



The Critical Roles of Muslim Women in the Development of Modern Education: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: One of the most critical aspects in the development of a society is education. From the Quranic perspective, man and women do not come to this world accidentally without any mission and purpose in their life as the Qur'ān says: "Did you think that we had created you in play (without any purpose), any that you would not be brought back to Us?" (*Al-Mu'minun*, 23:115). Thus, Islām has put a greater emphasize and rights on education, not specifically towards men but also women. Both men and women are equally encouraged to acquire knowledge as what was being said in the Prophetic tradition, "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave". However, what are the unique critical roles of Muslim women in the development of modern education? To examine this issue, it is important to know the position of Islam in relation to education and women's education. Generally, education can be in a formal as well as non-formal setting. Thus, it is important to identify the type of curriculums that should be provided to the Muslim women in developing their roles towards the *ummah*. By applying a purely qualitative methods, this paper will examine the critical roles of Muslim women in education as well as the issues and challenges faced by them in carrying out their roles in the development of the modern education system.

Keywords: Muslim women, development modern education, issues, challenges

1. Introduction

The teaching of Islām establishes complete and genuine equality between man and woman. This is indeed a fact readily acknowledged by everyone who knows Islam well and understands Islamic law as outlined in the Qur'ān as well as the sayings and practices of Prophet Muhammad Shallallah alaihi wassalam. (Al-Khayat, 2003).

Before the coming of Islām, the condition of women in general was dismal. It was written in the history of human civilization that the woman, who gives birth to man as mother, was humiliated and treated harshly. Their position had been reduced as being 'a maid' rather than a dignified woman (Jawad, 1998). Women were being held in bondage to their husbands. Their husbands could keep them or divorce them at their will and pleasure. Women in the pre-Islamic era were also viewed as embodiment of sin, misfortune, disgrace and shame. Moreover, women had no rights or position in the society, which in return could also, confused the society about the nature of women.

They even questioned whether God had granted them a soul or vice versa. (Ibid, p.1). Al-Mawdudi (1976) added that women in those societies was not classed as a person but as a thing, similar to property, an object of scorn and contempt (p.2) Thus, the position and role of women was drastically redefined with the arrival of Islām as the religion of peace. Thus, it is important to examine the critical role of Muslim women in education in order to discover the beauty of Islām.

2. Literature Review

The Status of Women in Islam

With the advent of Islām, the status of women was redefined with restoring the birthrights of women, and prohibiting the practice of ‘female infanticide’. Therefore, as were men, Islam elevated the woman to the status of being worth of human dignity as the Qur’an says:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ
لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْفُسُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٣﴾

“O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.” [al-Hujarat, 49:13]

The above verse stressed the importance instruction to humankind to treat human beings with dignity and respect, without discrimination and prejudice based on any ground. The only distinction that can be made between human beings according to the Islamic tradition is a distinction based on their fear of God as stated from verse 13 of *Sūrah al-Hujarat*. (Ashrof, 2005: p.235)

Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“All people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. There is no claim of merit of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a white over a black person, or of a male over a female. Only God-fearing people (*taq’wa*) merit a preference with God”. [Narratted by Imam Bukhari]

According to Syaikh Mustafa al-Siba’ie (1962), in relation to the absolute, woman is equal to man in all essential rights as well as duties, and God makes no distinction between man and woman. Thus, for God, they are to be equally rewarded or punished for their deeds. The Qur’an says:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ
وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَشِيعِينَ وَالْخَشِيعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ
وَالصَّامِتِينَ وَالصَّامِتَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا
وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٣٥﴾

“Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.” [al-Ahzab, 33:35]

The Quranic expression “believing men and women” in addressing the believers emphasize the equality of men and women in regard to their respective duties, rights, virtues and merits. (Jawad, 1998, p.5)

In the beginning era of Islam, women practiced their rights with the encouragement from Prophet Muhammad *Shalallah ‘alaihi Wassalam*. There were several inspiring Muslim women who were very influential in the development of their society. For instance, the Prophet wife’s, Aisha Abu Bakr *Radiyallah hu anha*, was known for her intellect and role as an educator. Indeed, she was a scholar of jurisprudence, *Hadīth* or the Prophetic traditions (Aquil, 2011, p. 24). The other example of notable Muslim women in time of the Prophet was Rufayda al-Aslamiyyah, who became the first nurse in Islamic history. She was one of the most important women who treated the wounded in the wars that took place during the Prophet’s era. This shows that, in Islamic traditions, women were not denied and there were indeed empowered to contribute the earliest Muslim societies (Al-Hassani, 2010).

Raja Aquil (2011) and Salim al-Hassani (2010) argued that there are little information found on Muslims’ contributions in traditional history books and resources translated from Arabic or other languages into English. However, there are ongoing researches uncovering the extent of political, religious and social influence of Muslim women. This is very critical in giving inspiration to Muslim women nowadays. During the Islamic golden ages, Muslim women were represented in all areas including scholars, rulers, doctors, writers and poets. For instance, in the 10th Century, Labna of

Carboda was a well-known mathematician who was said to be well versed in the exact sciences, and could solve the most complex geometrical and algebraic problems known in her time (Scott (1904) & al-Hassani (2010)).

The other example of prominent Muslim Women in the late twelve and thirteen century was Fatima binti Abi al-Qasim al-Ansari al-Sharrat. She was the most learned woman in al-Andalus. Her engagement and commitment with the works of legal theory, jurisprudence as well as mysticism makes her known as a scholar who knows a wide subject of Islamic sciences. Indeed, Fatima binti Abi al-Qasim was the mother of a known eminent professor, Abū al-Qāsim b. al-Taylasān. Abū Ja'far al-Gharnāfī (d. 1309), an Andalusī Scholar, stated that Fatima had memorized enumerable books under the guidance of her father, including al-Makki's *Tanbīh*, al-Qudā'ī's *al-Shihāb*, Ibn 'Ubayd al-Tūlaytalī's *Mukhtasar*, all three of which she knew by heart. Her father also taught her *Sahīh Muslim*, Ibn Hishām's *Sīra* [of the Prophet], al-Mubarrad's *al-Kāmil*, al-Baghdādī's *Nawādir*, and other important works that enable her to be one of the greatest Muslim scholars in Andalusia. She also memorized the Qur'ān under the supervision of Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Madwarī, the great ascetic who is considered from among the *abdāl* [an important rank within Sufism] (al-Gharnati, 2008). Further more, one of the prominent centers of learning till today; Al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco was founded by a woman named Fatima al-Fehri in 859 (Al-Hassani, 2010). Thus, Al-Hassani added that women were not confined to their homes, however, women consisting of scholars enjoyed considerable public authority in society, not as the exception, but as the norm. These examples in addition show the critical role of Muslim women in developing the society through education.

The Rights of Women in Education

In Islām, seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim man and women. Thus, knowledge is generally respected and highly appreciated in Islām as the Qur'ān says:

“Allah will raise high ranks those that have faith and knowledge amongst you.” [*al-Mujadilah*, 58:11]

Indeed, the Qur'ān addresses the excellence of scholars and their superiority over the common people as it says:

“Say, “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding.” [*Az-zumar*, 39:9]

The prophetic hadith also stress about the important of seeking knowledge as Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) said:

“Seeking knowledge is compulsory for each and every Muslim”. [Narrated by al-Tirmidhi, Related by Ibn ‘Adiyy, al-Baihaqi and al-Tabarani].

Muslim scholars agreed that a Muslim woman is also included in the meaning of the above *hadīth* as she is obliged to know her role of as a Muslim in her daily life including her worship towards God. If her husband does not able to guide and teacher her, her husband has not right to prevent her from seeking knowledge (Al-Qaradawy, 1997).

The first verses revealed to Prophet Muhammad stress the importance of acquiring knowledge as the Qur'ān says: “Read, in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clinging substance. Read! Your Lord is The Most Bountiful One. Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know.” [*al-Alaq*, 96:1-5]

According to Fatime Umar Naseef (2000), these verses were revealed to define the outlines of a religion based on knowledge as well as establishing the importance of attaining knowledge.

The verse also highlight the importance of reading, as the key to knowledge and since writing complements reading, God highlights this act by saying “taught by the pen”. Thus, one of the most important curriculums that should be prepared by a mother to her child is to teach reading and writing. As it is know, the pen or pencil is the most fundamental utensil used in transmitting and preserving knowledge that has its impact on humanity over centuries. (Syed Qutub, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'ān*, vol;6: p.3932]

Woman's education is very crucial for our society since she is the one who produces future men and women. She is the primary school to the future of the society. The basis foundation of humanness and moral education were led by the mother, who are naturally the first teacher and educator of every human being. Naseef (2010) quoted Ibrahim Haafes (d.1932), an Egyptian Poet, as stating:

“For he who can teach our girls,
I say: Their ignorance, in the East is the reason of our failure,
A mother is her children's kindergarten,
If well prepared, a nation of decent stock, ours would be.
A mother is a garden.
If watered, flourishing white, it would be.
I am not saying, to let the women,
unveiled, wander amongst the men,
Teach our girls virtuousness;
In all situation, it is a firm righteousness.” (p.82)

Ibrahim Haafes has expressed the critical role of educating women as a future mother and teacher. Thus, women need to be “watered” with knowledge's in order for them to function well in the society.

Al-Rasaafi, a well-known poet, stated:

“Morals are seeds, to be sown and watered

with noble hands.
 If irrigated by a schoolmaster,
 morals would flourish on virtuous stems.
 Morals are best refined
 In a maternal lap.
 A mother's lap is a school,
 Educating boys and girls,
 Do we aspire for perfection while,
 Our Children are raised in ignorant laps?
 Isn't knowledge in Islām
 an obligation upon boys and girls?
 Our Mother's sea of knowledge
 Provided answers for every problem
 Didn't the Prophet (peace be upon him) teach her
 to become a glorious scholar?" (*Ibid.*)

Men and women are equal when comes to learning, reading and writing articles and books related to religious, moral, as well as books related to health issues, home management, children's education etc. The experience that women had in educating their own children and societies makes them unique. However, Naseef (2010) argued that women should be able to seek knowledge without compromising in any way their modesty and chastity. Women's education should be comprehensive, so that the role of Muslim women in the society can be optimized.

3. Discussion

The Critical Roles of Muslim Women in Education

Islām does not restrain women to the role of mother despite the fact that this role is an inherent biological function of women. Likewise, the role of parenthood does not limit to mothers, but it brings an important emphasis on both men's and women's responsibility for providing and caring their families (Aquil, 2011, p: 27).

Aquil (2011) argued that Islām reveres the biological function of mothering as a distinction between men and women. However does not define this as the psychological and social limitation for women as not all women will get married or have children. Thus, to restrain a women to this purpose would be unreasonable.

Yusuf al-Qaradawy (1997) argued that some biased people who are guided by personal interests propagate that Islām has forced the woman to be imprisoned at home and not to go out except to the grave! This verdict certainly is not based upon the Qur'an and prophetic traditions or in the history of Muslim women in the first three centuries. Indeed the Qur'an says:

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ
 عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ
 أُولَئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

“The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those - Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise.” [al-Tawbah, 9:71]

The Qur'an makes man and woman partners in bearing the heaviest responsibilities in their daily lives, and that responsibility is the responsibility of enjoining the right and forbidding the evil. Thus, these shows that woman in Islām is a member of the society, which helps in building the development of the economic, social and education of the society.

One of the most important aspects in the life of a human being is education. It is the most important aspects in human development and perhaps the most influential social institution in any societies. According to Hashim & Langgulung (2008), education in general is to transmit a common set of beliefs, values, norms, understanding from the adult generation to its youth. Islām treats education as a form of worship (*ibadah*) where Muslim shared a common set of values based on the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Hassan, K (1989) defined education from the Islamic perspective as a long life process of preparing an individual to actualize his role as vicegerent (*khalifah*) of Allah on earth and thus contribute fully to the reconstruction and development of his society in order to achieve well-being in this world and hereafter.

Syed Ali Ashraf (1979) defines education as a process of involving three rewards consisting of the individual, the society or the community to which he or she belongs and the whole content of reality, both material and spiritual which plays a dominant role in defining the nature and destiny of man and society. Al-Attas (1984) however maintains that the purpose of Islamic education is not to cram the pupil's head with facts but to prepare them for a life of purity and sincerity.

Therefore, Muslim women who are in the education sector as well as in the informal education institution such as the home should give total commitment to character building based on the ideals of Islamic ethics, the highest goal of Islamic education. Al-Attas stressed on character building that needs to be included together in the formal as well as non-formal education curriculum. Thus the types of curriculum that need to be prepared for a Muslim women whose role are teachers and mothers are defined by the definition of Islamic education that was composed at the First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah in 1977, the following words:

“Education should aim at the balanced growth of the total personality of man through the training of man’s spirit, intellect, his rational self, feelings and bodily senses. Education should cater therefore for the growth of man in all aspects: spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, linguistic, both individually and collectively and motivate all aspects towards goodness and the attainment of perfection. The ultimate aim of Muslim education lies in the realization of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large.” (Ashraf, 1985, p.4)

The formal curriculum offered at schools plays important role in observing the academic development of a person. However, the role of informal curriculum is often neglected as parents carry it out at home. Thus, what type of curriculum should parents including mothers offered at home to their children in order to produce a happy home? Every woman should seek into two types of obligations which consisting of individual obligation (*fard ayn*) and collective obligation (*fard kifayah*) as what al-Ghazali had stated in his work “*al-Ihya Ulumuddin*”.

Individual obligation includes correcting her creed, strengthening her faith, perfecting her home management skills, providing good education for her children and attending her children, whereas collective obligations is when the nation is in need of female doctors, gynecologists, sportswomen, nurses and teachers to teach in girls’ schools, then the nation should ensure that adequate numbers of female doctors, nurses, sportswomen and teachers are produced. Therefore, at this stage, it is an obligation upon Muslim women to seek knowledge such as sciences. Thus, the purpose of gaining knowledge for every Muslim woman is to acquire necessary skills to become a good member of a society.

Al-Ghazali holds parents responsible for looking after their children in a proper manner as he reflects a child like a mirror, ready to reflect anything put in front of him, as well as a sacred trust in the hands of the parents. He also argued that through education, a child could turn into a good citizen or vice versa. Therefore, like Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali believes that education of a child should begin with the Qur’ān. Thus, it is very important for a Mother who acts as a teacher in the family to acquire knowledge related to the Qur’anic reading apart from understanding its content.

Islamic education also empowers women to participate in the economic development of their society within the limitations of their religious obligations. For instance the wife of Prophet Muhammad *Shalallah ‘alaihi wassalam*, Khadijah *Ridayallahu anha* was known to be a wealthy businesswomen in her time. She was well-known for her dedication in feeding and developing the Muslim Ummah for two years when Prophet Muhammad *Shalallah ‘alaihi wassalam* and his followers were severally prosecuted and economically sanctioned by the Makkah unbelievers (Liman, Sulaiman, & Aliyu, 2016). This shows that the critical role of Muslim women in education depends on the specialization of knowledge that she has.

Challenges Faced By Muslim Women in Education

Muslim women today are facing numerous challenges that might affect their lives as Muslims. According to Liman, Sulaiman & Aliyu (2016), the challenges and problems arise are largely due to the influence of western education which comes in with western culture and their way of life. The ultimate end of western education according them is to get enlightened and have a means of livelihood by seeking for a job or any entrepreneurial skill. It does not however, observe at the purpose of creation of man which is containing in Islamic education. Thus, some of the resultant effects particularly on the woman are the abandonment of family life either in her role as a wife to her husband as well as a mother to her children.

One of the purpose of creation of a woman as taught in Islam is to procreate and to rear new generation. Thought she can also do some other task like engaging in economic pursuit, taking a career job etc., however procreation is her greatest and primary work that no one can rival her. It must be understood that, women has been prepared by the creator both physically and psychologically to live happily as what is taught in the Qur’ān as well as the prophetic hadith. But due to the ego to attain the goal of western education, women often abandon this primary responsibility in the pursuit of western education, women often this primary responsibility in the pursuit of working career. As such, one may discover women that have passed marriage age not married at all. (*Ibid.*)

Furthermore, housemaids have now assumed the role of parents as far as taking care of children is concerned. For instance, very early in the morning both parents leave for work, leaving the child to the care of the housemaids. However, by the time they returned home in the late afternoon, they might feel tired which result in taking less attention towards their children. Thus, thinking of having a quality time with the children is one of the critical questions that mother as well as parents should have in their mind.

The other challenges of Muslim women are about the irresponsibility of the husband. It should be noted that it is the women right as a wife for the husband to teach her about matters of her religion that she does not know and of which she cannot afford to remain ignorant (Saleem, 2005).

It was narrated from Abu Musa Al-Ash’ari *Radiyahallahu anhu*, that the Prophet *Shalallah ‘alahi wassalam* said:

“There are three who will have double reward: A man who has a slave women and he trains her well and teaches her well, then he sets her free and marries her. He will have a double reward”¹

Al-Haafiz ibn Hajar in his work “*Fath al-Bari* (1/229)” stated that this *hadith* refers to a slave woman, but may be extended by analogy to one’s wife, because it is more important to teach a wife about her duties towards Allah and the *Sunnah* of His Messenger than one’s slave woman.

It was narrated by Ibn ‘Umar *Radiyallahu anhu* that Prophet Muhammad *Shalallah ‘alaihi wassalam* said: “Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock, the man is the shepherd of his family and is responsible for them...”²

A man’s caring for his family does not only involved providing food, drink and clothing, but he need also teach them about their religion, because attention to religious matters takes precedence over attention to worldly matters and issues.

If the husband is not able to teach his wife, or he does not have the knowledge to guide and teach her wife that she needs in religious matters, then he may go out and ask knowledgeable people on her behalf. If he does not do that, then he has to allow her to go out in an appropriate manner and time, in order to ask questions and learn. It is not permissible for him to prevent her from taking steps to learn how to practice her religion properly, which is obligatory upon her. (Saleem, 2005)

One of the challenges faced by Muslim women in education is the physical education or sports. Generally, Muslims must understand that Islam promotes good health and fitness and encourages them to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles. On the other hand, there are aspects of the religion which affects how the physical activities and sports can be practiced. The issues and challenges are, for instance, women following their faith cannot engage in mixed gender sports which required some consideration in dress code as well as the environment. Due to the lack of awareness among the Muslim women especially, many Muslim women have been prevented or not felt able to participate in sports (Sporting Equals, 2010). Nevertheless, Muslim women and men should understand some ethical dimensions of performing physical activities and sports such as the attire and environment that needs to be separated as for the purpose of valuing and respecting women.

6. Conclusion

It is an exaggeration and deviation from the guidance of Islām, if the women are deprived from acquiring knowledge. Thus Islām protects the nature of woman as created by God and respects her supreme function for which she is intuitively chosen by the Creator, who naturally gave her more than man’s portion of compassion, affection, sensitivity and excitability to be prepared for the compassionate vocation of motherhood, which supervises the greatest industry of the nation, the industry of future generations. (Al-Qaradawy, 1997)

Islām considers the home as the great kingdom of the woman and thus considers the woman’s roles as a mother and teacher, a kind of worship (*ibadah*) and *jihad*, struggle in the cause of Allāh. Islam wants to establish happy homes to be the basis of a happy society and to achieve that; a curriculum consisting of formal as well as informal curriculum such as home curriculum is needed to educate the family members. The curriculum should be based upon the Qur’ān as well as prophetic hadith, which would not only develop the spiritual aspects, but also the physical as well as intellectual aspects. Thus, every Muslim woman should master the knowledge related to individual obligation as well as to identify their strength which contributed to the development of knowledge related to collective obligation (i.e. *fard kifayah*). This would ensure that optimum role of the Muslim women at every educational aspects consisting of formal as well as informal educational settings.

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² A *Saheeh Hadith* narrated by Muslim (3/1459), Al-Tirmidhi (1705).

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