

A COLONIAL LEGACY: UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF FEMALE ILLITERACY IN PAKISTAN

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The very first word revealed to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was *iqra'* which translates as *read*, *recite* or *proclaim*. Devout Muslims literally followed this command and for centuries remained prominent in the realms of science, medicine, literature, art and other related fields (Arnold, 2001). Today's stark reality is that a large number of Muslims do not know how to read or write. And a very significant proportion of this number is women who are denied access to knowledge in the guise of Islamic tradition. I agree with Shah (1998) that it is not Islam but, "Control over the interpretation and dissemination of religious knowledge, socio-cultural traditions in the patriarchal system and economic pressures, all contribute in a complex situational interplay to condemn women to deprivation, which are further validated through manipulated interpretation of religion" (p. 58). In this paper I extend this argument by taking a stance that for education in Pakistan this "situational interplay" and the "manipulated interpretation of religion" is a socio-political legacy of the British colonial rule that has condemned both men and women to deprivation. Therefore, the present issues of education in Pakistan may not be properly understood without taking into account the historical reactions of the Muslim subjects of the British Raj when the formal schooling system was initiated in the undivided Indian subcontinent.

The introduction of formal schooling system of education introduced by the colonial masters was a historical phenomenon with far reaching implications. The then Muslim subjects had mixed reactions. One school of thought declared it to be against Islam and thus rejected it. Others accepted it because it was an economic necessity for the survival of Muslim families. Yet another school was considering the socio-political realities as well as the economic losses in the face of not having formal schooling. All these perceptions about the formal schooling were spearheaded by religious scholars and each of them found legitimacy in Islam. In doing so, however, they created artificial categories of knowledge with serious implications for education of all Muslims but more so for Muslim women.

In this paper I contend that the misinterpretations of Islam by religious scholars during the colonial period still impede the educational prospects of Muslims, especially females, in Pakistan. While the general argument developed applies to both men and women, I have particularly highlighted the more adverse effects for women. In the subsequent pages I first provide the Islamic view of knowledge followed by the

“manipulated interpretation” of knowledge in the Indo-Pak subcontinent during the colonial period. In order to illustrate that the colonial bequest still exists and persists, I have included the ‘voices’ of women from three areas of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), which is considered to be one of the strongholds of religious as well as conservative social forces in Pakistan. The paper concludes with implications of the colonial heritage for the education of females in Pakistan.

The view of Islam on Knowledge

The Qur’ānic view of *‘ilm* (knowledge) is divine. It is revealed by Allah the Almighty —“Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who teacheth by the Pen, teacheth man² that which he knew not” (96:3-5). Several verses in the Qur’ān support the sacred nature of knowledge which is highly prized in Islam as the Qur’ān calls knowledge the “legacy of the prophets”. At the same time the Qur’ān also urges Muslims to think, ponder, reflect and acquire knowledge³ so that they can be closer to Allah the Almighty and that is why seeking knowledge is the duty of every Muslim for which he/she will be rewarded: “Allah will raise in ranks those of you who believe as well as those who are given knowledge” (*Sūrah* 49, Verse 11). The emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge is also reflected in the number of verses, mentioning *‘ilm* in the Qur’ān—750 and the third in terms of frequency. The first two are *Allāh* (God) and *Rabb* (the Sustainer), 2800 and 950 times respectively.

The Qur’ānic verses dealing with knowledge and its derivatives—pen, book, etc. do not distinguish between men and women (Naseef, 1990). Similarly, sayings of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) explicitly direct Muslims, both men and women to “seek knowledge even if you have to go to China for it.” (*Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*⁴). Another saying equates the path to knowledge with the path to Paradise—“who leaves home in quest of knowledge is actually walking on the path leading to the paradise.” (Ḥadīth). Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) himself taught both men and women in the mosque of Medina (Al-Hibri 1982, Mernissi, 2003; Shah 1998), a tradition continued by his wife Ayesha after his death.

It is also important to note that neither the Qur’ān nor the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) make any separation between the knowledge for the purposes of this world or the hereafter. Nor do any of these sources make a distinction between religious or secular knowledge. In the context of the Indian subcontinent this distinction was created during the colonial period in order to reject the formal schooling system that was introduced by the English rulers in the eighteenth century. The split of knowledge between *dīnī ta’līm* (religious education) and *dunyāwī ta’līm* (worldly education or secular education) made the acquisition of secular education less desirable for ‘good’ Muslims in general and for good Muslim women in particular. As the purpose of acquiring secular education was supposed to be economic—obtaining official jobs to support a family—it was deemed irrelevant and hence more undesirable for Muslim women. Thus the false dichotomy between the sacred and the mundane knowledge also created a social division between ‘good’ Muslims and ‘bad’ Muslims. The divide was stricter for women who were supposed to be the guardians of Islamic culture for the future generation of good Muslims. These perceptions of knowledge and schooling swelled the ranks of illiterate females in the undivided Indian subcontinent. The areas that formed Pakistan in 1947 inherited an overall literacy rate of 16% with only 2% for females as reported in the first

Population Census of Pakistan in 1951. The ideas about good and bad Muslim women still echo in the views of Pakistani women which are presented later.

‘Islamic’ view of education in the colonial period

Historical records show that in the Indian subcontinent (more so in Muslim parts) there was a widespread network of elementary schools called *maktab* which were connected to mosques (Ahsan, 2001). In these institutions both boys and girls were taught how to read and write as well as the principles of Islam. Madrasahs were the institutions for advanced level of learning where the curriculum also included local languages (including Arabic), logic and arithmetic (Ahmed, 2003, Nayar, 1998). However, the sources do not indicate whether females were also enrolled in these madrasahs.

Under the British Raj, English school system was introduced for the explicit purpose of, “educating the ‘natives’ in the language, history and sciences of the West and Christian virtues was part of an ‘enlightened’ policy to civilize” (Esposito 1999, p. 50). Formal schooling was thus seen by locals as a move to strengthen not only the colonial rule but also to spread Christianity. Muslims’ response to this threat was divided. One school of thought rejected formal schooling as they considered it an attempt to impart secular (if not Christian) education and thus a threat to the Islamic faith (*ibid.*). Religious scholars of this camp upheld the tradition of Madrasah education as opposed to the government-sponsored schools. In their attempt to distance themselves from the colonial schooling system, these scholars also rejected ‘Western knowledge’ which included natural sciences, philosophy, logic, etc. “As the Moughul Empire disintegrated, ... and the British Raj appeared, even the rudimentary exposure to logic and mathematics was abandoned [in Madrasahs] ... The segmentation of course work between “*deeni taalim*” [religious education] and “*dunyawi taalim*” [worldly education or secular education] became solidified.” (Ahmed, 2003). By labelling the knowledge and history of sciences and mathematics as “*dunyawi taalim*” or knowledge for this world, not only these scholars created an artificial category but they also obliterated the contributions of Muslim scholars to these disciplines. In fact these Muslim scholars, “introduced the first discontinuity in Islamic education” (*ibid.*) by limiting it to the study of the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth and the Islamic Jurisprudence only. It is this particular moment in the history of the undivided subcontinent when Muslim scholars themselves divided knowledge into two artificial, meaningless and mutually exclusive categories — *dīnī* (religious, sacred) and *dunyāwī* (worldly, mundane), a distinction not found in the early history of Muslim education.

During the colonial period not only the false dichotomy between the types of knowledge was created but the scope of knowledge was also restricted. According to the Muslim belief, the Qur’ān is timeless. It was relevant for the generations of the past, it is relevant for the present and it will be relevant for the future. Implicit and explicit in this belief is the fact that the Qur’ān transcends time and space. The Ḥadīth, on the other hand, could become frozen in time had it not been followed by *Ijthihād*⁵ because the Prophet lived, according to the Qur’ān in a particular context and time. Human societies are organic entities. The ground realities change with time and space. How to live in those contexts according to the Qur’ān is an evolving code of conduct. The latter requires constant dialogue with the Qur’ānic text in the light of which roles and responsibilities of all Muslims including women can be defined and redefined

contextually. Thus the interpretations of Hadīth and Jurisprudence cannot be static or isolated if these are meant to be relevant for all times to come.

Another damage done by the creation of this false dichotomy—*dīnī* vs. *dunyāwī*—was that the very nature of knowledge itself was changed. According to the Islamic belief, the Qur’ān is the source of all human knowledge, therefore, it contains the seed of every branch of human knowledge known or yet to be discovered. By compartmentalizing knowledge into ‘sacred’ and ‘mundane’, and thus restricting the acquisition of the latter, the Muslim response to the formal schooling introduced by the colonial masters denied the organic nature of knowledge that is neither limited by boundaries nor is fossilized. In fact the system of education advocated by these scholars bears no resemblance to the one introduced by the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) in his time.

According to Ahsan (2001) the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), “organized a national education system and established its various sub-departments for the teaching of languages, commerce and business administration, industrial education and training, agricultural education and research, physical education and defense and strategic studies.” (p. 55). Put in the time frame in which Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was living, the education system he introduced was very ‘modern’. Not only did it meet the needs and requirements of the then ‘present’ times but was also geared to expand and develop further as is evident in the later establishments of the centers of excellence⁶ in Muslim lands (Nanji, 1995). Contrary to the Muslim traditions of expanding intellectual activities by opening gates to new knowledge and broadening the existing ones, the Muslim scholars of the undivided India deprived Muslim students of madrasahs from studying the then ‘modern’ subjects on the pretext of religion. With the creation of this artificial categories of Islamic and un-Islamic subjects the scope of knowledge became limited and with this move, madrasah which until then had a tradition of being dynamic institution of higher learning, was fossilized.

Another school of thought also narrowed down the scope of knowledge by limiting it to the economic field thus tying it to the market activities. Religious scholars belonging to this school looked at the formal education as a means to an economic end which was official employment. They urged Muslim men to acquire ‘Western’ education (Saiyid, 1998). Their views particularly damaged the cause of female formal schooling. According to the local Muslim norms as women were not responsible for the economic upkeep of their families, they were not supposed to be part of the labour market. Education was for men by the “law of necessity”. These scholars (or reformists, as they are referred to), led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan further coagulated the false dichotomy of knowledge. Saiyid (1998) has captured the views of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (and his movement) as “men had to adopt the new learning and language because they had to go out in the world and earn a living, but women were under no such compulsion and so should stick to traditional education” (p. 44). By intertwining education and employment, this school of thought also embedded the issue of female schooling in the local culture so firmly that in Pakistan, even today, resistance to the issue of female literacy is a socio-cultural phenomenon (Farah, 1998).

The aforementioned misrepresentation of the notion of knowledge limited the scope of education for the Muslims of Indo-Pak subcontinent in general and for Muslim women in particular. The parameters for the education of women were not drawn from the Qur’ān or the life of the female companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.).

Islamic society, during the time of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his companions was egalitarian (Ahmad, 1996, Mernissi, 2002). It became unequal in the later centuries as Islamic culture blended with the local realities of different times and places. The Muslim culture in the subcontinent had evolved from within the indigenous culture which had many other influences as pointed out by Ali (2000):

During the long development of Islam in South Asia, involving the conversion of a large number of Hindus to the faith, the Muslim community had come to be influenced by Hinduism and had adopted many indigenous Indian practices. Muslim women were seen as the particular vehicle of Hindu traditions and indigenous customs within the Muslim community. They came to be the victim of a socio-cultural irony; on the one hand they enjoyed, in theory, the high status given to them by Islam; on the other hand, they were regarded as the bearers of influences which could destroy the Muslim community from Within. (p. 4).

It was this 'hybrid' Muslim culture and not Islam that curtailed woman's rights, including her right to seek knowledge in the Indian subcontinent especially under the colonial rule on the pretext of Western threat to Islamic values. However, by denying women their legitimate rights that were fully enjoyed by their counterparts in the era of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his companions⁷, the Islamic values were actually undermined as these practices relegated women's status and locked their existence in yesterday's world. For the Muslim men, however, the acquisition of knowledge was a temporal phenomenon—relevant to time and space. The implication was not only that knowledge is dynamic but also that man's world and his roles evolve with time and space. In other words a double standard for defining and redefining social gender roles was created. In short, the Muslim response by Sir Syed and his allies solidified women's predicament by advocating that educated males could teach their females what they thought appropriate. This not only negated women's individual rights but it also made men in charge of what and how of women's education.

Yet another response of Muslims to the introduction of formal schooling was the marriage between the Western schooling and religious education for both Muslim men and women. The ideas of these scholars were more popular with the urban "common middle class or new bourgeois class" (Ali, 2000:xiv). At this moment in the history of Muslim females education emerged as a symbol of modernism because educated females were viewed as a "negation of everything that was considered 'backward' in the old society" (*ibid.*) including the language.

The issue of language embodied in the question of the medium of instruction surfaced as a Muslim identity issue⁸ but was riddled with class distinctions. English language came to be known as the language of the elite and the urban-based middle class (Rahman, 2002, Ali, 2000). English, being the language of the colonial masters, was considered a vehicle of 'secular' knowledge, and so was not taught at madrasahs. The rejection of English language by madrasahs could also be due to the fact that Arabic was the language of Islam, Persian was the language of Muslim rulers and Urdu was the general language of educated Muslims (Rahman, 2002) before the subcontinent became a British colony. The legacy of these complex struggles persists

even today in the form of three parallel systems of education—Madrasah schools, Urdu medium government schools and English medium private schools in Pakistan. These systems serve three different socio-economic classes—the poor, middle and upper class respectively (Rahman, 2004).

All these responses to the formal schooling, introduced by the British masters, impacted on the issue of female education in one way or another turning it into a social problem that Pakistan is still grappling with. I could not find any research on female education in madrasahs but looking at the writings of some of the religious scholars of the Dār-ul-‘Ulūm at Deoband (the leading madrasah or Islamic university of the time), on the topic of female education,⁹ one can see that the emphasis was on the traditional religious education for the sake of ensuring the moral upbringing of their children. These scholars believed that this kind of education could best be imparted at home without breaking the traditions of seclusion and purdah. It is not difficult to understand why the followers of these scholars rejected formal schooling because it required girls to come to a public place thus violating the local norms of seclusion and purdah.

To summarize the above discussion, the religious scholars of the Dār-ul-‘Ulūm at Deoband rejected formal schooling for Muslim men and women alike whereas Sir Syed and his followers advocated formal schooling for Muslim men only. Their views for Muslim women were not very different from the scholars of Dār-ul-‘Ulūm at Deoband as they too inclined toward the traditional teaching of religion, Islamic ethics and moral values. Since the government schools were not going to offer these subjects women were encouraged to be taught at home (Ali, 2000; Saiyid, 1998) while respecting the purdah tradition. As pointed out by Saiyid (1998), Sir Syed emphasized that the government’s first priority should be to educate Muslim men. These educated males could then teach their women. Once the men were educated they would demand educated wives then the government can also consider educating women (*ibid.*). This point of view not only negated the right of women to seek knowledge as individuals but also made it contingent upon the wishes and demands of men putting them in charge of female education.

The third response of Muslims to formal schooling—combining religious education with the secular subjects—was accepted more by a newly emerging middle class of Muslims who were predominantly urban dwellers. Their views were actually in line with what Sir Syed had said about educated men wanting educated wives as Ali (2000) points out, “As many of the men of this class themselves were the product of Western education and cultural influence, they therefore needed ‘new women’ as their partners, women who would be presentable in colonial society yet with a role that remained primarily in the home.” (p. xiv). The potential damage of this response to the cause of women was that education was seen more as a status symbol, a luxury and a privilege thus alienating the lower socio-economic strata of the Muslim society.

Muslim women’s quandary was perpetuated alike by the Muslim responses mentioned above. Even the third response which believed in combining the so-called religious and secular education, apparently the best, was equally problematic for the cause of Muslim women education on many accounts. Firstly, it endorsed the dichotomous nature and scope of education. Secondly, it was advocated by an emerging class of urban bourgeoisies who wanted a ‘new woman’ who was different.

Hence the educated women were seen as above the 'ordinary' women who were illiterate, poor and mostly rural. This, in fact, was the emergence of education as a social class marker and a status symbol which resonates with Saiyid's (1998) account of the Punjabi Muslim women. The notion of educated women being different also bears resemblance to the views expressed by women from the Northern Areas of Pakistan (Ashraf, 2006) and women from Iran (Mehran, 2005) as well as by some of the women from NWFP reported later.

All of the Muslim responses to the formal schooling introduced by the colonial masters, discussed earlier, had two things in common; these were reactions to a 'perceived' threat to the Islamic faith and Islamic culture; and these were spearheaded by Muslim religious scholars of the time and were justified in the name of Islam. Given the local environment of that time, the colonial rule by Christians and the dispossession of Muslims as a result of the failed War of Independence, the responses had profound impact on Muslims who were largely poor and lived in rural areas which later became part of Pakistan. Their resistance to education in general and to female education in particular was reflected in the extremely low literacy rate of Pakistan when it came into being in 1947.¹⁰ Today the total literacy rate and the female literacy rate are 54% and 42% respectively, as reported by the Government of Pakistan (2003), whereas the UNESCO (2004) report puts these rates at 42% and 29% respectively. In either case, female literacy is much below the desired level. If we look at the regional variations of the literacy rates the gender disparities and rural/urban differences are more pronounced for the NWFP and Baluchistan which are considered to be more religious and conservative. (Table 1)

Colonial legacy: The current view of education

In 1947 when Pakistan came into being its literacy rate was extremely low. Merely 16 percent of its total population could read or write. The latter included barely 2 percent of women. Since then every government has tried to improve the education levels, particularly of females. However, among the repressive factors responsible for the low levels cultural barriers are the strongest (Qureshi, Pirzado and Nasim, 2006; Qasimi, 2001; Farah and Bachus, 1999). It is important to note that the topic of female education in Pakistan has been discussed in newspapers, magazines and seminars but remains less explored through systematic field research involving females themselves. In this section I will present women's own views on female education. It illustrates how deeply they have internalized the nineteenth century's misrepresented versions of 'Islamic' views of education. This information was part of a larger research which explored the perceptions of Pakistani women about their social existence. Using a multi-stage sampling technique, a sample of 100 women—40 urban and 60 rural—was selected from three areas of the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. The areas included were Abbottabad from Hazara Division, Peshawar from Peshawar Division and Swat from Malakand Division. Views of these women were elicited on five major issues including education.¹¹ Information was collected through long-term informal engagement with selected informants, semi-structured interviews and a series of focused group discussions with women of varying ages and socio-economic backgrounds over a period of six years: 1998 to 2004. The present paper presents their views on education only, which are summarized in Figure 1 below.

Table 1

Literacy Ratio by Gender and Province, 1981 and 1998¹²

Administrative Units	1981 Census (%)			1998 Census (%)		
	Both Sexes	Male	Female	Both Sexes	Male	Female
Pakistan	26	35	16	44	55	32
Rural	17	26	7	34	46	20
Urban	47	55	37	63	70	55
N W F P	17	26	6	35	51	19
Rural	13	22	4	31	48	15
Urban	36	47	4	54	67	39
F A T A	6	11	4	17	30	3
Rural	6	11	1	17	29	3
Urban			-	39	60	12
Punjab	27	37	17	47	57	35
Rural	20	30	9	38	50	25
Urban	47	55	37	64	71	57
Sindh	31	40	22	46	55	35
Rural	16	25	5	26	38	12
Urban	51	56	44	64	70	57
Balochistan	10	15	4	25	34	14
Rural	6	10	2	17	26	8
Urban	32	42	19	48	58	33
Islamabad	48	59	34	73	81	62
Rural	33	48	18	63	75	49
Urban	58	69	47	77	83	70

Literate: A person who can read a newspaper and write a simple letter in any language.

Literacy Ratio: % of literate persons in population age 10 and above.

Source: Population Census Organization, Government of Pakistan, Official Website.

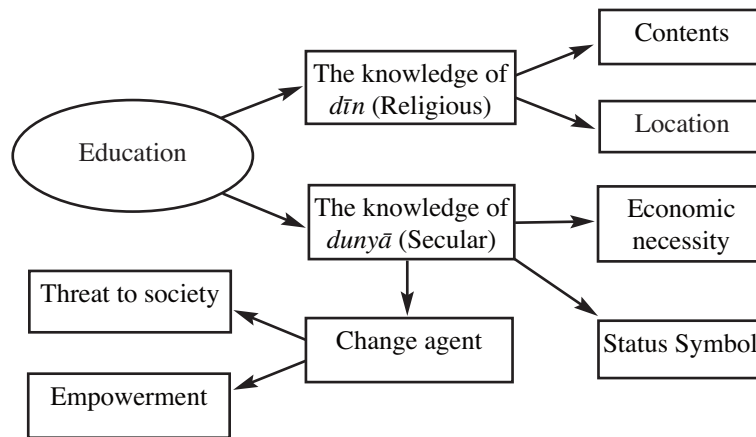


Figure 1 Education as seen by women

The women in my sample broadly divided education into two major categories—the knowledge of *dīn*¹³ or religious education and the knowledge of *dunyā*¹⁴ or the formal schooling.¹⁵ Nonetheless, blanketed within this dichotomy was a very complex, multi-dimensional and multi-layered view of education. It sometimes had a clear-cut rural and urban divide but for most of the time the conception of education had crisscrossing of social stratification along gender and social class lines.

The knowledge of *dīn*: religious education

Seeking the knowledge of *dīn* was considered divine and was thus seen as a religious duty. Women from all areas agreed unanimously that Islam gives women the right to be educated and that education was a must for every Muslim. Participants from Peshawar stated, “Allah has made it obligatory for women and men to seek knowledge of *dīn* [religion] because it is for Allah. This way Muslims can excel in piety.” A women group from Abbottabad added that the knowledge of *dīn* was a must for both men and women because the standards for piety are the same for them. The overall consensus was that acquiring religious knowledge was a religious duty of every Muslim man and woman because the knowledge of *dīn* (henceforth religious education) was sought with the ultimate aim of submission to Allah as women groups from Swat explained: “Allah Himself has promised that if a student dies while seeking religious knowledge he/she will be raised to the ranks of a *shahīd* (martyr). Tell me a single Muslim who would not like to be a *shahīd*.”

For religious education both men and women were equal, according to these women, except for the contents of education and the location of education. The agreed upon contents of religious education included the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth, biographies of prophets including Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them), his companions and Islamic moral codes for both men and women. For men, however, these women added the knowledge of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence as part of their religious education. The justification given for these additional subjects for men was that as family heads they were required to deal with public affairs. This was the first time these women had made a separation along gender lines: “Men and women are equal for Allah but

are unequal on earth. Men have more responsibilities than women so they not only need more knowledge but also different kinds of knowledge” (women from Swat). Women groups from Abbottabad pointed out that courtrooms were not meant to be run by women: “it is a man’s job to be a *qāḍī* (Judge) and *wakīl* (Lawyer). Even as a witness in the courtroom they [women] are not equal to men”.

The second distinction, also along the gender lines, appeared when the physical notion of schooling was discussed. Women in my sample were using religious education and madrasah education interchangeably making it clear that religious education and madrasah were inseparable. However, it turned out that this was true only for men as the groups largely agreed that for women an in-depth knowledge of the above-mentioned contents was not necessary; therefore, there was no need for girls and women to attend madrasah. Hence madrasah education, both as a spiritual concept and a physical entity, was for boys and men only.

The knowledge of *dunyā*: secular education

Basically all women in my sample agreed on two propositions: seeking knowledge of *dunyā* is for *dunyā* (for the daily existence) and was thus considered mundane; and education in formal schools was the knowledge of *dunyā*¹⁶ (henceforth secular education). Nevertheless, the disagreement was on the purpose and outcome of secular education for men and women.

Secular education was deemed necessary for economic survival. The purpose of formal schooling for these women was a means to an end; it is a prerequisite for a good job to sustain families economically. The latter is the responsibility of men as was pointed out by women groups from Abbottabad: “Schools are good for boys. They [boys] need jobs because they are the heads of their households. They will support their families.” Since women would be provided for by men they did not need formal schooling.¹⁷

Another reason for women not needing formal education was concerned with the outcome of secular education as given by the women groups from Swat: “Secular education teaches rebellion, rebellion against traditions, against religion. Do you think these educated women would obey their husbands the way we do? They will break up the family within no time.” Rural women (with few exceptions) in particular put secular education on the opposite end of religious education. For them the present degradation of Muslims all over the world was because religious education was being contaminated through the secular education of women. The women groups from Swat posed the question, “How can a mother raise good Muslims if she has spent most of her time in learning about the West?” In fact women from Abbottabad put Muslim educated women at par with Western women because the former were equally distant from Islam and Islamic values. “The difference between *farungī* [Western] women and these women [educated Muslim/Pakistani] is that of skin colour only. Their deeds are equally dangerous. They both are a threat to Islam and Islamic values and beliefs.”

Another outcome of the secular education that was seen as a threat to Islamic values and beliefs by these women (with few exceptions) was the ‘independence’ of educated women as it would encourage breaking up of families especially by not ‘obeying’ their husbands: “These women [educated] do not care about their husbands because they don’t need them [financially] but for our people what good a woman is who has no husband, no home and kids to take care of? Who will protect her when

she is old?" Yet another threat, voiced by the women from Swat was the impact of the educated women on the next generation: "When our young girls see how independent, mobile and free these educated women are, they want to be like them. But if we let them loose, our boys will not marry them and we cannot allow them, especially girls, to marry outside the family." Women from all area in this research, Abbottabad, Peshawar and Swat thought that educated women without family ties (no husband and/or children) might be acceptable in other parts of the country (meaning Pakistan) but not in NWFP as: "In our culture she will be a burden on her family [a laughing stock, if not a financial burden], a rejected object, good for nothing."

For urban women secular education had different shades of meanings. For a small group of women (majority from Swat with a few from Abbottabad), secular education was not suitable for women. They put it at the opposite end of the religious education. "Girls who go to school forget their religious obligations. They do not offer prayers or recite the Qur'ān." The implicit message was that educated women move away from Islam. For the majority of urban women in my sample, however, religious and secular education were not mutually exclusive categories. Participants from Peshawar and Abbottabad emphasized that formal schooling with religious teaching was what was needed to meet the challenges of the present-day world. "There are good Muslim women who went to schools. They are working [employed] too, to help their families. They are keeping *dīn* and *dunyā* together."

Another small group of urban women (majority from Peshawar with a few from Swat and Abbottabad), were not against women's schooling per se but were questioning the utility of that knowledge. For instance, participants from Abbottabad wanted to know that: "girls from ashraf families [of noble birth and/or character] do not work [hold paid employment]. Then why would parents waste money on girls' education?" Women from Peshawar and Swat suggested that instead of investing in female education it would be better to provide quality education for boys who are going to marry these girls. "If we spend money on sending girls to schools, there will be less [money] left for boys and they will suffer but women will suffer more, you see."¹⁸

Another unanimous view of secular education's purpose-cum-outcome was education as a status symbol albeit with different overtones for women from different areas and locality. For instance, women from Swat, both urban and rural, agreed that upper class families sent their daughters to schools because they did not want to appear 'backward'. "It is considered to be fashionable to go to school especially to English medium." However, the females of these families were not allowed to hold jobs because that would lower the family status by giving the impression that they 'lack' money. This meant that for the upper class families, female education brought status when it was not tied to employment but for the lower class families it was the opposite: "They [lower class families] send their daughters to schools so that they [daughters] can earn money to help increase the status of the family." For poor families female education did not appear to be so much a symbol of 'status' but a necessary means for socio-economic mobility.

An area where the interests of both the upper and lower class families converged, according to the women groups from Swat was that educated daughters had better prospects for marriage: "When boys are educated [in upper class families] and girls are not then they [boys] seek educated girls, even from lower

class families.” Women from Peshawar and Abbottabad also agreed that educated women had better chances of getting good proposals as schooling increased women’s status. It is interesting to note that a large majority of rural women from Abbottabad, with a small number from Peshawar, complained about losing their educated sons to urban-bred educated girls. These girls were perceived to have ‘higher’ status than their rural counterparts.

Yet another dimension of status that emerged from these discussions was the independence of educated women both financially and socially. Then again the perceptions of these characteristics presented a contrast between rural and urban women. In rural areas women considered independence—especially financial—as a threat to the stability of the family. “Men are superior because they spend their money for the upkeep of women. If a woman is self sufficient why would she put up with a husband?” Conversely urban women talked about independence as empowerment. Women from Peshawar, for instance, appreciated the fact that “Education gives women more choices. They can work outside the home if their family needs it.” Similarly women groups from Abbottabad were glad about the ease of mobility of educated women for the good of their families: “Educated women are more confident when it comes to moving around, be it accompanying a sick elder to the hospital or taking a child to school or getting things for the house.” Yet the rural women looked down upon women who were seen in public: “they [educated women, employed women] have abandoned their culture. They have come out of their place [home]. Therefore, men do not respect them. All those things happening to these women [rape, murder] are because by being out, in public, they are asking for it.” These perceptions might very well be the rationale for these women making earlier remarks about the knowledge of Islamic Jurisprudence not being necessary for Muslim women because it belongs to the public field. What they did not realize was that Islamic Jurisprudence is the practical application of the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth to issues which pertain to the daily life of both men and women. By handing it over to men women are perpetuating their “control over the interpretation and dissemination of religious knowledge” (Shah 1998:58). At the same time the conspicuous absence of Muslim women Jurists in the Muslim history does not leave much room for convincing these (or other men and women for that matter) that this was not advocated by Islam.

As I interacted more with the rural and urban women from Abbottabad, Peshawar and Swat, my reflections turned more toward what Shah (1998) has said about women’s regression: “through manipulated interpretation of religion” (p. 58). The women I spoke to were all Muslims and claimed to be practising Islam. Still while referring to ‘our culture’, the women from Aboottabad used ‘our Hazara¹⁹ culture’ and the women from Peshawar and Swat used ‘our Pukhtoon²⁰ culture.’ None referred to Islam or Islamic culture. For me this raised a question (unanswered though) whether they were aware that most of the cultural practices they were referring to were regional traditions which may have nothing to do with Islam. At the same time these traditions were not only accepted but also internalized by them in the name of Islam.

Similarly, I found that their views on secular education were complex, discordant and often contradictory. Moreover, there were sharp distinctions between the nature and the purpose of education for men and women. The complexity of secular education was that knowledge was put in the larger context of the present day

economic world. For the religious education this context was not mentioned at all despite the fact that religious education was also a source of income for many of the families especially in rural areas. Particularly puzzling was the case of a widow from Abbottabad. She was raising her three kids by working as a Qur'ānic teacher for the children (especially females) of affluent families. Her 'paid employment' was not considered disgrace for her family but a formally educated woman, in the similar circumstances, was not acceptable. I heard almost similar views from women from other areas as well.

Another complexity was the implicit as well as explicit messages from various groups that educated women were 'different' but the perceived differences varied largely across groups. I found this view of education even more complex and full of contradictions. The comments of women, from both rural and urban areas, clearly established that the independence and empowerment of women were associated with their education. This finding is consistent with Ashraf (2005) who reports similar results for the women from the Northern Areas of Pakistan. What is different in her study though is that in my sample women saw this independence and empowerment of educated women as a threat to men. This was because educated women would challenge the authority of men by asking for equality especially as they would not be dependent upon them for their upkeep. This raises the question how selective is the dissemination of women's rights in Islam in these parts of Pakistan? Almost all the women I talked to knew their 'duties' as a good Muslim woman, wife, mother and daughter. They knew that men were superior, and as witnesses men and women are not equal. But how many of them actually realized the implications of the fact that Khadija, the first Muslim woman and the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), was a very rich and independent business woman in her own right and it was she who initiated the marriage proposal. Did these women know that the payment of *mahr*²¹ as a part of marriage contract is actually meant to empower women by giving them equality and independence? For me even more questionable would be the access of women themselves to the materials they can actually read and understand for themselves on what Islam has really said about them and their rights and responsibilities.

The above questions became even more pertinent when I noted a very strong division between the perceptions of rural and urban women regarding a 'good' and 'bad' Muslim woman in relation to education and employment. The detailed discussion will not be presented here.²² Suffice it to say, for the purpose of this paper, that a large majority of the urban women saw a 'different Pakistani woman' who was, "no longer illiterate and secluded, with bound feet and minds." (Ali, 2000:xiv). The rural women in my sample (small urban groups as well) categorically rejected these women. But the urban women in my sample (excluding a small minority) accepted the Muslim identity of these 'different' Pakistani women who were parallel to the 'enlightened' Muslim women of the undivided India (Ali, 2000), or the "new Muslim woman" of Iran (Mehran, 2005). The experiences of all these women regarding the 'paradox of tradition and modernity' (*ibid.*:217) are comparable.

The present day Pakistani educated women are struggling to redefine their traditional roles within the socio-religious parameters in order to cope with the expectations of their modern roles. This act of 'keeping *dīn* and *dunyā* together' was one of the strongest recurrent themes in my discussions with urban groups from Peshawar and Abbottabad. They were fulfilling their religious duty by getting formal

schooling. At the same time by utilizing that schooling for the upkeep or improvement of their family standards they were also serving a mundane yet essential duty. The latter was important for the stability and happiness of their families, so they were being 'good' Muslim women. It is interesting to note that a large majority of urban women, mostly from Peshawar, frowned upon educated women for wasting limited resources by not holding a paid job. Bashiruddin (2005) reported similar comments made by men and women alike in the self-study of her professional career.

To summarize, it was evident that the ghosts from the colonial past were present. The false dichotomy of religious knowledge vs. secular knowledge was still strong with its attendant stratification along gender, locality and social class lines. The internalization of pre-independence colonial responses was evident. How are these responses translated into larger context is reflected upon in the next section.

Reflections on education in the larger context

Education is an important social institution in any society but the way it interacts with other social institutions defines its local context. In Pakistan the perceptions about where and how education, especially for women, fits into the larger system spark different reactions recreating (rather perpetuating) the divisions that were created during colonial times. The views of women, discussed earlier, provide insights into the societal schism over the issue of education which has serious implications for the Education for All targets.

In Pakistan, the education sector is dominated by donor-funded projects (Farah and Shera, 2006). The non-governmental organizations working for the promotion of education are financed by Western countries. The pro-Western stance of the Pakistan government amidst the rising anti-West sentiments, jeopardize the initiatives of the government as well as of the non-governmental organizations. The anti-West sentiments are present-day equivalents of the anti-British sentiments of the colonial period. If the ex-colonial masters are pushing the agenda of formal schooling especially for females, then it is perceived to be a threat to the Islamic culture and values much like it was considered during the British Raj. It was demonstrated by the fierce resistance of a large number of religious scholars to the government of Pakistan's move to reform madrasah curriculum²³ in 2003 because it was seen as an imperialistic move by the US administration. "We would not let America tamper with Islam and secularize our religious education" (Qazi Hussain Ahmad, November 2002).

Another ghost from the past is the false dichotomy between religious knowledge and secular knowledge. Education for *dīn* is a religious duty of every Muslim. Thus women have the right to seek knowledge. However, in the larger picture it is the upbringing of the future generation of righteous Muslims that is required of women as mothers (Government of Pakistan, 1959)²⁴, and this may not require more than religiously educated women. The formal education or education for *dunyā*, on the other hand, is geared toward the job market. Since a Muslim man is required to support his family, he needs education for earning his livelihood. Therefore, acquiring secular education may be considered a religious duty for a man but not for a woman. These perceptions and explanations are attached to the larger social system of gender roles. Thus the important policy issues that will affect the pace and the direction of Education for All programs are questions like: why do women require formal education? What kind of education, and what for? Once the

policy makers agree on what roles men and women are expected to perform in a Muslim society and how they should be prepared for these, only then the purpose of education and the content of education can be spelt out.

Considering that the policies are being shaped by political leaders who not only have “control over the interpretation and dissemination of religious knowledge” but also have the power to enforce the manipulated interpretation (Shah, 1986), the future of education will depend largely on the political stance of the government of Pakistan whether to perpetuate the colonial legacy or re-discover the meaning and spirit of knowledge and education as advocated by Islam. If the government decides to propagate the false dichotomy between religious and secular education, then madrasah education will be encouraged for both boys and girls. It is important to note that in the last decade many madrasahs have been established in Pakistan for girls in general and in the rural areas and NWFP in particular, and the results from Masjid-Maktab project of the government of Pakistan also show that the enrolment of both boys and girls increased in *maktabs* (Warwick and Reimers, 1995), yet the curricula of these madrasahs and *masjid-maktabs* do not challenge the dichotomy between religious and secular education. The message for ‘good’ Muslim women is still the same; religious education being sacred is a must for them but the ‘secular’ disciplines being mundane and also linked with ‘employment’ are not ‘desirable’. Moreover, the inclusion of so-called ‘secular’ subjects is rejected by these institutions, hence the message still stays strong even though separate universities for women have been created that do not distinguish between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ vocations.

If there is a political will to discard the colonial heritage then the way to do it is what I would call a ‘Pakistani response.’ As an Islamic Republic we must realize that today’s socio-economic pressures and geo-political realities are different. On the one hand we need to preserve our Muslim identity, but on the other, we must carve our niche in the fast moving world. Both these objectives are achievable by unfreezing the Islamic concept of knowledge and education, because the split between the ‘Islamic’ and the ‘un-Islamic’ has undermined the political will of the majority of Muslims to acquire the right kind of education which is the key to success. The people who created this artificial barrier were none other than religious scholars. They are the ones who should be beside the government of Pakistan to undo the damage because in Islam all knowledge is divine. The responsibility attached to the acquisition of knowledge is to use it for the larger good of society. Thus the debate should not be whether the knowledge per se is Islamic or un-Islamic but the application of that knowledge which is human action. This would also require re-defining our gender roles and responsibilities. Maybe this is the area where Muslim scholars including Pakistani scholars need to deliberate. This would necessitate the revival of *ijtihad* which actually led to the rise of Muslim scholarship in the first place.

Conclusions

The Indo-Pak subcontinent lost a lot in her ordeal under British colonial rule. Firstly, the formal schooling divided Muslims on the issue of education. Knowledge was artificially dichotomized into knowledge of *dīn*/for *dīn* and the knowledge of *dunyā*/for *dunyā* making it into sacred vs. mundane respectively and thus pitting Islamic knowledge against un-Islamic knowledge even until today. Secondly, the division of knowledge into two categories created two parallel systems of educational

institutions. One is madrasah system which promotes 'Islamic' knowledge and thus is considered sacred. The other is the mainstream schools system which provides 'un-Islamic' or secular education and thus is mundane. Both the systems are hostile to and un-accepting of each other. Thirdly, yet another distinction created during this time was between 'good' Muslims and 'bad' Muslims. The harsh realities of the labour market forced many Muslims not only to accept formal schooling but also to seek actively Western education. They were labelled as 'bad' Muslims by the opposite school of thought. Fourthly, the division of Muslims over the issue of schooling was not confined to schools only. Given the fact that the British were non-Muslims, "the struggle against European colonialism often appropriated the rhetoric of a war between the Christendom and Islam" (Esposito 1999, p. 50). Thus formal schooling, especially for women, became a war casualty. It is not hard to hear the resounding echoes in madrasahs' strong resistance to the Pakistan Government's intervention in the madrasah system. Maybe it is the perceived conflict between Islam and secularism. Sixthly, as women are considered to be the "primary school of our children" (Naseef, 1990:81), their own knowledge was limited to religious education based only on the teaching and learning of the Qur'ān, Ḥadīth and moral principles. Last but not least was another war casualty—the disintegration of the subcontinent's indigenous educational system. Since it was done under the rhetoric of 'modernizing' a traditional society, therefore, everything related to the old educational system, functional or non-functional, was rejected. The notion of 'modern' education ensured that any attempt to revive the old educational system would be deemed as a 'return' to antiquity and thus was resisted or rejected outright.

Notes

1. The author is Assistant Professor at the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, Karachi-Pakistan. She can be contacted at: rashida.queshi@aku.edu.
2. Scholars of Islamic studies agree that the word 'man' used here and in many Ḥadīths encompasses humanity including women. For more details on this topic see Naseef, F.U. (1990). *Women in Islam: A Discourse in Rights and Obligations* (S.M. Abedin, ed.). New Delhi: Sterling Publishers,.
3. For those readers who find this statement contradictory to the earlier see Ul-Islam, A. (2003). Knowledge and the Ideals of Education: An Islamic perspective. *Muslim Education Quarterly*. Vol. 20, nos. 1 & 2:27-42.
4. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* is a collection of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It is considered to be one of the most authentic and extensively cited references.
5. Exerting the sum total of one's ability attempting to uncover Allah's rulings on issues from their sources (Qur'ān, *Sunnah*, *Ijmā'*, etc.). <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/reference/glossary/term.IJTIHAD.html>
6. Baitul Ḥikmah (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, during the times of Bani Abbasyia, was an inter-culture learning and research institute where works of great scholars from all over the world including China, India, and Greece, were being translated, discussed, debated, and enriched. Many of the Western classics reached the West through the translation work done by Baitul Ḥikmah during the eighth and ninth centuries. (Baghdad in the memory of Muslims by Abdul Malik Mujahid, retrieved from soundvision.com)
7. See Jawad, H.A. (1998). *The Rights of Women in Islam: An authentic approach*. USA, St. Martin Press for details of women's rights and their practice during the early periods of

- Islam.
8. see Rahman, T. (2002) *Language, Ideology and Power: Language learning among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India*, for more details.
 9. See Ali, A.A. (2000). *The Emergence of Feminism among Indian Muslim Women 1920-1947*. Pakistan: Oxford University Press for excerpts and other details.
 10. These were despite the fact that there were concerted efforts by the Indian elite, both Hindus and Muslims, to uplift the socio-economic positions of the local communities in general and of females in particular. See Ali, A.A. (2000), *The Emergence of Feminism among Indian Muslim Women 1920-1947*, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, for efforts to improve the education of Indian Muslim females and Saiyid, D. (1998). *Muslim Women of the British Punjab: From Seclusion to Politics*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd. for the Muslim women in Punjab.
 11. The other four themes were: self, freedom, rights and employment. Those findings are documented separately.
 12. The figures are rounded up to the next higher decimal.
 13. *Dīn* stands for religion. Therefore, it also implies sacredness of the knowledge.
 14. *Dunyā* literally translates into ‘world.’ However, put next to each other *dīn* and *dunyā* are considered poles apart. *Dīn* stands for everything divine, sacred and geared towards the hereafter. Whereas *dunyā* is associated with worldly, mundane, day to day pursuits for this life only.
 15. There were many local variants for formal schooling. In Abbottabad and Hindko speaking parts of Peshawar it was called Ungraizi Taalim (literal translation is English education). In Swat and Pushto speaking parts of Peshawar it was called the Unraizono school (literal translation is the school made by Westerners. In either case the connotation is more than 16. As was the case with the religious education and madrasah being interchangeable, at least for boys and men, similarly secular education and schools were inseparable for both boys and girls.
 17. It is important to note that with few exceptions for these women the word ‘educated’ was co-terminus with ‘employed.’ When I tried to separate the two there was a complete rejection of the idea. If a woman is not employed what is she getting educated for?
 18. The implication was that by not having good quality education men would not be able to get good jobs and their families would suffer.
 19. Hazara Division is in the North of the NWFP. It consists of five districts including Abbottabad. Majority of the people speak Hindko with Kohistani and Pushto being the second and third language respectively.
 20. Pukhtoon means a person who speaks Pushto which is one of the major languages spoken in NWFP. However, Pukhtoon culture refers to set of values, customs and beliefs which are common to people living in Baluchistan, parts of Iran bordering with Baluchistan and Afghanistan.
 21. Marriage in Islam is a social contract between a man and a woman. *Mahr* is a part of that contract. According to this the husband will pay a certain amount in cash or kind, mutually agreed, before consummating the marriage. This cash or kind becomes the personal property of the wife. This property gives her some measure of financial independence as well as social security.
 22. The details are documented separately in a work that is still in progress.
 23. Madrasa Ordinance, October 2002.
 24. This was one of the goals of female education defined by the first Commission on National Education in 1959 and is present in subsequent policies either explicitly or implicitly.

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