

Girls' Education and Islam:

A Divine Command with Historical Precedent¹



Without question, education for women and girls is an integral part of Islam. Beginning millennia ago with prophetic words, through centuries of tradition and pursuit of knowledge, to 21st-century institutions, Muslim women respect the divine obligation to learn. Neither the Holy Quran nor the hadith² can reasonably be used to justify restricting the education of girls.

“Searching for knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim male and Muslim female.”

Hadith of Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ) Recorded in Hadith Collection Ibn Majah

Girls' Education is a Divine Command

In Islam, education is a divine command for both men and women. The Holy Quran as well as the *hadith* leave no doubt that women, like men, are obligated to increase their knowledge and pursue it. The Holy Quran puts the highest emphasis on the importance of acquiring knowledge, and with more than 800 references to the word *ilm* (knowledge) and its derivations, it urges mankind to think, ponder and reflect.

In the Holy Quran, Allah orders both men and women to increase their knowledge and condemns those who are not learned. The very first revelation to Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ) starts with the word *read* and says:

“Read. Read in the name of thy Lord who created; [He] created the human being from blood clot. Read in the name of thy Lord who taught by the pen: [He] taught the human being what he did not know.”

(Q96: 1-5)

A basic principle of Sharia states that when a commandment is revealed, even if the masculine form of a word is used, the female gender is also included in this commandment. If this principle is rejected, then the basic pillars of Islam such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and alms-due become null and void for women. Though God Almighty and the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) use the masculine form to describe most of the commandments, women are also bound to act and follow those rules and regulations.

The obligation for women and men to study is also confirmed by the *hadith* and the *sunnah*³. Preventing women and girls from receiving education is preventing them from fulfilling the divine obligation commanded by Allah and intervening with their *akhirah* (afterlife).

Girls' Education is a Divine Right

Girls' education is one of the sacred/cardinal rights of all human beings in Islam. These rights include sanctity of life, property/wealth, religion, mind/intellect, honor and family/progeny. The right to education falls under the cardinal right of mind and intellect (*al-Aql*), which are central to the *deen* (faith). The Holy Quran tells us (Q17:70, 95:4, 2:30-34, 33:72) that every human being is furnished with reason and has the potential to be good and to choose to work for the establishment of harmony, and honors reason as the mechanism by which moral choices of right and wrong are made.

Education of girls is central to their faith because it increases their knowledge, teaches them how to use their intellect, furnishes them with critical reflection skills and makes them better Muslims and better members of their communities. It allows girls and women to make use of the gifts Allah has given them

Girls' Education as a Requirement of Maqasid and Masalih Mursalah

The pursuit of knowledge for girls and women is also a requirement of the *maqasid* and *masalih mursalah*, or public good, because educating girls has important benefits for their families and communities. According to Muslim jurists and scholars, the pursuit of public good is the *maqasid* (purpose/objective) of law and governance in Islam. The Holy Quran urges Muslims to improve their communal life, to support one another and to combat poverty.



Benefits of Education to Society

“Education is the only way to empower them [girls], improve their status, ensure their participation in the development of their respective societies, and activate their role to be able to take responsibility for future generations.”

Dr. Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen, secretary-general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

Education is more than the ability to read and write. It is a process of acquiring knowledge, skills and values in a variety of different areas that enables individuals to contribute to the social, economic and political well-being of their families and communities in meaningful ways. Without educating its citizens, no society can develop and prosper.

Some of the benefits of educating women include the following:

- Literacy, especially literacy of women, is a means to achieving a sustainable and healthy society.
- Enrolling and keeping girls in school can positively impact their health, protection and economic prosperity and improve the security of their communities and countries.
- Educating girls reduces female fertility rates, lowers infant and child mortality rates, lowers maternal mortality rates, as well as increases women's participation in the labor force and fosters educational investment in children.
- Education helps communities recover faster after war and conflict because it builds resilience, stability and strong social cohesion.
- Educating girls contributes to stronger economies and alleviates poverty. Economic development and poverty reduction require countries to benefit from the talents, skills and productivity of all their citizens, both men and women. Reducing the gender gap and educating girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) will help reduce the skills gap, increase employment and productivity of women and reduce occupational segregation.
- Women's education results in more equal distribution of capital because it facilitates capital generation in families and in poor and deprived communities. Women's participation in the economy and access to labor markets help build strong, secure and sustainable economies.
- Educating girls leads to healthier and happier families because as mothers, educated women make better and more informed decisions for the well-being of their children, including protecting them against disease.
- When women are educated, violence is lowered, and children have better psychological well-being and are happier.

Education of Girls in Islam is not Limited to Religious Themes

The concept of knowledge in Islam covers a broad spectrum of subjects. The Holy Quran describes the breadth of knowledge as vast and says that learning embraces both the religious and the secular. Many verses of the Holy Quran invite the reader to ponder and meditate about the creation of the universe. Thus, it is wrong to allow women to partake only in the study of religious sciences and prohibit them from a wider scope of education.

The idea that women are allowed to learn only from female teachers and that instruction from men is prohibited due to the demands of purdah is a misperception. Islam is a religion for all nations and all times, and is based on practical reality. There is no stipulation that only women can teach other women or a ban regarding male teachers for women. If the rules of attire are properly observed, then men can teach female students under Sharia.



Examples of Girls' Education in Islamic History

First Islamic School

The first school in the history of Islam was established by the Prophet (ﷺ) following the battle of Badr. During the battle, 70 men from the enemy ranks were taken prisoner. These prisoners were literate people who could read and write well. The Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ) declared that if

each prisoner taught ten Medinan children—both girls and boys—how to read and write, their ransom would be paid and they would be set free.

Prophet (ﷺ) Invested in the Education of Girls

Since the early years of Islam, learned women enjoyed high public standing and authority. The Prophet (ﷺ) made an effort to educate women and girls and encouraged his wives and daughters to learn and be educated. He held classes for women, and women were often present in the public assemblies that came to learn from the Prophet (ﷺ). Women in his household received education not only in Islamic sciences but in other fields such as medicine, poetry and mathematics, among others. He made arrangements for training women in the commandments, setting aside one day a week to meet with them.

Muslim Women Contributed to Hadith Scholarship and Islamic Sciences

After the death of the Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ) in 632, the guidance of his wives Hafsa, Umm Habiba, Maymuna, Umm Salama, 'A'isha and others was instrumental to understanding and practicing the life of the Prophet (ﷺ) and maintaining it in the historical memory of the Islamic community. Authoritative *hadith* collections, such as Sahih Bukhari, could not have been completed without the efforts and contributions of these women. Mohammed Akram Nadwi, in his work *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, identifies over 8,000 women scholars of *hadith* throughout Islamic history. These women scholars often attained high rank in all spheres of religious knowledge and taught both men and women.



Muslim Women Founded Universities and Schools

Women were founders or patrons of schools and other educational institutions. For example, University of Al-Qarawayyin, the oldest continuing university in the world, was founded in 859 in Morocco by Fatima Al Fihri. The school was a famous center of learning, leading in sciences, philosophy and Islamic studies, where Muslim and non-

Muslim scholars such as Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, Jewish philosopher Maimonides and Pope Sylvester II, who is said to have introduced Arabic numerals to Europe, studied. Dhayfa Khatun (d.1242) was a Muslim woman who, in addition to her political and social roles, sponsored learning in Aleppo and founded two schools: al-Firdaous School, specializing in Islamic studies and Islamic law, and the Khankah School, specializing in Sharia and other fields.

Muslim Women Made Significant Contributions to Poetry, Science and Technology

Educated Muslim women also studied other topics and contributed to science and technology since the early days of Islam. For example, Amat-Al-Wahid Sutaita Al-Mahamli (d.987) from Baghdad excelled in many fields including Arabic literature, *hadith* and jurisprudence. Lobana of Cordoba (10th century) was recognized for her knowledge and expertise in the sciences, especially in solving complex geometrical and algebraic problems. Maryam Al-Ijliya (d.967) was an astrolabe maker in Northern Syria whose innovative designs were recognized by the city's ruler. Rabia Balkhi of Afghanistan, who lived in the 9th century, is considered the first woman to write poems in modern Persian and was well known for her beautiful verses.

Muslim Women Participated in Medicine and Health

Women have been active in the field of medicine since the time of the Prophet (ﷺ). Rufaida al-Aslamia (b.620) is arguably the first known female nurse and surgeon. She established mobile caravans to serve her community during war and peacetime. She was active in various community services to help the poor and needy and trained many of the Prophet's (ﷺ) companions in clinical skills. Shifa bint Abdullah, whose given name was Layla, was known as Al-Shifa (the healer) because of her skills. The tradition of female nurses and surgeons continued well into the 17th century.

Girls' Education in Muslim Countries Today⁴

A number of Muslim countries today recognize the importance of incorporating women's education to advance a nation's stature. While there are systemic inequalities regarding girls' and boys' education, and girls lag behind boys in school attendance, relatively more girls are receiving education in Muslim countries. Some Muslim countries are poised to close any gaps between genders—in **Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain and Libya**, for example, more girls are in secondary school than boys.⁵ Among predominantly Islamic countries, **Tunisia, Indonesia and UAE** have some of the highest female literacy rates,⁶ with 96.1% in Tunisia,⁷ 92.1% in Indonesia⁸ and 95.8% in UAE—statistics unheard of in many other parts of the world.⁹



Egypt has been redesigning its education system to provide quality education. In 2010, there were more women than men in various fields: education (72% women), humanities (72%), arts (73%), basic sciences (54%) and medicine (57%).¹⁰ In 2017, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of **Saudi Arabia** granted women access to government services, including education and healthcare, without the need for a guardian's consent. Saudi Arabia's Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University is the world's largest female-only university. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Jeddah is the country's first coed university. According to the Saudi ministry of education, as of 2015, women constituted 51.8% of university students.¹¹

These nations support girls' education at all levels, including the university level, and in all fields. In fact, the percentage of women pursuing a STEM education is higher in the Middle East than in the West.¹² According to 2015 data from UNESCO, regional averages for the share of female researchers were 39.8% for Arab states and 32.3% for North America and Western Europe.¹³ In the U.S., approximately 15% to 20% of engineering students are women. The National Science Foundation in the U.S. is funding a study to identify the mechanisms that motivate women to pursue degrees in engineering in **Jordan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia**, where female participation rates are as high as 50%. In 2017 in Saudi Arabia, women graduating with a bachelor's degree outnumbered men in biology, information technology, mathematics and statistics and physics.¹⁴ In **Iran**, close to 70% of university STEM graduates are women.¹⁵

In **UAE**, women make up 70% of all university graduates, and 56% of UAE graduates in STEM courses at government universities are women. At the prestigious Masdar Institute of Science and Technology in Abu Dhabi, 60% of Emirati graduate students are female.¹⁶ The UAE space agency (UAESA) is led by a woman, Sarah al-Amiri, the minister of state for advanced technology, and 80% of the UAESA scientific team are women.¹⁷

Endnotes

- 1 This brief is extracted from "Islam and Negotiation Action Guide for Muslim Women." For full citations and references, please see: Kadayifci-Orellana, S. Ayse. "Islam and Negotiation Action Guide for Muslim Women." Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, n.d.
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- 3 Practices of the Prophet (ﷺ).
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