

al-Muḥaddithāt:Notes for a talk on
the women scholars of ḥadīth

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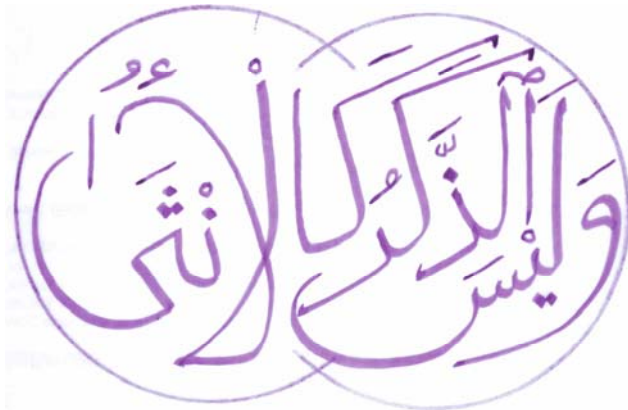
1 Introduction

The idea is widespread that Islam, if practised in any social order, enforces the inferiority of women. In fact this idea is so widespread that the very concept of *women* Islamic scholars sounds like a contradiction – as if to say, you can't have both in the same society – you can't have both Islam and women Islamic scholars or, if you can, the women scholars could never have the respect and authority, the public recognition, accorded to men scholars.

I am here to inform and assure you that women Islamic scholars did exist in Islamic society and that, fortunately, they are beginning to emerge again in good number. I have just finished writing in Arabic a biographical dictionary of some 8000 women scholars in just one field of the Islamic sciences, namely the ḥadīth – the study of the words and deeds, the teaching and practice, of the Prophet, *ṣalla-llāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*. This dictionary spans the whole period from the first to the fifteenth (the present) centuries of Islam. It covers all the regions of the world traditionally associated with Islam, although I must report that, so far, I have been unable to find as much information as I would wish relating to Southeast Asia (the Malaysia/Indonesia region) or to western China, both areas where Islam has been long established.

The dictionary is divided into forty volumes, according to the density of material. The first volume is devoted to the women of the household of the Prophet. The next six volumes (2–7) are about the *Ṣaḥābiyyāt*, the Companions of the Prophet; volumes 8–10 are about their Successors, the *Tābiʿiyyāt*. Then, a volume each for the second to fifth centuries of Islam. Three volumes (15–17) for the sixth century; five volumes (18–22) for the seventh century; six volumes (23–28) for the eighth century; again six volumes (29–34) for the ninth century. Thereafter, one volume each for the tenth to the present centuries. I do have some tentative explanations to offer for that falling off in the numbers from the tenth century – there is a parallel falling off in the number of men scholars of ḥadīth over the same period. But I will come back to that. The striking thing is that in the formative period of Islam, the period of the Companions and Successors, women scholars are not only great in number but also great in prominence, great in their authority. Men go to them to learn, and doing so is normal. Why should that be?

The Qur'an states that God knows well what He has given existence and life to, male or female, and it says forcefully (3: 36): *the male is not as the female*. For believers, therefore, the difference between male and female is a strong fact, a strong, objective reality in the order of creation. And so we must take account of this reality, not ignore it. Now, it is possible – in the social orders that human beings construct – to build on this difference disadvantage, inferiority, discrimination. It is also possible to build on it equity, fairness, a true parity in rights and obligations so that there is no diminution in the personal or social potential of either male or female, no diminution in the dignity of either. The Qur'an's command to do justice to all people regardless of personal biases or local differences means that Muslims, men and women, have a moral obligation to construct a social order that is fair to all, whatever their gender, nationality,



wa laysa dh-dhakarun ka-l-unthā
(Qur'an, 3: 36) and the male is not as the female

race or any other marker of difference that an individual person is unable to alter by intention or action.

In the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet – and I am quite confident about putting these two primary sources together because the Prophet's Sunnah, reliably reported and understood, is always and necessarily framed within the guidance of the Qur'an – in these primary sources of Islam there is no indication that the marked difference between male and female marks the female as necessarily inferior to the male in spiritual or moral or intellectual potential. The purity and spiritual perfection of Maryam, the mother of the prophet ʿĪsa, *ʿalayhi s-salām*, is one of the best known portraits of human excellence in the Qur'an (see *Āl ʿImrān*, 3: 37, 40–42; *Maryam*, 19: 16–34). An example of intellectual ability and exemplary political leadership is presented in the Qur'an's portrait of the Queen of Sabāʾ (*al-Naml*, 27: 23–44). We see her reflect alone, then call on her council, listen attentively to their advice, and then, after further pondering, take her decision to avoid military confrontation. After that, it comes as no surprise that, when the issue is put to her by God's Messenger, she recognizes his truthfulness and affirms faith. By contrast the abuse of human political power and defective understanding are presented through the account of a masculine ruler, the Pharaoh. He is morally and spiritually blinded by arrogance and, in spite of the words preached and the miracles publicly and repeatedly shown to him by God's Messenger, chooses the path to destruction and damnation.

Nothing in the primary sources of Islam would lead anyone to suppose that there are different paths to salvation for men and women; that one is offered a high and open road with no restriction, the other a lower road with narrower horizons and boundaries to moral or intellectual development. Salvation is individual and personal. A woman is not saved by association with the virtue of a father or brother or husband; nor is she condemned by association with the sin of a father or brother or husband. Every soul carries its own burden of good or bad deeds to the final Judgement. And, as the Qur'an tells us, no soul is charged with a burden beyond its capacity – for believers, this means that everyone, male or female, is given a responsibility before God and is also enabled by God to carry that responsibility. Individuals, male or female, achieve salvation only through their own intentions and actions, not by linkage with a particular tribe or clan or illustrious ancestor. The individual can stand free of the limitations of others, however powerful. That is why, in the Qur'an, the wife of Pharaoh, when she holds herself aloof from her earthly lord and master and dissociates herself from his tyranny and wrongdoing, is presented as a supreme example of moral excellence for all believers to emulate (*al-Tahrim*, 66: 11): 'And God strikes as an example for the believers the wife of Pharaoh when she said: My Lord! Build for me a house in the Garden and deliver me from Pharaoh and his works and deliver me from the wrong-doing folk.'

The legal independence of women in the Islamic tradition is generally well understood. People generally know that the legal personality and the property of a woman do not disappear into that of her husband when she marries. But people generally do not know, or do not appreciate, that this independence is founded upon women's independence as moral and intellectual beings. The spiritual equality of men and women is one of the fundamental principles of Islam, repeatedly affirmed in the Qur'an – for example in *al-Nisāʾ*, 4: 32, *al-Nahl*, 16: 97, and *Āl ʿImrān*, 3: 195.¹ Ḥadīths also amply support this view. The Prophet is reported to have said,

¹ 'O mankind, be wary of yourselves before your Lord, Who created you from a single soul, created out of it its mate, and from the pair scattered countless men and women'. (4: 1)

'To the men [belongs] fortune from what they are earning, and to the women [belongs] fortune from what they are earning.' (4: 32)

'Whoever does righteous work, man or woman, and has faith, to him We will surely give a life that is good and pure, and We will recompense them according to the best of what they were doing.' (16: 97)

‘the women are pairs of men’.² This equality is embodied in a variety of ways. For example, a woman is invited to Islam directly and not through the agency of males.³ At the time of the Prophet, all Muslims, men and women alike, would personally pledge their allegiance to him and to Islam.⁴ It is important to remember here that pre-Islamic Arabian society allowed women to make their own decisions with regard to religion. For instance, Fāṭimah bint al-Khaṭṭāb embraced Islam while her brother ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb was still an unbeliever.⁵ Similarly, Umm Ḥabībah bint Abī Sufyān embraced Islam while her father remained a pagan.⁶ In that earliest period of Islamic history a Muslim woman could have a husband who was still a non-Muslim, as in the example of Zaynab, the daughter of the Prophet.⁷

The early Muslim community developed a set of standards and criteria to describe who was and who was not qualified to take part in transmitting or elucidating religious teachings. A core requirement was to be of independent moral character – that is, free of any coercion or intimidation. This requirement applied to both men and women, as is clear in abundant references in the primary sources.

Muslim women took keen interest in almost all the scholarly disciplines of their times and made significant, even outstanding, contributions to various fields of knowledge. A good example from the early period of the respect for women’s intellectual ability is the appointment, during the rule of ‘Umar, the second caliph, and one of the greatest of the Prophet’s Companions, of a woman as inspector of the market in Madinah.⁸ Madinah was then the capital of a growing empire. ‘Umar can hardly have contemplated (still less carried out) such an appointment if he, or the society generally, conceived of women as incompetent to hold important public office.

‘I do not allow the work of a worker from among you, whether male or female, to waste. You [all belong] to one another.’ (3: 195)

² Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, k. *al-Ṭabārah*, b. *fī l-rajul yajidu l-ballab fī manāmi-bī*.

³ Arabic uses masculine and feminine genders to refer to men and women expressly; however, like many other languages, in the absence of an expressed distinction, the masculine is used as the common gender. It is a mistake to read this usage as referring to men alone.

⁴ God commanded the Prophet: ‘When women believers come to you to make a covenant with you that they will not associate anything with God, nor steal, nor fornicate, nor kill their own children, nor slander anyone, nor disobey you in what is good, then make a covenant with them and seek God’s forgiveness in their favour. Indeed God is most forgiving and most merciful.’ (Qur’an, *al-Mumtaḥanah*, 60: 12)

⁵ Ibn ‘Abbās asked ‘Umar what had called him to embrace Islam. ‘Umar replied: ‘Three days after Ḥamzah had embraced Islam, I went out of my house, and by chance met a man from the clan of al-Makhzūm whom I asked: “Do you prefer Muḥammad’s faith over that of your own forefathers?” The man replied: “One who is more closely related to you than myself has also done so.” I asked him who it was. “Your sister and your brother-in-law,” the man from al-Makhzūm said. I hurried back and found the door of my sister’s house bolted from within; and I heard some humming inside. Later, when the door was opened, I entered the house and asked: “What is that I am hearing?” My sister replied: “You heard nothing; we were exchanging words.” I struck her on the head, whereupon she said defiantly: “We do that whether you like it or not.” I was remorseful when I saw her bleeding, and said to her: “Show me the scripture.” ‘Umar narrated the whole incident. (Ibn Athīr, *Uṣd al-ghāba*, vol. v, p. 519)

⁶ When Abū Sufyān went to Madinah in the eighth year of Hijra, he visited his daughter Umm Ḥabībah, then wife of the Prophet. He was about to sit on the Prophet’s bed but his daughter did not allow him to do so and rolled the mattress away. Aggrieved by this, he said: ‘Is it that the mattress is not worthy of me or that I am not worthy of it?’ Umm Ḥabībah replied curtly: ‘This is the Prophet’s mattress, and you are an unclean polytheist; I did not want you to sit on it.’ Abū Sufyān felt annoyed and said: ‘While I have been away something has gone wrong with you.’ (Ibn Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, vol. viii, pp. 99–100)

⁷ Zaynab was married to her maternal cousin Abū l-‘Āṣ b. Abī l-Rabī‘. She embraced Islam though her husband did not. In the battle of Badr, he was taken prisoner. Zaynab offered a ransom for his release. He was subsequently allowed to go free on condition that, on his return to Makkah, he would set her free. He did so, and Zaynab was able to emigrate to Madinah.

⁸ Her name was Shifā’ bint ‘Abdillāh al-‘Adawiyah. See Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī‘āb*, vol. ii, p. 741.

Muslims were not inhibited about regarding women with respect for their intellect, and learning from them. So we find the names of women among the names of those proficient in each of the Islamic sciences. For example, in theology (*kalām*), al-Sayyidah Sārah bint al-Shaykh ʿUmar b. Aḥmad b. ʿUmar al-Maqdisī, lectured on the book *Sharḥ Madhābib abl al-sunnah wa maʿrifat sharāiʿ al-dīn* of Ibn Shāhīn. This book was read to her in her house in Qāsyūn, Damascus in 715 AH. In the field of jurisprudence Amat al-Wāḥid bint al-Ḥusayn b. Ismāʿīl al-Maḥāmīlī (d. 377) was a great Shāfiʿī jurist. She learnt ḥadīth and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) from her father, Ismāʿīl b. al-ʿAbbās al-Warrāq, from ʿAbd al-Ghāfir al-Ḥimṣī and others. She knew the Qurʾan by heart and, in Shāfiʿī *fiqh*, was particularly expert in the law of inheritance. Al-Barqānī records that she used to give fatwas in the company of Abū ʿAlī b. Abī Hurayrah. Another great jurist was Fāṭimah bint ʿAbbās b. Abī l-Faṭḥ al-Baghdādiyyah al-Ḥanbaliyyah (d. 714 AH). Well trained in *fiqh*, she knew much of *al-Mughnī Ibn Qudāmah* by heart. The famous theologian and mujāhid Imam Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymiyyah marvelled at her intellectual prowess. Women in Syria and Egypt benefited greatly from her teaching. Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī has described her as ‘the jurist, scholar, holder of higher *isnāds*, the mufti, accurate, of great virtue, knowledgeable in different traditions, the unique one of her time, sought after from every corner.’⁹ In Mauritania there used to be hundreds of young girls who knew the *Mudawwana*, one of the earliest compilations of Mālikī *fiqh*, by heart. ʿĀʾishah bint ʿAbdillāh b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabariyyah al-Makkiyyah (d. ca. 776 AH) composed a book on the history of her family, from which al-Sakhāwī, the great historian benefited, confirming that it ‘contains useful information’.¹⁰ An expert of language was Ṣāfiyyah bint al-Murtaḍā b. al-Murtaḍḍal (d. 771 AH). Her husband Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Qāsimī the theologian benefited from her in the sciences of language. She wrote a number of books.¹¹ The celebrated Arabic dictionary *al-Qāmūs* is narrated by al-Suyūṭī from six women: Āsiyah bint Jārullāh b. Ṣāliḥ al-Ṭabarī, Ṣāfiyyah bint Yāqūt al-Makkiyyah, Ruqayyah bint ʿAbd al-Qawī b. Muḥammad al-Bijadī, Umm Ḥabībah bint Aḥmad b. Mūsā al-Shuwaykī, Kamāliyyah bint Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Nāṣir al-Makkī and Umm al-Faḍl Ḥājir bint Sharaf al-Maqdisī. Each of the six narrated the book directly from its author, al-Firūzābādī. Faṭḥunah bint Jaʿfar al-Marsiyyah wrote *Qiyān al-Andalus* as an answer to *al-Aghānī* of Abū l-Faraj al-Aṣbahānī. Nuḍār bint al-Shaykh Abū Ḥayyān (d. 730 AH) was an excellent student of grammar; her father Abū Ḥayyān, the great imam of grammar, praised her, and said he wished her brother Ḥayyān would have been like her. And then, there are a large number of women poets.

Of course, to go into the contribution of women in these different fields is beyond the scope of my research. In this talk I can at best provide a skeletal survey of the *muḥaddithāt*. The sources of this work are scattered in books of ḥadīth, history, *asmāʾ al-rijāl*, *asānid*, *samaʿāt*, the reports of teachers and travellers, and so on. I have done my best to refer to all these sources. Some of them are published; some are in manuscript; some of them are known about but not yet traced. The most important works I used are: *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* of Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* of Khalīfa b. al-Khayyāt, *al-Taʾrīkh al-kabīr* of Imam al-Bukhārī, *Taʾrīkh al-thiqāt* of Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Takmila li-wafayāt al-naqalah* of al-Mundhirī, *Tabdhīb al-kamāl* of Abū l-Ḥajjāj al-Mizzī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ* of Imam al-Dhahabī; *al-Durar al-kāminah*, *al-Iṣābah*, *Tabdhīb al-tabdhīb*, and *al-Majmaʿ al-muʿassas* of Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar; *al-Dawʿ al-lāmiʿ* of Ḥāfiẓ al-Sakhāwī.

2 The scholarship of women

In the Islamic tradition the mainstream path to salvation is not asceticism (*zuhd*), the struggle to discipline and perfect one’s will, although that is a necessary and commended stage. The

⁹ Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *al-Dhayl ʿalā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah*, vol. iv, p. 467–68.

¹⁰ Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, *al-Iʿlān bi l-tawbīkh liman dhamm al-taʾrīkh*, p. 216.

¹¹ Ibn Zabārah, *Mulḥaq al-badr al-ṭālīʿ*, p. 104.

mainstream path is concerned less with the struggle for faith than with producing the fruits of faith, living the good life personally and collectively. The essential requirement for doing that is knowledge and understanding of how the good life is to be lived. It follows that since women, like men, must independently seek their salvation, the acquisition and transmission of such knowledge is a necessary obligation for both. Just as men are not restricted in getting knowledge from either men or women teachers, so also women are not restricted in acquiring knowledge from either men or women teachers. Men are enjoined to teach; so too women are made responsible for teaching the ignorant and the children of their community. There has been no dispute among scholars about the formal equality of men and women in respect of their competency and responsibility to receive and impart knowledge, albeit Muslim societies have sometimes been reluctant, even opposed, to seeing that responsibility fulfilled.

Evidence from the first Islamic century indicates a deep interest among women in the Prophet's teachings and their active pursuit of guidance from him. Women were always present when the Prophet addressed the people in general or gave a sermon. Their interest in knowledge led them on occasion to ask the Prophet to grant them private sessions in which they could ask about issues relating specifically to women. Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī has narrated that a woman came to God's Messenger and said, 'O Messenger of God, the men have taken away your ḥadīth, so make a day for us, when we come to you, and you can teach us what God has taught you.' The Prophet assented and taught them what God had taught him.¹² That is why there are many ḥadīths that are transmitted only through women, because only they heard them. And Imam Shawkānī commented, 'It is not reported by any of the scholars that he rejected a ḥadīth narrated by a woman because the narrator was a female.'

Ibn Jurayj has narrated that Jābir b. 'Abdullāh reported that on the day of 'Īd al-Fiṭr, the Prophet stood up and led the prayer. He started with the prayer and then gave a speech. When he finished he came to the women and gave a sermon. Ibn Jurayj asked: '‘Aṭā', do you regard it as compulsory upon the imam to deliver a sermon to women?' 'Aṭā' replied: 'It is indeed compulsory on imams [to do so]. So why is it that they do not perform this duty?'

There are many *sunna*s accepted by the ummah coming from women among the Prophet's Companions. Anyone with even a minimal knowledge of the Sunnah must accept this as fact.¹³ Ḥākim Abū 'Abdillāh confirms that one fourth of the Sharī'ah has been narrated by 'Ā'ishah alone.¹⁴ An old custom, still found today, illustrates the expectation that women, like men, should cultivate scholarly interests and abilities, the custom of including some useful religious books¹⁵ with the bride's dowry.

For most women, however, the pursuit of knowledge never replaced family obligations. Instead, women were expected to tackle the demands of family life and religious obligations along with meeting the wider obligations of society. I have found that, throughout Islamic history, the major cities used to have their share of women scholars engaged in teaching, learning and spreading Islamic religious sciences. There are also many examples when celebrated male Islamic scholars turned to these *muḥaddithāt* for religious advice. Thumāmah b. Ḥazn al-Qushayrī narrates how he met 'Ā'ishah and asked her about *nabīdh*. 'Ā'ishah called a black girl and said: 'Ask this girl, because she used to make *nabīdh* for the Messenger of God.'¹⁶ This ḥadīth suggests that early scholars did not hesitate to accept knowledge even from a black slave girl if she knew

¹² Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-'Ilm*, b. *Hal yuj'alu li-l-nisā'ī yawman 'alā ḥidab*.

¹³ *Nayl al-awṭār*, vol. viii, p. 22.

¹⁴ Zarkashī, *al-Ijābah*, p. 59.

¹⁵ One example is mentioned by Imam Dhahabī. He writes (*Siyar A'lam al-Nubalā'*, vol. xiv, p. 233) that brides were usually given the *Mukhtaṣar* of Imam al-Muzanī at the time of their wedding.

¹⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-Asribah*, b. *al-Naby 'ani l-intibādh fī l-muzaffat wa-l-dubbā' wa-l-ḥantam*.

what was relevant to the issue at hand. It is also a clear example of a scholarly contribution from a female from what we would now call a ‘marginalized’ group.

Another ḥadīth indicates the respect accorded to women who had knowledge of the Prophet’s words and actions. Abū Salamah has narrated that a man came to Ibn ‘Abbās while Abū Hurayrah was sitting near him. The man asked about a woman who bore a child forty days after her husband’s death. Ibn ‘Abbās said: ‘She is to wait for the later of the two dates.’ He referred to the verse of the Qur’an (65: 4) that specifies that the waiting period for pregnant women ends when they are delivered of ‘what they are carrying’. Abū Hurayrah said: ‘I am with my brother (Abū Salamah).’ He meant by this courteous expression to indicate his preference for the judgement of Abū Salamah that the waiting period for a widow who was pregnant at the time of her husband’s death ended when she gave birth, even if this was before the time specified for a woman who was not pregnant. Ibn ‘Abbās then sent his slave Kurayb to seek the advice of Umm Salamah. She told him that the husband of Subay‘ah Aslamiyyah had been killed and that she was pregnant by him. She gave birth forty days after his death. Then she received proposals for marriage – Abū Sanābil was one of those who proposed – and God’s Messenger allowed her to accept one of them.¹⁷

3 Receiving knowledge of the ḥadīth

Islamic society is founded on the sense of continuous, uninterrupted accountability to God, and upon the piety and modesty that follow from that. Muslims, men and women, are required to cleanse their hearts and protect themselves, their bodies and their comportment, from doing or inciting any indecent or prohibited act. To this end, Islamic society does not promote uninhibited mixing of men and women. However, this is not meant to impede or prevent women from the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

Women would usually start their scholarly careers within the family home, learning from family members who had already acquired knowledge of Islamic sciences. This practice meant that traditions of scholarship deepened and were preserved in families over generations. The advantage of such continuity was that the younger members of the family – including women-- could be instructed in the high tradition of ḥadīth from a very early age. Fāṭimah bint al-Mundhir b. al-Zubayr began the study of ḥadīth under her grandmother Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, and then continued with other scholars outside her family until she became one of the more famous traditionists of her generation. Many notable scholars – such as her own husband Hishām b. ‘Urwah b. al-Zubayr, and Muḥammad b. Ishāq, the author of the well-known *sīrah* – narrated on her authority.

Fāṭimah’s husband Hishām once objected to Ibn Ishāq’s narration from Fāṭimah: ‘Ibn Ishāq narrated from my wife Fāṭimah bint al-Mundhir, but by God he never saw her.’ Imam Dhahabī comments: ‘Hishām was right in his oath, Ibn Ishāq did not see her. [But then] he never claimed to have seen her. Rather, he mentioned that she narrated ḥadīth to him.’ He adds: ‘We have studied ḥadīth with a number of women and I never saw them. In the same way many *tabi‘īn* narrated from ‘Ā’ishah, the wife of the Prophet, without ever seeing her face.’¹⁸

Another example of scholarship begun in the home is Imam Mālik’s daughter, who, according to al-Zubayr, had memorized the whole of her father’s *Muwattā’*. She would sit behind a door in the family home and whenever a reader made a mistake in reading she would knock on the door to indicate that there was an error to be corrected.¹⁹ Another example is of Sitt al-‘Arab bint Muḥammad b. Fakhr al-Dīn Abī l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Bukhārī (d. 767

¹⁷ Ibid., *k. al-Ṭalāq, b. Inqidā’ ‘iddah al-mutawaffā’ ‘an-hā zanju-bā...*

¹⁸ *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. vii, p. 38.

¹⁹ Qāḍī ‘Iyād, *Tartīb al-madārik* vol. i, pp. 109–10.

AH) granddaughter of the celebrated *muḥaddith* Ibn al-Bukhārī. She studied under her grandfather and became one of the important narrators of his ḥadīth. Many famous experts of ḥadīth, like Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-‘Irāqī, Ḥāfiẓ Nūr al-Dīn al-Haythamī, and Ḥāfiẓ Abū Zur‘ah al-‘Irāqī, narrated from her.

On completion of training at home, women would venture out to seek knowledge from masters of *‘ilm*. This was commended by ‘Ā’ishah, who said that women should not let any obstacles impede their pursuit of knowledge, and she pointedly said: ‘How good were the women of Anṣār, whose modesty did not stop them attaining the understanding of religion.’²⁰ Later generations of Muslim women learnt ḥadīth from male masters in their own towns and those travelling male scholars who visited their towns. While attending the lectures, they would pose questions and engage in discussions. Umm al-Faḍl bint al-Hārith narrates how, on the day of ‘Arafah, during the Prophet’s lifetime some people were discussing whether the Prophet was fasting or not. Some claimed that he was fasting, some that he was not. Umm al-Faḍl resolved the debate by sending the Prophet a bowl of milk, which he drank while mounted on his camel.²¹ This settled the argument. The incident shows, and Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar cites this ḥadīth to make just this point, that scholarly debate could take place between men and women even while fully observing the Shari‘ah restrictions.

At times women would travel to other cities to listen to the great scholars, and often made these journeys part of the pilgrimage. The ḥajj generally played an important role in providing opportunities to meet people from distant places and to maintain a high degree of cultural cohesion and unity across the Islamic world. Distinct screened spaces were normally provided in the classes of every *muḥaddith* for the women students who attended. If such classes were held inside mosques, then women could learn directly from men scholars by sitting in the area designated for them.

The books of ḥadīth are full of examples of women scholars who studied outside their homes under the masters in their own or in other cities. Umm Muḥammad Khadijah used to attend the classes of Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and learnt ḥadīth from him. In later life, she narrated from Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and Yazīd b. Hārūn, another great traditionist of Baghdād. Among her students was ‘Abdullāh, the son of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, who described how ‘she used to come to my father and hear ḥadīth from him; and how he used to narrate ḥadīth to her’.²²

One method of acquiring and transmitting ḥadīth was the certificate of authority or *ijāzah*, which in later centuries became very popular. Another was to study under as many teachers as possible and collect narrations from scholars in different cities. Well-known traditionists would have hundreds of names amongst their teachers. Women scholars of ḥadīth too followed in this practice. We find both men and women making concerted efforts to acquire ḥadīths from as many teachers as possible, especially from the masters of high *isnād*. Most of them boast substantial lists of the names of those they studied under. Zaynab bint al-Kamāl, ‘Ā’ishah al-Maqdisiyyah, Fātimah al-Maqdisiyyah, and Hājir bint Sharaf are celebrated examples of women scholars who accumulated extensive personal lists of ḥadīth teachers.

4 Diffusion of the knowledge of ḥadīth

Women scholars of ḥadīth have had a huge impact on our knowledge of the Sunnah and ḥadīths of the Prophet. Roughly one-fourth of our knowledge would be lacking if it were not for the

²⁰ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-‘ilm*, b. *al-Ḥayā’ fi l-‘ilm*; Muslim: *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-Ḥayd*, b. *Isti‘māl al-muḥtasilah min al-ḥayd fursatan min misk*; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, k. *al-Ṭabārah*, b. *al-Iḡbtisal min al-ḥayd*; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, k. *al-Ṭabārah*, b. *al-Ḥayd kayfa taḡhtasik*; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. i, p. 210.

²¹ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-Ḥajj*, b. *sawmi yawmi ‘Arafah*; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-Ḥajj*, b. *Istiḥbābi l-fitri li-l-ḥājji yawma ‘Arafah*

²² Khaṭīb Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. xiv, p. 435.

efforts of these women and the many important books that, in later centuries, were produced on the basis of what is narrated from them.

4.1 Teaching to both men and women

The teaching offered by the *muḥaddithāt* was not restricted to other women, but extended to male students as well. Since the time of the Companions, it has been a well-established practice that women modestly obscured behind the screen may teach ḥadīth to male students. Al-Suyūṭī records this: ‘The ancestors learnt ḥadīths from ‘Ā’ishah and other *mothers of the believers*, while they narrated ḥadīth, from behind the curtain.’²³ Al-Sakhāwī relates how ‘ ‘Ā’ishah and other women Companions used to teach from behind the screen.’²⁴ On certain occasions, however, where there was no possibility of any private interaction, they could teach directly, without a screen. This is illustrated in the account of how Ibn Rushayd studied under Fāṭimah al-Baṭayhiyyah in the mosque of the Prophet.

4.2 Teaching in homes

Students would also gather in the homes of many women scholars. Usually the female students would be inside the house directly in front of the teachers, while the male students would remain outside, positioned so as to be able to hear and put questions. One famous teacher who conducted her teaching in this way was Zaynab bint al-Kamāl, who narrated from a large number of teachers. One of her students, Imam Dhahabī, describes her as soft-spoken, patient and polite in manner. He tells how the students of ḥadīth crowded around her house, and how she would teach them through most of the day.²⁵

4.3 Teaching in mosques and schools

Schools and mosques were also used as teaching venues. One *muḥaddithah* who taught in the mosque of the Prophet in Madina was Umm al-Khayr Fāṭimah bint Ibrāhīm b. Maḥmūd al-Baṭayhī. Among her teachers were: the famous narrator of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Abū ‘Abdillāh al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Mubārak b. Muḥammad al-Zabīdī (546–631 AH); the Ḥanafī shaykh, Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Sayyid al-Bukhārī known as Ibn al-Ḥāṣirī (546–636 AH); and Abū l-Qasim ‘Abdullāh b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Abdillāh ibn Rawāḥah al-Anṣārī (560–646 AH). She taught ḥadīth in Damascus and other places. Imam Dhahabī, Imam Subkī, Ibn Rushayd Sabtī and many other great scholars studied under her. Ibn Rushayd came all the way from Fez to do so at a time when she taught in the Prophet’s mosque in Madinah. He recounts how she would lean on the wall of the tomb of the Prophet facing the head of the Prophet. Here she wrote *ijāzah* for him with her own hand. Ibn Rushayd studied under her the hadiths in the treatise *Juz’ Abī l-Jabm* and others.²⁶

4.4 Teaching from notes and memory

The usual practice of teaching ḥadīths in later centuries was to use original notes or books that would have been compiled by women while studying under their teachers. In earlier centuries, especially amongst the Companions and Successors, ḥadīths were memorized, then later put into writing by dictating from memory to a scribe. The tradition of teaching from memory continued amongst some women scholars, for instance Fāṭimah bint Abī Bakr b. Abī Dāwūd al-Sijjistani²⁷ and others.

²³ Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-rāwī*, vol. ii, p. 28.

²⁴ Sakhāwī, *Fath al-muḥbith*, vol. ii, p. 211.

²⁵ *al-Durar al-kāminah*, vol. ii, p. 117.

²⁶ *Mil al-‘ayyab*, vol. v, p. 21–25.

²⁷ Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. xiv, p. 442.

4.5 Teaching while travelling

Travelling did not prevent women from teaching. They taught wherever they happened to be. As a result the name of an individual woman scholar may be associated with a number of different cities. ʿĀʾishah, the wife of the Prophet, on her way back from the Battle of the Camel passed the city of Baṣrah where she stayed as a guest of Umm Ṭalḥat al-Ṭalaḥāt Ṣafīyyah bint al-Ḥārith al-ʿAbdariyyah. While she was there, she narrated ḥadīths to the women of the city and responded to their questions. The visit left a legacy and women such as Ṣafīyyah narrated from her. Such narrations are well documented in the compilations of *sunnaḥ*.²⁸ Fāṭimah bint Saʿd al-Khayr (d. 600 AH) is another example. She studied ḥadīth under her father Saʿd, and then Zāhir b. Ṭāhir, Abū Ghālīb b. al-Bannāʾ, Qāḍī Abū Bakr, Yaḥyā b. al-Bannāʾ and others. She taught ḥadīth in Damascus and Egypt. Her students included Ḥāfiẓ al-Dīyāʾ Khaṭīb of Mardā and Ḥāfiẓ al-Mundhirī. Zaynab bint Aḥmad b. ʿUmar al-Maqdisiyyah (d. 722 AH) a teacher of Imam Dhahabī, born in Qāsyūn, studied under the great *muḥaddiths* of her age and lectured on ḥadīth in Bayt al-Maqdis, Egypt, Madinah and other places.²⁹

4.6 Teaching through correspondence

When students of ḥadīth and the great teachers were unable to meet in person, they communicated by correspondence. Sayyidah bint Mūsā Mārāniyyah Miṣriyyah (d. 695 AH) wrote to al-Dhahabī for her *ijāzab*. Dhahabī has recorded how he travelled to meet her, but she died while he was en route.³⁰ Ḥāfiẓ al-Mundhirī wrote to a large number of *muḥaddithāt* and received their permission to narrate from them.

5 A 'high' *isnād*

In standard practice, the *isnād* of those ḥadīth scholars who narrate within fifty years of the death of their teachers is regarded as high. Among the female ḥadīth transmitters there are hundreds whose *isnāds* are esteemed as high: among them Shuhdah Katībah, Tajannī Wahbāniyyah, Zaynab bint al-Kamāl, ʿĀʾishah al-Maqdisiyyah, her sister Fāṭimah, and Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad Tanūkhīyyah. It was through ʿĀʾishah bint ibn ʿAbd al-Hādī that the *isnād* of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and some other compilations of ḥadīth came to be regarded as very high by later generations.

6 The volume of narrations from women scholars

The large volume of narrations of ḥadīth by women scholars merits attention in its own right in many ways. These have come from various generations of learned women – from the generation of the Companions, their Successors, and each generation after them.

There are many women scholars who had collected a very large number of ḥadīths. ʿĀʾishah the wife of the Prophet (d. 57 AH) has narrated 2210 ḥadīth, of which 297 are included in the *Ṣaḥīḥs* of Imam al-Bukhārī and Imam Muslim. Another example is ʿĀbidah al-Madaniyyah, who narrated from Imam Mālik b. Anas. Some *ḥuffāẓ* even report that she narrated 10,000 ḥadīths. Zaynab bint al-Kamāl (d. 740 AH) is recorded by her students as having studied enough books of ḥadīth to load a camel. Mention of these books is found in Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar's vast list of ḥadīth texts. I do not know any master of ḥadīth today who has worked through all these titles.

²⁸ Abū l-Ḥajjāj al-Mizzī, *Ṭabdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. xxxv, p. 209.

²⁹ *Muṣjam al-shuyūkh*, vol. i, p. 248.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 294.

7 Narration of the important sources of ḥadīth

In the earlier centuries, women participated fully in learning ḥadīth and its sciences, narrating and teaching it. In later centuries when works such as *Musannafāt*, *Jawāmiʿ*, *Masānid*, *Maʿājim*, *Arbaʿūnāt*, *Ajzāʿ* and other types of collections were being compiled, the pressing need was to preserve the ḥadīth accurately and transmit them exactly without addition or deletion. Women also took part in this process. A great authority on ḥadīth (famous also for her high *isnād*) was Umm al-Kirām Karīmah Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Marwaziyyah (d. 463 AH). She studied the whole of the *Saḥīḥ* of Imam al-Bukhārī under Abū l-Haytham Muḥammad b. Makkī al-Kushmayhanī and other teachers. She then moved to Makkah where she remained until she died in 463 AH at the age of one hundred.

She was well known for her piety as well as her knowledge. Great imams like al-Samʿānī and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī studied under her. She taught the *Saḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī many times. She would not allow anyone to study it without first studying her original copy of the *Saḥīḥ*. Abū l-Ghanāʾim al-Narsī reports that when he came to Karīmah to study, she gave him her original copy of al-Bukhārī, from which he copied some pages and then compared them with his own. She said she would not accept it unless he compared with her original, which he then did. He also studied with her other books of ḥadīth. She was held in high esteem by the likes of the father of Abū Bakr b. Manṣūr al-Samʿānī, who praised her as remarkable and unique.³¹

Other women who became famous for their knowledge of ḥadīth and narration of the *Saḥīḥ* of Imam al-Bukhārī were Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad (d. 539 AH), Shuhdah bint Aḥmad al-Ibrī (d. 574 AH), Zaynab bint ʿAbd al-Rahman (d. 615 AH), Sharīfah bint Aḥmad al-Nasawī, Zaynab bint Muẓaffar (d. 709 AH) and Sitt al-Wuzarāʾ bint ʿUmar al-Tanūkhīyah (d. 716 AH).

Among the women who studied and taught the *Saḥīḥ* of Imam Muslim were Umm al-Khayr Fāṭimah bint ʿAlī (d. 532 AH), Fāṭimah al-Shahrazūriyyah, and Šāfiyyah bint Aḥmad (d. 741 AH). The long-lived and pious scholar of ḥadīth, Umm Ibrāhīm Fāṭimah bint ʿAbdullāh b. Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Jūzdāniyyah al-Aṣbahāniyyah (d. 524 AH), is well known for her narration of ḥadīths and works, including al-Ṭabarānī's *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr* (37 volumes) and *al-Muʿjam al-ṣaḡīr* (2 volumes) from Abū Bakr ibn Raydhah al-Ḍabbī. Imam al-Dhahabī called her the *musnidah* of her time – a traditionist with high *isnād* – and noted that she was the last person in the world to narrate from Ibn Raydhah.³² Having studied al-Bukhārī under al-Ḥajjār, ʿĀʾishah bint Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Hādī (d. 816 AH) was the last person who narrated the *Saḥīḥ* with a high *isnād*. Among her students was Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar, who has recorded the titles of more than 25 books that he studied under her. Her sister Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad (d. 803) also had a very high *isnād*. Ibn Ḥajar worked through 85 books of ḥadīth under her. Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad al-Tanūkhīyah (d. 803 AH) had studied ḥadīth with the greatest teachers of ḥadīth of their time. Ibn Ḥajar, who had read around a hundred books of ḥadīth under her, described her as unique in her gift of narration.

8 The students of the *muḥaddithāt*

The women scholars of Islam were very influential in many ways. Perhaps the greatest demonstration of this is in the large number of students who flocked to hear them teach. ʿĀʾishah, the wife of the Prophet, is a prime example of a female scholar from whom a large numbers of students benefited. Imam Abū l-Ḥajjāj mentions that over 300 students have narrations from her in the major collections of ḥadīth. Among them are well-known

³¹ Ibn Nuqtah, *al-Taʿyīd*, vol. ii, p. 324; Dhahabī, *Sīyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. xviii, p. 233; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa-l-nihāyah*, vol. xii, p. 105; Taqī al-Fāsī, *al-ʿIqd al-thamīn*, vol. viii, p. 310.

³² Samʿānī, *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*, vol. ii, p. 428; Ibn Nuqtah, *al-Taʿyīd*, vol. ii, p. 322, Dhahabī, *Sīyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. xix, p. 504.

Companions – ‘Abdullāh b. Zubayr, ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās, ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī, Abū Hurayrah, Rabī‘ah b. ‘Amr al-Jurashī, and also al-Aswad b. Yazīd al-Nakha‘ī, ‘Alqamah b. Qays al-Nakha‘ī, ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Abidīn, ‘Aṭā’ b. Abī Rabah, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Imam Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī, ‘Ikrimah mawla of Ibn ‘Abbās, Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makkī, Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn, Masrūq b. Ajda‘, Makḥūl, Nāfi‘ mawla of Ibn ‘Umar, Qāsim b. Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, Sālim b. ‘Abdillāh ibn ‘Umar, Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyab, Sulaymān b. Yasār, Ṭawūs b. Kaysān, Imam Sha‘bī, ‘Ubaydullah b. ‘Abdillāh b. ‘Utbah b. Mas‘ūd, ‘Urwah b. Zubayr.

As I said earlier, in the realm of knowledge there was no distinction between the genders. Scholars sought knowledge from men and women teachers alike. There is hardly a major scholar of ḥadīth who, in the course of his studies, did not seek knowledge from women teachers and did not narrate on their authority. Even ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the fourth caliph, regardless of his high status in terms of juristic knowledge, narrated ḥadīth from a woman called Maymūnah bint Sa‘d.³³ The well-known Umayyad caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz used to consult with ‘Amrah bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. One of the most reliable pillars of ḥadīth, Imam al-Zuhrī (d. 124 AH), has narrated ḥadīth from a number of women, including the afore-mentioned ‘Amrah bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, Nadbah, Fāṭimah al-Khuza‘iyyah, Hind bint al-Ḥārith al-Fārisiyyah, and Umm ‘Abdillāh al-Daw‘siyyah.³⁴ Imam Abū Ḥanīfah has narrated from Umm al-Ghurāb; Imam Mālik (d. 179 AH) has narrated from ‘Ā’ishah bint Sa‘d b. Abī Waqqās.³⁵

Sayyidah Nafisah bint Ḥasan b. Zayd b. Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 208 AH), knew the Qur’an by heart and was a scholar of both *tafsīr* and ḥadīth. Born in Makkah and brought up in Madīnah, she migrated to Egypt with her husband Ishāq b. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq. In Egypt Imam Shāfi‘ī heard ḥadīth from her.³⁶ Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH) has narrated from Umm ‘Umar bint Ḥassān b. Zayd al-Thaqafī. Qāḍī Abū Ya‘lā al-Farā’ (d. 458 AH) has narrated from Amat al-Salām al-Baghdādiyyah. Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī has narrated the whole *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī from Karīmah al-Marwaziyyah. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597 AH) has narrated from a number of women. Imam Abū Sa‘d al-Sam‘ānī (d. 562 AH) has narrated ḥadīth from 69 female scholars of ḥadīth, and has mentioned all of them in his *Muṣjam al-shuyūkh*. Ḥāfiẓ Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571 AH) received ḥadīth from over eighty women. Ḥāfiẓ Abū Ṭāhir Silafī (d. 576 AH) narrated from more than ten women. Ḥāfiẓ Mundhirī (d. 656 AH) narrated from a large number of women scholars and has mentioned them in his *al-Takmilah fi wafayāt al-naqalab*. In later centuries all the important scholars of ḥadīth like Imam Ibn Taymiyyah, Abū l-Ḥajjāj al-Mizzī, ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Bīrzālī, Imam Dhahabī (d. 748 AH), Ḥāfiẓ Ibn al-Kathīr, Ḥāfiẓ Muḥammad b. Rāfi‘ al-Sulamī, Ḥāfiẓ Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH), Ḥāfiẓ Abū l-Faḍl al-‘Irāqī, Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar Asqalānī (d. 852 AH), Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, Ḥāfiẓ Sakhāwī and al-Suyūṭī have a significant number of *muḥaddithāt* among their teachers.

The great female traditionist (*musnidah*) of Iṣfahān, ‘Afīfah bint Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Fārifāniyyah (d. 606 AH), studied *al-Muṣjam al-kabir* (37 vols.) and *al-Muṣjam al-ṣaghīr* (2 vols.) of al-Ṭabarānī and Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād’s *Kitāb al-Fitan* under Fāṭimah al-Juzdāniyyah. She was the last student of ‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. Muḥammad al-Dashtaj, who was himself the last student of Abū Nu‘aym al-Aṣbahānī. She taught a large number of books. Among her many students are: Ḥāfiẓ Diyā’ al-Dīn al-Maqdisī, Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Nuqṭah al-Baghdādī, Ḥāfiẓ ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Maqdisī, and Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Mundhirī.³⁷ Another important woman scholar

³³ *al-Iṣābah*, vol. vii, p. 173.

³⁴ Ibn Ḥajar, *Tabdhīb al-tabdhīb*, vol. xi, pp. 466, 482; Muslim, *al-Munfaridāt wa-l-wuḥdān*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Tabdhīb al-tabdhīb*, vol. xii, p. 464.

³⁶ Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. x, p. 106; Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-dhabab*, vol. iii, p. 43.

³⁷ Mundhirī, *al-Takmilah li-wafayāt al-naqalab*, vol. ii, p. 194; Ibn Nuqṭah, *al-Taḥqīd*, vol. ii, p. 326; Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. xxi, p. 481.

was the great traditionist Zaynab bint Makkī b. ʿAlī al-Ḥarrāniyyah (d. 688 AH). She studied many books of ḥadīth from Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar b. Muḥammad b. Ṭabrāzād and spent her life teaching ḥadīth. Students crowded her house all the time, including Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Mizzī, al-Birzālī and al-Dhahabī. Ibn Taymiyyah has narrated ḥadīth from her in his book *al-Arbaʿūn*.

9 The collection of ḥadīths narrated by individual women scholars

It has been a tradition among ḥadīth scholars to compile narrations of distinguished masters. There are hundreds of collections in this category. A number of women traditionists have had their ḥadīths and narrations compiled in this way. One of them is Umm al-Faḍl Bībī bint ʿAbd al-Ṣamad b. ʿAlī al-Ḥarthamiyyah al-Ḥarawiyyah (d. 477 AH). Her ḥadīth are compiled in a book known as *Juzʿ Bībī*, which she narrated from Ibn Abī Shurayh. Traditionists in subsequent centuries have been particularly keen to study this book under their teachers.³⁸ Another example is that of the long-lived *musnidah* of Iraq, Shuhdah bint Aḥmad b. ʿUmar al-Ibrī al-Dīnawariyyah (d. 574 AH). She studied ḥadīth under Abū l-Fawāris Ṭirād b. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Zaynabī, al-Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad b. Ṭalḥah al-Niʿālī, Jaʿfar b. Aḥmad al-Sarrāj and others. She narrated a number of books in ḥadīth, *rijāl* and history. Among her many students are Imam Ḥāfiẓ Abū l-Faraj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Jawzi, Ḥāfiẓ Ibn ʿAsākir, and al-Samʿānī. Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī has praised her highly, describing her as the last heir of the *isnād* of Baghdād, and noting that as she lived long, the people, their children, and grandchildren were able to benefit from her teaching. The compilation of her narrations is titled *al-ʿUmdah fī Mashyakhat Shuhdah*.³⁹ Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar compiled a book devoted to the *isnāds* of the traditionist Maryam bint al-Adhrāʿī (d. 805 AH) titled *Muʿjam al-Shaykhab Maryam*. Similarly Ibn Ḥajar collected *al-Mashyakhat al-Bāsimah li l-Qibābī wa Fātimah*, compiling together the narrations of his teachers Najm al-Dīn al-Qibābī (d. 838 AH) and Fātimah bint Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Maqdisī al-Kinānī (d. 838 AH).

10 The geographical extent and historical continuity

The rich tradition of ḥadīth scholarship among women is not confined to any particular part of the Islamic world or any particular period in its history. In fact, throughout Islamic history, and in almost every part of the Islamic world, there have been women who devoted themselves to becoming expert in the science of ḥadīth. Unlike their male counterparts, their lives and voices have not been preserved fully in the biographical dictionaries. As a consequence people have wrongly supposed that women scholars were uncommon in Islamic societies. One reason for the tendency to obscure women's contributions to scholarship may have been the emphasis in Islamic tradition on the modesty of women, with the consequent unwillingness to provide information about them to anyone other than close relatives. This characteristic of Islamic society inhibited the recording of details about many women scholars, and about their contributions to society and scholarship. There are a few exceptions.

A great jurist and traditionist ʿAbd al-Qādir b. Abī al-Wafāʾ al-Qurashī (696–775 AH) has described the life of Fātimah bint Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Samarqandiyyah in his celebrated book, *al-Jawābir al-muḍīʿah fī tarājim al-Ḥanafīyyah*. She was the daughter of Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Samarqandiyyah (author of *Tubfat al-fuqahāʾ*) and was married to ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Kāsānī (author of the famous book of Islamic law *Badāʾiʿ al-sanāʾiʿ*). Of Fātimah, al-Qurashī reports: 'She attained the status of jurist under the training of her father. Fatwas used to come out from the house with her signature and the signature of her father. When she married al-Kāsānī fatwas

³⁸ Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. xviii, p. 403. *Juzʿ Bībī* was published from Kuwait in 1406 AH.

³⁹ Ibn al-Jawzi, *al-Mashyakhab*, p. 208; Ibn Nuqṭah, *al-Taʿyīd*, vol. ii, p. 29; Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. xx, p. 542.

started coming from her house with her signature, the signature of her father and the signature of her husband. Her husband, when unsure of a fatwa, would turn to her for clarification.’

Al-Qurashī further says: ‘It has come to our knowledge that in the cities of Transoxiana [...] a fatwa is only issued from a house if it has the signatures of the householder and his daughter, his wife or his sister.’⁴⁰ It is evident from such records how numerous and how influential female scholars were in the society. Their absence generally from biographical records does not do justice to the extent of their real involvement in academic and scholarly activities.

As for the geographical spread of women ḥadīth scholars across the Muslim world I can mention here only a few examples to illustrate it:

Jumu‘ah bint Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Ubaydullah al-Maḥmiyyah from Nīshāpūr. She came to Baghdād and lectured on ḥadīth, reporting from Abū ‘Amr b. Ḥamdān, Abū Aḥmad al-Ḥāfiẓ, Abū Bakr al-Ṭarrāzī, ‘Abdullāh b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Rāzī and Bishr b. Muḥammad b. Yāsīn. Among her students were Abū Muḥammad al-Khallāl, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Alī al-Azjī, Abū l-Ḥusayn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Shurūṭī. Al-Khallāl writes of how much Imam Abū Hamid al-Isfrāyīnī respected and praised her.⁴¹

Amat al-Salām bint al-Qāḍī Abī Bakr Aḥmad b. Kāmil (d. 390 AH) from Baghdād is another example. She studied ḥadīth under Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Baṣṣānī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥumayd b. al-Rabī‘ and others. Her students included al-Azharī, al-Tannūkhī, al-Ḥusayn b. Ja‘far al-Salmāsī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥasnūn al-Narsī, Abū Khāzim b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. al-Farrā’ and Abū Ya‘qūb Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. al-Farrā’. She lectured on ḥadīth in Baghdad. Khaṭīb mentions the high admiration her students, al-Azharī and al-Tannūkhī, had for her and describes her piety and intelligence.⁴²

In India there were some women whose contribution to the science of ḥadīth is also well documented. For example, Amat al-Ghafūr bint Imām Ishāq al-‘Umarī al-Dihlawī, who studied ḥadīth and *fiqh* under her father, married the great expert of ḥadīth Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qayyūm al-Budhānawī. ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī describes her as an expert in *fiqh* and ḥadīth, whose expertise in these fields was sought by her husband on problematic issues.⁴³

The scholarship of ḥadīth among women has continued throughout the centuries of Islam. Starting with the wives of the Prophet to the present day, we find a rich tradition of scholarship among women. The number of female narrators from among the Companions in itself is quite high. Among them:

‘Ā’ishah, the wife of the Prophet (d. 57 AH), narrated 2210 ḥadīths, of which 297 are in the *Saḥīḥs* of Imams al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Qabīṣah b. Dhuwayb says: ‘Ā’ishah was most knowledgeable of all the people. The great Companions of the Prophet used to consult her and sought answers to their complex questions. ‘Urwah b. Zubayr says: ‘I never saw anyone more knowledgeable in *fiqh*, medicine and poetry than ‘Ā’ishah.’⁴⁴

Umm Salamah, the wife of the Prophet (d. 59 AH) narrated 378 ḥadīths. Among the famous narrators from her are: the companion ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās; al-Aswad b. Yazīd al-Nakha‘ī, ‘Atā’ b. Abī Rabāḥ, Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makkī, Masrūq b. Ajda‘, Nāfi‘ mawla of ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar, Sa‘īd al-Maqbūrī, Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyab, Sulaymān b. Yasār, Imam Sha‘bī, ‘Ubaydullah b. ‘Abdillāh b. ‘Utbah b. Mas‘ūd, ‘Urwah b. Zubayr.

⁴⁰ *al-Jawābir al-muḍī‘ah*, vol. iv, pp. 122–23.

⁴¹ Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta‘rīkh Baghdād*, vol. xiv, p. 444.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 443.

⁴³ ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī, *Nuḣbat al-khawāṭir*, vol. vii, pp. 92–93.

⁴⁴ Ibn Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, vol. viii, pp. 58–81; Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr: *al-Istī‘āb*, vol. iv, pp. 356–61; Mizzi: *Tabdhīb al-kamāl*; Dhahabī, *Sīyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. ii, p. 135; *Tadhkirat al-ḥuffāẓ*, p. 27; Ibn Ḥajar: *al-Iṣābah*, vol. iv, p. 359, *Tabdhīb al-tabdhīb*, vol. xii, p. 461.

Asmā³ bint Yazīd b. Sakan narrated 81 ḥadīths; Maymūnah, *umm al-mu³minīn*, narrated 76 ḥadīths; Umm Ḥabībah, *umm al-mu³minīn*, narrated 65 ḥadīths; Ḥafṣah, *umm al-mu³minīn*, narrated 60 ḥadīths; Asmā³ bint Umays narrated 60 ḥadīths; Asmā³ bint Abi Bakr narrated 58 ḥadīths; Umm Hānī bint Abi Ṭālib narrated 46 ḥadīths; Umm ʿAṭīyah narrated 40 ḥadīths; Fāṭimah bint Qays narrated 34 ḥadīths; Umm al-Faḍl narrated 30 ḥadīths; Umm Qays bint Mihsan narrated 24 ḥadīths; Rubayyī^c bint Muʿawwidh narrated 21 ḥadīths.

In all, the six sound ḥadīth collections include ḥadīths from 132 women classed as Companions of the Prophet. A large number of ḥadīths of women narrators are also found in other collections such as the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the *Musnad* of Abū Yaʿlā, the *Musannaḥs* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Shaybah and al-Ṭabarānī's *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*.

The number of *tabiʿiyyāt* (the generation after the Companions), whose ḥadīths are in the six sound books exceed 170. Among them:

ʿAmrah bint ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Zurārah al-Anṣāriyyah al-Najjariyyah (d. 98?/106? AH) narrated from Rāfi^c b. Khadij, ʿUbayd b. Rifāʿah b. Rāfi^c al-Zuraqī, Marwān b. al-Ḥakam, Ḥabībah bint Sahl, Ḥamnah bint Jaḥsh, ʿĀʾishah and Umm Salamah, Umm Hishām bint Ḥārithah b. al-Nuʿmān. Among the famous narrators from her are: Sulaymān b. Yasār, ʿAbdullāh b. Abī Bakr b. Muḥammad b. ʿAmr b. Ḥazm, ʿUrwah b. Zubayr, ʿAmr b. Dīnār, Ibn Shihāb Zuhri, Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd Anṣārī. Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn has described her as *thiqab* and *ḥujjab*.⁴⁵ Imam ʿAli ibn al-Madinī also praised her very highly.⁴⁶ ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz said: 'No one is left who has more knowledge of the ḥadīth of ʿĀʾishah than ʿAmrah.'⁴⁷

Ḥafṣah bint Sīrīn (died after 100 AH), narrated from Anas b. Mālik, Abū Dhībān Khalīfah b. Kaʿb, Rabī^c b. Ziyād al-Ḥārithī, Abū al-ʿĀliyah Riyāhī, Salmān b. ʿĀmir al-Ḍabbī, Umm ʿAṭīyah al-Anṣāriyyah. Among the famous narrators from her are Iyās b. Muʿāwiyah, Ayyūb al-Sakhtyānī, Khālid al-Ḥadhdhā, ʿĀṣim al-Aḥwal, ʿAbdullāh b. ʿAwn, Qatādah, Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn, ʿĀʾishah bint Saʿd al-Baṣriyyah. Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn described her as *thiqab* and *ḥujjab*.⁴⁸ Iyās b. Muʿāwiyah said of her, 'I have never met anyone whom I prefer over Ḥafṣah.'⁴⁹

Muʿadhah bint ʿAbdillāh al-ʿAdawiyyah (d. 83 AH), narrated from ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, Hishām b. ʿĀmir al-Anṣārī, ʿĀʾishah, and Umm ʿAmr bint ʿAbdillāh b. Zubayr. Among the famous narrators from her are Ishāq b. Suwayd, Ayyūb al-Sakhtyānī, Jaʿfar b. Kaysān al-ʿAdawī, ʿĀṣim al-Aḥwāl, Abū Qilābah, Qatādah. Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn described her as *thiqab* and *ḥujjab*.⁵⁰

Umm al-Dardā³ al-Ṣuḡhrā (d. 81 AH), narrated from Salmān al-Fārisī, Faḍlāh b. ʿUbayd al-Anṣārī, Kaʿb b. ʿĀṣim al-Ashʿarī, her husband Abū l-Dardā³, Abū Hurayrah, and ʿĀʾishah. She had a large number of students. Makḥūl says: 'She was a *faqīhah*.'⁵¹ ʿAwn b. ʿAbdillāh b. ʿUtbah says: 'We sat next to Umm al-Dardā³, then we said to her: we have caused you tiredness. She said: you caused me tiredness, no. I have sought *ʿibādah* in everything, but I did not get anything more curing and satisfying than the company of scholars and revision with them.'⁵²

In later centuries the tradition of women scholars of ḥadīth continued with Fāṭimah bint Abī ʿAlī al-Daqqāq, the wife of Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 480 AH). She was among the famous traditionists of the fifth century and studied under Abū Nuʿaym al-Isfrāyīnī, Abū l-Ḥasan al-

⁴⁵ *Tabdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. xxxv, p. 242.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, vol. ii, p. 387; Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. iv, p. 507; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tabdhīb al-tabdhīb*, vol. xii, p. 439.

⁴⁸ *Tabdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. xxxv, p. 152.

⁴⁹ Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, vol. viii, p. 484; Mizzī, *Tabdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. xxxv, p. 152; Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. iv, p. 507; Ibn Ḥajar: *Tabdhīb al-tabdhīb*, vol. xii, p. 438.

⁵⁰ *Tabdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. xxxv, p. 309.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 355.

⁵² Ibid.

‘Alawī, ‘Abdullāh b. Yūsuf, Abū ‘Abdillāh al-Ḥākīm and others. Amongst her students were ‘Abdullāh al-Furāwī, Zāhir al-Shahḥāmī and Abū l-As‘ad Hibat al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid. Al-Dhahabī describes her as devoutly obedient in the service of God, and holds her in the highest esteem.⁵³

‘Ā’ishah bint Ḥasan b. Ibrāhīm al-Warkāniyyah (d. ca. 470 AH). She wrote ḥadīths dictated by Abū ‘Abdillāh ibn Mandah and she studied under other famous traditionists of her time. Al-Dhahabī has described her as a ‘preacher, scholar, and holder of high *isnād*’. Al-Sam‘ānī says: ‘I asked Ḥāfiẓ Ismā‘īl b. Muḥammad about her. He said: “She was a righteous woman and a scholar; she used to give sermons to women; she wrote out Ibn Mandah’s *Amālī* from him; she was the first person whose ḥadīths were dictated to me in person. My father sent me to her and she was an ascetic.”’ Among her students are al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd al-Mālik al-Khallāl, Sa‘īd b. Abī al-Rajā’ and Ismā‘īl al-Ḥammāmī.⁵⁴

Other women scholars of that period include: Fāṭimah bint ‘Alī (d. 532 AH). Khadijah bint Aḥmad al-Nahrawāniyyah (d. 570 AH); Tajannī bint ‘Abdillāh al-Wahbāniyyah (d. 575); Sitt al-Katabah Ni‘mah bint ‘Alī (d. 604 AH); ‘Ā’ishah bint Ma‘mar (d. 607 AH); Zaynab bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Shi‘riyyah (d. 615 AH) and Ṣafiyyah bint ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 646 AH).

In the eighth century the number of women teachers about whom we have records increased sharply. A reliable explanation of why this should have been so must wait upon a thorough investigation into it. Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar alone has mentioned 170 *muḥaddithāt* of this century in his book, *al-Durar al-kāminah*. Some of the more famous *muḥaddithāt* mentioned in other biographical dictionaries are: Sitt al-Wuzarā’ bint ‘Umar (d. 716 AH); Zaynab bint Aḥmad al-Kamāl (d. 740 AH); Ṣafiyyah bint Aḥmad (d. 741 AH); Sitt al-‘Arab bint Muḥammad b. al-Fakhr ibn al-Bukhārī (d. 767 AH) and Juwayriya bint Aḥmad al-Hakkārī (d. 783 AH).

The number of women teachers remained high in the ninth century AH, and Ibn Fahd al-Makkī narrates from 130 of them. These include Maryam bint al-Adhra‘ī (d. 805 AH); Fāṭimah bint Khalīl al-Maqdisiyyah (d. 838 AH) and Umm Hānī Maryam bint Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Hūrīniyyah (d. 871 AH). Hājir bint Sharaf al-Dīn al-Maqdisī (d. 874 AH) was a particularly famous teacher from this era.

Famous *muḥaddithāt* of the tenth century AH include Umm al-Khayr Amat al-Khāliq al-Dimashqiyyah (d. 902 AH), ‘Ā’ishah bint Muḥammad (d. 906), Umm al-Hanā bint Muḥammad al-Badrānī al-Miṣriyyah (d. 911 AH); Fāṭimah bint Yūsuf al-Qāḍī Jamāl al-Dīn al-Tāḍifi al-Ḥanbalī (d. 925 AH); Khadijah bint Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-‘Āmiriyyah (d. 935), Būrān bint Muḥammad al-Qāḍī Ibn al-Shahnah (d. 938 AH), Bāy Khātūn bint Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad al-Ḥalabiyyah (d. 942 AH); Fāṭimah bint ‘Abd al-Qādir b. ‘Uthmān (d. 966 AH); Zaynab bint Muḥammad al-Ghazzī (d. 980 AH); Quraysh bint ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ṭabariyyah al-Makkiyyah (d. 1107 AH).

According to Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī the last mentioned (Quraysh bint ‘Abd al-Qādir) ‘was a jurist and scholar of ḥadīth from Makkah. She lectured on ḥadīth at her home in Makkah.’ Another example is that of Shaykhah Umm ‘Imrān, Maryam bint Muḥammad b. Ṭāhā al-‘Aqqād al-Ḥalabiyyah al-Shāfi‘iyya (d. ca. 1220 AH). She was an expert in Qur’anic recitation as well as a great scholar of hadith. Born in Aleppo in 1156 AH, she studied the Qur’an and some elementary books of sciences under her father. Apart from her father, she received *ijāzah* in ḥadīth from the great *muḥaddith* ‘Allāmah Abū Sulaymān Ṣāliḥ b. Ibrāhīm al-Janīnī. ‘Allāmah Khalīl al-Murādī

⁵³ Ibn Nuqṭah, *al-Taqyīd*, vol. ii, p. 321; Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. xviii, p. 479.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 302.

called upon her in Aleppo in 1205 AH, and praised her and attested to her knowledge and virtue.⁵⁵

In the last century also there were a number of female traditionists. Among them: Sayyidah Shams al-Nisā' bint al-Sayyid Amīr Ḥasan al-Sahsawāniyyah (d. 1308 AH). She studied the Qur'an with *tajwīd*, learned writing, and studied *Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ* and the six sound books, under her father. 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī, author of *Nuzḥat al-khawāṭir*, says of her that she was intelligent, sharp in memory, pious, and righteous. She knew the ḥadīths and their *isnāds* by heart.⁵⁶ Fāṭimah Shams Jahān al-Jarkasiyyah al-Madaniyyah, the wife of Shaykh al-Islam 'Arif Ḥikmat (d. 1272 AH) was another great scholar who lived in Madinah. She gave an *ijāzah* for her ḥadīth to the famous Ḥāfiẓ 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī.

It is worth noting that throughout all the centuries, the women's scholarship, as far as accurate and intelligent transmission of the hadiths is concerned, is regarded as more reliable than that of men. It is well-known that a good number of male narrators of ḥadīth have been accused of inaccurate reporting and some even of fabrication. No woman ḥadīth scholar has ever been accused of such wrongs and weaknesses. Imam Dhahabī comments on this point by declaring that he knew of no women who had been accused of any willed or unwilled aberrance from the strict standards of the scholarly tradition.⁵⁷ Ibn 'Arrāq al-Kinānī has devoted an entire chapter of his famous book *Tanzīḥ al-sharī'ah al-marfū'ah 'ani l-aḥādīth al-sharī'ah al-mawḍū'ah* to listing hundreds of fabricators; no woman's name crops up, not even once.⁵⁸

11. Postscript

The geographical spread and the continuity in Islamic societies, from the earliest times to the present, of women scholars of ḥadīth, demonstrate that the phenomenon was not an aberration from the norm, albeit there was a falling off, a decline in numbers in the later centuries (after the tenth).

Of course there is a great deal more to be said about this phenomenon. There remain many questions that need to be asked about, for example, the social and political background behind the information that I have surveyed. We need to find out more – to the extent possible – about the circumstances in which the women scholars lived and worked, about how they balanced their responsibilities as learned Muslims with their other commitments – as mothers, wives, sisters, as citizens or subjects in the polities in which they lived. We need to know more about how they travelled, where they stayed, and how their learning and teaching were financially supported and by whom.

While so much (and more) needs to be researched and understood, I hope that I have made a good enough case to dismiss the prejudice that Islamic societies, simply by being Islamic, must hold women back, must confine them to the domestic duties of house and home, of wives or mothers. If the Islam of the Companions and their Successors is the best model to turn to for authoritative guidance, then the evidence is overwhelming that women have the same obligation to acquire and teach the knowledge needed to practise Islam as men do. It follows that Islamic society must be ordered in such a way that women, like men, are enabled to discharge that obligation. To restrict educational scope for girls to what trains them to serve in house and home is to deny their right to learn (and then teach) what is needed for the full realization of their potential as worshipping servants of their Creator. To do so is to limit the cultural space ahead of them, to make the earth around them narrower, to draw down the horizons above

⁵⁵ Muḥammad Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh, *I'lām al-nubalā bi-ta'rīkh ḥalab al-shubaba*, vol. vii, pp. 166–67.

⁵⁶ 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī, *Nuzḥat al-Khawāṭir*, vol. viii, p. 185.

⁵⁷ *Mizān al-i'tidāl*, vol. vii, p. 465.

⁵⁸ Kinānī, *Tanzīḥ al-sharī'ah*, vol. i, pp. 19–133.

them. Then, if such restriction is carried too far, it is no great exaggeration to liken it to a sort of burying alive. The burying alive of infant girls was a terrible practice of the Arab Jāhiliyyah, the period of Ignorance before Islam. And the Qur'an (*al-Takwīr*, 81: 8–9) warns of the Day when the victims of that crime will cry out to God for justice – the day *when the infant buried alive shall ask for what sin she was killed*.

The women scholars who contributed so much to our knowledge and understanding of Islam by preserving and transmitting the ḥadīths and *sunnaḥ*s of God's Messenger, *ṣalla-llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*, enjoyed authority and respect in the communities they served. Their authority was not founded upon personal political power such as a queen or princess might wield openly from the throne, or secretly from behind it. Nor was it founded upon some charismatic, mysterious influence, such as is enjoyed by women (or men) who acquire a reputation as saints or faith-healers or ecstasies of some kind. The women whose work I have mentioned achieved what they achieved in the field of public knowledge, not secret knowledge; and by the ordinary means of public reasoning from and with the same sources as were accessible to others – indeed that was their very business (as it was of the great men scholars busy in the same task), to make the primary sources accessible to others, to all. That is why all Muslims owe so great a debt of gratitude to both the *muḥaddithūn* and the *muḥaddithāt*.

As Muslims their foremost concern was to act in ways that would enable virtue and disable sin in their personal lives and in the public ethos of their societies. As scholars their primary concern was to collect and order accurately as much as they could of the guidance that was the legacy of God's Messenger. Since it is affirmed of the women scholars of ḥadīth that none was ever accused of dubious reports, their lives illustrate a double achievement, combining personal and professional virtue. I have said, and here reiterate, that their lives were lived in conformity with, not in opposition to, the norms and values of Islam as these were evolved, practised and embodied in its formative period.
