

Religious Knowledge, Women Empowerment and *Da'wa*

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Introduction:

Since the independence of Pakistan and the inception of the Islamic Republic, there had been no formal institution functioning for the empowerment and authority for women in the religious domain of the country. Following the traditional norms of the Islamic society, women in conservative families were constrained in their households. Their position for decades was in the contours of typical custodian or mentor in the house. However, in 1980's and 90's a sizable number of mosques and Muslim organizations opened their door to women and started to provide prayer rooms, religious instructions and other services particularly for women believers. The number of these organizations continues to increase incessantly. One can argue for that this new found autonomy of the Muslim women would eventually polarize the phenomena of religious authority itself and as a consequence would cause her own interpretative to dominate. Moreover, this affair would sooner or later rejuvenate the very roots of authority, opening the path for women to become authorized interpreters of religious sources.

Objective:

Enquiring into the present investigation of the Muslim women acquiring formal religious Knowledge, we can observe a close relationship between the acquisition of religious knowledge and empowerment. While opinion anticipates that the dispersion of knowledge would lead to a new subjection to gender authority.(1) Scholars working in the field have started to issue a counter argument, making fray in knowledge acquisition and shifts in religious authority in favor of women's participation in creation and dissemination of religious discourse.(2)

However, it should be noted that the relationships between knowledge acquisition and empowerment have been rarely studied; the focal point of the investigation was the process of recognition and disposition of Muslim women. We also attempted to answers certain questions such as, how authority is formulated through knowledge, how it is discerned, how it is challenged and how it is outlined.

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Methodology:

For the purpose of exploring the thematic link between religious knowledge acquisition and women empowerment, 20 practicing and publically committed women from Zainab Academy were interviewed using purposive sampling. The interview guide included questions related to the importance of religious knowledge, the feelings and perspectives shared by the sisterhood, the importance of *dawa* and the concept of identity and empowerment.

The study has focused on detailed narrative of the participants as well as their words, phrases, expressions and nonverbal cues.

With regards to ethical considerations, the respondents were given a brief overview of the research, their consent was sought and they were assured that their identity would be kept anonymous. Independently from in-depth interviews, we conducted long term fieldwork that included participant observation and meetings with the teachers to gain an in-depth insight into the world of practicing females at Zainab Academy, Lahore.

Findings :

Women Participation in the acquisition and diffusion of Islamic Knowledge

Most of the women who presently engaged in the dissemination and procurement of Islamic knowledge were involved in the process of Islamization in their youth. This was accompanied by their desire to adhere to the true faith, resisting temptation of the secular milieu and to consolidate their doctrines.(3) They referred to this imperishable Iman(faith) as Sina qua non. These new age Muslim women also reported that , it was not just their zeal and adherence to their faith that motivated them to acquire knowledge but that they also considered rudimentary knowledge deficient. They there by contended to the assertion of the classical and contemporary Muslim scholars that ‘faith is defective without wisdom’. (4,5)They considered committing themselves to the study of religion a basic means of cultivating their faith in order to effectively transform their lives. The knowledge of Islam is meant to engulf the believer with divine presence, which the women seldom confronted in the implacable secular society.

Considering the status Islam extols to knowledge, one can access the indissoluble connection between true faith and knowledge. The virtues of knowledge have been accentuated countless in the scriptures, where knowledge is said to embody faith. When women emphasized the significance of knowledge, they generally stressed two different effects knowledge has for a believer. Primarily, it consolidates their tenets, which is considered fundamental to the enlightenment of religion and ushers to a more profound believe. Faith, instead of being a hindrance to the

accumulation of knowledge in the women's perspective, constitutes its necessary starting point and vice versa. Such assumption challenge dormant conceptions of religion rooted in the post-Enlightenment tradition, which frames religion as a sub-category lying in semantic opposition to transcendental ideas of reason and individual autonomy. Moreover, women's subjective inclination to critique Islam seems more analogous to their parent's generation, notably, their supposed 'traditional,' 'non-reflexive' emulation of religious practices.(6)

Alternatively, ilm is pertinent to the metaphysical transmission of Islamic credo. Here, the goal is physically the cultivation of certain emotional inner disposition, which is the very basis on which faith is to be constructed and fortified.

This is the interaction of the cognitive and spiritual aspect of Islam. On the one hand, it is the cognitive acquisition of simple knowledge, facts, hadiths, and verses of the Quran and the meaning of their content. On the other hand, it has an effect on the relationship with God .The more I have knowledge, of course, provided that I am convinced of these things, the more I am fulfilled by faith, the more I am proud of my faith, and the deeper are those roots. The more my faith becomes unshakable. This spiritual growth is absolutely linked to this cognitive growth which one achieves through access to the sources.

While this discernment may seem more tilted towards the endeavor to become 'pious subject', there is yet, another dimension with a much more collective orientation involved.

Motherhood and the Promulgation of Knowledge to the Posterity:

A critical point here is that women have bounded their acquisition of knowledge with their appetite to be a good mother, thereby justifying their demand in the arena of religious hegemony. Unlike in the Colonial era, where the notion of knowledgeable women was an unorthodox anomaly, women argue that fostering children under the shade of the learned women will fulfill the requirements of transmitting Islamic values to the next generation.

This limitation does not conceive a restriction on their 'naturally given' role of a mother; rather they saw this as a privilege, most notably because by bringing up her children the woman is esteemed as the most important person in charge of the construction or maintenance of the Muslim community and of society in a broader sense. Thus, they have decisive trust to keep, which would ultimately determine the fate of their coming generation. It is therefore important to underline that the high value

attributed to knowledge accumulation not only contain an individual component, as described above, but also has a strong collective implication.

The boundaries between public and private spheres hold particular significance. The establishment of the 'Private' domain manifests in the public domain, this gives rise to the relevance of domesticity. The prominence and responsibility that women attribute to the role of a mother comes close to the concept of "Political Motherhood" elaborated by Pnina Werbner .(7) In this concept, the domestic sphere constitutes both a separate entity and a realm, which gain universal and intimate importance. Hence, the domestic sphere, as the women conceptualized it, cannot be limited to a domain that is constitutive for process of individualization, but instead turns out to be a space that is largely societal and political. This idea of 'educated mother' was related to a redefinition of domesticity as a separate sphere, is gaining a central position in the formation of society. This enterprise has been condensed into the key notions of *islah* (reform) and *tajdid* (renewal). Moreover, Muslim women envisage the domestic sphere as a space that should be the basis for the creation of a collective subject, based on Islamic virtues, contemplated for the wider Islamic (transitional) *umma* through appropriate knowledge and supervision. This is the primary focus that has been adopted by the contemporary women in Pakistan. The reverential status of these women, coupled with the devoir to educate their children opens another horizon of spreading the Islam around the world.

Knowledge diffusion in *da'wa* activities:

One of the repercussions of the incessant increase in the education level of the women is that a growing number of them now engaged in spreading the philosophy of Islam and rectifying the heresies and apprehensions linked to Islamic values and traditions, particularly those associated with women. Apart from numerous informal and semi-private initiatives that the women set up themselves, more and more female teachers are employed in the different established Islamic female and gender-mixed organization. A myriad number of Islamic research organization have emerged, led by women, these provide counseling and secular education necessary for accomplishment in the society. This perception of knowledge dissemination can best be encompassed in terms of *da'wa* (literally: 'call' or 'invitation'). Since the primal years of Islamic foundation in the holy city of Madinah, *da'wa* has been viewed as a duty incumbent upon believers in order to encourage fellow Muslims in their struggle to lead more devout and pious lives. Nowadays, it has become an institution of immense significance with activism from all factions of the Islamic society. The modern shift in the concept of *da'wa* has sought

women to spread Islam. This duty is considered a liability, as described by a teacher:

From an Islamic point of view, it is 'khayrukum man ta'allama al-quranwa 'allamabu' which means 'the best among you are those who learn the Quran and teach it. This is ofcourse for me a theological motivation. Furthermore, it is a responsibility for which one will not only be rewarded but will be held accountable if you don't hand down this knowledge. In this regard, I see it as my duty.

The effort must be made by the believers themselves under preliminary and provisional conditions. Thus, orthodox Muslims feel a need to transmit their Islamic knowledge to Muslims of future generation that they qualify as being predominantly non religious. They conceive it as the only way of enduring their theology, to consolidate and perpetuate the identity of its community from getting eroded and tainted with the passage of time.

The da'wa also wishes to redress some of the misconceptions linked to women especially concerning those related to their modest dress code and the rights of women. For women this means in particular to do instructional work in the sense of attempting to work against the widespread fallacy that Islam inherently produces gender inequality. In this context, the work of women on da'wa and their perseverance on knowledge acquisition can be rooted to their aim of dissociating Islam from its stereotype connotation of illiteracy. Thus, women pursuit to supplant their innocent passivity on religious issues, through the counter-image of educated and committed women.

Conclusion:

Understanding the women's aim to acquire and impart knowledge is simultaneously coupled with a sense of responsibility towards the construction of a virtuous community, which they try to put into practice in a twofold way. First, they relate it to a reaffirmation of motherhood, and to educate the next generation. Second, they articulate the goal to transmit knowledge and Islamic virtues to the wider Muslim community.

The women's emphasis on religious knowledge acquisition and their participation in the processes of knowledge diffusion provides them with a new role inside the Islamic community: they become the main educators of the next generation and the wider community through *da'wa*.

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