

The Mahram

Not all those who were permitted into the house were allowed to sleep there. The law of mahram was the governing principle. Mahram allowed access to all individuals that were not eligible as spouses. Hence the daughter-in-law's parents, sisters and brothers were allowed to spend the night there (especially if they happened to be coming from other, villages). Cousins (iben el 'am and Iben el khal) from the father's side or the mother's side were allowed to enter the house but were not permitted to sleep there. These mahram regulations were however circumvented in actuality by practical considerations. In most cases, the males of the house and male visitors were taken to sleep in the 'allieh (elevated room), while the women always slept in the house.

The degree to which sleeping restrictions were observed depended to a great extent on the age of the women in the house. Restrictions were much observed when the daughter-in-law was still a bride. For the first week of their marriage, the bridal couple were left alone as all other members of the household left the house to sleep at relatives or out in the frontyard, if weather conditions allowed. In general, elderly women were not subject to the mahram principles.

Finally, the house played a significant role during festive occasions such as marriages, births, and circumcisions. On most of these occasions, ritual proceedings took place in and around the house. Although such occasions tended to obliterate some of the restrictions observed against having ghurabah (outsiders) males enter the house, the inside of the house remained predominantly a female domain.