

## **Purdah: A Religious Practice or an Instrument of Exclusion, Seclusion and Isolation of Women in a Typical Islamic Setting of Northern Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper looks at the concept and perception of purdah and its practice in a typical Islamic setting of Northern Nigeria. The paper makes a holistic appraisal of existing literature (academic and religious) bringing to bare the implication of meanings and interpretation of purdah based on cultural and religious practices and how it has impacted on the women in the Northern region of the country. The paper concludes that, women are denied of inheritance; do not have access to land and other means of production. As banks in Nigeria insist on getting collateral before they can advance loan to those who want to go into business, they cannot access bank loans to start business. Even many of the intervention programmes introduced by the government aimed at empowerment of the less privileged members of the society have not impacted positively on their lives. The institution of purdah can be seen to be inimical to the progress and development of the womenfolk in the Northern part of the country. It has secluded and excluded them from the social, economic and political activities going on in the society, thereby confirming their second class status. The exploitative tendencies of purdah has put the women in such a precarious position so much so that they lacked the wherewithal to demand for and get equal right with the men.*

### **Introduction**

Since the dawn of history, the female gender the world over, has been subjected to different forms of discriminatory tendencies. They vary according to age, social status and the dominant prevailing ideology in the society at a given epoch. Each era, and each system saw a gradual but systematic institutionalisation and entrenchment of a second class status for the female gender. They experienced different degree of subjugation and exploitation. Certain religious institutions were put in place not only to perpetuate the second class status but to sanction it. It is from this backdrop that the study of the institution of purdah in the Muslim communities of Northern Nigeria becomes relevant. In both theory and practice, purdah has remained a controversial issue. Some including Muslim women who hold on it tenaciously believe it uphold the dignity of women. They contended that it allows men to see and respect women for her intellect, faith and personality. However, others especially with the rise of radical feminism view it as a backward system put in place to keep women in perpetual subjugation. The paper examined the institution of purdah in Northern Nigeria. It focused on the origin and context of purdah from the perspective of the Quran and the hadith. The divergent of opinions as regards the interpretations of the various injunctions in the scripture were situated in their context. The various negative impacts on the womenfolk, in particular and the society in general were situated within the patriarchal social system that nurtured exclusion.

### **Origin**

Historical evidence suggests that sexes were separated long before the period of the Muslim conquest. Similar traditions of isolation around the world make it impossible for Islam alone to be responsible for purdah. Susan (1998) opined that it probably develop in Persia and later spread to Middle Eastern lands. She argued that it is not an Islamic custom but was picked up by some Muslim who settled in Iran and India, where it was an established pre-Islamic tradition designed to show case the wealth of a family.

An institution similar to purdah flourished in ancient Babylon where no woman could go outside unless masked and chaperoned by a male from the family (ibid). Part of the household was also separated as a practice of segregation. Similarly, in ancient Assyria, women had to remain behind curtains where darkness and little breeze prevailed. This is why probably some scholars see purdah as a jail.

The Achaemenid rulers of Persia hid their wives and concubines from public gaze. They were extremely jealous, severe and suspicious about their women, not only their wives, but their slaves and concubines. They kept them so strictly that no one sees them abroad. They spent their lives shut up within the doors (free Encyclopaedia). It is contended that in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. during the Arab conquest of what is now Iran, the Muslim probably adapted the idea of purdah to their religion. (Susan, op cit). Purdah was vigorously observed in Iran before it was banned by Reza Shah. The Taliban in Afghanistan, however have made their women to observe complete purdah all times they were in the public (free Encyclopaedia op cit).

Hijab was ordained compulsory with 3 A.H or 5 A.H. It is said that the Quran contains seven verses altogether concerning hijab; three of these are featured within the Surah Noor and four in Surah Ahzaad. Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasalam, reintroduced the custom as part of Islamic tenet, faith and time, the law associated with purdah became more severe (Susan op cit). During the era of British domination and subjugation of India observance of purdah was very strictly adhered to and widespread among the Muslims. In Saudi Arabia it is argued that it is a custom with cultural rather than religious basis. Meanwhile in the United Arab Emirates where women can wear skirts and similar modest garment, Arab women often observe purdah.

### ***Purdah as a Concept***

There is no much controversy that surrounds the meaning of purdah as scholars and commentators are clear about what they are talking about. It is probably its application, to whom applicable and in what circumstances that there are divergent of opinions. Lindsey (1997) posited that it is a 'veil for millions of women who adhere to Islam. It is a Persian word which translated loosely to mean 'curtain', but has come to refer to the separate world of males and female along with virtual concealment of most women in the Islamic culture (ibid). Schion contended that it is curtain which makes sharp separation between the world of men and that of women, between the community as a whole and the family which is its heart, between the street and the home, the public and the private, just as it sharply separates society and the individual. Nazeer (2009) however, posited that purdah is an imposition on mature women till they reach old age and cross child bearing times. It is not an obligation on old women. Purdah is said to be linked to the concept of Namus. Namus is an ethical category, a virtue in Middle Eastern Muslim patriarchal character. It is a gender specific category of relations within a family described in terms of honour, attention, respect/respectability and modesty. (Wikipedia, the free Encyclopaedia). Nazeer (op cit) opined that purdah stems from religious values about modesty and proper comportment and that it does not have grounding in religious teaching.

Purdah falls into two interwoven categories. On one side is the requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form. What is to be covered and how to cover it has remained highly controversial. According to Nazeer (op cit) the Salafi Sect and the Tabliq group advocate that women should wear burqa or purdah to cover their entire face revealing only the eyes. To those who share similar aspirations with this group, the law of Hijab requires the whole female body from head to feet including face to be concealed in the presence of ghair muharam (with whom marriage is permissible). The form of concealment includes burqa and chaddar. Burqa consist of a skill cap attached to mounds of material that drop around the face and all the way to the ground. Chaddar on the other hand is an immense shawl used to hide their faces and bodily feature (Lindsey op cit). The other side of purdah is the physical segregation of the sexes. It involves the isolation of the sex. Men and women are traditionally separated by a screen for prayer. They may equally be discouraged from associating in public. At home a private area such as Zenana or harem is created where men are not allowed. In some circumstances, there is the use of high walls, curtains and screens erected within the houses.

Advocates of purdah attributed its introduction to the place of the Shaitan, iblis in our daily interactions particularly its powerful influence on relationship between men and women. It is their view that purdah became necessary because gaze at a girl is a poisonous arrow among the arrows of the Iblis. To them, every eye is a fornicator and when a man is alone with a woman, the third one present is Shaitan. Furthermore, it is desirable to guide the piracy of household, to prevent men from entering the house of another man as it is unlawful for a woman who is a believer to allow anyone to enter the house without the man's permission. More importantly, they opined, a woman is an object of concealment because whenever she emerges, shaitan surreptitiously peruse her (and lays in wait to create his fitna for morality). It could be seen that only the females have been singled out as the object that shaitan can only influenced. Does it shaitan/iblis discriminate? Does it only go after the women and leaves the men alone Has not the various Islamic injunctions warn both men and women against the presence and power of the shaitan?

### ***Islam and Sharia***

Islam is a way of life. The entire life of every Muslim, male or female is governed by the Quran, the Sunnah as well as the sayings and deeds of prophet Muhammad (SAW). These contain various Islamic injunctions which are the source of the Sharia both in theory and practice (Yusuf, 2011). To the Muslims, the world over, the Quran is a special holy book sent to mankind by Allah. Various chapters of the Quran testify to this. The chapter of the Bees 16:102 acknowledge that ‘the Holy Spirit has brought the revelation from the Lord in truth, in order to strengthen those who believe as Guide and Glad Tidings to Muslims.’ For the Muslims therefore, “this Quran doth guide to that which is most right (or stable) and gives the glad tidings to the believers, who work deeds of righteousness, that they shall have magnificent rewards.” (Bees 17:9).

The various injunctions in the Islamic holy books, particularly the Quran, cover many spectrums of human rights. These rights are sacrosanct as they are granted by Allah. In Suratul Bani Israaila (17:31-32) is contained right to live, respect for human life as well as humane treatment. Right to justice, fairness and equality is equally provided (Yusuf op cit).

“O believers, be your sources of justice, witness for God. Let no destation for the people move you not to be equitable – that is nearer to God fearing. (5:8) the rights emphasizes the sanctity of privacy. In Suratul Nuur (24:27), Muslims are admonished not to enter homes other than their own without expressed permission of the owner and they should do so with respect and humility.

### ***Sharia and Women***

Yusuf (op cit) contended that while the sharia encourages Muslims to work for the sake of mankind, the position of women has remained contentious. The Quran is gender ‘sensitive’ and has made provision for women’s rights even though some may either be contradicting or not very clearly stated and have led themselves to conflicting interpretation or misinterpretation. A whole chapter, Suratul An-Nasi has been devoted to a spectrum of women issues. Issues about how to treat orphan girls, marriage, and the right of women to bridal gifts; when to release properties of orphans to them. Others include how to share inheritance; injunctions as to not inheriting women by compulsion, living in kindness with women and conduct expected of women in the family.

Furthermore, in many other injunctions and in many other Surahs are many other women related issues. In the Quran are Surahs in which Allah emphasize the equality between the males and the females. In Surah 3:195, it is stated that both the male and females shall be rewarded according to what he or she has done, whether good or bad. Surah 4:32 equally said, to man is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn. In a similar direction, Surah 4:123 states that both male and female that do righteousness and have faith will enter heaven and no injustice will be done to them. Surah 33 is even more emphatic in clearly stating this equality.

It states:

*“For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who give charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity and for men and women who engage much in Allah’s praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward”*

However, there are other injunctions in the Quran that makes this equality a suspect. In Surah 4:33, the physical attribute of the male has been made to put them many poles above the female. This aspect of the scripture said men are the protectors and maintainer of women because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other and they support them from their means. While on the other hand Surah 2:222 painted the females in a negative light:

“They are a hurt and pollution, so keep away from women in their courses and do not approach them until they are clean”.

Nevertheless, the Sharia is aware that human beings will pass from one generation to another. Besides, objective reality of a particular generation will require the interpretation of the Islamic injunctions in a more positive and progressive right. It is in the light of this it recognised the fact that the society is dynamic and as a result provision must be made for some of the things that are not directly mentioned in the Quran. (Yusuf op cit). Consequent upon this, there is Ijimaa and Qiyass in Sharia.

Ijima according to Al-Utheumeen (2003) is the consensus of opinion amongst the pious and righteous Muslim Scholars in any generation. When nothing is directly mentioned in the Quran or the Sunnah about a case, then the Ijima is considered a valid case. Ijima becomes binding due to the fact that the prophet (SAW) has related in various authentic traditions that the scholars from among his ummah (community) will never arrive at a consensus that contains misguidance or error. The Qiyass on the other hand, refers to the analogical deduction of a ruling regarding a specific issue where there is no clear reference to it in the Quran, Sunnah or Ijima. Al Utheumeen (ibid) opined that the deduction is based on the good resemblance of a case to another one for which there is known evidence from the Quran, Sunnah or Ijima.

In the Quran as well as the hadith, reference to purdah as an institution directed at women alone from the injunctions is conflicting and could be subjected to various interpretations. The injunctions raised many issues. Purdah for whom? Is purdah directed at the wives of the prophet of Islam? Is it for those in the upper echelon of the society who wanted to keep their women secluded from the community because they could afford it? Is it for the common man and woman who are daily challenged by abject poverty, illiteracy, collapse of essential infrastructure etc.? Is it for all time and for all places? How is purdah to be administered, by women?

Must there be partial covering of the body and the face? Or must all parts of the body be covered leaving only the eyes in order for the women to be able to see where they are going? Above all these when is the purdah to be observed?

Surah 4:15 of the Quran admonished, 'if any of your women are guilty of lewdness, take the evidence of four (reliable) witness from amongst you against them; and if they testify, confine them to the houses until death do claim them, or Allah ordains for them some (other) way. This is clear example of purdah but in an extreme or abnormal circumstance. However, in another section, Surah 4:129 says, if a man finds it difficult to be fair and just as between women if they ardently desire it, they are admonished not to leave them as it were hanging (in the air).

But Surah 24:31 gives a more detail expression of the type of purdah and to whom it is directed. It says,

*“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guide their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appears thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers’ or their brothers’ sons or their sisters’ sons, or their women, or their slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs or small children who have no sense of shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments”.*

We have gone into a detail presentation of this Surah because it is very illuminating. In the first place, it is part of the often quoted injunction on the desirability of purdah by women in Islam. Secondly it answered some of the fundamental questions we raised earlier on. It clearly identified those the women should not conceal themselves from. In the same vein, it challenged the current protagonists of purdah to evaluate their perception of the institution. This is because going by this injunction, purdah is not supposed to be practiced in the household except there is a visitor who is not necessarily a relative. In essence, purdah is recommended only outside the home.

Furthermore, important concepts in the Surah when subjected to critical analysis throws more light on the nature of purdah recommended. Women are admonished to lower their gaze and guide their modesty. The Chambers Dictionary (2005) explain gaze to mean to look fixedly or long and steadily in admiration. So in other words, women are not expected to put a fixed steadily look on the opposite sex particularly those that are not members of the family. Apart from this and in continuation of stipulated purdah, the women are expected to draw their veil over their bosoms and not display their beauty to strangers. The veil is a covering of fine fabric for the head, face or both for protection, concealment or ceremonial purpose (ibid). To draw a veil over therefore, is to conceal or protect discreetly, head, face or both and the bosoms. The women in the light of this are expected to be careful in their action and choice of words.

Surah 33:32 amply demonstrated this, particularly in reference to wives of the prophet. It states, ‘O consort of the prophets. You are not like any of the other women. If you do fear (Allah), be not too complacent of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire.’ In furtherance of this, Surah 33:33 say, “And stay quietly in your houses and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former times of ignorance.”

Surah 33:53 emphasized the privacy of the prophet. Men were admonished not to enter the house of the prophet until cleared to do so. They could enter for a meal when invited and leave immediately thereafter. However, if they requested for anything from his wives/ladies they should ask them before a screen. Even for these women, according to Surah 33:55, “there is no blame (on these ladies if they appear) before their father or their sons, their brothers, or their brother sons or their sisters’ son or their women or the (slaves) who their right hands possess. Meanwhile, surah 33:59 gives us an insight into when purdah is desirable. “O prophet tell your wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their garments over their persons (when abroad). That is most convenient that they should be known (as such) and not molested.”

For the exponents of purdah, including some of the women who are secluded, it is the best thing to have happen to women. To a large number of them, it is a sign of maturity and modesty, a very supportive and respectful practice that actually liberate women. Purdah they contended has made women to be looked at as individual and they are judged not by their physical beauty, but by their inner beauty and mind. The liberation involved their not been looked at as sex object that can be dominated. They argued that when a woman covers herself she places herself on a higher level and it allows men to see and respect her for her intellect, faith and personality.

The exponents further observed that in Islam women are likened to a sweet creature and everything about her is an attraction for spectators. She wears hijab so as not to attract the swarms of flies and dirty creatures attracted to uncovered sweets. In a similar vein, it is claimed that purdah is to prevent them from displaying their bodies and exposing them to the risk of rape and molestation. They therefore, claim that it is responsible for the comparatively lower rates of reported sex crime in the region of the world which practice purdah or due to isolation of women.

### ***Dimension to Seclusion and Exclusion and its Negative Compact***

The gender bias interpretation of purdah inclined injunctions in the Qur’an and the hadith is a clear demonstration of what is good for the goose, is not good for the gander. The Quran admonished that both the women and the men should lower their gaze and guide their modesty. Using similar words, surah 24:30 says, “say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them, and god is well acquainted with all they do.” Why are the men not practicing purdah? Why are they not using the veil? Why is it imposed only on the women? Could it be because the men call the shot? The Islamic religion it could be recalled is male dominated and controlled – women cannot call to prayer and lead the prayers. They have been pushed to the back seat.

It is argued that the groups (men as expected) which instigated the practice of covering the face took their decision based on hadith where Aisha (RA) accompanied the prophet and found herself in an unforeseen and embarrassing situation and had to take a spontaneous action. Aisha (RA) was on a journey together with the prophet and lost her necklace. She went in search of it and in the process she became stranded as the party which brought her had left. She later went back to the camp place and did not find anyone in the camp. She sat down waiting for the search party and became overwhelmed by fatigue and slept off. Safwan bin at Mauttal as Sulami Adh – Dhakwan who was behind the army came back to the camp and recognised her. His recitation of the Istirja (Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi rajiun) woke her up and she used her head cover to veil her face at once (hadith 5: 462). This spontaneous action of Aisha (RA) by responding to the spur of the moment to hide from the man has been advanced by a group as a testimony to purdah. Some scholars have argued that the group have no authority to overrule the law of Allah and His prophet.

The criticism of purdah is historical. A Bengali feminist Rekeya Sakhawal Hussain through her story titled, the sultan’s Dream took the first bold step. A British convert to Islam and the translator of the Qur’an condemned purdah in the Indian sub-continent and the practice of face veiling among the Muslim women (Wikipedia the free Encyclopaedia). According to Mernissi (1987) purdah which has led to the denial of women’s right in the Islamic society does not come from the Quran, saying of Muhammad (SAW) or tradition but from those who see these rights as conflicting with the interest of the male elite. To Susan (op cit) it makes women to produce chauvinistic boys and submissive girls. It makes the women to know what their fathers, husbands and sons wants them to know. Mernissi (op cit) contended that women’s inferiority is the result of institutions developed to subordinate her legally and socially to the male in the family structure. She argued that Islamic law is nurtured by a code of ethics which sees women’s role as producing legitimate male heirs.

Furthermore, she pointed out, this role may be compromised if women are not restricted in their activities, especially during child bearing years. Muslim ideology contended Mernissi (op cit) socialises men and women to perceive each other as enemies, keep them separate as possible and create repressive institutions. After all women have been described as erudite, intelligent, and politically active and even a capable fighter and leaders in wars (Lindsey op cit). She posited that the protagonists of purdah relied on stories that are part of the commentaries on the Quran and that the accuracy of these thousands of narratives is questionable as each period interprets them according to prevailing cultural standard. It is contended that totally masked feature or look is un-Islamic and unwarranted as Allah and His prophet advocated the cladding of the entire body and revealing only the face and the hand up to the wrist. Dressing this way makes the person recognizable.

In the light of this, Surah 33:59 says, ‘O prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughter and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go out). That will be better, so that they may be recognised and not annoyed. Allah is ever forgiving, merciful’.

Hadith 4092 narrated by Aisha Ummul Mu’min further confirm this:

*‘Asma, daughter of Abu Bakr entered upon the Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him, PBUH) wearing thin clothes. The Apostle (PBUH) turned his attention to her. He said: O Asma, when a woman reaches the age of menstruation (matures) it does not suit her that she displays part of the body except this and this and he Muhammad (SAW) pointed to her face and hands’.*

However, most important of all is the conduct of the pilgrims in Mecca and Medina during the holy pilgrimage. It could be recalled that the Muslims annual pilgrimage is one of the most important single event that bring together men and women from different parts of the world running into millions to perform one of the recommended five pillars of Islam. In Fiqh 5:49 Bukhari and Ahmad have reported the prophet (PBUH) said: “A pilgrim woman must neither cover her face nor wear gloves.” Considering the high level of interaction that goes with some of the rites to be performed, considering also the fact that in some of these rites, it is everyone for him/herself it is argued that if the face ought to be covered the prophet would have certainly say so. In one of the hadiths narrated by Abu Huraira, the prophet said, ‘Religion (Islam) is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So you should not be extremists, but try to be near perfection and receive the good tiding that you will be rewarded. (1:38).

The inability of the male dominated society to rise above extreme tendencies has led to the imposition of purdah which has manifested itself in seclusive and exclusive tendencies that alienated the females from socio-economic as well as political activities. The withdrawal into purdah in the Northern part of Nigeria has restricted women’s personal, social and economic activities out their homes. It has kept the women in subservient position and they cannot interact and compete with the men on equal footing. While the men can go out at will any time of the day, stringent conditions have been laid down for the women if they have to venture outside their homes.

The various injunctions did not prevent the movement of women outside the home, but the advocates of purdah have only sanction their movements in extreme circumstances. Even then she cannot be trusted to go out alone. She must be accompanied by a close relative (muharam) if the distance to her destination is that more than three days and three nights. Above this, she should not mix with men who are not related to her unless she needs to and she has to be covered so that men cannot see her face. Curtailment of the right to movement and their concealment has made the women to be illiterate and ignorant of what is going on around them. Consequent upon this, only a negligible few, a drop in the ocean, compare with the women population in the north have access to education. There are very few female teachers, not to talk of female doctors. Meanwhile this is a society in which the political class is insisting that male doctors should not attend to their women in the hospitals.

Purdah has bred illiteracy, ignorance and lack of education among the womenfolk and this has shot them out of the task of national building. It has affected their contribution to national issues and even those that relate to their health- preventive and curative health issues. They found it very difficult to recognise symptoms of diseases generally, not to talk of the dangerous ones, and take preventive measures. Doctor’s prescriptions are not understood and so therefore, they find it difficult to administer prescribed drugs to their children. When the women are pregnant they are not encouraged to go for antenatal care as the doctors are male and probably non-Muslims. They are also likely to interact with men who are not members of the family or relatives and are likely to interact with women who are non-Muslim who may likely influence them in one way or the other.

Besides the institution has made team work and building team spirit almost impossible. Social movement among the female folks in the Northern part of the country has been difficult to come into fruition. The women find it difficult to network within the geo-political region not to talk about networking with their counterparts in other part of the country. They have not been able to form themselves into co-operative organization so that they can get loans from the banks and government agencies. Meanwhile, the men have continued to organise themselves, to corner all the economic resources of the land.

Since the window of opportunity for education is ridiculously few, the labour force is dominated by the men and this has resulted in ridiculously low wages paid to the few women who found themselves working in some organizations. Even those working find it difficult to join the labour union and make their impact as unionists and in the course of that champion the cause of women.

Furthermore, in the current democratic process in the country, women politicians from the Northern part have not been able to make any impact. Their numerical strength has not translated into any political gain for them as a result of the institution of purdah. They are unable to form informed opinion about the democratic process. They have been shot out of offices and responsibility in the various political parties.

The politicians of northern stock and the political parties have made the political field only open to the men. After all, meetings of the political parties are held in the night to the early morning and with purdah women cannot be at such meetings. The women are even ignorant of their fundamental rights even those enshrined in the Quran, what more of insisting those rights are protected and violators sanctioned.

The seclusion and exclusion unleashed by purdah on the women in the Northern Nigeria has made them to experience the type of exploitation by women in Bangladesh. The poverty stricken Muslim women in Bangladesh are forced to earn a living within the restriction imposed by their religious culture. According to Paul (1992) purdah has been used in rural Bangladesh as an instrument that enables men to dominate over the family structure and cause a division by gender and this has made women to be dependent upon their husbands. With the purdah system in Northern Nigeria, the women are kept in the homes and they hardly see their husbands for most part of the day and since they are not economically empowered, they depend on their small children boys and girls to hawk goods and snacks for them so that they can have something, no matter how small.

Above all these, women are denied of inheritance. They do not have access to land and other means of production. Since banks in Nigeria insist on getting collateral before they can advance loan to those who want to go into business, they cannot access bank loans to start business. Even many of the intervention programmes introduced by the government aimed at empowerment of the less privileged members of the society have not impacted positively on their lives.

The institution of purdah from our discussion can be seen to be inimical to the progress and development of the womenfolk in the Northern part of the country. It has secluded and excluded them from the social, economic and political activities going on in the society, thereby confirming their second class status. The exploitative tendencies of purdah has put the women in such a precarious position so much so that they lack the wherewithal to demand for and get equal right with the men.

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