

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Do women have a right to be educated in Islam?

The Messenger of Allah said, *"To learn knowledge is obligatory upon all Muslim men and women."*ⁱ

The Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) said: *"Seeking knowledge is a duty on every Muslim"*ⁱⁱ The Muslim woman is obliged to seek the kinds of knowledge that have been made obligatory for individuals and communities, meaning the Fardh (obligations), Wajib (necessities), Sunnah and Musthab (preferable).

The Muslim woman understands the high value that has been placed on knowledge since the earliest days of Islam. The women of the Ansar asked the Prophet: *"Appoint a special day for us when we can learn from you, for the men have taken all your time and left nothing for us."* He told them, *"Your time is in the house of so-and-so (one of the woman)."* So he came to them at that place and taught them there.ⁱⁱⁱ

So the women at the time of the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) had a time to seek knowledge behind a veil when the men had been taught and a second day during the week without the men.

Al-Bukhari records another tradition going back to Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (may Allah be pleased with him) who said: *"Asma bint 'Umayy (may Allah be pleased with her) came to the Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) and said to him, 'O Prophet of Allah, 'Umar said to me, 'We emigrated before you did, so we are more entitled to the Messenger of Allah than you are.'" "How did you reply to him?" the Prophet asked her. "I said, 'That isn't true at all! You were with the Messenger of Allah, who fed your hungry and preached to your ignorant. As for us, we were in the far off land of Ethiopia as hated outcasts. We went there for the sake of Allah and His messenger, and during our time there we were persecuted and fearful.'" In response, he said, "No, he is not more entitled to me than you are. He and his companions have emigrated once, whereas you and the others who journeyed by ship to Ethiopia have emigrated twice."*

After this conversation, Asma (may Allah be pleased with her) said, *"Abu Musa al-Ashari and those who had been with us on the ship have come to me in successive groups, asking me about this saying of the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) and believe me, nothing in this world could have given them greater joy than these words to them from the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace)."*

On the basis of sound traditions such as these, one may see that women during the days of the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace), like men, used to attend gatherings devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, learning and instruction. Women, like men, were entrusted with traditions to be memorized and passed on to others, and they were every bit as active in such pursuits as men were; in fact, such activity on women's part met with encouragement and full support from the Messenger of Allah himself (may Allah bless him and grant him peace).

'A'isha (may Allah be pleased with her) herself a leader in the field of education, praised the women of the Ansar for their enthusiasm for learning: *"How good are the women of the Ansar that their shyness did not prevent them from learning and comprehending religious matters."*

This comment came when the Ansari woman, Asma bint Shakal, was enquiring about the bathing following menstruation. She kept asking until she got answers, but when the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) said that cleanse herself, she asked how exactly this was to be done. The Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) felt too shy and respectful to spell it out; he said *"Praise be to Allah, cleanse yourself with it!"* and covered his face. 'A'isha (may Allah be pleased with her) spoke quietly (in another report, took Asma (may Allah be pleased with her) aside) and explained that she should apply the cotton to the marks of blood, i.e. cleanse her private parts with it.^{iv}

This report demonstrates how determined the first Muslim women were in their pursuit of knowledge.

Women unable to understand!

French writers during the revolution, like Rousseau, Voltaire and others, looked at women as a burden that needed to be taken care of. Rousseau in his book "Emile", which he wrote concerning the education of women, proposed a different form of education for women, based upon the fact that women were

unable to understand what men were able to understand. There are no records of female Western intellectual or writers until the 1800's.

'Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) devoted her life to teaching. She had over 200 students including men. According to Scholars one third (1/3) of Islamic knowledge came through women Scholars like 'Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her).

So what should we teach girls?

Besides the ability to read the Qur'an properly with Tajweed in Arabic, and understand its meaning. Then she should learn something of the sciences of hadith, the life of the Prophet, and the history of the women of the companions of the Prophet, who are prominent figures in Islam. She should acquire as much knowledge of Islamic Law (fiqh) as she needs to ensure that her worship and daily dealings are correct, and she should ensure that she has a sound grasp of the basic principles of her religion. Then basics of education, which all people need, have been outlined in the following list of what literate women, of any background, should be able to do:

- Read the labels on cans and boxes of food
- Read a bus or train schedule
- Look up numbers in a telephone directory
- Read a contract, a deed etc.
- Read medical directions
- Help their children with homework
- Read the menu in a restaurant
- Read road signs
- Read the warning labels on poisons and pesticides
- Read a letter from a relative or friend and write a response.
- Keep their own accounts etc.

This list should be self-explanatory. In the case of women, who are the primary carers of their children, being able to understand simple medical instructions may even be the matter of life and death. For them to read food labels is important for pork or alcohol detection purposes.

This is the minimum education that should be available to Muslim girls and women. No Muslim woman should ever be discouraged or prevented from reaching her potential. There is a wealth of talent and ability which should not be wasted. One thing must always be kept in mind that whilst fulfilling the obligation of learning knowledge other obligations are not abandoned.

Bearing all the above in mind Muslim women should seek careers at professional level and become Drs, Surgeons, Dentists, nurses, Solicitors, social workers etc.

Having determined that Muslim girls should be educated, we should give some thought to the question of where and how this may be achieved. There are three options:

1. Home-schooling
2. Islamic schools
3. Private schools
4. Or a good State schools .

It is worth mentioning at this point that Imam Dhahabi says "Abu Musalman Farahidi learnt from 17 women, Imam Bukhari, Imam Muslim, Ibn Hibban also learnt from women." It was women because of whom these people became great men.

ⁱ Mishkat & Ibn Majah

ⁱⁱ Ibn Majah

ⁱⁱⁱ Fath al-Bari. Also narrated by Abu Said al-Khudri (may Allah be pleased with him) in Bukhari.

^{iv} Muslim