Women Scholars of Islam:
They Must Bloom Again

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Courtesy: Monthly Message International [August-September 2003]

Ever since becoming conscious about Islam on one hand and the contemporary social reality on the other, I have often been disturbed by realizing that, in many aspects, there is a huge gap between what Islam stands for and what the social reality is. A vital area where this gap is so pronounced is gender issues. After tying the knot with my beloved wife and then joining the parents club through two most wonderful daughters, I was compelled to take a much closer look at gender issues.

I have remained keen over the years to learn more about these issues. However, I have been increasingly dissatisfied as I continued to discover directly from the Qur'an, Qur'anic literature, Hadith, Seerah and history that what we are generally adhering to, and traditionally defending and promoting in regard to gender issues stands in sharp contrast to the Qur'anic and Prophetic vision as well as the heritage.

There is a general notion among the religious establishment of Islam, and derived therefrom, among the common Muslims, that Islam recognizes superiority of men over women. Even in Sayyid Abul Ala Maudoodi's well-known and highly respected urdu commentary, *Tafhimul Qur'an*, verse 4 of Surah an-Nisa erroneously got translated into English as following: "Men are superior to women ... not in the sense that they are above them in honor and excellence..." [Tr. by Ch. Muhammad Akbar, Islamic Publications, Lahore, 1997 ed.; Vol. 1, p. 121; note: a more recent translation from Islamic Foundation, UK has a different rendering]. Even though some qualifier and clarifier have been added in the preceding rendering, the very expression, "men are superior to women" - in whatever sense it may be - is questionable, because if honor and excellence are excluded from the scope of "superiority," what exactly is the meaning and basis of superiority or excellence then?

Indeed, completely discounting birth-related distinctions, he commented on verse 13 of Surah al-Hujurat: "... In that (Islamic) society there is no distinction based on color, race, language, or nationality. ..." One should be impressed by Maulana Maudoodi's articulation as to the sweeping implication of the verse that destroyed the foundation of any other concept of superiority/excellence. However, is it not proper to include gender in that list, too? Once again, unless we are willing to accept the implication that this Qur'anic declaration (49:13) - *Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (the person who is) the most God-conscious*. - applies to males only, it is only Islamic that Maulana Maudoodi's comment should have read, inclusive of gender, as following: "... In that society there is no distinction based on color, race, language, nationality or gender. ..."
Muslims routinely take the position that Islam does not recognize any unfair distinction based on color, race, language, or nationality. Unfortunately, however, even in this age of gender consciousness, we are failing to uphold and present Islam in consonance with the full scope of the Qur'anic vision and the Prophetic heritage.

Not too long ago, a friend of mine from Los Angeles, California (teaching at a university there) called me and among other things, lamented the fact that his otherwise devoted Muslim family is finding a difficult time to have rooms assigned for them in Masjid with appropriate or adequate ventilation. Might a little bit of natural light and wind be hazardous to our women's as well as our spiritual health and well-being?

There are many Muslim countries where women going out for their regular needs find little or no facility for women to wash and pray. Several years ago I participated in the Shura (consultative) committee of one of the Islamic Centers in USA. By the vote of the community, the elected chairman of the Shura was joined by his wife (also elected as a member) in the Shura as well. At the very first meeting, one of the brothers - who must have felt that the presence of the sister, even with her husband present, was a violation of Islam - to protect his own piety and lodge his silent but otherwise conspicuous protest, stood up and left.

Several years ago, I visited a Masjid in one of the Midwestern states in USA, where I found the facilities for washing for men was not that good but survivable. However, due to neglect or poor maintenance, whatever might be, my young daughter, going around by herself into the women's section, later on, came out crying at what she experienced there. A non-Muslim woman in one of the places of America was refused the taxi-service by a Muslim driver because she had a dog with him. It did not matter that she was blind. The brother, feeling dutybound (?), offered a prodigious lecture to this blind, non-Muslim lady. Although there are many examples to the contrary, there are some disturbing patterns that Muslims themselves should be confronting and scrutinizing in a self-critical and proactive manner.

The literacy rate is already poor in the Muslim countries and the rate for women is disproportionately lower. Let us not talk about the poor women in various countries who are without any protection and whose life, honor and property are anybody's game. Women were robbed of their professional and out-of-the home positions under strict public code in Taliban's "Islamic" Republic of Afghanistan. In contrast, Muslim women in Iran are doing relatively a lot better, but the top-tier religious hierarchy is still a drag on the society's overall progress. In the heartland of Islam with Makkah and Madina, controlled by a externally-installed dynasty and dominated by Wahhabism, women don't have the right to drive. It is so ironic and outrageous, because the sacred city of Makkah was founded through the valiant and exemplary struggle and sacrifice of a lone woman, Hajera, the wife of Ibrahim and the mother of Ismail (a). Yet, now a woman does not have the right to drive by herself.

More seriously, quite often we hear about women being meted out capital punishment for illicit sexual relations. Usually, women bear the brunt of the orthodox Shariah codes,
even though we all know that even when raped, women, for a multitude of reasons, can't be so easily expected to step up and claim to have been raped. In many countries, women are routinely deprived of their property and inheritance. As personal and family matters, women rarely can secure their rights even from their relatives. In many Muslim countries, women are routinely subjected to physical violence, often lethally, which is condoned or tolerated by the broader society as personal or family matter. Vulnerable women are routinely married to be added to a husband's collection and also divorced at random as it pleases the husbands. The existing laws, values, customs and power structures - in combination - make and keep women weak, vulnerable, marginalized, and even oppressed.

Of course, women are completely absent from the pertinent discourse to shape and reshape the Islamic laws and codes. Islamic movements in various parts of the world are chanting about the progress they have made in promoting the cause of the women in accordance with Islam and vainly arguing how Islam is rightfully superior in dealing with women's rights. As they are still groping with the issues whether women should veil themselves (i.e., use niqab, face-covering), they have no problem with men playing games, such as soccer, with albeit "longer" shorts! In some Muslim countries, leading Islamic parties still stubbornly insist that women must cover their face as well. They might be super-lenient in regard to interpreting Islam in matters of political expediency, but regarding women's issues they have to be most extremely conservative. Many such organizations are also promoting separate women's educational institutions as well as separate women's organizations for Islamic causes. At the same time, Islamic parties in many Muslim countries remain at bay without broad support, especially from women, while they have to contend with challenges from many home-grown, viciously anti-Islamic feminists. Indeed, a whole new generation of men and women is growing up with the entrenched impression - and even conviction - that Islam is seriously biased in terms of gender issues. These are Islamic MOVEmenents that seem rather unable to MOVE in a contemporary context.

I should clarify that my arguments and opinions herein are to be applicable within the context of Islam. For example, when I am referring to the insistence by Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh on veiling of women, it is because I consider this veiling (face-covering) Islamically unwarranted and the insistence unacceptable. Such position is based on extreme conservatism, especially when it comes to gender issues. Let me raise some further questions now. Are men really superior to women according to Islam? Why don't we have women Islamic scholars, experts, and Mujtahids (jurisprudents)? To solve the problems of women, do we need, or is it Islamic, to have separate Islamic schools/colleges/mosques? Is it alright for women to give lectures to a mixed gathering of Muslim men and women? How about doing so at Islamic Centers/mosques?

I hope that I have not already rung too many alarm bells. Based on my study of the Qur'an, Hadith, Seerah and history, I have concluded quite a while ago that what we are promoting, both by saying and doing, today are mostly opposite to what Islam teaches. Then, several years ago it was by chance I came across a book Struggling to Surrender by a new American Muslim, Dr. Jeffrey Lang. The book was captivating. But apart from its
richness in terms of the experience he frankly shared and thoughts he provoked, it was an important eye-opening experience for me in regard to gender issues. We are generally aware that Muslim women, such as Hadhrat Aishah, Fatima, Khadija (r), and others, have played distinguished role during and immediately after the Prophet (s). In that book, there were some brief references to a forgotten, but very distinctive role Muslim women have played in Islamic history.

My interest was deeply aroused. I followed up by reading the original reference, Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features & Criticism by Dr. Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, a late scholar from Calcutta University [Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993]. This book had a chapter titled "Women Scholars of Hadith," [pp. 117-123] which was an eye-opener for me.

For the first time I realized one of the most basic defects in our contemporary Muslim attitude and thinking in regard to gender issues. We all know that beyond the few towering women personalities in the earliest part of the Prophetic era, we can hardly name any woman scholar. It is well-known that in our contemporary century, Islamic scholars, Imams, experts, as well as leaders of Islamic movements, HAVE NOT been educated by men AND women. Going back further, even noted scholars such as Shah Waliullah Dehlavi and Shaikh Ahmad of Sarhind, popularly known as Mujaddid Alf Sani did not (correct me, if I am wrong) have any woman among their educators. It was simply not possible, because "women scholars" of Islam - teaching men and women, in public context, where many of them were, overall the best of the best of their time, not just among women - have become an extinct species.

What am I saying? Learning of Islam by men from men AND women? Tell me, isn't it true that the founder of Tabligh Jamaat (Maulana Muhammad Ilyas), founder of Ikhwan al-Muslimoon (Shaikh Hasan al-Banna), Saudi Arabia's late chief Mufti Shaikh Ibn Bazz, or even the founder of Jamaate Islami (Sayyid Abul Ala Maudoodi)¹ did not have among their educators any contemporary women scholar? How many of us have ever heard or known that there were times spanning many centuries when top male Islamic scholars sometimes used to recommend their mixed groups of students, men and women, to learn a particular text such as Sahih al-Bukhari or Sahih Muslim from none other than some specific woman scholar? If we have not, the attitude of these generations of Muslims, including their leaders, scholars, mentors, vis-à-vis women, can be better understood.

The role of women scholars of hadith is unique in the human history, prior to our modern times. There is simply no parallel to this special and valuable role played by women scholars in the development, preservation and dissemination of Islamic knowledge. In the words of Dr. Zubayr Siddiqi, "History records few scholarly enterprises, at least before modern times, in which women have played an important and active role side by side

¹ He is wrong about this. I do know that Maulana Muhammad Ilyas was taught Qur'an by his mother, taught some hadiths by his aunt. All of whom were scholars in their own right. Sheik Bin Bazz, I believe was also taught by women. Sheikh Hamza Yusuf (lesser sheikh) received some hadith instruction from his Sheikh's wife. They are still being taught by women.
with men. The science of hadith forms an outstanding exception in this respect. ... Islam produced a large number of outstanding female scholars, on whose testimony and sound judgment much of the edifice of Islam depends. ... Since Islam's earliest days, women had been taking a prominent part in the preservation and cultivation of hadith, and this function continued down the centuries. At every period in Muslim history, there lived numerous eminent women-traditionists, treated by their brethren with reverence and respect." [p. 117]

Muslims are generally familiar with a handful of female luminaries from the time of the Prophet. However, what they are generally unfamiliar with is a large number of women scholars over many centuries after the first generation. This is an unforgivable lapse for the Ummah.

Just to mention a few, hopefully, would spark our interest in learning about this neglected dimension of our remarkable history. Do we know that Umm al-Darda (d. 81/700) was regarded by some of her contemporary leading male traditionists as "superior to all the other traditionists of the period, including the celebrated masters of hadith like al-Hasan al-Basri and Ibn Sirin." 'Amra was specially recognized for her authority on traditions related by A'isha and among her many notable students was Abu Bakr ibn Hazm, the celebrated judge of Medina, who was ordered by none other than the caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz himself to write down all the traditions known on her authority. [p. 118]

Zaynab bint Sulayman (d. 142/759) "gained a reputation as one of the most distinguished women traditionists of the time, and counted many important men among her pupils." [p. 118] Almost without any exception, the compilers of major collections of hadith also lists a good number of women traditionists and scholars as their teachers. "A survey of the texts reveals that all the important compilers of traditions from the earliest period received many of them from women shuyukh: every major collection gives the names of many women as the immediate authorities of the author. And when these works had been compiled, the women traditionists themselves mastered them, and delivered lectures to large classes of pupils, to whom they would issue their own ijazas." [pp. 118-119]

It is so unfortunate and ironic that now this hadith literature in particular is used to suppress and deny the role, rights and status of women and confine them to the corners of our households. During the fourth century, there were women scholars, whose classes were always attended by many other scholars of great repute. Karima al-Marwaziyya (d. 463/1070), is one of those names that we should proudly know and remember, "who was considered the best authority on the Sahih of al-Bukhari in her own time. Abu Dharr of Herat, one of the leading scholars of the period, attached such great importance to her authority that he advised his students to study the Sahih under no one else, because of the quality of her scholarship." Among her students were al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, a noted Islamic scholar and historian. [p. 119]

Fatima bint Muhammad (d.539/1144) received from her contemporary hadith specialists "the proud title of Musnida Isfahan (the great hadith authority of Isfahan)." Shuhda 'the Writer' (d.574/1178) "was a famous calligrapher and a traditionist of great repute ...
lectures on *Sahih* al-Bukhari and other hadith collections were attended by large crowds of students; and on account of her great reputation, some people even falsely claimed to have been her disciples. [p. 119]

Sitt al-Wuzara became well-known as an authority on Bukhari. Her acclaimed mastery included Islamic law as well. Crowned as 'the musnida of her time', she delivered public lectures on the *Sahih* and other works in Damascus and Egypt. [p. 120]

In fourteenth century, Zaynab bint Ahmad (d.740/1339) used to deliver public lectures the *Musnad* of Abu Hanifa, the *Shamail* of al-Tirmidhi, and the *Sharh Ma'ani al-Athar* of al-Tahawi. Do we remember the great traveler Ibn Battuta? He studied hadith with her and various other women during his stay at Damascus. [p. 120]

Learning was by both men and women. So was teaching, and the environment definitely was not a segregated one, where the learning as well as teaching took place. There were hardly any notable men during those centuries who did not receive teaching from women scholars as well. Furthermore, it was not just one or a few isolated cases. But there were a large number of women whose contribution to the field of learning and teaching remains an honored tradition that we may have altogether forgotten and neglected. Worse; many of us become vehemently opposed to it.

The famous historian of Damascus, Ibn Asakir, studied under more than 1,200 men and 80 women. He obtained the special *ijaza* of Zaynab bint Abd al-Rahman for the *Muwatta* of Imam Malik. The famous Qur'anic commentator Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti studied the *Risala* of Imam Shafii with Hajar bint Muhammad. Zaynab bint al-Sha'ri (d.524/615-1129/1218) studied hadith under several important traditionists, and in turn taught many students - "some of who gained great repute - including Ibn Khallikan, author of the well-known biographical dictionary *Wafayat al-Ayan*." [pp. 120-121]

Further account of the women scholars' contribution can be found in the works of Ibn Hajar, the author of the most important commentary on *Sahih al-Bukhari*. In one of his works, he provides short biographical accounts of no less than about 170 prominent women of the eighth century. Most of them were hadith scholars and under many of whom the author himself had studied. According to him, some of these women were acknowledged as the best traditionists of the period. For example, Juwayriya bint Ahmad, studied a range of works on traditions, under scholars both male and female. She then taught at the great colleges of the time, and then offered famous lectures on various Islamic disciplines, which used to attract an audience of high repute. Some of Ibn Hajar's own teachers and many of his contemporaries attended her discourses. Another teacher of him was A'isha bin Abd al-Hadi (723-816). She was regarded as the finest traditionist of her time. Students from diverse backgrounds used to travel long distances "in order to sit at her feet and study the truths of religion." [p. 121]

In a book *al-Daw al-Lami*, biographical dictionary of eminent persons of the ninth century, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (830-897/1427-1489) provides information about the great women scholars of that period. In another book, *Mu'jam al-
Shuyukh, Abd al-Aziz ibn Umar ibn Fahd (812-871/1409-1466), provides biographical notes about "1,100 of the author's teachers, including over 130 women scholars under whom he had studied." Many of these women scholars were of the highest repute and trained many of the great scholars of the following generation. [p. 121]

There were women scholars whose field of expertise went far beyond hadith. "Umm Hani Maryam (778-871/1376-1466), for instance, learnt the Qur'an by heart when still a child, acquired all the Islamic sciences then being taught, including theology, law, history, and grammar, and then traveled to pursue hadith with the best traditionists of her time in Cairo and Mecca. ... She pursued an intensive program of learning in the great college of Cairo, giving ijazas to many scholars, Ibn Fahd himself studied several technical works on hadith under her." [pp. 121-122]

A'isha bin Ibrahim (760/1358-842/1438) studied traditions in Damascus and Cairo, and "delivered lectures which eminent scholars of the day spared no efforts to attend." [p. 122]

For various reasons that should be subject of a serious study, the "involvement of women in hadith scholarships, and in the Islamic disciplines generally, seems to have declined considerably from the tenth century of the hijra." [p. 122] There are several other biographical dictionaries that list names of women scholars of the subsequent period, but in vastly reduced numbers. Yet, as part of an endangered group, there were women who continued their valuable contribution. Asma bint Kamal al-Din (d.904/1498) wielded great public influence. She delivered public lectures on hadith, and trained women in various Islamic sciences. A'isha bint Muhammad (d.906/1500) taught hadith to many students. She was a professor at the Salihiyya College in Damascus. [p. 122]

The last known woman traditionist of the first rank, Fatima al-Fudayliya, also known as al-Shaykha al-Fudayliya, settled at Mecca. She founded a rich public library there. "In the Holy City she was attended by many eminent traditionists, who attended her lectures and received certificates from her." [p. 123]

History records that these women scholars "took their seats as students as well as teachers in pubic educational institutions, side by side with their brothers in faith. The colophons of many manuscripts show them both as students attending large general classes, and also as teachers, delivering regular courses of lectures." These were NOT gender-wise segregated institutions either. "[O]n folio 250, we discover that a famous woman traditionist, Umm Abd Allah, delivered a course of five lectures on the book to a mixed class of more than fifty students, at Damascus in the year 837/1433." [p. 123]

Although one can't draw a superficial connection between the decline of the Islamic civilization and the gradual disappearance of the women scholarship and participation, the reality is that our collective foundation of knowledge and heritage is based on the proud and noble contribution of scholarship of both men and women, as students and teachers, side by side, and there must have been substantive consequence from this loss of women scholarship.
The conditions of the Muslim world in general, and that of Muslim women in particular, stand in sharp contrast with the Islamic vision and heritage that continued through many centuries after the Prophet. Today, Muslim women are rarely welcome in the public life and especially in the mosque, let alone being part of our pool of educators, experts and mentors. This has created serious disenchantment among the women in the Muslim world, and turned some of them into bitter opponent to religion in general and Islam in particular. The existing conditions are a clear perversion of Islamic teachings and guidance. The absence of women scholars has also caused a great imbalance in our Islamic discourse in general and Islamic law (fiqh) in particular, by leaning toward the most extremely restrictive positions, opinions and provisions for the women.

In our contemporary time, there are Muslim women, particularly educated in the West or in the western tradition, who are establishing themselves as scholars of Islam. This is a very encouraging development. They are making critical contributions toward a new legacy of quality scholarship, especially in the field of gender issues. However, their emergence is not internal to Islam, and the broader Muslim society is yet to embrace them as part of the religious establishment, toward which they turn for religious scholarship. Of course, the religious establishment continues its orthodox resistance against such development of women scholarship and participation to protect their traditional turf.

In order to adequately empower women from the Islamic perspective, women need to equally and fully participate in our society, beginning with education and scholarship. The principle of Shura (mutual consultation) requires that those whose lives are affected by various decisions/opinions of Islamic laws and dictates ought to be full participants in the pertinent discourse. Women need to take interest in and men come forward to facilitate women's development in the field of education and scholarship. Muslim men need to demand such changes, as our Islamic pursuit for positive change can't be either complete or balanced without women being our full and equal partners. We need to cherish an environment where Muslim men, side by side with women, can engage in Islamic education and discourse, as students as well as teachers. We need women in all fields of Islamic and other studies, where men must excel in a competitive environment. We need to take this pursuit seriously, until we have qualified Islamic jurisprudents (mujtahids) and scholars among women, side by side with men, whose joint input would reshape our Islamic discourse and laws.

This does require no less than a revolutionary change, but it is an Islamic must. It is like turning Islam in our lives downside up, because Islam as we understand and practice it has been turned upside down. Muslims need to coalesce together to revive this glorious tradition of women's scholarship. Without them, our society would be fundamentally deficient and imbalanced, which will be reflected in all walks of our lives. That is why we again need women scholars back: THEY MUST BLOOM AGAIN.