

## Focus Essay

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### Women's Rights in Islam: The Responsibility for Women's Education

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#### Abstract

Generalizations about Islam and human rights in Islam are seen replete in today's media, especially the misconceptions on Muslim women's rights. With an emphasis on the historical, theological, and social aspects of women's access to knowledge in Islamic tradition<sup>1</sup>, this paper aims to explore the rights and obligations of women in Islam regarding education. It also discusses the harmony between women's rights to education and the value of the obligation of being nurturers and caretakers within the family.<sup>2</sup> The paper highlights the continued necessity for efforts toward gender equality in education from an Islamic perspective while also taking into account the difficulties and advancements in women's education in nations with a majority of Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

**Keywords:** Islamic rights, Muslim women, Al-Qur'an, Sunnah/Hadiths, education.

#### Introduction

Gender equity is an important topic. Additionally, many viewpoints from a range of backgrounds are represented in the discussions and writings on this topic. For non-Muslims and, occasionally, even for some Muslims, the

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Islamic viewpoint on this matter is the least understood, most misrepresented, misunderstood, or even misperceived. The conduct of certain Muslims who do not practice the true Islam, as well as the prevalent local cultural traditions in many regions of the world, have been demonstrated to perpetuate false notions of the authentic Islamic perspective.

Writing or discussing the Islamic position on any given topic requires knowledge of the Islamic values found in the Islamic holy book as well as the ability to distinguish between the core teachings of Islam and the wide range of cultural practices that are practiced by its adherents and may or may not be in line with those teachings.

Briefly explained, Islam is a religion of peace, unity, love, understanding, and tolerance. Its holy book is called *Al-Qur'an* (*the recorded words of Allah – Allah is the proper name of God in Islam and is not used to denote any being*) and *Sunnah* (the teachings of His messenger (the last Prophet) Muhammad); and its followers are called Muslims.

Due to the rights of Muslim women in this particular faith, all Muslims, male or female, must begin pursuing education, learning, and knowledge-seeking at a very young age. Furthermore, a person, regardless of gender, is responsible for their actions and deeds on the Day of Resurrection in the hereafter. As such, they must be aware of the teachings of the *Al-Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, especially the five fundamentals of Islam: believing in a single God (Allah - the creator) and His messenger (Muhammad – peace be upon him), praying, giving to others, fasting, and going on pilgrimages, among other things. Besides that, they are also obliged to know the attributes of Allah, knowledge of what is lawful and unlawful, right and wrong, their religious obligations, and laws revealed in the *Al-Qur'an* regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, adultery, murder, theft, etc.

To be more precise, Islam gives women a lot of rights and status in their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. Even though some other contentious issues, such as polygamy, gender equality, women's right to run for any position as head of state, etc., have been discussed, debated, and disagreed with by scholars from all over the world, UDHR, the *Al-Qur'an* and Hadith clearly explain their rights regarding inheritance, property ownership, marriage, divorce, maintenance, education, earning a living, and participation in any socio-political situations.

## Literature Review

There has been much discussion of women's educational rights in Islam in both religious studies and general public discussions. The Al-Quran and Hadith, in particular, emphasize the value of education for all Muslims, regardless of gender. Verses such as "*Read in the name of your Lord who created*"<sup>4</sup> make it abundantly evident that the Lord in the Al-Quran commands both men and women to pursue knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The well-known phrase "*Seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim*"<sup>6</sup>, which emphasizes that both men and women have a right to education, further emphasizes the Hadith's emphasis on the duty of knowledge acquisition for all Muslims.

Despite these scriptural underpinnings, the way this right has been applied has differed greatly among Islamic societies due to political, historical, and cultural influences. Women's educational opportunities have been limited in some traditional and conservative contexts, frequently as a result of cultural perceptions of gender roles and how religious texts are interpreted.<sup>7</sup> Religious obligations and social norms clash in historical debates about women's education under Islamic law.<sup>8</sup> In early Islamic history, women were engaged scholars, but as conservative interpretations of Islam gained traction, their access to education became more restricted.

Rather than Islam itself, contemporary academics and activists contend that patriarchal social structures are to blame for these restrictions. According to reformers Amin (1899)<sup>9</sup>, who fought for educational equality in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the fundamental principles of Islam uphold women's rights to and responsibility for education. Islam does not oppose women's education; rather, it envisions a society in which men and women have equal access to education.<sup>10</sup> According to UNHR, in article 26 of UDHR, it states that every human has equal right to education regardless of age, gender, background, or religion. They have to be ensured for equal access to even quality education and other rights, such as right to marriage, divorce, freedom of speech, freedom of choice, etc. deserved.

There are still issues in spite of these theological justifications for women's education. Women's access to education is still restricted in many Muslim-majority nations by issues like poverty, political unrest, and conflict.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, there has been progress, as more Muslim women are enrolling in schools and universities across the globe. The full realization of women's educational rights in accordance with the original

religious teachings of Islam is still being pushed for by ongoing Islamic reform movements.<sup>12</sup>

### Methodology

This paper was written based on qualitative-data interpretation. The researcher used Al-Qur'an textbook, Hadiths, documents, observations, and other articles relating to the main research topic, *Muslim women's rights to and responsibility for education*, to be discussed. The findings were aimed based on the following main research questions:

1. How were non-Muslim and Muslim women treated in the past?
2. What are the rights and responsibilities of Muslim women in Islam?
3. How are their rights and responsibilities perceived by the world?

### Findings and Discussion

It is true that in all western and even most Muslim societies of the past, the view of a woman's role was mainly as a wife, a mother, and a housekeeper. Even though the biggest role of a non-Muslim girl in education, at that time, was to spend her time in learning some simple things to fulfill the responsibility for her necessary household jobs or even was forced to stay at home, the right and responsibility for a Muslim girl was to go to religious school to gain more knowledge on her compulsory daily religious practices. In contrast, it is illustrated in UDHR, the *Al-Qur'an and Sunnah (Hadiths)* that education and knowledge are extremely mandatory upon men and women in any religion, and thus Islam. Let us look at what Allah Almighty in His Noble Al-Qur'an and His Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

*Those truly fear God, among his servants, who have knowledge: for God is Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving.*<sup>13</sup>

إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ  
(Surah Fatir: 35:28)

*Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are educated with understanding that receive admonition.*<sup>14</sup>

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ  
(Surah Az-Zamar: 39:9)

And according to Abu Musa Al-Ashari, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

*He who has a slave girl and teaches her good manners and improve her education and then manumits and marries her, will get a double reward; and any slave who observes Allah's right and his master's right will receive a double reward.*<sup>15</sup>

Regarding the above revelations and sayings by our beloved Prophet (peace be upon him), it can be clearly inferred that education and knowledge are a must for every Muslim man and woman. Furthermore, since the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) appeared and introduced Islam to the world, he gradually eliminated slavery not only among Muslim but also non-Muslim societies. By the third verse above, it can be inferred that women, even if they are slaves, deserve their right and responsibility to gain knowledge and education, and it is compulsory for their master to send them out for knowledge and education. Therefore, Islam pays much attention to both men and women's rights to education and knowledge – religious and academic. As seen in recent years, many young women have decided to devote their time to education from primary to higher level of education in all forms of education: formal, informal, or non-formal, before getting married and having children. And this resembles with what are stated in the Articles of UDHR that as follows:

Article 1: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Article 2: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

Article 26: “Everyone has the right to education. ..., at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. ... education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, as a Muslim woman who has learned about this topic and read the revelations of those rights mentioned in UDHR, in the Al-Qur'an, and in the authentic Sunnah, I think that women in Islam have the same rights as men because the Al-Qur'an teaches that women are always respected and protected and that men and women are equal in Allah Almighty's eyes.

In addition to her mandatory obligation to seek out and acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for her daily activities, such as managing the household, educating herself, training, and raising and caring for her

children, she must also pursue education and training to become a good wife, mother, housekeeper, businesswoman, etc. For the most part, she can only acquire those skills through formal education. For this reason, the majority of nations now offer full-time education to both Muslim and non-Muslim men and women. Some women pursue Islamic studies at the mosques while many other women go on to university to become as well-educated and qualified, in any fields, such as medical sciences, law, teaching, etc., as their brothers. For example, the two wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him), Khadijah Binte Kuwaylid (RA), the first wife, was a very wealthy businesswoman. She was the richest woman in Mecca (Makkah in Saudi Arabia) in the ancient time who explored her long trip to Syria by employing a group of men to help with her business, before getting married to the Prophet (peace be upon him). The youngest wife, Aishah Binte Abu Bakr (RA), had a great love for learning and possessed an incredible memory. She was able to recite more than 2,000 verses in the *Al-Qur'an* and narrated them all to other people, especially women. Both were known and considered as the great ladies for their inspiring and leading intellectual abilities to other men and women at that time, and their names and deeds have remained motivational and inspirational for younger generations until now.

In accordance with the obligation that every male and female human being has to fulfill and is required to acquire in this great religion for his or her every day actions and deeds, such search for further knowledge and education also helps release his or her sins in the hereafter as well. Therefore, the woman, being the best companion to the man, needs to spare her time seeking knowledge and education in order to make herself become a better self and useful member for her family and society, and more importantly, a meaningful citizen contributing to the development of her country's socio-economic status, and thus to the world.

As it is revealed in the *Al-Qur'an* that wisdom and an increase in knowledge is needed for every human being, I would like to quote one verse from the *Al-Qur'an* as below:

*Wisdom and knowledge is a great treasure and everlasting wealth. He is Allah who gives wisdom to whom He likes. Unto whom wisdom is given, he has indeed been blessed with a great treasure.*<sup>17</sup>

يُؤْتِي الْحِكْمَةَ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا  
وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ  
(*Surah Al-Baqara: 2:269*)

This verse implies that every human being is the best of Allah's creation and that since God has endowed each person with knowledge, it is their duty and superiority to impart this knowledge and education to themselves. As a result, it is depicted that all men and women have equal rights to education and knowledge acquisition in order to fulfill their respective obligations as true Muslims for a happy life both here on Earth and in the hereafter. So, education or knowledge to both men and women is vital. Without either one, it is hard for the servants (all human beings) of Allah Almighty to understand His scientific miracles and signs since some of them are shown through our normal science and logic.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the Al-Quran and Sunnah (Hadith), which emphasize the importance of knowledge for all Muslims, regardless of gender, provide strong support for women's right to and responsibility for education. Islam's core beliefs support equal educational opportunities for both men and women, despite the fact that historical and cultural factors have influenced how these rights are implemented. Modern academics and reformers contend that rather than the religion itself, societal and patriarchal interpretations are to be blamed for the restrictions placed on women's access to education. Even though there has been progress in a number of Muslim-majority nations, more work is required to completely protect women's right to and responsibility for education and guarantee that they have equal opportunities in accordance with Islamic religious principles.

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