third category witnessed involvement in the following activities: poetry (44 women), literateurs (22 women), secretaries (11 women), manuscript copyists (4 women), lexicographers (3 women), grammarians (2 women) and Qur'an reciters (16 women). In addition, 6 women were fulltime hadith scholars, 8 were *zahid* (ascetics), 6 were knowledgeable in fiqh (jurisprudence), 4 were knowledgeable in history, 4 were knowledgeable in arithmetics, 1 taught theology and 1 taught *fara'id* (inheritance law) (Viguera, 1992).

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### **Women's Role in Politics and Administration:**

The role and contribution of Muslim Andalusian women in the fields of politics and administration is not denied. The class which succeeded in playing this role usually were related to important people in the country, for example, as wife, slave, mother, daughter, grandmother, granddaughter or sister of the Ummayyad Caliph in Cordova, Sultans of Muluk al-Tawa'if, Sultan of Dawlah al-Murabitin, Sultan of al-Muwahhidin and also Sultan of Banu Nasr (Viguera, 1992). These women evidently succeeded in playing a big role in influencing prominent figures related to them and thus directly shaping the political development of the nation.

Among these was the example of the role played by Sabihah, the Queen of Caliph al-Hakam al-Mustansir. During his reign, the focus was very much on affairs of acquiring knowledge. This had given ample space for his Queen to administer the government. Based on her competence and intelligence, Sabihah became powerful and influential. History records that authority at that time was in her hands. She was given a secretary appointed by the Caliph, that is, Muhammad ibn Abi 'Amir. As a powerful state figure, she frequently received visits by envoys, statesmen and also poets. She also headed the *Majalis al-Hukm* and administrative state procedures. Other than having a secretary, Sabihah also had an assistant, that is, Ja'far ibn Hisham who held the position of *al-hajib* which was equivalent to a ministerial post. With her power, Sabihah was able to influence the Caliph to appoint Ibn Hisham (who was 11 years old) as heir instead of al-Mughirah who was 26 years old. Even though many problems cropped up after the demise of al-Hakam, for example, a conspiracy to depose Ibn Hisham, Sabihah was able to overcome them. She continued to rule and was much loved by the people for her low taxation policy. It was reported that she passed away in the year 398H. Based on this explanation, we can conclude that Sabihah had a great influence in state administration.

Other than Sabihah, Fatimah bint Amir al-Muslimin Abi 'Abd Allah ibn Amir al-Muslimin al-Ghalib bi Allah, that is, spouse to one of the Nasrid Rulers, Amir al-Muslimin Abi 'Abd Allah al-Ghalib bi Allah, is recorded in history as the prominent figure who was responsible for state administrative affairs during her husband's rule. Her experience benefitted her son and grandson until she died in the year 749H (Ibn al-Khatib, 1973:1). Fatimah surely had a great influence and tremendous ability to be able to influence her husband, son and grandson in running state affairs.

Women slaves were also not excluded from the sphere of influencing certain state figures in determining the policy or action plan in a state affair, in other words, in interfering indirectly with the political affairs of the state. The clearest example is the role of I'timad in influencing her husband's action, al-Mu'tamid ibn 'Abbad, Ruler of Seville. I'timad, described as an attractive and well-spoken woman with a sense of humour (Kahhalah, 1977:1), was the favourite wife of al-Mu'tamid and bore his sons. I'timad was originally called al-Rumaykiyyah by her master, Rumayk bin Hajjaj who later gave her to al-Mu'tamid. Al-Mu'tamid who dearly loved I'timad was said to have adopted the title al-Mu'tamid to suit his name with the name I'timad. She was said to have influenced her husband to sentence Ibn 'Ammar to death because some sections of his poems contained threats and censures. I'timad's action showed how great women's influence was in state administrative affairs. However, the influence of this woman was at one time the cause of criticism of the Umayyad Ruler in Cordova. This happened to Caliph al-Mustakfi who was criticised for being manipulated by a bad woman named Bint al-Marwaziyyah (Viguera, 1992).

Maternal influence evidently played a great role in determining the pathway of a kingdom. A clear example was the role played by 'A'ishah, wife of Abu al-Hassan 'Ali ibn Ismail, Nasrid ruler in Granada, who successfully influenced her son, Abu 'Abd 'Allah Muhammad or also known as Boabdil, to rebel against his father for the throne. 'A'ishah did so because she was envious of the influence of her husband's second wife, her competitor by the name of Zuhra who was a Christian woman. Boabdil's action under the influence of his mother clearly gave an opportunity to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain to attack Granada and wipe off Islamic rule from al-Andalus (Amir Ali, 1961).

In addition, state dignitaries could not avoid being influenced by women. For example, al-Hijab al-Mansur Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn 'Amir had been influenced by Asma' bint Ghalib, Mawla Amir al-Mu'minin al-Nasir li Din Allah Abu al-Mutarrib 'Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad whom he married in the year 367H. According to records, Asma' was one of the beautiful and pious women of that time, and the one who most influenced al-Mansur among his wives (Ibn al-Abar, 1990).

Apart from a political role in al-Andalus, there were also women who were recognised for their expertism in state administration. This could be seen especially in the art of calligraphy such that women secretaries appeared to play an important role in the task of keeping official state records or related matters. Al-Murakushi (d.647H) reported that in eastern Cordova, there were about 170 women copyists of al-Qur'an using the kufi khat. He expected a similar situation in other cities (Bahjat, 1979). This showed that al-Andalus had many women who were good in calligraphy. Among the well-known women secretaries was Saffiyah bint 'Abd Allah from Seville. Besides being a great orator and writer as well as a talented poetess (al-Kazbari, 1999), she was reported to be an expert calligrapher. She was assigned to copy manuscripts and her work was then re-copied by other competent copyists (Amir Ali, 1961).

Another example which can be highlighted here is Kitman Qurtubiyyah, one of the *jariah* (servants) in the palace of Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir. She was reported to be one of the Caliph's secretaries (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Other than Kitman, it was reported that there was another secretary of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir named Maznah who was highly knowledgeable in calligraphy in that era. She was reported to have died in 358H (Kahhalah, 1977:5; Bahjat, 1979). In addition, al-'Abbadiyyah who was a servant to al-Mu'tadad 'Abbad bin Muhammad al-Ishbili also was a secretary to the Ruler of Seville (Ibn al-Abar, 1990).

Another prominent figure was Nazzam, secretary in the palace of the Caliph in Cordova during the reign of Hisham al-Mu'ayyad ibn al-Hakkam al-Mustansir bi Allah. She was knowledgeable and clever in the art of correspondence (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Other than Nazzam, another who contributed in the secretariat was Lubna. She was a secretary of al-Hakam al-Mustansir bi Allah and his father al-Nasir. In addition to being a secretary, she was also competent in the field of *'arud* (science of Arabic poetry), literature, *nahw* (syntax) and poetry such that, it was reported that there was none better than her in the palace (Ibn al-Abar, 1990).

#### **The Role of Women in the Literary Arts:**

Throughout Islamic rule in al-Andalus, many women were involved in literary activities whether in writing or narrating poetry. More women poets or literateurs were born there in comparison to women in the eastern world because biographical books recorded show that women in the east were more inclined to learning hadith, fiqh or qira'at. Based on observation of these biographical books, there were 44 women poets and 22 women literateurs in al-Andalus.

Walladah binti Khalifah al-Mustakfi in Cordova (416/1025) was one of the renowned women poets in al-Andalus. Her poems portrayed the freedom and high status of women during her time (Viguera, 1992). Walladah who never married in her life was a respected and esteemed poetess of her time. She often became the focus of various groups for the greatness and beauty of her poems, her eloquence, courage and openness (al-Maqqari, 1995). She died in the year 484H and left behind a legacy for modern scholars to study (Viguera, 1992).

Another example was Maryam binti Abi Ya'qub al-Ansari who was one of the renowned women poets and literateurs in Seville after 4H Century AD. Her greatness was proven when a contemporary poet equated her to Maryam al-'Azra' in terms of piouness and to Khansa' in her presentation of poetry and *mathal* (parables) (Bahjat, 1979; Kahhalah, 1977:5). Saffiyah bint 'Abd Allah from Seville was also a gifted poetess, but she was more prominent as a calligrapher (Amir Ali, 1961), whereas al-'Abbadiyyah, servant of al-Mu'tadad 'Abbad from Denia was a multilingual poetess and literateur besides being secretary to the ruler of Seville. She was so knowledgeable that she was able to compete with male scholars of her time (Ibn al-Abar, 1990; al-Maqqari, 1995:4). In addition, Buthaynah binti al-Mu'tamid was also an intelligent, courageous poetess like her mother I'timad al-Rumaykiyyah. She was imprisoned when her father was deposed, and was bought over by a Seville merchant for his son. She did not allow herself to be touched before being married to the young man. She had written poetry bytes to her parents concerning the matter. When her father received the poems she sent, he was very glad with her situation and agreed to marry her to the young man. Buthaynah's poems were later widely publicised in the western part (Kahhalah, 1977:1; al-Maqqari, 1995:4).

Umm al-Kiram bint al-Mu'tasim bin Samadih, daughter of Ruler of Almeria (443/1051-484/1091) was well-known for her love poems she composed for a handsome young man who was a palace slave known as al-Simar (Viguera, 1992; Kahhalah, 1977:4). Ghayat al-Muna and Nuzhah al-Wahbiyyah, servant of a secretary named Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad bin Wahb al-Humayri, were also one of the famous women poets. Nuzhah was said to be one of the most special persons born in al-Andalus. She sang poems, narrated tales as well as *ayyam al-'Arab* (story of a historical *Jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic) Arab day). She was able to memorise *amthal* (proverbs) and *nasab* (lineage) as if she had been born in the eastern part (Ibn al-Abar, 1990; Kahhalah, 1977:5). There were many more women poets who appeared in al-Andalus such as Hassanah bint Abi al-Mukhsha 'Asim bin Zayd bin Yahya bin Hantalah, famous for her poems praising Amir 'Abd al-Rahman bin al-Hakam (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). So was al-Ghassaniyyah al-Bajayniyyah, a poet and literateur from Bajayniyyah, famous for poems praising the rulers of 4H Century (Kahhalah, 1977:4). Another poetess was Shalbiah al-Adabiyyah who wrote poems to Caliph al-Mansur Abu Yusuf, relating the cruelty of the governor and tax collector in her locality (Ibn al-Abar, 1990).

Some of the others who were recorded in historical books were 'Ubdah bint Bishr Umm al-'Izz, Mahjah, Bahjah and Nazhun. 'Ubdah was a poem transmitter who narrated her own father's poems (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Umm al-'Izz was clever in memorizing poetry, while Mahjah was a writer and poetess at par with Nazhun al-Qulay'iyah (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Bahjah, a resident of Cordova, was a friend of Walladah. Besides being famous for her poems, Bahjah was also renowned for her beauty (Amir Ali, 1961). And Nazhun was a writer and poetess contemporary with Hamdah (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Umm al-Hasan bin Qadi Abu Ja'far al-Tanjali was another poetess and writer. She could recite the Qur'an beautifully and knew part of medical science (Kahhalah, 1977).

In addition, many Andalusian women, whether free women or even slaves, emerged as singers famous for their sweet voices. Among them was Hamdunah bint Ziryab, who was the most famous Andalusian singer among her family such that male singers narrated her songs. She was renowned in the whole of al-Andalus and was more famous than her singer sister, 'Ulayyah bint Ziryab (Kahhalah, 1977; Ibn al-Abar, 1990). 'Ulayyah was said to live a long life after being the sole survivor of her family and many narrated her songs. Ziryab not only taught his children to sing, he even taught his and others' servants too. Among his servants who became a famous singer was Mut'ah who was said to have a beautiful face and whom he taught fine manners as well as the finest songs until she became the favourite singer of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman bin al-Hakam (Ibn al-Abar, 1990).

And Masabih, servant of the secretary Abu Hafs 'Umar bin Qahlil, was also among the singers who sang Ziryab's songs. She proved to be an outstanding singer with a voice so sweet that a person would write to her master just to hear her sing (Ibn al-Abar, 1990; Kahhalah, 1977). And Qalam was an Andalusian woman who later came to stay in Madinah to learn singing. She was a smart woman with an excellent memory. She also memorised Arabic traditional stories passed down the generations besides being a writer skilled in many types of writing (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Another name which should be highlighted is Fadl al-Madaniyyah who was nurse to a princess of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. She was brought to Madinah and had improved her ability to sing. Fadl and her friends were bought by Amir 'Abd al-Rahman bin al-Hakam. Besides being a great singer, Fadl was also competent in Arabic (*sarf*) morphology and *adab* (manners) (Ibn al-Abar, 1990; Kahhalah, 1977).

### **The Role of Women in the Intellectual Field:**

The progress of intellectual development in al-Andalus had given all its citizens including women, the opportunity to acquire knowledge, enabling those who were able to join the intellectual class of men in disseminating knowledge to those in need of it. Among the intellectual women who emerged in al-Andalus was Fatimah bint Yahya bin Yusuf al-Maghani who was learned in the religious field. She had spent her whole life teaching what she knew to all groups whether men or women. It was recorded that male scholars engaged in frequent discussions with her. She passed away in Cordova in the year 319H (Bahjat, 1979; Viguera, 1992; Kahhalah, 1977).

Other than Fatimah, Maryam bint Abi Ya'qub al-Ansari from Seville was a knowledgeable person who contributed her services by teaching Andalusian women literature and poetry (Bahjat, 1979). Records state that during the reign of Caliph al-Mahdi II, Maryam had visited houses in Ishbilliyah just to teach *sarf* (morphology), *nahw* (syntax) and *adab* (manners) (al-Kazbari, 1999). She had numerous students despite being a woman. She also taught *balaghah* (rhetorics), poetry and literature. It was reported that she passed away at the end of the 4H Century AD (Amir Ali, 1961).

Rashidah al-Wa'izah had travelled all areas in al-Andalus to raise awareness of women by educating them (Bahjat, 1979; Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Umm Shurayh al-Muqri who studied '*Ilm al-qira'at*' from her husband Abu 'Abd bin Shurayh, together with him taught the knowledge they possessed such that their student Abu Bakr 'Ayyad bin Baqi who learnt from them at a young age, took pride in the matter (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). And Maria bint Abi Ya'qub al-Faysali was recorded as an intellectual woman famous for her knowledge and her compelling poetry, such that she was known in the West as the Arabian Corinna (Kahhalah, 1977; Amir Ali, 1961).

Among other names was Sayyidah bint 'Abd al-Ghani bin 'Ali al-Abdariyyah al-Gharnatiyyah, a *hafiz* (memorizer) of the Qur'an who had a beautiful handwriting. It was reported that she studied in Tunis and copied *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* by al-Ghazali. She was said to have died in Tunis in 647 (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). In addition, Ishraq was also an Andalusian woman famed for her intellect. Even though not originally from Al-Andalus, she was invited to teach Andalusian children. She was famous for poetry narration and interpretation (al-Kazbari, 1999). 'A'ishah bint Ahmad al-Qurtubiyyah was an Andalusian woman who cannot be ignored. This is because she was highly honoured by Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir and was recognised for her intellect. An interesting thing about her was that she had a special library containing a collection of (*nadir*) rare manuscripts most of which were written with her own hand (al-Kazbari, 1999).

Andalusian women also studied '*ilm al-hadith*' (Hadith sciences) leading to the appearance of women traditionists such as Ghada bint 'Abd Allah bin Hamdun from Cordova. She narrated Hadith from Sa'id bin 'Uthman al-A'naqi and Ghada (Kahhalah, 1977). In addition to Ghada, Umm al-Hassan bint Abu Liwa' Sulayman bin Asbagh bin 'Abd Allah was also a pious, ascetic and honourable woman. She was known for her knowledge in fiqh and hadith (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). 'Abida al-Madinah Umm Walad Habib bin Habib al-Marwani was a black slave from Madinah who narrated Hadith from Malik bin Anas and other scholars. She was later brought to al-Andalus by Muhammad bin Yazid bin Musamah after her haj (pilgrimage). Muhammad was reported to be impressed with her knowledge and understanding (Ibn al-Abar, 1990).

Another intellectual Andalusian woman who should be highlighted was Zaynab bint Muhammad bin Ahmad bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Zuhri al-Balansiyyah. There are claims that she was 'Azizah bint Ibn Mahriz. Zaynab was said to have the opportunity to learn from her maternal grandfather, Abu al-Hassan bin Huzayl. She

studied *Kitab al-Taqsī* by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr under him. She was a pious woman who died at age 80 in the month of Jamad al-Awwal 635H (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Another intellectual woman, Zaynab bint Abu ‘Amir Yusuf bin ‘Abd Allah bin Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Barr from eastern al-Andalus (Shatibah) had the opportunity to study various sciences from her father who was one of the Andalusian scholars in *fiqh*, *al-Hadith*, *al-qira’at* and *al-tarikh*. She was one of the learned and pious women of that time (Ibn al-Abar, 1990).

In addition, another famous Andalusian woman was al-Hakam’s servant. After discovering that his servant was intelligent, al-Hakam requested Abu al-Qasim Sulayman bin Ahmad bin Sulayman al-Ansari to teach her astronomy. Within 3 years, she was able to master the science and asked to serve in al-Hakam’s palace (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Meanwhile, Lubnah who resided in al-Hakam’s palace was also a scholar in Arabic language and *‘ilm al-hisab* (mathematics) (al-Kazbari, 1999). And Zaynab bint al-Khalifah Abu Ya’qub Yusuf bin al-Khalifah Abu Muhammad ‘Abd al-Mu’min bin ‘Ali who was Andalusian by birth, studied dialectical theology and other sciences from Abi ‘Abd Allah bin Ibrahim. She was knowledgeable, intelligent and insightful as well as ahead of other women of her time (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). The daughter of Fayaz al-Qurtubi was the wife of Abu ‘Abd Allah bin ‘Itab. She studied the science of *tafsir*, Arabic language and also poetry from her father. In addition, she also studied *fiqh* from her husband. Historical records show that she left Cordova to study *al-qira’at* under Abu ‘Amr al-Muqri, but was too late, for he fell sick and passed away. Fayaz’s sister looked for a friend of Abu ‘Amr al-Muqri and then went to see Abu Dawud to study under him in Valencia. She was said to be competent in *al-qira’at al-sab’* (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). Fayaz’s daughter died in 446H (Ibn al-Abar, 1990). This showed that Andalusian women had a strong spirit and did not easily lose hope to acquire knowledge and support from family and society.

### Conclusion:

Andalusian women played an active role in various fields of life such as politics, whether directly or otherwise, in intellectual activities for personal reasons, general public or aristocracy, and also in the development of arts and culture. Muslim Andalusian women were clearly ahead of Christian women in Europe at that time. In addition to the factors of tolerance and peace enjoyed, this phenomena was caused by Islamic teachings itself which gave special rights to women to make personal progress and utilise their knowledge and expertise for the benefit of society, and Andalusian women have exercised that right.

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