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Education as a Right of Women in Islam: Prophetic Teachings and Contemporary Neglect

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Abstract
The Holy Qur'an ordained that acquiring knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim, a directive that applies equally to men and women. Prophetic teachings and early Islamic history exemplify this principle, with women such as ¯Aishah (RA) and other female scholars actively participating in education, scholarship, and the transmission of knowledge. These historical precedents underscore that Islam recognizes education as both a religious obligation and a vehicle for empowerment. Despite this, contemporary Muslim societies often exhibit a significant gap between these ideals and current practice, as women face social, cultural, and structural barriers that limit educational access. Recent studies highlight that such neglect is largely a result of cultural misinterpretations, patriarchal norms, and systemic inequalities rather than any Islamic injunction. This study critically examines the Qur'anic and Prophetic foundations of women's education and analyzes the underlying factors contributing to its contemporary neglect. The findings emphasize the necessity of reaffirming Islamic educational principles, promoting community awareness, and implementing policy reforms that align with the Prophetic vision of equitable access to knowledge. By bridging the gap between textual mandates and contemporary realities, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of women's educational rights in Islam and their practical realization in modern Muslim societies
Keywords: Education, Muslim Women, Contribution, Rights, Islam, Status

Introdution

The Holy Qur'an ordained that acquiring knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim, and this injunction applies equally to men and women. In Islam, the Qur'anic emphasis on knowledge is foundational, as the first revealed word "Iqra" (Read) highlights the intrinsic importance of learning for all believers. From an Islamic perspective, education functions as both a religious obligation and a means of personal, social, and moral development. Contemporary studies affirm that Islamic educational principles uphold equal rights to education for women, situating knowledge as an obligation and empowerment tool

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regardless of gender. For instance, research analyzing Muslim communities emphasizes that Islamic education plays a central role in shaping the identity and intellectual agency of Muslim women, refuting stereotypes of passivity or marginalization (Ab, Rukhaiyah, W., Shukri, A., & Rafidah Mohamad, C. , 2025)

Historical and theological scholarship further underscores that women's education was endorsed and practiced in early Islam. The Prophetic tradition contains clear indications of this universal obligation, teaching that "seeking knowledge is compulsory upon every Muslim" — understood by classical scholars to encompass both men and women. This principle is evident in the active participation of women in learning and knowledge transmission during the Prophetic era, where female scholars such as ʿĀʾishah (RA) held respected positions as teachers and transmitters of religious knowledge. Contemporary Islamic education research situates these early models as normative, providing a religious and ethical foundation for women's learning that is rooted in authentic sources.

Despite these doctrinal and historical foundations, contemporary Muslim societies often exhibit a gap between Islamic ideals and practice. Multiple studies show that structural and cultural barriers such as patriarchal norms, restricted access, and socio-economic challenges continue to impede Muslim women's full participation in education. A systematic study in Pakistan found that patriarchal social norms, limited access to schooling, and gender bias remain significant impediments to women's education despite the positive stance of Islamic education on gender equality (Ibrahim, Otho & Ahmed, 2023).

Similarly, research on Muslim women's access to education in India documents how women confront a range of barriers including traditional gender roles and community expectations that limit their educational participation, reflecting wider social constraints rather than religious doctrine (Begum & Myrthong, 2023).

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Studies also emphasize that Muslim women's participation in education and work continues to be shaped by gendered societal norms, which can be reinforced by misinterpretations of religion and cultural traditions (Shehu & Zejno, 2025).

In addition to barriers, scholarship highlights the transformative potential of education for social and national development. Research on Muslim women's education in the context of human development reveals that when women are educated, they contribute substantially to broader socio-economic progress, reinforcing the argument that education is central to both individual and collective empowerment in Muslim societies (Alkanchi et al., 2025).

While contemporary research affirms Islamic teachings that support women's right to education, it also points to divergent social realities where cultural practices, economic conditions, and institutional challenges undermine this right. A growing body of literature on global Muslim contexts demonstrates that educational inequities are neither universal nor religiously mandated, but are in many cases the result of local interpretations, socio-economic constraints, and policy gaps. As such, this research seeks to bridge doctrinal sources with current empirical realities, analyzing Prophetic teachings, historical precedent, and contemporary neglect to understand the forces that shape Muslim women's educational access today. By doing so, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to reclaim the authentic Islamic vision of education and propose reforms that advance gender-equitable learning opportunities in Muslim societies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the conceptual and normative foundations of women's right to education in Islam, with particular reference to Prophetic teachings and their contemporary interpretation and application. A qualitative approach is most appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of religious texts, scholarly interpretations, and socio-religious discourses surrounding women's education within Islamic thought.

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Research Design

The research is designed as a qualitative, textual, and analytical study. It focuses on critically examining primary Islamic sources alongside contemporary academic literature to identify the extent to which women's educational rights are supported within Islamic teachings and how these rights are currently neglected or misunderstood in modern Muslim societies. The study does not aim to measure attitudes or behaviors empirically but rather to analyze meanings, interpretations, and patterns within authoritative texts and scholarly discourse.

Data Sources

Data for this study are drawn from authentic Islamic sources, including classical Hadith collections such as Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Sunan Abū Dāwūd, and Sunan al-Tirmidhī, which provide clear evidence regarding the obligation of seeking knowledge and document the educational engagement of women during the Prophetic era. In addition, authoritative Sīrah literature is consulted to explore the roles of women in early Islamic society, particularly their participation in learning, teaching, and the transmission of knowledge. These foundational texts are examined alongside contemporary scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and research studies published between 2020 and 2025 that address women's education in Islam, Islamic pedagogy, gender justice, and the contemporary challenges affecting Muslim women's access to education. All materials are selected from reputable academic databases such as Google Scholar and PubMed to ensure reliability, scholarly relevance, and contemporary significance.

Obligation of Seeking Knowledge in the Sunnah

The obligation to seek knowledge occupies a central position in the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and is articulated in inclusive terms that encompass both men and women. One of the most frequently cited Prophetic narrations states that "seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim," a formulation that scholars emphasize is gender-neutral

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and universal in scope. Contemporary academic analyses confirm that this Hadith establishes education as a religious duty rather than a gendered privilege, thereby affirming women's equal entitlement to learning within Islamic jurisprudence (Wakia et al., 2025). Studies examining the linguistic and juristic dimensions of Prophetic discourse further demonstrate that the Sunnah does not contain any explicit exclusion of women from the obligation of acquiring knowledge, but instead reinforces a shared responsibility for intellectual and spiritual development among all believers (Mehfooz, 2021). This inclusive framing provides a strong normative foundation for recognizing education as a right of women in Islam and challenges later cultural interpretations that have sought to restrict women's access to knowledge.

The Prophet ﷺ as an Educator of Women

The Prophetic model of education offers clear evidence of women's active inclusion in religious learning during the early Islamic period. Historical sources indicate that the Prophet ﷺ regularly taught women alongside men and also arranged separate teaching sessions in response to women's requests for dedicated instruction. This practice reflects an educational approach that was both responsive and accommodating, ensuring that women had direct access to religious knowledge (Azam & Afzal, 2025). The Prophet ﷺ consistently encouraged women to ask questions and engage in dialogue, thereby validating their intellectual agency and reinforcing their role as active participants in the learning process. Scholarly research highlights that this encouragement fostered an environment in which women could seek clarification on religious, legal, and social matters without hesitation, a practice that stands in contrast to contemporary norms in some Muslim societies where women's questioning is discouraged (WISE Muslim Women, 2022). By recognizing women as capable learners and contributors to religious understanding, the Prophetic educational model established a precedent for gender-inclusive pedagogy rooted in respect and intellectual empowerment.

Female Scholarship in the Prophetic Era

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The presence of female scholars in the Prophetic era further illustrates the practical realization of women's right to education in early Islam. Among these scholars, ʿĀʾishah (RA) occupies a particularly prominent position due to her extensive contributions to the transmission and interpretation of Hadith. She narrated a substantial number of Prophetic traditions and was frequently consulted by senior male companions on matters of jurisprudence, ritual practice, and legal reasoning. Academic studies describe her as a central authority in the early Islamic intellectual tradition, whose scholarly opinions shaped legal discourse across generations (Mehfooz, 2021). Beyond ʿĀʾishah (RA), research on early Islamic history documents numerous other learned women who participated in the transmission of Hadith, issued legal opinions, and taught students in formal and informal settings. Contemporary analyses of female muḥaddithāt reveal that women played a significant role in preserving the authenticity of Prophetic knowledge through rigorous methods of narration and evaluation (Majeed & Alvi, 2024). Biographical works, such as those examined by Nadwi (2021), further demonstrate that women's scholarly engagement was not exceptional but rather a sustained and recognized feature of Islamic intellectual history. These findings collectively challenge assumptions that women's participation in Islamic scholarship is a modern innovation, instead situating it firmly within the earliest foundations of the Muslim community.

Contemporary Neglect of Women's Educational Rights

Despite the clear Islamic textual foundations affirming women's right and obligation to seek knowledge, a significant gap persists between these principles and their practical implementation in many contemporary Muslim societies. This shift from normative religious teachings to lived social realities reflects a broader pattern in which cultural practices, socio-economic constraints, and selective religious interpretations overshadow Prophetic guidance. While Islam establishes education as a universal religious duty, contemporary contexts often fail to uphold this mandate for women, resulting in systematic neglect of their educational rights.

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Forms of Neglect

One of the most visible forms of neglect is the restricted access of women to educational institutions, particularly beyond the primary level. In several Muslim-majority contexts, girls' education is deprioritized due to economic pressures, safety concerns, or traditional expectations regarding women's domestic roles. Early marriage further exacerbates this issue by interrupting or entirely terminating girls' educational trajectories, limiting their opportunities for intellectual and professional development. Recent participation studies indicate that early marriage remains a significant barrier to female education, especially in low-income and rural settings, where schooling for boys is often prioritized over that of girls (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Additionally, cultural norms frequently frame male education as a family investment while viewing female education as optional or secondary, reinforcing gender disparities in access to learning (Participation and Access Studies, 2023–2025).

Causes of Neglect

The persistence of these forms of neglect is closely linked to deeply rooted cultural patriarchy that shapes family decisions, institutional policies, and societal expectations. Patriarchal norms often dictate rigid gender roles, positioning men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, thereby reducing the perceived value of women's education. Misinterpretations of religious texts further compound this problem, as selective or context-free readings are sometimes used to justify restrictions on women's mobility and learning. Scholars argue that such interpretations are not grounded in authentic Islamic teachings but rather reflect cultural assumptions imposed upon religious texts (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Moreover, a widespread lack of awareness regarding Prophetic teachings on women's education contributes to the continuation of these practices. When communities remain unfamiliar with the inclusive educational model established by the Prophet ﷺ, cultural norms often supersede religious principles, leading to the marginalization of women's educational rights

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Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a clear and persistent disconnect between the Islamic normative framework regarding women's education and its contemporary realization in many Muslim societies. While the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ establishes education as a universal religious obligation and demonstrates a pedagogical model that actively included and empowered women, present-day practices often diverge sharply from this precedent. This contrast underscores that the marginalization of women's educational rights is not rooted in Islamic teachings themselves, but rather in socio-cultural dynamics that have come to overshadow Prophetic guidance.

Recent empirical and analytical studies provide substantial evidence of the ongoing neglect of women's educational rights in many Muslim societies. Ibrahim et al. (2023) highlight that female participation in education remains uneven, with structural barriers such as poverty, early marriage, and gender-biased social expectations significantly limiting access. Studies conducted between 2023 and 2025 on participation and access further demonstrate persistent gender gaps in secondary and higher education enrollment across several Muslim-majority regions, despite improvements in primary education. Global analyses of Muslim education trends also indicate that while policy frameworks increasingly acknowledge gender equality, implementation remains inconsistent due to cultural resistance and insufficient integration of religious teachings that support women's education. These findings collectively underscore that contemporary neglect is not a result of Islamic doctrine, but rather of social, cultural, and interpretive failures that diverge from Prophetic guidance.

The Prophetic model, as discussed earlier, reflects an inclusive educational ethos in which women were recognized as capable learners, teachers, and transmitters of knowledge. The Prophet ﷺ not only encouraged women to seek knowledge but also facilitated their learning through direct instruction, dedicated teaching sessions, and respectful engagement with their questions. In contrast, contemporary restrictions such as limited access to education,

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early marriage, and the prioritization of male education represent a significant departure from this model. These practices stand in direct contradiction to the Sunnah, which neither endorses gender-based exclusion nor supports the curtailment of women's intellectual development.

By situating contemporary practices against the Prophetic model, this study contributes to existing scholarship by reaffirming that Islam's foundational sources advocate educational equity, while contemporary neglect reflects a failure to translate these principles into practice. The discussion thus reinforces the need for renewed engagement with Prophetic teachings, greater awareness of women's educational rights in Islam, and critical reassessment of cultural norms that have been mistakenly legitimized through religious discourse. Such an approach is essential for bridging the gap between Islamic ideals and lived realities and for restoring education as a shared religious responsibility for both men and women.

Conclusion

This study confirms that women's education in Islam is a fundamental religious obligation firmly rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Through qualitative textual analysis of primary Islamic sources and contemporary scholarly literature, the research demonstrates that Islam unequivocally affirms women's right to seek, acquire, and transmit knowledge. The Prophetic model of education was inherently inclusive, recognizing women as active participants in learning and as contributors to religious scholarship.

Historical evidence from the Prophetic era illustrates that women's educational engagement was both normative and respected. Prominent female scholars, particularly ʿĀʾishah (RA), played a central role in the transmission and interpretation of Hadith and were consulted by leading male companions on religious and legal matters. The presence of numerous female scholars further affirms that women's intellectual participation was an established feature of early Islamic society rather than an exception. These precedents

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directly challenge contemporary narratives that restrict women's educational roles in the name of religion.

Despite this strong normative foundation, the study identifies a persistent gap between Islamic principles and contemporary practice in many Muslim societies. The marginalization of women's education today is largely driven by socio-cultural constraints, patriarchal norms, economic pressures, and misinterpretations of religious texts rather than authentic Islamic teachings. Practices such as limited access to education, early marriage, and the prioritization of male schooling represent a clear departure from Prophetic guidance and undermine Islam's universal emphasis on knowledge.

The findings also highlight the broader significance of women's education for social and human development. Educated women contribute to improved health outcomes, economic stability, and community well-being, reinforcing the Islamic understanding of knowledge as a means of individual and collective advancement. Addressing the contemporary neglect of women's educational rights therefore requires realigning cultural practices and institutional policies with Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings. Promoting awareness, challenging patriarchal norms, and ensuring equitable access to education are essential steps toward restoring an authentic Islamic vision of knowledge grounded in justice, inclusion, and empowerment.

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