



Women's Education in Islam: Historical Contributions and Present-Day Challenges

Dr. Shahida Naumani

Director, Shauoor Welfare Society, Lahore

Email: info@shauoor.org.pk

Abstract

This article discusses the theological basis, historical evolution, and current realities of women's education in the Islamic context. It disproves the common misconception that Islam discourages women scholarship through the study of Quranic injunctions, Prophetic traditions, and great historical women who played a vital role in the Muslim intellectual tradition. Research outlines how the early Islamic societies promoted women academic pursuits and identifies some of the key figures like Aisha (RA) and Fatima al-Fihri. The article then discusses current barriers to women's educational pursuits in Muslim countries, such as patriarchal forces, cultural barriers, and geopolitical realities. The article concludes that a return to true Islamic teachings offers a foundation for educational reform and women empowerment in several Muslim countries.

Keywords: Women's Education, Islam and Gender, Aisha (RA), Fatima al-Fihri, Muslim Women Scholars, Islamic Education, Gender Equality in Islam

Introduction

The issue of women's education in the context of Islam has long been the subject of much attention in academic debates, socio-political discussion, and religious criticism. In contrast to common stereotypes about Islam and the oppression of women, historical records bear witness to the fact that Islam has never downgraded the importance of education for both genders. Since the very start, the pursuit of knowledge has been regarded as a divine command, with many examples throughout Islamic history testifying to a tradition of educated,

enlightened women actively participating in intellectual, religious, and social activities.

The Qur'an and Hadith always appeal to the acquisition of knowledge as a duty to all Muslims without discrimination of gender. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself cultivated a culture that encouraged the education of women, as he can be observed through the work of his wife Aisha (RA), one of the most influential transmitters of hadith in Islamic history. Moreover, such influential historical personalities as Fatima al-Fihri, the founder of the oldest continuously running university in the world, reflect the pivotal role played by Muslim women in the establishment of institutions of learning.

Yet, the current reality is a mixed picture. While numerous Muslim nations have achieved advancements in female education, obstacles like patriarchal norms, socio-economic constraints, political instability, and misinterpretation of religious scriptures remain in the way of progress. The international debate around gender equality and education gains more and more engagement with Islamic thought and requires a balanced understanding of inheritance in the past as well as current realities.

This research tries to present a comprehensive image of women's education in Islam by examining its historical achievements, critiquing the theological foundations of women's education, and evaluating the current challenges across regions. From this vantage point, the article seeks to debunk common myths and demonstrate the ways in which Islamic renewal can form the foundation of women's empowerment through education.

The Quranic and Prophetic Principles of Women's Education

Islamic principles constitute a solid foundation for the education of women through obedience to knowledge, self-improvement, and service to humanity. The



Published:
June 20, 2024

Quran itself over and over emphasizes education and reflection for all believers, whether male or female. The verse, "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" (Qur'an 39:9), is universal in scope, emphasizing a pursuit of knowledge as a laudable and necessary activity for men and women alike.

Among the most powerful and ancient signs of Islam's commitment to learning is contained in the mandate given in the first revelation: "Read in the name of your Lord who created" (Qur'an 96:1). This first verse laid the foundation for a literacy and learning-focused culture in Muslim society, not exclusive to men. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) urged women to seek knowledge as well, frequently declaring, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah), a hadith which pre-classical scholars largely agree is binding on males and females.

Additionally, the Prophet involved himself in direct teaching of women and held special classes specifically devoted to their educational development. Historical evidence shows that women attended the Prophet's sermons, asked questions of religious nature, and were asked to participate actively in the intellectual and spiritual pursuits of the society. Worth mentioning is that the Prophet directed his companions, "Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from going to the mosques of Allah" (Sahih Muslim), establishing their right to public involvement, including involvement in learning sessions.

The principles rooted in the Quran and prophetic hadith provided a conceptual and operational framework that enabled active involvement of women in the education field of Islamic civilization. This theological legitimation later took the shape of the work and achievements of various Muslim women intellectuals and educationists in various situations in the past.

Historical Contribution of Muslim Women to Education

Throughout Islamic history, women have had a significant but often overlooked role in the intellectual and educational development of Muslim societies. From the early years of Islam to and through the classical Islamic Golden Age, Muslim women have been significant scholars, teachers, and patrons of scholarship.

A good case in point is Fatima al-Fihri, who founded the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, in 859 CE. Al-Qarawiyyin is recognized by UNESCO and the Guinness World Records as the oldest continuously operating and existing learning institution in the world. The university was initially a mosque that progressed over time to become an institution of higher learning. Fatima's gift ensured that many scholars of both genders would continue to enjoy formal learning over generations.

Another well-known figure is Aisha bint Abu Bakr (RA), the wife of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is regarded by many as a major hadith transmitter, as well as a jurist in her own right. Her deep knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, medicine, poetry, and history earned her the respect of her contemporaries as well as later scholars. She taught many of the Prophet's companions and was often consulted on matters of legal and moral questions, and became one of the most prolific narrators of hadith.

Women were scholars and teachers in the following centuries, particularly in hadith and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Classical Islamic biographical dictionaries record the names of many female scholars. Zainab bint al-Kamal (d. 1339 CE), for instance, and Aisha bint Muhammad al-Muqaddam (d. 1404 CE) were both highly regarded hadith teachers in Damascus, who were frequented by large numbers of male scholars.

The above instances confirm that involvement of Muslim women in educational activities was not a deviation, but a natural part of Islamic civilization. As students, school founders, or teachers, their historical achievements prove the leading position of women in the intellectual life of the ummah (Muslim world).

Challenges to Women's Education in Modern Muslim Societies

In spite of the natural promotion of women's education within the Islamic system and the rich tradition of women scholars, most Muslim societies today are confronted with persistent obstacles that block women's movement towards quality education. Such obstacles are the result of an interplay of sociocultural, political, and economic circumstances, which tend to contradict Islamic principles.

1. Misconceptions of Religious Culture

In most of the world, gender-based customs and traditional cultural practices are wrongly read as religious requirements. This has resulted in the withholding of education from girls and women. Conversely, fear of societal shame or that a woman's role is in the home reduces support for her formal education. These beliefs continue despite evident Quranic and prophetic command that places a high value on education for women and men alike.

2. Political Instability and Conflict

Conflicts, displacements, and political unrest in nations such as Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and some African nations have greatly destroyed schools. Girls usually are the first to be taken out of school during crises, either by fear or financial burdens. Moreover, extremist groups have especially targeted education for women, as evident in the Taliban's prohibition or Boko Haram's destruction of girls' schools, directly violating Islamic values that promote knowledge.

3. Economic Challenges

Poverty is the largest obstacle to girls' education. Among poor families, in times of resource scarcity, the males will be sent to school, while the females are

supposed to help out with domestic duties or money-making activities. Education, such as fees, uniforms, and transport, may be out of their reach, especially in rural communities that are distant from schools.

4. Shortage of Female Teachers and Gender-Friendly Schools

Parents in most conservative communities do not want their daughters to attend schools with no female teachers or single-sex facilities. A lack of secure and culturally acceptable learning environments discourages further enrollment, particularly after primary school. Early marriage also truncates a girl's education.

5. Policy Gaps and Implementation Failures

Although most Muslim countries have made it official, that pledge to girls' education is most frequently unevenly applied. Weak governance, corruption, and lack of adequate fiscal resources most frequently lead to poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and flawed curriculum planning. More importantly, there is no religious debate that critically challenges harmful norms and advocates female education based on Islamic reasoning.

Islamic View of Women's Education

Islamic education uncompromisingly emphasizes the quest for knowledge as an absolute duty for all, both male and female. The Quran and Hadith provide strong affirmative arguments for women's education, not just as a right but as a religious duty and a way of bringing about individual, family, and societal change.

1. Quranic Guidance

Quran always promotes seeking knowledge. Although it does not discriminate on the basis of gender while calling for seeking knowledge, there are certain verses which indirectly affirm rights of women to education:

- **"Are the knowing ones on a par with the ignorant ones?" (Qur'an, 39:9)**

This is a rhetorical question that includes all believers and emphasizes the superiority of the learned. In addition, the Quran respects women who practice thinking, contemplation, and scholarly activities:

- **"And recall that which is recited in your homes of the verses of Allah and wisdom. Verily, Allah is subtle and well aware of all things." (Qur'an, 33:34)**

This specific verse was addressed to the wives of the Prophet, inviting them not only to study but also to teach. In addition, it reflects the central role played by women in disseminating Islamic knowledge from the very beginning.

2. Prophetic Traditions

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) explained:

"Fulfilling knowledge is a duty on all Muslims." (Ibn Majah, Hadith 224)

This hadith explicitly declares that knowledge is not the exclusive right of a few but a duty on the part of all Muslims, male and female. The Prophet stressed the need for educating daughters when he declared:

Whoever has a daughter and does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not prefer his son to her, Allah will enter him into Paradise.
(Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Musnad)

This is a reflection of the higher value placed on girls and their right to proper upbringing, including schooling.

3. Historical Traditions of Early Islamic Communities

The early Muslim societies are the quintessential examples of these principles of doctrine. Women scholars were not the exception but part of the Islamic world. Scholars such as Aisha bint Abi Bakr (RA), Fatima al-Fihri, Umm al-Darda, and Zaynab bint al-Kamal instructed male as well as female students. Their efforts were valued, and their intellectual contributions were validated by Islamic teachings.

4. Education as a Means of Spiritual and Social Growth

In Islam, education is more than the mere acquisition of knowledge; it is a vital tool in character development, comprehension of divine guidance, and discharge of one's duty to society. Education of women is thus critical in churning out pious, knowledgeable, and responsible citizens who will meaningfully contribute to society.

Modern Movements and Initiatives Supporting Muslim Women's Education

Over the last decades, Muslim communities have become more aware of the importance of women's education and this has led to numerous reforms, movements, and global campaigns. These campaigns aim to harmonize Islamic teachings with contemporary practice in order to prevent Muslim women from losing their right to education.

1. National education reforms in Muslim countries

The majority of Muslim nations have made definite efforts to promote female education and women's education. For example:

Pakistan has introduced interventions such as cash transfers to rural women and cash transfers conditional on school enrollment under the Benazir Income Support Programme that are tied to school enrollment.

Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, has incorporated gender equality in its education policy and improved the educational opportunities of girls in both Islamic and secular schools.

Since the 1990s, Iran has seen a dramatic increase in the number of women enrolling in universities, sometimes outnumbering men in specific fields.

These initiatives demonstrate that, with Islamic values and government involvement, women can thrive in education.

2. Global Islamic Institutions

There are different Islamic movements around the world advocating for the education of women as a religious and developmental imperative:

- ❖ Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) funds educational schemes to achieve gender parity in education in Africa and Asia.
- ❖ Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has placed highest priority on women empowerment and literacy in its 2025 Programme of Action.
- ❖ Muslim Aid, Islamic Relief, and other NGOs fund schools, scholarships, and Muslim girl awareness programs all over the world.

These organizations emphasize that women's education is not an agenda of the West but a fundamental aspect of Islamic social justice.

3. Informal and Virtual Learning Platforms

With the revolution in the digital age, most Muslim women are accessing education through online courses, madrasas, and community-based informal courses. Availability of Islamic scholarship for free, free online degrees, and language courses has made higher education accessible even to women in restrictive settings.

This transition holds particular importance for women situated in conflict-affected regions, isolated locations, or environments characterized by patriarchal norms, where attending educational institutions in person might be impeded.

4. The Female Islamic Activists and Scholars

Contemporary Islamic female scholars such as Dr. Amina Wadud, Ingrid Mattson, Dr. Asma Barlas, and Shaykha Halima Krausen have been at the forefront of reinterpretation of Islamic scriptures based on gender equity. Their scholarly contributions point to the compatibility of Islam with the values of woman empowerment, including the right to pursue learning.

Activists such as Malala Yousafzai, although at times controversial in particular contexts, have become universal symbols for the education rights of Muslim girls,

something that resonates with Islamic teachings that encourage seeking knowledge.

Challenges in Muslim Women's Education Today

In spite of Islamic teachings and contemporary initiatives, Muslim women still encounter various socio-cultural, political, and economic obstacles that hamper their educational progress. These obstacles differ geographically but are most likely to originate from religious script misinterpretation, patriarchal mindsets, and institutional biases.

1. Cultural Misinterpretations of Religion

The most common obstacle is the misuse of Islam on a cultural basis. Patriarchal practices in most societies are wrongly termed religious. For instance, keeping girls out of school after puberty or subjecting them to early marriages are not Islamic injunctions but tribal practices. Religious and cultural syncretism creates resistance to women's education, especially when religious language is appropriated as a way of justifying disparities.

2. Political Instability and Conflict

In war-torn or politically unstable regions—such as regions in Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and Afghanistan—schools are destroyed or occupied, and girls' education falls behind. The recent example of the Taliban prohibition of girls' secondary and tertiary education in Afghanistan is a story in itself that defies Islamic teachings and deprives generations of women of their basic rights.

Refugee girls, especially those from Muslim-majority nations, face the double burden of language, economic marginalization, and discrimination in host nations.

3. Lack of Infrastructure and Basic Resources

In numerous low-income countries predominantly inhabited by Muslims or in rural regions, there exists a pronounced deficiency of female educators, distinct

educational institutions, transportation options, and sanitary facilities, which discourages families from enrolling their daughters in school. The lack of secure, accessible, and gender-responsive educational settings continues to pose a significant obstacle.

4. Economic Inequality

Financial adversity is a strong deterrent, and poor families tend to send boys to school instead of girls. Girls can be taken out of school to help with domestic chores or to work. Even in theory, if education is free, extraneous expenses like books, uniforms, and travel are bound to discourage girls from attending school.

5. Stereotyping and Discrimination in Non-Muslim Societies

In Western or non-Muslim societies, Muslim girls are more likely to encounter Islamophobia, cultural-based discrimination, and institutional discrimination. Wearing the hijab, for example, could result in bullying or exclusion, deterring Muslim girls from being fully integrated into learning spaces. Muslim women scholars could also encounter fewer mentors and microaggressions that could impede their advancement.

Opportunities and Strategies for Improving Muslim Women's Education

While challenges are immense, there are more and more available opportunities and strategies—within institutional structures and civil society organizations alike—that can help bridge the gender gap in education among Muslim communities.

1. Recovering Islamic Narratives

Scholars and human rights activists are aiming to restore true Islamic values that enhance the education of women. They emphasize the Quranic ayahs and Hadiths that encourage education for all human beings through public awareness

campaigns, khutbahs, seminars, and Islamic books. Islamic intellectuals like Dr. Ingrid Mattson and Dr. Amina Wadud have also been instrumental in deriving religious messages to ensure gender equity in educational access.

2. Government and NGO Interventions

Different Muslim governments and international non-governmental organizations have begun initiatives to promote female literacy and education. For instance:

- Bangladesh also launched a female stipend program, which improved girls' enrollment in rural schools.
- Pakistan's "Benazir Income Support Programme" offers incentives for girls' education in poor communities.
- Indonesia and Malaysia have spent extensively on universal education, and attained some of the Muslim world's highest rates of female literacy.

NGOs such as CARE, Malala Fund, and Muslim Hands also provide scholarships, construct schools, and sponsor teacher training programs solely for girls in Muslim communities.

3. Technology and Online Learning Role

Today, Muslim women everywhere have education within reach by way of cyberspace. Virtual classrooms, Islamic e-learning sites, and online courses allow women in oppressive environments to study discreetly and securely.

Organizations like Qalam Institute, Bayyinah TV, and SeekersGuidance provide both Islamic and secular learning in conjunction with a gender-inclusive strategy, thus removing various geographical and cultural barriers.

4. Empowering Teachers and Women Role Models

Emphasizing Muslim women's achievements in different spheres can motivate the next generation. From Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai to biotechnologist Hayat Sindi and fashion designer Dina Tokio, Muslim women are contributing a great deal to science, art, activism, and education. Promoting their accomplishment in the media and through school curricula assists in altering social attitudes.



Published:
June 20, 2024

Empowering more women to become teachers, principals, and education policymakers through training and appointment also instills more confidence among families and motivates more girls to attend school.

5. Community-Based Educational Programs

For those instances when access to learning resources is limited, community-based programs fill the gap. Madrasas, mosques, and women's organizations (halaqas) can be made to provide both religious and secular learning. Curriculum delivered by highly regarded female scholars and community advocates ensures cultural appropriateness and family acceptance.

Conclusion

The struggle of women to attain education is not a recent development but a fundamental principle of Islam. Women have been active as scholars, teachers, and transmitters of religious and secular learning from the start of the Islamic era. The decline in the education of women in the majority of Muslim societies, therefore, cannot be explained by Islamic teachings but by cultural misreadings, the influence of colonialism, economic disparities, and socio-political limitations. Going back to the teachings of Islam and learning from great historical figures and contemporary women Muslim leaders, it is clear that the empowerment through education is essential for the creation of fair, prosperous, and spiritually enlightened societies. It is only through an all-out effort with the participation of families, communities, scholars, policymakers, and international institutions that the challenges—whether cultural, economic, or structural—can be overcome. Education for women is not only their right but a responsibility of society in Islam. Reviving this heritage with renewed fervor will not only empower Muslim women but elevate whole communities to the Islamic norm of an educated and accountable Ummah.



Published:
June 20, 2024

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