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MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRACTICE OF UNVEILING AND ITS EFFECTS IN KILIFI TOWNSHIP, KILIFI COUNTY

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Abstract

Purpose: Veiling as a practice has sparked a lot of debates among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. There are Muslim perspectives that exist on the practice of veiling. The pro-veiling and anti-veiling. The latter had a backing of the feminists and other people, some of whom started associating veiling with a form of slavery, backwardness and oppression to a woman.

Methodology: The instruments for data collection comprised of questionnaires, oral interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 80 questionnaires were distributed to gather information. Three questionnaires were not returned. This represented a 3.75% of those who did not return the questionnaires. Respondents were *ulamas*, community elders, women who previously unveiled, women currently veiling, the Muslims and the non-Muslims. The data collected was analyzed and presented to form the basis of this dissertation.

Results: The study found that fifty percent (50%) of the respondents believed that Muslim women were wearing the veil. They do so because it is a religious obligation. However, due to the influence of Secularization, desire to expose latest fashionable dresses and attracting men sexually, this situation has impacted the practice of veiling negatively among Muslim women. Based on the findings, it was suggested that Muslim organizations should play a vital role in sensitizing Muslim women to veil. This research seeks to establish Muslim perspectives on the practice of unveiling and its effects in Kilifi township, Kilifi County. Studies should be conducted to find out if Secularization, influx of women who do not veil or growth of higher learning institutions are responsible for influencing Muslim women to unveil.

Unique contribution of the study: This research will enable the public and academic domain in general to understand the importance of adhering to the practice of veiling since a greater percentage of the respondents were of the view that veiling was a religious obligation.

Keywords: *Veiling, Slavery, Veil, Secularization*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that the veil more than any other Islamic practice, has become the symbol and evidence of violence Islam has inflicted on women (Mahmood, 2005) For many people, the veiled woman symbolizes the oppression of women in Muslim cultures and provides proof that these cultures need to be saved (Cloud, 2004). Images of covered women have often been used to illustrate the “backwardness” of Muslims and subordination of women in Muslim societies (El Guindi, 1999). It has been observed that the impact of gendered Islamophobia have shown that Muslim women who wear *hijab* suffer discrimination in the work (Parker-Jenkins, 1999). Recent studies have identified significant barriers to veiled Muslim women accessing jobs (Keung, 2002).

However, some Muslim women have continued veiling; leading many non-Muslims to question their motives for doing so. In fact, since September 11, 2001, it has been observed that the number of Muslim women who wear the veil has increased significantly (McGinty, 2006); in spite of facing greater scrutiny and suspicion due to a generalized fear of Muslims. The word veil literary means covering or concealing something.

It can be defined as a symbol or dress worn by Muslim women to offer them cover or protection from injury or lustful eyes of the public (Murphy, 1964). It is an article of clothing, worn exclusively by Muslim women, which is Baron intended to cover the body, head or face. In the Islamic context, it is a dress worn by Muslim women which accords them respect, modesty and morality. Various forms of the veil have been adopted from the Arab culture in which Islam arose. Many of these garments cover the hair, ears and throat, but do not cover the face. For example, the Afghan *burqa* covers the entire body, obscuring the face completely except for a grille or netting over the eyes to allow the wearer to see. The *boshiya* is a veil that may be worn over a headscarf. It covers the entire face and is made of a sheet fabric, so the wearer is able to see through it. The *niqab* and *burqa* are also two veils of dress that cover the head except for a slit or hole for the eyes. This study focuses on *buibui* as an aspect of the veil. It considers it as a dress that is not tight-fitting which accords a Muslim woman her modesty, decency and morality. It gives her dignity by hiding which men might find sexually attractive. A Muslim woman, by so doing, tends to fulfill an Islamic obligation. In this study, the word veil or *hijab* shall be used repeatedly to represent *buibuibi*.

It has been suggested that the practice of wearing a veil-uncommon among the Arabs prior to the rise of Islam-originated in the Byzantine Empire (Brenner, 1996). The veil is a symbol of Islamic piety, but it has been a cause of controversy. For example in 1989, a public school in Creil, a town in northern France, expelled three Muslim schoolgirls for refusing to remove the Islamic headscarves they wore to school. The expulsions were widely reported in France and in international media and were followed by other expulsions of other Muslim girls in towns and cities across the country, accompanied by growing community protests (Jones, 2009).

The increasing common practice of veiling among Muslim women has stimulated a great deal of scholarly investigation and debate. The practice of veiling in this study is used to discuss the

social standing of Muslim women. On one hand, some scholars contend that Muslim women occupy a subordinate status because of the veiling. Some empirical evidence lends support to this view, as many scholars in general have highlighted the traditional and gendered customs prescribed by Islam, most notably, the veiling and shrouding of Muslim women. The different interpretations of the Quranic laws suggest that it is not the oppressed ideological framework or religious belief system, but ideologies which are located at the level of social relations of gender which determine the subordination of women. On the other hand, a growing number of scholars disagree and propose that oppression and subjugation of veiled Muslim women may, in many regards, be overstated (Brenner, 1996).

1.1 Statement of the problem

Kilifi Township is known to be the home of variety of religions. There are Christians of various denominations and Muslims who prescribe to Islamic law. Different Muslims have different perspectives on the practice of veiling. This situation has led to various discourses and debates among Muslim scholars on the practice of veiling. The prevailing fraternity holds the view that veiling by Muslim women is obligatory while on the other hand the anti-veiling, which is promulgated by the feminists, are of the view that it is a matter of personal choice and individual sense of religiosity (Atasoy, 2003). The pro-veiling Muslims further argue that unveiling leads to negative effects in the society. Despite most Muslim leaders and parents insisting on Muslim women to wear the veil-which they consider as most modest form of dress- and despite the message of immorality on unveiling being constantly addressed in mosques and *madrassas*, it has been observed that a number of young Muslim women from Charo wa Mae have abandoned the strict adherence to the Muslim practice of veiling. This study was conducted at Kwa Charo wa Mae because it was this neighborhood in which these Muslim ladies resided. This study therefore seeks to investigate the factors that led to the abandonment of veiling to unveiling by these Muslim women in Kilifi Township.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were:

- i) To determine the different perspectives of Muslims on the practice of unveiling and its effects in Kilifi Township
- ii) To establish the history of the spread of Islam in Kilifi town

1.3 Research questions

- i) What are the different perspectives of Muslim women on the practice of veiling in Kilifi Township, Kilifi County?
- ii) What is the history of the spread of Islam in Kilifi town?

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected through oral interviews with different categories of respondents which included females who veiled and those who did not veil, *madrassa* teachers and mosques *imams*. Focus Group Discussion was also held and their views were also collected. The study employed the above technique. Informants were recruited through purposive and snowball

sampling technique. Purposive sampling allowed researcher pick study subjects because they are information rich and possess required characteristics with respect to the study objectives. The informants picked made representation of the larger informants or target population. In this study, interviews with key informants were conducted. It targeted Islamic consultants of ten (10) *ulama*, ten (10) community elders, twenty (20) women previously unveiling and twenty (20) women currently veiling. FGDs were comprised of ten (10) old Muslim women of forty years and above and ten (10) *madrassa* teachers; including their *mudir* i.e. headteacher. In order to find other informants with similar characteristics, snowball strategy was employed with the initial informants recommending to the researcher others having similar characteristics and willing to participate in the study.

3.0 RESULTS

Perspectives of *ulama* (Muslim scholars) on the practice of veiling

This section discusses perspectives of the veil on the practice of unveiling. The perspectives include the veil is a religious requirement, a concealment (*stara*), a shield (*kinga*) or a fashionable dress. Their views were collected and analyzed. A category of ten *ulama* were interviewed in Kilifi. The study aimed at getting their views if women were wearing the veil because it was a religious requirement, concealment (*stara*), a fashionable dress or a shield (*kinga*). Five *ulama* expressed their views that the veil was a religious requirement, two *ulama* expressed that the veil was concealment (*stara*), two *ulama* maintained that the veil at was a shield (*kinga*) while one *aalim* argued that the veil was a fashionable dress. They gave varied opinions as follows:

The veil is a religious requirement

An interview with five *ulama* revealed that women were wearing the veil because it was a religious requirement. The following were their perspectives:

“It is obvious that the veil is predominantly worn by Muslim women. One could find that right inside the veil, a woman has also put on certain dresses that are not supposed to be seen in public. The veil is the only one that conceals that kind of inner dress properly. This implies that the intension of the wearer of that the veil was merely to abide by the commandment of Allah (S.W.) on veiling. Besides, it beats the logic for A Muslim woman to cover up inside her veil something which she knows the public would wish to see, laud and admire; only for it to be covered up by the veil. There must some element of Allah-fearing in her.” The veil is a religious dress since it is easily and explicitly distinguishable from other forms of dresses. Through veiling, a woman gives herself a Muslim identity. According to the teachings of the Quran, Muslims believe that they have divinely been ordained to wear the veil. The *aalim* justified his statement by quoting a Qur’anic verse which goes:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things) and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts, etc.) and not to show their adornment except only that which is apparent (like palms of hands or one eye or both eyes for

necessity to see the way, or outer dress like veil, gloves, head-cover, apron, etc), and to draw their veils all over *Juyubihinna* (i.e. their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms, etc) and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their (Muslim) women (their their sisters in Islam), or the (female) slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants who lack vigour, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex,. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you, O believers, that you may be successful.”¹

The *aalim* (Muslim scholar) expressed that the veil was a religious requirement. Therefore, when you see women wearing the veil, they do so solely for the sake of obeying the commandment of Allah (S.W.). He further stressed, “Veiling therefore is not an option but it is a religious obligation.

Another *aalim* said that although some women consider the veil as a fashionable dress, a dress of modesty, or whatever the case it may be, the major reason as to why they do so is to comply with the commandment Allah (S.W.).

Another *aalim* expressed his opinions, “Many Muslim women would have wanted to be free to wear dresses of their choices. But they have decided to keep that aside and wear the veil anytime they moved out of their homes; whether it is hot or cold. This shows that they consider wearing the veil as a religious obligation”.

An opinion from another *aalim* held, “Women put on the veil today because they don't want to expose their adornments to the public. This is because Islam forbids women from exposing their adornments publicly: except to a certain category of people. The Holy Quran specifies this category of people as follows:

Forbidden to you (for marriage) are: your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father's sisters, your mother's sisters,, your brother's daughters, your sister's daughters, your foster mother who gave you suck, your foster milk suckling sisters, your wives' mothers, your step daughters under your guardianship, born of your wives to whom you have gone in-but there is no sin on you if you have not gone in them, (to marry their daughters)-the wives of your sons who(spring) from your own loins and two sisters in wedlock at the same time, except for what has already passed; Allah is Oft Forgiving, Most Merciful.²

Therefore, women wear the veil because it is a religious obligation”.

View from another *aalim* held, “Women wear the veil not for any purpose but to hide what they are wearing inside the veil so that they don’t expose them to the public and end up being sinful. This shows that they behave in this manner so as to adhere to the laws of Islam”.

“Wearing *buihui* must be observed by all Muslim women; failure to which it will lead to the disobedience against the teachings of Islam”. The veil, he added, is a dress of modesty and women are supposed to be modest all the time in their life. Therefore, wearing the veil is mandatory, and there is no short-cut to that”.

The veil is a concealment (*stara*)

Two *ulama* expressed their opinion that women were wearing the veil as concealment (*stara*). One of them expressed, “The veil conceals what is not supposed to be seen publicly by the world of men which is full of sexual temptations. The veil is not supposed to expose to the public how one’s bosoms, for instance, truly look like”.

Another *aalim* added, “There are some people who do misuse the veil. This is done when they use the veil to cover their indecent and funny dresses that are not compatible to the teachings of Islam. Such women re-veil when they have finished doing their own private affairs, like attending discos at night clubs, among other acts that are forbidden by Islam.

The veil is a shield (*kinga*)

Two *ulama* that were interviewed said that the veil was a shield (*kinga*). One gave his perspective as follows:

“When a woman has put on the veil, she is bound to shield herself against possible sexual temptations. These temptations, if not careful, can drive her towards indulging into infidelity or other forms of illicitly sexual behavior”.

He added, “Naturally, a woman’s body is considered by many as a centre of sexual attraction to the opposite sex. Under normal circumstances, this kind of behavior is also displayed by such animals like peacock; which spreads its beautiful coloured wings in order to attract male attention”.

He further added, “Wearing of the veil protects a woman body against public curiosity. In other words, the veil does not only shield the wearer against evils, but it also shields women from lustful eyes”.

He reiterated, “Wearing the veil does not only provide shield (*kinga*) to the wearer, but it is indeed a commandment which has been ordained in the Holy Quran”. He quoted a verse from the Holy Quran as:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things) and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts, etc) and not to show off/display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their *khumur*³ over their bosoms...”

He concluded, “When a Muslim woman wears the veil, she does not expose her body figure. The veil provides as a shield because it instills fear of Allah (S.W.) into the heart of the wearer”.

Another *aalim* expressed, “Muslim women wear the veil because they consider it as a shield “*kinga*”. They believe that by wearing the veil they become easily identifiable by people as Muslims. When this happens, especially in an area that is dominated by Muslims, they will be accorded with respect which in turn will shield them against any unforeseeable insult or harm for that matter. This is because the veil is considered as a dress of modesty”.

The veil is a fashionable dress

In the opinion that the veil is a fashionable dress, an *aalim* explained his perspective as follows:

“Some women wear the veil today as fashion. This is so because most of the veils in the Market today are designed in such a way that they tighten and expose the body of the Wearer i.e. woman, revealing what should not be revealed to the public, Islam condemns this behavior.”

He added, “Most of the contemporary veils in the market today are made of different shapes and designs. It has become difficult to distinguish the traditional and the conventional veil from the rest of dresses that people put one today. This implies that the level of respect which people used to accord to the veil has now been diluted. The real meaning of the veil has been lost. Women therefore go for the fashion of the day and not the dignity or modesty which the veil offers to the wearer. Unlike before, the practice of wearing the veil has now been adopted by people belonging to other religious affiliations in Kilifi. Although they are not obliged to do so by their faith, some have found appealing to them and they wear it.

Although Muslim women and men across the world have found different perspectives of negotiating and reconciling contested interpretations of veiling and its effects, most Muslims lend support that it is a religious obligation which must be practiced by Muslim women.

History of Islam in Kilifi Town

Islam in Mtsanganyiko

The spread of Islam at Mtsanganyiko was attributed to, among other factors, the conversion to Islam by the *Kauma* tribe. They embraced Islam through interaction with Arabs in trade relations and intermarriage. Their ancestors’ tombs still lie there today. Sacrifices were offered at this place as *sadaqa* (charity) to the people who attended this ceremony known as *ziara* (ceremonious

visit to the graveyard). A famous family known to conduct the ceremony was the *Matari* family. They used to visit the sacred grooves. The ceremony is still being observed today annually. However, it is only a few people and friends of the *Matari* family who still attend it. This is because there emerged a group of Muslims who denounced it; citing it as *shirk* (polytheism) in Islam. However, in spite of the above denouncement, the ceremony contributed to the Islamization of the community in Kilifi. This was because people related to each other in different ways during this function. They also got a chance to feast from the sacrificed animals during this ceremony. Hence, they became attracted to it and ultimately joined Islam.

There were a number of factors that contributed to the end of this trade at Mtsanganyiko. They include the abolishment of the slave trade in 1833. As a result of this development, the market for the slaves became non-existent. This state of affairs posed a big blow to the trade since some of the highly valuable commodities were slaves. No one ever thought for a moment that such a booming trade was going to end. Another factor that led to the collapse of the above trade was that, the area experienced a heavy down pour which eroded most parts of the area. The natural physical set up of the land became deformed. As a result, this made the area undockable for the dhows that used to come there.

With the collapse of the trade at Mtsanganyiko, some local people moved to other areas of the region in pursuit of new life. Some people went to Kilifi town with their families. It is difficult to get the names of the first lot of these people who settled permanently in Kilifi. This is because such movements took place long time ago. Nevertheless, some biographical sketches of their generations that came later were obtained through oral interviews with some people who knew their whereabouts. One of them was Amani Rubea Amani. Rubea earns a living through fishing. He used to go for fishing with other fishermen like Hamad Mzee Hamad who would use *mahema* to trap the fish where as Rubea would use a fishing net.

Islam in Kilifi town

Having explained the history of Islamization of Mtsangayiko, it is equally important to know how Islam spread in Kilifi. It should be noted that the significant factor that led to the institutionalization of Islam in Kilifi was intermarriage. This is because those people who got married to the Muslim families earlier on started procreating children who were born as Muslims. For example, those people who came to Kilifi from Mtsanganyiko after the demise of the trade were predominantly Muslims. In addition, the people who left Mtsanganyiko and settled in Takaungu were Muslims. These two groups of Muslims later came to live in Kilifi.

Other factors include building of mosques, good relations that prevailed between the Arabs and the local people, the power of Islam itself, to mention but a few. On conversion to Islam, the *Mijikenda* abandoned their traditional beliefs that were against the teachings of Islam. The local people of Kilifi adopted the Islamic etiquettes. The Arabs culture of veiling readily influenced the local people to embrace and practice it due to the mutual interactive activities that existed between them and the local people like trade and in marriage relations. When they intermarried, the generations that emerged afterwards were Muslims by birth and

adopted Muslim names. This is the reason why some names of the local people living at Kwa Charo wa Mae have names that are mixed with Arabic, local names like, Ali Kahindi, Suleiman Chitole, Said Unda, Mohammed Katana, among others.

There are also important personalities who came to Kilifi and contributed to the spread of Islam. These personalities include Abdulatif Mohammed Basharahil, Ali Mohammed Shallo,^e Bakari Salim Ngao, and Mwango Rajab Mwango.

4.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Summary of findings

In analyzing the different perspectives of Muslims on the practice of unveiling in Kilifi Township, Kilifi County, the study highlighted major findings of the research. The study found that there were various perspectives of the Muslims on the practice of unveiling in Kilifi Township, Kilifi County. The study sought to find out if wearing the veil was as a result of being a religious requirement, a concealment (*stara*) to the woman, a fashion or a shield (*kinga*). The study has revealed that first; most Muslims were of the opinion that wearing the veil was a religious requirement, secondly that the veil was a garment of concealment (*stara*), thirdly, that the veil was fashionable, lastly, perspective was the veil was a shield (*kinga*).

The study explained how Islam spread in Kilifi town. It highlighted how significant/instrumental Mtsanganyiko was in the spread of Islam in kilifi town. This was because there was a movement of Muslims who came from Mtsanganyiko and settled in Kilifi permanently. As a result of their interaction with the local people, Islam spread in Kilifi town.

According to the discourse that led some Muslim women preferring to unveil, the study found out that women preferred unveiling because they wanted to look attractive to the opposite sex so as to draw their attention sexually. Similarly, the study found out some women unveiled because they were influenced by the Secularization, as a result of most countries in Africa having been colonized by the west. During that time, Secularization influenced the Africans. Because of this scenario, even those countries that were under the influence of the Arab-Muslims after the arrival of the westerners were also influenced by unveiling.

Mass media also influenced Muslim women to unveil by virtue of the invention of modern technology like the internet or social media which have greatly influenced some Muslim women's preference to unveil.

The study further revealed that unveiling was also caused by socialization. A few Muslim women whose neighbours were non-Muslims were bound to be influenced to unveil. This was because they would not feel comfortable to see their immediate neighbours (non-Muslims), whom they interacted with on daily basis, not veiling yet they themselves were veiling. To understand the effects of the practice of unveiling on society as observed by some Muslim women in kilifi Township Kilifi County, the study further found out that there were a number of effects of the practice of unveiling on society as observed by some Muslim women in Kilifi. It

has emerged that if a woman unveiled she found it much easier to have access to places that are associated with intoxication or drinking. But if she veiled, it saved her from the curious eyes of onlookers who found it unusual for a woman to wear the veil and then enter such a place.

Other effects are as follows:

If a woman did not veil, she becomes prone to seduction. This was because she exposed her body in public, which makes the opposite sex become attracted to her. Ultimately this leads to seduction. When seduction occurs, it may lead to sexual intercourse which may in turn lead to contraction of HIV/AIDS which has no cure so far. Unveiling can also lead to breakage of a home or a family. In the event that unveiling leads to seduction, adultery or HIV/AIDS, the husband or wife can demand divorce if he or she discovers that his or her partner is not faithful.

The study has established that unveiling makes a woman walk boastfully and majestically in public. This makes her prone to catcalls and whistles from males as she walks along in town. This ultimately leads to vanity. Unveiling is also responsible for rape. It has been observed that if a woman did not wear the veil and she dressed attractively in public, she was bound to attract and provoke the opposite sex to commit rape. This can further lead to such consequences as having a child born outside wedlock, etc.

In addition, the study also found out that unveiling deprived a woman of her religious identity as a Muslim. A woman becomes easily identifiable as a Muslim if she dresses the veil. When she was not done, she made people confused as to whether she was a Muslim or a non-Muslim. To establish what contribution the Muslim leaders, both men and women can do to enforce the practice of veiling as evident in Kilifi Township, the study found out that Muslims leaders ought to make enormous contribution towards the sensitization of Muslim women for them to embrace veiling as a religious practice. Intensive awareness campaigns ought to be organized to bring women who have unveiled to the fold of veiling.

Muslim media frame should televise programmes which show that women have decently dressed in the veil. This will influence other women to wear the veil.

Conclusions

It can be conclusively said that despite the fact that there has been discursive discussions and conflicting meanings on the practice of veiling, many scholars lend support to it and contend that is a religious requirement. Besides, it accords a Muslim woman her respect, modesty, morality and piety. Therefore, it should be encouraged to be practiced by Muslim women in the society.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations for this thesis:

There is need for Muslim organizations to help in the propagation and creating awareness on the importance of the veil. Muslim organizations should take the lead in organizing/conducting seminars, workshops, publishing news bulletin, among other ways. This implies that when the above functions are organized, representatives from the Muslim organizations should take that chance to enlighten the Muslims on the importance of wearing the veil. Supreme Council of

Kenya Muslims is the umbrella body of all the Muslims organizations, societies, Mosques Committees and Groups in Kenya. There is need for SUPKEM to play a vital role in sensitizing the Muslim community on the importance of wearing the veil. In so doing, they should be quoting various Qur'anic verses that emphasize on women putting on the veil. SUPKEM is a Non-Governmental organization with many branches across major towns in Kenya. It represents the Muslims of Kenya to the Government and therefore, any views expressed by it stand to reach-out thousands of Muslims at the grass-root levels. This will influence a considerable number of women to wear the veil.

There is need for *Ulamas* to be proponents of veiling. There is need for *ulamas'* intervention to this matter. They should embark on the campaign to scrap the notion or mentality that wearing of veil is a form of oppression, enslavement or belittling a woman. They should come out clearly to air their views towards encouraging women to wear the veil. The *ulamas*, as it is universally known, are mentioned in the Quran as Allah's-fearing people. In the Quran, Allah compares those who know with those who do not know.⁴ This implies that their recognition and impact in the society is enormous. They have the ability to influence Muslims to behave in a certain way. Besides, have the authority to decree on something provided it is not against the teachings of the Quran. Therefore, the *ulama* should utilize this advantage to call on Muslims to adhere to the code of dress that is considered by Muslims as decent and modest, which is veiling. In executing this, they can use mass media to publicize this matter especially via social networks. The *ulama* should join social media groups like *watsapp* and put their comments on veiling. Such comments would reach out to members of the group and the message of veiling would spread very fast.

There is need to educate women on the negative effects caused by unveiling. Conduction of *Darsas* or Islamic lectures can be the best tool for Muslims to use to convey the message of veiling to the women. The *madrassa* teachers can use such platforms to enlighten the community on the importance of wearing the veil. The *darsas* should be conducted both inside and outside the mosques. They should invite various speakers from different places so as to give talks that advocate women to stick

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