

The Educational Excellence and Rights of Women under the Khilafah

For decades, secularists have spun a web of lies around the subject of the education rights and status of girls and women under Islamic rule. They deceptively used the high illiteracy rates and poor access of education under secular or pseudo-Islamic regimes in the Muslim world over the last few decades to accuse Islam of depriving women of a good education. Their aim was to fearmonger against the return of Islamic rule under the shade of the Khilafah State (Caliphate) based upon the method of the Prophethood. However, the truth regarding the educational status of women under the governance of this glorious Islamic system is far from the spurious secular accusations and lies.

Indeed, the revelation of Islam brought a distinct view to the world towards the seeking of knowledge and education. Learning and teaching was intimately entwined with the religion and viewed as a service to God, and hence a means to gain great rewards in the Hereafter. The Prophet (saw) said,

«وَمَنْ سَلَكَ طَرِيقًا يَلْتَمِسُ فِيهِ عِلْمًا سَهَّلَ اللَّهُ لَهُ بِهِ طَرِيقًا إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ» (رواه مسلم)

“Allah makes the way to Jannah easy for him who treads the path in search of knowledge.” (Reported by Muslim)

Islam therefore held the acquiring of knowledge in high regard, classified it as an act of worship, and made it the measure for defining the rank of individuals, hence raising the status of scholars. Allah (swt) says,

﴿يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ﴾

“Allah will exalt in degree those of you who believe, and those who have been granted knowledge.” [Al-Mujadilah: 11]

And the Prophet (saw) said,

«وَفَضَّلَ الْعَالِمُ عَلَى الْعَابِدِ كَفَضْلِ الْقَمَرِ عَلَى سَائِرِ الْكَوَاكِبِ إِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ لَمْ يُوْرَثُوا دِينَارًا وَلَا دِرْهَمًا إِنَّمَا وَرَثُوا الْعِلْمَ فَمَنْ أَخَذَ بِهِ أَخَذَ بِحِطِّ وَافِرٍ»

“And superiority of the scholar over the worshiper is like the superiority of the moon over the rest of the celestial bodies. Indeed the scholars are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets do not leave behind Dinar or Dirham. The only legacy of the scholars is knowledge, so whoever takes from it, then he has indeed taken the most able share.” (Narrated by Qais bin Kathir)

The Deen of Islam also obliged the seeking of Islamic knowledge upon men and women alike as the Prophet (saw) said,

«طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ» (رواه ابن ماجه)

“Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim.” (Reported by Ibn Majah).

Additionally, Islam encouraged men and women to study the world around them to gain greater appreciation of their Creator as well as to effectively use all that Allah (swt) has created and subjected to serve man in this Dunya, in order to bring benefit to humanity in all fields – including science, medicine, industry and technology. Allah (swt) says,

﴿إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَآخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَالْفَلَكَ الَّتِي تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِمَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ مَاءٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ دَابَّةٍ وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيْحِ وَالسَّحَابِ الْمُسَخَّرِ بَيْنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ﴾

“Behold, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the alteration of night and day, in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind, in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead, in the beasts of all kinds that he scatters through the earth, in the change of the winds and the clouds made subservient between the sky and the earth, here indeed are signs for a people who understand.” [Al-Baqara: 164]

﴿وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا مِّنْهُ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾

“And He has made subservient to you, whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, all, from Himself; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect.” [Al-Jathiya: 13]

All this created a thirst within Muslims for all forms of knowledge and incentivised Muslim men and women alike to pursue education and scholarship in various fields and to become teachers of others. It also formed the basis of the Khilafah’s high regard for education for men and women, reflected in its heavy investment in the building of schools, colleges, madrassahs, universities, libraries, and observatories as well as in its training of teachers during its centuries of Islamic rule – all to ensure widespread access to education for its citizens. Many ‘Houses of Knowledge’ (Dar al-Ilm) were founded in the 9th and 10th century CE in the Eastern and Western provinces of the State. Khalifah Harun al-Rashid, one of the early Abbasid rulers ordered that to every mosque, a school should be attached. Vizier Nizam al-Mulk in the 11th century CE established a system of schools of higher education across the Muslim world, including in cities such as Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and Herat. Khalifah Nur al-Din in the 12th century CE followed in his footsteps by founding many such institutes in Damascus and other large cities. Cordoba alone had 70 libraries. The number of kuttab (teachers) in the Muslim world increased rapidly until almost every village had its own kuttab. And at one point during Islamic rule, there were 74 in colleges Cairo, 73 in Damascus, 41 in Jerusalem, 40 in Baghdad, 14 in Aleppo, 13 in Tripoli and in addition to numerous institutions in other cities, providing free education to tens of thousands of pupils.

Alongside this, a host of prestigious universities re-known internationally for their academic excellence were established across the state and became centres of learning for the intellectual elite of the world and institutions to which students from across the globe flocked. These included the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco built in 859 CE, Al-Azhar University in Egypt established in 970 CE, Mustansiriya University in Baghdad founded in 1227 CE, Sankore University in Timbuktu, Mali constructed in the 14th century CE, and Istanbul University in Turkey established in the 15th century CE.

It is not surprising therefore that in this atmosphere of learning and study spurred on by the Islamic system of the Khilafah, women’s education also flourished. The Prophet (saw) himself had set the precedence for the importance of girls and women’s education through his own words and actions. And the mother of believers, Aisha (radhiya Allahu anha) also praised the women seeking knowledge,

”نِعْمَ النِّسَاءُ نِسَاءَ الْأَنْصَارِ لَمْ يَكُنْ يَمْنَعُهُنَّ الْحَيَاءُ أَنْ يَتَفَقَّهْنَ فِي الدِّينِ“

“The greatest women are those from Ansar, those that are never ashamed to be always studying about religion” (Reported by Bukhari and Muslim)

He (saw) would teach both men and women about Islam in the mosque and other public assemblies but also set aside special times to specifically educate women and answer their questions about the Deen.

عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ، قَالَتْ النِّسَاءُ لِلنَّبِيِّ ﷺ غَلَبْنَا عَلَيْكَ الرَّجَالَ، فَاجْعَلْ لَنَا يَوْمًا مِنْ نَفْسِكَ. «فَوَعَدَهُنَّ يَوْمًا لِقِيَهُنَّ فِيهِ، فَوَعظَهُنَّ وَأَمَرَهُنَّ» (رواه البخاري)

Abu Sa'id al-Khudri (ra) reports that some women said to the Prophet (saw), *"Men have gone ahead of us (in terms of acquisition of knowledge). Therefore, appoint a special day for our benefit as well."* **The Prophet (saw) fixed one day for them. He (saw) would meet them on that day, advise them and educate them about the Commandments of Allah (swt).** (Reported by Al-Bukhari)

The Prophet's (saw) view of the importance of female education is reflected in the scholarship of many of his wives, the Sahabiyyat (the female companions), and other women during his rule of Madinah. His wife Aisha (ra) for example, earned the title of 'faqihat ul Ummah' (jurist of the Ummah) due to her knowledge of hadith and expertise in Islamic jurisprudence. She narrated over 2200 hadith from the Prophet (saw). It is said that only Abu Hurairah (ra), Ibn Umar (ra), and Anas (ra) transmitted more. The scholar Ibn Hajar writes, *"One fourth of the commands of the Prophet (saw) were transmitted by her."* Prominent Sahaba (male companions of the Prophet (saw)) would turn to her for answers to their religious questions. The great Islamic jurist and Sahaba, Abu Musa Ashari (ra) said, *"Whenever any matter became difficult for us, the Companions of the Prophet (saw), then we asked Aisha about it. We found she had knowledge of that."* Umar bin Al Khattab (ra) and Uthman bin Affan (ra) as Khalifahs would also refer to Aisha (ra) to answer particular questions regarding hadith and fiqh. But she also had a great command over other fields of knowledge, including medicine, poetry, literature and the history of the Arabs. The Sahaba, Urwah ibn Az-Zubayr (ra) said of her, *"I have never seen any (man or woman) who has more knowledge of the Qur'an, the obligatory duties, what is lawful and unlawful, poetry, literature, the history of the Arabs, their genealogy, than Aisha."*

Other wives of the Prophet (saw) such as Umm Salamah, Hafsa, Umm Habibah and Maymunah also excelled in learning, had extensive knowledge of hadith and issued Islamic edicts, as did numerous Sahabiyat such as Asma bint Abu Bakr, Umm Atiyah, Umm Shareek, and Fatima bint Qais (ra). Others had expertise in poetry, such as Khansa bint Amr, Hind bint Athathah, Atikah, Umm Aiman and Safiyah bint Abdul Muttalib ibn Hashim. The Prophet (saw) also placed importance on female literacy, reflected in his instruction to Shifa bint Abdullah to teach writing to his wife Hafsa.

The Khilafah followed in the teachings and example of the Prophet (saw) by embracing this Islamic view of the importance of women's education. Girls and women were able to access education at home, in schools, mosques, colleges and other institutions from male and female teachers alike. Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a modern-day Indian scholar who conducted an extensive study on the female scholars of Islam in Islamic history, narrates that in every city where Muslims settled, women would receive knowledge from scholars in their locality. Famous schools and mosques where women regularly attended classes as proven from attendance registers included the prestigious Umayyad and the al-Jami' al-Muzaffari Mosques in Damascus, and al-Madrasah al-Umariyya, and Dar al-Hadith al-Nuriyyah, also in Syria. The prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo also gave special access to women as students and as lecturers – a right that women in the West only acquired in their universities centuries after. Some schools were established specifically to educate girls. The first was Jami' al-Qarawiyyin madrassah built in 245 AH (859 CE) in West Aqsa. Women were also able to travel extensively across the Islamic world to seek knowledge, unhindered by national borders which did not exist under the Khilafah which had united all its lands into one state.

Consequently, thousands of female scholars were generated in the history of this glorious state that implemented the Islamic Shariah laws.

"Mohammed Akram (an Indian modern day Islamic scholar) embarked eight years ago on a single-volume biographical dictionary of female hadith scholars, a project that took him trawling through biographical dictionaries, classical texts, madrasa chronicles and letters for

relevant citations. 'I thought I'd find maybe 20 or 30 women,' he says. To date, he has found 8,000 of them, dating back 1,400 years, and his dictionary now fills 40 volumes...."

Extract from "A Secret History" by Carla Power published in New York Times Magazine, February 25, 2007.

These female scholars reached high ranking in all spheres of knowledge of the Deen and became famous jurists, issuing Islamic verdicts, interpreting Qur'an, transmitting and critiquing hadith, and even challenging the rulings of judges. Many wrote books on various fields within Islamic sciences, sometimes consisting of 10 or more volumes. They also routinely taught in houses, schools, and the main mosques and colleges of their cities – to both male and female students. Some colleges such as the Saqlatuniya Madrasa in Cairo were funded and staffed entirely by women. Ruth Roded, Senior Lecturer in the History of Islam and the Middle East at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem documents that the proportion of female lecturers in many classical Islamic colleges was higher than in modern-day Western universities.

Amongst the famous female scholars under the Khilafah, were Umm Darda in the 7th century CE who lectured in hadith and fiqh at the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the capital of the Khilafah at the time. One of her students was the Khalifah of the State, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan who would sit in her study circles along with her other students. Another was Nafisa bint Hassan, a 9th century (CE) scholar in Egypt whose students included the honourable mujtahid Imam Shafi'i. And yet another of these female scholars was Sitt al-Wuzara bint Umar who was popular in Damascus in the 12th century CE for teaching al-Bukhari's Sahih hadith. She was invited to Cairo where she taught it in the Great Mosque and other venues. Her lessons were attended by the scholars and other notables of the city – male and female. All this was performed within the limits of the Islamic social system, with the Islamic dress codes and separation of seating of men and women respected.

Other female scholars of note included Amrah bint Abd al-Rahman - who issued legal opinions in Madinah on matters such as business transactions and punishments. Imam Malik (rm) referred to her fatwas regarding Hajj in his famous Muwatta. Aishah bint Abd-al-Hadi was a 9th century (CE) scholar who was appointed to the post of principal teacher of Sahih al-Bukhari in the grand mosque of Banu Umayyah. Another female scholar was Shaykhah Umm al-Khayr Fatimah bint Ibrahim, who in the 14th century (CE) taught hadith in the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, a location revered by the whole community, reflective of the high respect she enjoyed amongst her society. And Zainab bint Kamal was a 14th century (CE) scholar who taught more than 400 books of hadith. Her 'camel load' of texts attracted camel loads of students and with her towering intellectual reputation she lectured in some of the most prestigious academic institutes in Damascus.

The students of many of these female scholars of Islam included the great male jurists and Mujtahideen of their time such as Imam Malik, Ibn Hajar, and Ibn Taymiyya (rm). Countless eminent male scholars also mentioned their female teachers in their books, wrote biographies of them and praised them for their knowledge, intelligence, patience, virtuous conduct, integrity, and piety. The teachers of the eminent 13th century (CE) Islamic historian Ibn al-Najjar for example included 400 women; a quarter of the teachers of the great 14th century Jurist Al-Suyuti were women; while the re-known 12th century (CE) scholar Ibn Asakir narrated hadith from over 80 women and dedicated a whole book to biographical accounts of them. Additionally, from the biographies of many of the great male scholars of Islam, it is clear that an important factor in the success they had of combining righteousness with Islamic knowledge was the foundation in education they had been given by their mothers.

Under Islamic rule, women therefore played an essential role in the development, transmission and preservation of the various fields of Islamic sciences, fiqh and hadith, hence contributing to the richness of Islamic culture and scholarship. They also enjoyed great respect amongst their society, were sought after for their tafseers and fiqh rulings, and acquired and exercised the same authority as male scholars, including the right to give ijaazahs (or a license to teach) to their students. There are even records of female scholars at times using their Islamic knowledge to intervene in court judgements to prevent miscarriages of justice. Amrah bint Abd al-Rahman, the great muhaddithat and faqihah for example once intervened in a court case presided over by the Qadi (governor) of Madinah who was to implement the hudud punishment upon a thief who had stolen some iron rings. Amrah reminded the judge that such a punishment could only be applied upon the one who had stolen something worth a quarter of a dinar or more. Consequently the Qadi reversed his decision and released the defendant for he had no argument against the authority of the Islamic evidence she cited.

These female scholars of Islam lived a full Islamic life, managing their households, nurturing their children, attaining scholarship, participating in community affairs, being advocates for justice, commanding the Maruf and forbidding the Munkar, and accounting the ruler. The Indian scholar, Mohammad Nadwi Akram writes, *"I have worked through much material over a decade to compile biographical accounts of 8000 Muhaddithat. Not one of them is reported to have considered the domain of family life inferior, or neglected duties therein, or considered being a woman undesirable or inferior to being a man, or considered that, given aptitude and opportunity, she had no duties to the wider society, outside the domain of family life."*

Under the Khilafah, women also excelled in other fields of study such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, calligraphy, poetry, science and engineering. For example, Labana of Cordoba was an expert in mathematics and literature in the 10th century (CE). She was able to solve the most complex geometrical and algebraic problems and her vast knowledge of general literature obtained her employment as a secretary to the Khalifah, al-Hakem II. Mariam "al-Astrolabiya" Al-Ijilya was a scientist and inventor in the 10th century (CE). She designed astrolabes which were used in astronomy to determine the position of the sun and planets and for navigation. Her designs were so innovative that she was employed by the ruler of the city in which she lived. Lubna of Andalus was a poetess who also lived in the 10th century (CE). She excelled in grammar, rhetoric, mathematics and calligraphy. She was one of the chief scribes of the state and was entrusted with official correspondence. Fakhr al-Nisa Umm Muhammad Shuhdah was a 12th century (CE) specialist in Calligraphy. She wrote for the Khalifah al-Muqtafi. It was said that at her time there was not anyone in Baghdad who could match the excellence of her writing. Women from the Banu Zuhr family were physicians who served the 12th century (CE) Khalifah Abu Yusuf Yaqub al-Mansur, while the 15th century Turkish surgeon Serefeddin Sabuncuoglu describes female surgeons in Anatolia performing surgical procedures on female patients. Under Islamic rule, there were also women calligraphers from Spain to Syria, Iraq to India who practiced the art of copying the Qur'an. It is reported that in Eastern Cordoba alone there were 170 female calligraphers who transcribed the Qur'an in the Kufi script.

Alongside all this, the love for seeking knowledge, and the personal devotion to Allah (swt) instilled within women under Islamic rule, drove many to spend their own money in the building of schools, universities and other institutes to provide education for others and secure the rewards in the Hereafter for doing so. For example, it was Umm ul-Banin Fatimah who built the first madrassah for girls in 245 AH (859 CE). She kept fast from the day the foundation was laid till the building was completed. And Fatima Al-Fihri established in 859 in

Fez, Morocco, what is now recognized as the first degree-granting university in the world, the Qarawiyyin Mosque and Madrassah, spending her entire inheritance in the process, and also keeping fast until the building was erected. It became one of the most prestigious and important centres of education in the world. There were no fees and students were given monetary allowances for food and accommodation.

All this was driven by the implementation of the Islamic laws and systems under the Khilafah that encouraged citizens – male and female – to study Islam and the world around them, as well as to excel in every field of life for the benefit of society and humanity. Furthermore, it was the Islamic principles upon which the Khilafah is based that obliged the state to give the immense importance and value to female education that it deserves, harnessing the potential of its women and ensuring their educational aspirations were met.

This glorious legacy also awaits women in the future Khilafah based upon the method of the Prophethood Insha Allah, which will also prioritise the provision of a first-class education system to all its citizens – male and female. Furthermore, the Khilafah (Caliphate) is obliged to provide free education at primary and secondary levels to both boys and girls. This would include subjects such as the Islamic disciplines, Arabic, mathematics, and the experimental sciences such as biology, chemistry and physics. The state will also strive to fund free higher level education for men and women to the best of its ability.

“It is an obligation upon the State to teach every individual, male or female, those things which are necessary for the mainstream of life. This should be obligatory and provided freely in the primary and secondary levels of education and the State should, to the best of its ability, provide the opportunity for everyone to continue higher education free of charge.”
Article 178, Hizb ut Tahrir’s Draft Constitution of Al-Khilafah

This glorious State will therefore seek to eradicate female illiteracy and secure the educational dreams of girls and women. It will also encourage them to enter higher studies and facilitate them in specializing in various fields, including the Islamic disciplines, medicine, science, languages and engineering, harnessing their thinking and skills to elevate and benefit the whole society. This will include generating an abundance of women scholars, doctors, nurses and teachers for example to provide the best education and healthcare services to the female citizens of the state. All this will be guaranteed within the framework of the Islamic social system, that will separate teaching of male and female students in both state and private schools. This will enable Muslim girls and women to pursue their educational aspirations while also adhering to all the laws of Islam which ensure the protection of their dignity and safety. Furthermore, it will strive to remove any traditional attitudes or cultural barriers that devalue female education or prevent girls from pursuing their educational rights. It is only the implementation of the System of Allah under the shade of the Khilafah that can achieve such a distinguished vision for female education.

﴿الرَّ كُتِبَ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ النَّاسَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ﴾

“Alif Lam Ra. (This is) a Book which We have sent down to you so that, by their Lord’s permission, you lead out the people from the darkness (of ignorance) into the light (of faith), to the way of the Mighty, the Owner of Praise.” [Ibrahim: 1]

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