



Are women deficient in intelligence ?

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The position of women in islam has been topic of debate for many years. Often we see many hadith and quranic verses being misinterpreted by christian missionaries and other polemics against Islam [sometimes also Muslims themselves misinterpretate or misquote hadeeth due to cultural backgrounds or "pre-islamic" influences]. The most famous narration of them all is the next one :

Once Allah's Apostle went out to the Musalla [to offer the prayer] on 'Id-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, "O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you [women]." They asked, "Why is it so, O Allah's Apostle ?" He replied, "You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you." The women asked, "O Allah's Apostle ! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion ?" He said, "Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man ?" They replied in the affirmative. He said , "This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?" The women replied in the affirmative. He said, "This is the deficiency in her religion." ¹

Many are those who question the meaning it conveys. This is largely due to the fact that the Hadith is quoted only in part and the relevant statement is cited out of context. People always attribute to the Prophet the suggestion that women are inferior to men on grounds of a deficient mind and lack of faith. This is far from true. To start with, the Prophet was speaking to a congregation of women on a joyous occasion. Exemplary in his care for others, particularly his companions, and kind and compassionate as he was, it is inconceivable that he would insult them by such a statement, if he meant it as a statement of fact, like some of us do. The Prophet, peace be upon him, simply used this phrase "deficient in mind and religion" to alert them to what he wanted to say to them. The Prophet, peace be upon him, frequently uses such a method, inserting some words that may not be relevant to the point he wants to stress, so that they serve to attract the attention of his audience. Furthermore, his statement expresses amazement at a well-known situation, when a man is infatuated by a woman to the extent that his behavior changes in character. He may be wise and intelligent, yet he could easily behave in a way that is inconsistent with his intelligence and wisdom when he is so infatuated. This is a case where a woman who is generally weaker than a man can control him. The Hadith mentions that the Prophet's women audience asked him to clarify what he said. His clarification pinpoints certain aspects that suggest no inferiority whatsoever. The mental deficiency is [only] related to the fact that in certain cases, two women witnesses are required in place of one-man witness. This has to do with the role of each of the two sexes in Islamic society. It is no reflection on a woman's mental ability. As for religious deficiency, the Prophet [saw] states

¹: Muslim [Iman 132] ; al-Tirmidsi [Iman 6] ; Ibn Maja [Fitan 19] ; Ahmad Ibn Hanbal [2:67]

the fact that a woman is exempt from prayer and fasting when she is in menstruation. While God gives a woman the reward for prayer and fasting as if she has done them, since she stops only because of her condition and in response to God's orders, still the fact that she does not fulfill these duties means that her worship is less in terms of what she offers. It does not mean that she is a lesser believer.

As for a relevant statement of fact in this regard, the Prophet, peace be upon him, says, "Women are full sisters of men." In the Arabic text, the Prophet, peace be upon him, uses here a word, which implies total similarity and equivalence. Hence, the Prophet's statement suggests no inferiority attached to women. The Qur'an and the Sunnah assign the same duties to both men and women, and promise them the same reward. If this does not mean the same status, I would like to know what does. As for the other part of the narration, it is often presented to support the view that women will outnumber men in hell. However Shehzad Saleem [Director Al-Mawrid, Institute of Islamic Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan] has pointed out in "Renaissance" [a monthly Islamic Journal] that this inference is incorrect and has arisen by not properly appreciating a particular style of communication used in certain Ahadith which depict dreams of the Prophet [saws]. Such dreams are a source of revelation for the Prophets of Allah and in them they are shown certain images by the Almighty for the purpose of educating Muslim men and women. As a principle, all such dreams are not to be interpreted literally; they contain realities which are depicted in symbolic form. Symbolic representation is a very subtle and powerful way of expression: Facts seem veiled yet for him who pauses to ponder they are the most evident. They move a person in the manner poetry does. They ignite in a person the spark to look behind the apparent. They urge him to reflect and to meditate and then to discover and to infer. They educate him without rousing his prejudices. The Prophets of Allah [saws] have effectively employed this technique of communication. The words and discourses of the Prophets Joseph [saws] and Jesus [saws] for example are full of powerful parables and subtle symbolism. The dream of the Prophet Joseph [saws] and the way he interpreted it is mentioned in the Qur'an also. If he saw in his dream that the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing before him in prostration, he knew that these heavenly bodies symbolized certain personalities. The Ahadith which depict more women in Hell should also be interpreted keeping in view this basic principle. These Ahadith do not delineate the population of women in Hell since this would be a literal interpretation; on the contrary, they just caution them that there are certain deeds which they do a lot and which, therefore, would be more instrumental in taking them to Hell; so they should avoid them. In other words, the symbolism is causative in nature. In the above quoted Hadith [narration], the cause has been symbolized to warn women of something which they often do. ²

Fatwa by Shayk Gibril F.Haddad:

Question:

I would like to know the interpretation of the Hadeeth according to which the prophet Muhammad stated that women lack in intelligence. A hanafi site on the internet [islam.tc/ask-imam] stated in detail that the hadeeth implies what it literally means and that men are more intelligent than women. It gives examples of superiority of Quran amongst other books. Allah forgive me if I am sinful for not agreeing with this interpretation. I would like to know if this is the only interpretation according to the Ahnaaf or even other madhabs ?

²: See: Shehzad Saleem, "Women outnumbering men in Hell", in "Renaissance" [February 2005], Vol. 15, No. 2

Reply:

The hadith states that the Prophet [upon him blessings and peace] , addressed a group of women in the mosque, saying: I have not seen any one more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious, sensible man could be led astray by some of you." The women asked: "O Allah's Apostle, what is deficient in our intelligence and religion ?" He said: "Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man ?" They replied in the affirmative. He said: "This is the deficiency of your intelligence"... "Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses ?" The women replied in the affirmative. He said: "This is the deficiency in your religion." ³

It's meaning is not literal:

The hadith here uses two figures of speech: the first is hyperbole [mubalagha] meaning exaggeration in the words "even a prudent, sensible man might be led astray by some of you" i.e. a fortiori an ordinary man. The second figure is synecdoche [majaz mursal] consisting in using the whole for the part: intelligence to mean the specific legal testimony of a woman, and religion to mean the prayer and fast at the time of menses. Numerous verses and other narrations stress that the reward of women equals that of men even if their acts differ. So this particular narration is not meant literally but as an acknowledgment of the inordinate power women wield over men while ostensibly "less active" in the "public" and "spiritual" spheres.

Three additional background meanings:

Three additional [background] meanings provide an indispensable *completion of the picture* of this hadith. These meanings revolve around *fundraising for jihad*, the blame of *women's cursing* of their husbands, and *the playfulness of the Prophet* [upon him blessings and peace] , with his female public

1. Fundraising

The real import of the hadith - spoken at the Farewell Pilgrimage - and its actual context was that the Prophet challenged the women that were present to realize that unless they helped raise money with *their gold and jewelry*, they would miss the reward of *men waging jihad* as well as show ingratitude.

2. Blame of cursing

In the full version of the hadith the Prophet [saaws] also orders the women to ask forgiveness and desist from frequently cursing their husbands. All this was spoken at a time of [1] the impending departure of the latter on jihad; [2] the impending departure of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, from this World ; and [3] the fact that: "*Cursing the believer is like killing him*" [Bukhari]

3. Playfulness

The Prophet was also being playful in his use of strong terms to impress this teaching on the listeners. Ruqayyah Waris Maqsum writes: "...After the Farewell Pilgrimage at the Eid prayer, the Prophet [Allah bless him and give him peace] walked past the men leaning on Bilal's arm, and came to the rows of women behind them. Bilal spread out a cloth and the Prophet [Allah bless him and give him peace] urged the women to be generous with their gifts of charity, for when he had

³: It is related in al-Bukhari and Muslim

been allowed a glimpse into the flames of Hell, he had noted that most of the people being tormented there were women. The women were outraged, and one of them instantly stood up boldly and demanded to know why that was so. 'Because,' he replied, 'you women grumble so much, and show ingratitude to your husbands! Even if the poor fellows spent all their lives doing good things for you, you have only to be upset at the least thing and you will say, 'I have never received any good from you !' [Bukhari 1.28, recorded by Ibn Abbas]. At that the women began vigorously to pull off their rings and ear-rings, and throw them into Bilal's cloth....."

In conclusion, we need to remove the meaning of the words of the Prophet [sasws] from our contemporary context of sour feminism and the clash of the sexes, and replace it into its proper context: namely, a parting, wartime exhortation using certain figures of speech which are not meant literally, nor are women the issue although they are addressed pointedly and, as it were, by the scruff of their gender; but rather, to trigger among wealthy and sensible citizens acts of generosity for the greater good while reminding them that life is fleeting and thankfulness a surer way to Paradise than despair. [4](#)

Fatwa by Shayk Muhammad Ali Al-Hanooti:

Question:

We are all equal in the sight of Allah swt and the only thing which sets us apart is our deeds. However, I have trouble with some of the hadiths and certain verses of the Qur'an and how they fit into this whole idea of equality between men and women. There is one hadith in particular which confuses me, and it is the hadith which says, paraphrased: "There are more women in hell because they were ungrateful to their husbands. Women are less intelligent than men because two women witnesses are required for one man witness. Women are more deficient in religion because they can not fast or pray during their menses." Now, to me, this hadith seems to show an inequality. I am a university student, and I have to say that I have not seen an overwhelming proof that men are more intelligent than women. I have noticed that sometimes men do better in math related subjects, but women *do equally better in liberal arts and subjects requiring analysis*. In addition, I find that there are many women who excel in the mathematics departments as well. Also, how can a woman be more deficient in religion due to her menses, if that is something she can not control ? It is a natural thing women have to contend with, so *how can it be that they are seen as having "less" religion than men ?.....*

Answer:

Our source of knowledge is Allah swt. Reason is not a source, but is a tool to understand what Allah revealed to us through his messenger. If you believe in this data, then your argument would be in the authenticity of the content of a Hadith.

The Quran is always fully articulate in vocabulary and style. Everything in the Quran is the exact saying of Allah. The Hadith is different in punctuality of language, because some Hadiths one related by the companions of the Prophet [upon him blessings and peace] , they could have a different synonym or a different additional or omitted conjunction or article. This is what is called in the Hadith terminology "narration by meaning".

4: See - http://www.livingislam.org/k/wiha_e.html -

The Hadith you referred to is authentic, the Prophet [saaws] talks about women not as a gender or a race or ethnic. He talks about sinful people who deserve what they will have of destiny. If a man does the same , he will have "the same Hell". This is the "only way" you can interpret the Hadith

The Prophet [upon him blessings and peace] has explained what he says of shortage of deen [religion] which is different from your interpretation or translation of deen [religion]. He says, you are less commended to practice the deen, because of menstruation. When he talks about lack of intellect, **he does "not" talk about potential of brain or capacity of talent or skill**. A woman is overloaded by being a mother or a babysitter or pregnant. All these carriers are around the clock, because of what she is, **she is always likely to forget more than a man who is devoted to one career only**. Allah is merciful, he forgives her and makes it easy for her when she is not fully responsible to give a full testimony as a witness. Nothing of that is defaming a woman, there is not a law that discriminates a woman to put her down.... [5](#)

Extra Notes:

Also "al lajnah al daima" , the fatwa council of Saudi Arabia confirms that the testimony of two women being equivalent to the testimony of one man [in the specific situation of Qu'ran 2: 282] has nothing to do with women's brain capacity, but rather with other factors.

".....With regard to the testimony of two women being equivalent to the testimony of one man in some cases, that is because women tend to be more forgetful than men **because of their natural cycles of menstruation, pregnancy, giving birth, raising children etc. All these things preoccupy them and make them forgetful**. Hence the shar'i evidence indicates that another women should reinforce a woman's testimony, so that it will be more accurate. But there are matters that pertain only to women in which the testimony of a single woman is sufficient, such as determining how often a child was breastfed, faults that may affect marriage, and so on...." [6](#)

In other words the prophet did not refer to a woman's ability to think and / or brain capacity when he talked about her "mental deficiency" , nor did he meant it literally. On the contrary the hadith in question tells us that the Prophet's women audience asked him to clarify what he ment by this mental deficiency. The Prophet [saaws] then went on to define precisely what he meant by it. His clarification pinpoints certain aspects that suggest no intellectual inferiority whatsoever. The Prophet told the women that this mental deficiency [he talked about] "only" refers to the fact that the Qu'ran in Surah Al Baraqa [verse 282] stipulates that: " two women witnesses are required in place of one-man witness". This stipulation however only refers to business transactions, or in other words matters in which women are generally less versed then men due to their inexperience in it and the role of each gender in the society. Muhammad Asad writes:

The stipulation that two women may be substituted for one male witness **does not imply any reflection on woman's moral or intellectual capabilities**: it is obviously due to the fact that, as a rule, women are less familiar with business procedures than men and, therefore, more liable to commit mistakes in this respect. [Abduh in Manar 111, 124 f.] [7](#)

5: See, - <http://www.islamonline.net/livefatwa/english/Browse.asp?hGuestID=j2y56m> -

6: Fataawa Al-Lajnah al-Daa'imah li'l-Buhooth al-'Ilmiyyah wa'l-Ifta', 17 / 7

7: Muhammad Asad, "The Message of the Qu'ran" [Gibraltar, 1980], note 273, p. 63

Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer comments on the verse in question:

“...It was **only lack of experience** in business transaction that the Qur'an insisted on having two women instead of one. The Qur'anic verse stipulating two women, in place of one man, **refers to only financial transaction, nothing else**. Thus even if one insists on literal adherence on the words of the Qur'an, one must apply this Qur'anic provision to matters of financial transaction only.....” ⁸

“...Another important thing to note about the verse is that though two female witnesses in place of one male witness have been recommended, only one would bear witness, the other's function being nothing more than reminding her in case she falters [on account of her inexperience in Financial matters] . The words of the Qur'an are: "an tadilla ihdahuma fatudhakkira ihdahuma ukhra" [if one of them should make a mistake, the other could remind her] . In those days there was always some possibility of female witnesses making mistakes **in Financial matter due to their inexperience and not due to any inferior intellectual ability**. This verse should be categorised as a contextual and not a normative one. The Qur'an is certainly not laying down any norm that in matters of witnessing two women should be treated as being equal to one man. Had it been so intended the Qur'an, wherever the question of witnessing arises, would have treated the women in this way. However, this is not so. There are seven other verses about recording evidence in the Qur'an but **none of them lays down the requirement of two female witnesses in place of one man.**” ⁹

A close examination of the Prophet's clarification or explanation related to the deficiencies mentioned in the hadeeth in question shows us that the Prophet's words were never meant literal and "only" referred to the fact that most women in his time had little knowledge in business transactions or economic issues "due to inexperience" and being less involved in such issues due to their role in the society. A woman's intellectual capacity, or ability to think is not discussed or referred to by the Prophet here. Had this been the case women would have been treated as inferiors in intelligence by the Prophet and Allah allmighty in the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah. However neither the Prophet, nor Allah Allmighty in the Holy Qur'an treat or view women as inferior or defect in intelligence and / or religion. On the contrary it is well known that the Prophet allowed Muslim women to teach and educate Muslim men. Had the Prophet [upon him blessings and peace] really viewed or believed that women were imperfect or defect in intelligence he would have never allowed Muslim women to teach or educate Muslim men. However he did ! Had women been viewed as imperfect or defect in reasoning and religion the Prophet would have never consulted women on important issues. However it is well known that the Prophet consulted his wife Um Salama on one of the most important issues to the Muslim community. Her advice prevented disunity among the Muslims after the Treaty of Hudaibiya and her opinion prevailed over that of many men, including Umar ibn al-Khattab [see: al-Tabari, Tafsir, vol. 22, p.10]. Our Prophet moreover praised his wife Aisha for her intellectual skills and knowledge ! He even allowed her and other women to educate many male companions [*sahaba*] in the religion of Islam !

Al-Qasim ibn Muhammad said, "**A'ischa undertook fatwa** [giving legal opinion] in the khalifates of Abu Bakr, Umar, Ithman and so on until she died." In "the shade of the Cloud" by Abu Abdullah al-Ghafiqi about A'isha, "She had the most transmissions and the most fiqh of those who gave fatwa. She was sought out by people from the furthest lands **for her knowledge** of the Sunna and what is obligatory. She related all poetry of the Arabs

⁸: Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, The Quran, Women and Modern Society [New Dawn Press, 2005], p. 73

⁹: Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, The Rights of Women in Islam [New Dawn Press, second edition 2004], p. 76

with purity. She was wonderful in tafsir [commentary on Qur'an] and eloquent expression. She has the most ample portion of knowledge and medicine." She transmitted to at least 77 men and 8 women, of whom 14 [11 men and 3 women] were related to her...

Ai'isha used to interpret the sciences and provide information on obscure matters to outstanding men. **She corrected a group of Companions** in many hadiths, they include: Umar and his son, Abu Hurayra, Ibn Abbas, Uthman ibn Affan, Ali ibn Abi Talib, Ibn az Zubayr, Zayd, Abu'd-Darda, Abu Sa'id, al-Bara, Fatima bint Qays and others. Urwa said "I never saw **anyone with more knowledge about the halal and the haram, general knowledge, poetry and medicine than A'isha**". Masruq said, "I saw the Companions asking A'isha about shares of inheritance [Al-Hakim].

This was not limited to A'isha. It was like that with the rest of the Prophet's wives and the female Companions - like Umm Sulaym, Umm ad-Darda, Fatima bint Qays al-Adawiyya, and other women after them. People used to receive knowledge and instruction from these women as they received it from men. This is confirmed in the books of hadith, history and biographical collections [Tabaqat] . **10**

Professor Yusuf Da Costa also points out in his book:

Part of the dignity granted by Islam to women, **has been to grant to her the right to participate in decision-making structures**, and to be part of the process of mutual consultation in such decisions: " [The believers are those] who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation" [42:38]. In Islam, women have been granted the right to participate in major decision making as a parent, **as an educator**, in the medical and legal professions, amongst others, and in all the different fields in which she participates. Such women have, as examples, the role of Sayyidatuna Aishah [r] who taught many of the Companions [r] **and the many female teachers of Imam Shafi'i**.

Since the advent of Islam, women have taught how to apply decision-making processes in different religious disciplines. **These applications require clarity of mind, the rapid reorganization of ideas, and the presentation of complex arguments.** **11**

Notice how women in the time of the Prophet [upon him blessings and peace] and Salaf [the first three generations of Muslims] were sought for education, guidance and fatwa . Allah in the Qu'ran moverover gives women the same rights as men in one of the most important matters related to intelligence and religion: "enjoining the good and forbidding the wrong" :

".....The Believers,men and women, **are "awliyya" one of another:** they enjoin on each other what is just, and forbid what is evil:" [Qur'an 9:71]

Allah allmighty here describes men and women as "*awliyya*" of each other, which means helpers, protectors or protecting friends and guardians. This quranic verse is general and includes helping each other with advise, sharing wisdom and religions or non-religious education on various issues which concern the society and / or an individual person or family. This verse proofs that Islam

10: Aisha Bewley, "*Islam: The Empowering of Women*" [Ta-Ha Publishers, 1999] , pp. 8-9

11: Dr. Yusuf Da Costa, "*The Honor of Women in Islam* " [Islamic Supreme Council of America, 2002] , pp. 30-31

doesn't view or treat women as deficient in intelligence and / or religion. Both men and women are each other's protectors and guardians, both determine what is good and what is evil. How can one misinterpretate and take the Prophet's words out of context and literally view or describe women as deficient in intelligence and religion when the Holy Quran gives shining examples of some women for the believers - male and female- to emulate ? :

“...Allah citeth **an example for those who believe** : the wife of pharaoh when she said:“My Lord ! Build for me a home with thee in the Garden, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his work, and deliver me from evil doing folk” ; and Mary, daughter of Imran, whose body was chaste, therefor We breathed therein something of Our Spirit. And she put faith in the words of her Lord and His Scriptures, and was of the obedient...” [Qur'an 66:11-12]

How can one misinterpretate and take the Prophet's words out of context [by overlooking the Prophet's own explanation given to these 'deficiencies' mentioned in the hadeeth] , and describe women as “imperfect” or “literally” deficient in intelligence and religion, when the first person to believe in the Prophet was a woman [his own wife Khadija] ! Secondly it's important to mention that when the Qu'ran was first compiled, it was given in the custody of a woman, Hazrat Hafsa bint Umar bin al-Khattab. She kept the compilation in her custody from the time of the first to that of the third Caliph Hazrat Uaaman. All later compilations of the Qur'an were based on this first compilation and copies of it were distributed throughout the Islamic world. Thirdly one should know that the first martyr to die in the cause of Islam was also a woman, Ummu Amir. Ruqaiyya Waris Maqsood moreover observes that women not offering prayer during their menses or fasting on those days in the month of Ramadan is not a failing in their religion at all [therefor one cannot interpretate the hadith discussed in this paper literally by taking the words of the Prophet out of context]. In one of her articles she writes:

Is it possible that the two above wry comments of the Prophet were also intended to be taken as examples of his humour ? It is vital that it should be made very clear that women not offering prayer during their menses or fasting on those days in the month of Ramadan **is not a failing in their religion at all - it was a concession allowed by Allah in His revelation.** As regarded the fasts, women were simply required to make up the missed days at some other time before the coming of the next Ramadan month. **Their period of uncleanness and “discomfort” during menstruation coming under the category of illness** : “...Therefore, anyone of you who witnesses that month should fast therein, and whoever is ill or upon a journey shall fast a similar number of days later on. Allah intends your well-being and does not want to put you to hardship. He wants you to complete the prescribed period so that you should glorify His Greatness and render thanks to Him for giving you guidance...” [Quran 2:185]. Imam Malik, who did not regard travelling as being a good enough reason, accepted menstruation as valid reason. "No one who, by the Book of Allah, has to fast may break his fast except for a reason - illness or menstruation. He must not travel and break his fast." Malik said, "This is the best that I have heard about the matter." [12](#)

Fiqh as-Sunnah 1.71a [in the Alim Encyclopedia cd] gives us: If women fast [while menstruating during Ramadan], those days will be considered null and void. They will still have to make those days of fasting up later on. Mu'adhah said: "I asked Aishah: Why must we make up the fasts missed due to our menstruation, but not the prayers [missed through menstruation] ?" **She said, "That was what the Messenger of Allah told us to do. We were ordered to make up the fasts, and we were ordered not to make up the prayers."** [13](#)

[12](#): Al-Muwatta 18:40

[13](#): Fiqh as-Sunnah 1.71a

More proof to show that the Prophet's words were never meant literally [and did not refer to a woman's ability to think or intellectual capacity] is the fact that a literal interpretation of the hadeeth [by overlooking the Prophet's own explanation given to these 'deficiencies' mentioned in the hadeeth and context] would conflict with various injunctions which are there in the Qur'an itself and also in some other traditions. If women were really viewed as defective in reason and religion in Islam, then it would be necessary to restrict their power to dispose of their properties and at least make it subject to the approval and permission of their husbands or guardians. But Islam has acknowledged the absolute competence of women in this respect and has allowed her full rights of disposition over her properties. A literal interpretation [by taking the Prophet's words out of context] would also conflict with some of the historical facts in the Prophet's time and that of the rightly guided Caliphs. During the time of the rightful guided Caliphs, the Caliphs sought counsel from women and gave importance to their opinions, see:

The Literature abounds with stories of women who dialogued with men about proper Islamic practices, or the preferred interpretation of an Islamic text. Women were also reporters of hadith. **As a result many prominent men came to them for religious education and guidance.** This trend continued for several centuries after the death of the Prophet. As the concept of education expanded, many women leaders appeared in the various disciplines. **There were prominent female literary figures, religious leaders, doctors, judges, politicians, and teachers to name a few.**

It might be useful at this point to mention some of these "women". **Among the outstanding "literary figures"** are Sukaynah bint al-Hussayn, the granddaughter of the Prophet, A'isha bint Talha and Walladah Bint al-Mustakfi. Among the physicians are Zainab, the physician of the tribe of bani Awd and Um al-Hassan, daughter of Judge Abu Jafar al-Tanjali. Among those **who actively participated in politics are Hind bint Yazid al-Ansariyah and Akrashah bint al-Utrush** [14](#)

Omaima Abou-Bakr writes:

In al-Sakhâwî's - al-Daw'al-lâmi' - , we read about Khadija daughter of al-Ashraf Sha'ban bin Husayn [d. 1422] who was "**characterized by reason and a leading Position**" [al-Sakhâwî, al-Daw'al-lâmi , p. 27] and the Meccan Khadija daughter of al-Wajih Abd al-Rahman bin Abdallah [1385-1455] who: "**taught hadith to many honorable scholars and possessed knowledge**, experience and decent manners" [al-Sakhâwî, al-Daw'al-lâmi p. 28] Zaynab daughter of al-Nur Ali bin al-Shihab Ahmad bin Khuld [d. 1486] was "**rational, judicious, a good organizer or manager**, friendly, patient, and content" [al-Sakhâwî, al-Daw'al-lâmi , p. 43]. Notice that these seemingly inharmonious descriptions **actually fit the time's picture of the perfect teacher-scholar**: one who can wisely conduct the learning sessions, is friendly and patient with demanding students, and finally qani'a, that is can be content or satisfied with any form of wages for her labors. As for Zaynab daughter of Qadi al-Kamil Abi al-Fadl Muhammad bin Abd al-Aziz [1363-1420] , she was "**of leading position, very intelligent**, a reader of the Qu'ran, who used to practice quizzing ["kanit tudhakkir"] with others on poetry and history" [more on this special learning exercise later]. She was also the superintendent of her mother's awqaf [al-Sakhâwî, al-Daw'al-lâmi p. 46]. Sarah daughter of Umar bin Abd al-ziz bin Ali bin Sakhr [1358-1451] **taught and disseminated a lot of material to a great many imams and scholars**, and Sakhawi reveals that he personally received from her "and indescribable amount of learning;" she was "**good, pious, clever, and tactful**" and her death was a loss to

14: Azizah al-Habri , "Islam, Law, and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women's Rights", in: "American University Journal of International Law and Policy" [1997] , vol. 12:1 , pp. 40-41

the people of Egypt [al-Sakhâwî, al-Daw'al-lâmi , p. 52]. And from Damascus another Sarah, daughter of Muhammad bin Ali bin Yusuf [d. 1457] who was from "the distinguished leaders **among the women of her time in mind, religion,** and nobility of descent" [al-Sakhâwî, al-Daw'al-lâmi , p. 53]. Then there is the Cairene A'isha daughter of Ali bin Muhammad bin Ibrahim bin Nasrallah bin Ahmad who was a Hanbalite scholar [1359-1436] : "**many of the imams received education from her, and students studied extensively under her,** for she was a good kind woman with great understanding and knowledge of the history of the 'Sira' , a great deal of 'hadith' works and a lot of poetry". Furthermore, "**she was quite intelligent** and used to read and grasp well the works of figh, she traveled to Palestine and taught hadith there to many eminent figures" [al-Sakhâwî, al-Daw'al-lâmi , p. 78]. The list of famous "Muhaddithat" across the major Muslim centers and capitals is long , and most of them as we have seen are especially described as **having aql and judiciousness.**

In other words, the "Muhaddithat" were succesful scholars and educators in their own right who were known not only for memorizing, preserving, and transmitting the hadith tradition, **but also for their expert knowledge and understanding of this corpus.** We also come across several of them who were given the title of "shaykha" , which Trittion thinks was used for a muhadditha or 'alima of the Hanbali school in particular. Others are given the titles of "Sitt al-wuzara" [lady of ministers] , "Sitt al-fuqaha" [Lady of jurists] , "Sitt al-ulama" [Lady of scholars] , "Sitt al-quda" [Lady of judges] etc. [15](#)

Dr. Mohammad Fadel writes:

The domain most widely recognized by modern scholarship in which women continued to participate alongside men was the public transmission of the hadith, the normative reports containing the history of the Prophet and the earliest Muslim community. Evidence of female participation in this realm can be found in the many diplomas [ijazas] containing women's names and in the colophons of manuscripts **that mention women as teachers** and as students. Further evidence of the recognized role of women's scholarship is the fact that many of these female scholars were given academic titles, such as al- musnida , **which can be translated roughly as "the authority"**.

Jonathan Berkey, in his important study of the educational system in medieval Cairo, suggests that women's participation in the intellectul life of Cairo was largely limited to the purely historical science of hadith. However, there is some **evidence that women also participated openly and legitimately in the more speculative branches of the religious sciences,** such as positive law and speculative Legal philosophy. Al-Hattab, a North African jurist of the 16th century, carefully mentions in the introduction of one of his Works the names of his teachers, his teacher's teachers, and the chain of authorities [isnad] that linked him to the authors of the various books that he had studied in his legal career. Two women appear in these chains of authorities. The First woman, Zaynab bint al-Kamal al-Maqdisiyya "al musnida" [d. 1339] , seems to have been involved only in the transmission of hadith. The second woman, however, Umm al-Hasan Fatima bint Khalil al-Kattani [or al-Kinani] , transmitted to al-Hattab the Works of the great Maliki jurist Shihab al-Din al-Qarafi. Through the transmission of of this woman, then, al-Hattab received al-Qarafi's encyclopedic work on Maliki positive law, the "Dhakhira" ; three Works on speculative philosophy, "Tanqih al-fusul" , "Sharh tanqih al-fusul", and "Sharh al-mahsul" ; a work on the Legal principles of the Maliki school, "al-Qawa'id" ; and al-Ummiyya fi idrak al-niyya , a work discussing the notion of intention and intentionality in the law.

15: Omaima Abou-Bakr: " Teaching The Words Of The Prophet: Women Instructors Of The Hadith [Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries] " , in: "Hawwa" [2003] , vol. 3, nr. 1 , pp. 317-18

Although the number of men who studied the religious sciences far exceeded that of women, it is sufficient to note that the participation of women in the production and reproduction of religious knowledge **was of a sufficient pedigree and skill that female authorities were recognized to be the intellectual equals of men** by the institutions of learning within certain medieval Muslim societies, even in the context of law. This official recognition is implicit in the fact that a woman's transmission of a book, a hadith, or a Legal opinion did nothing to lessen the legitimacy of the text being transmitted or the validity of the norm being enunciated. [16](#)

Islamic history bears witness to the fact that many women achieved fame and respect among the community for their intellectual skills and wisdom. Women's recognised participation as intellectuals moreover created awareness of the contradiction between the epistemological equality women enjoyed in the production and transmission of knowledge, and the opinion of those who took the hadith of the Prophet literal and argued that: "women are inherently deficient in reason and religion" [by overlooking the Prophet's own explanation given to these deficiencies mentioned in the hadith and the context]. The argument that women are inherently deficient in reason and religion was therefore already described as "weak" in "medieval times" by the Muslim Scholar Ibn al-Shatt, see:

Al-Qarafi's commentator, Ibn al-Shatt [d. 1323] , **describes this argument as weak** because if one accepts that female witnesses are deficient in reason and religion, this deficiency must also be present when a woman acts as a narrator of hadith. In that case, harm would still occur as a result of her deficient reason and character. However, he adds **the narration of a woman - unlike her testimony - does not need to be corroborated before it is accepted.** [17](#)

jurists realized that attributing **a general intellectual inferiority to women was, within the existing structure of Islamic law, an untenable position.** [18](#)

Had there been a natural quality inherent in women rendering their statements more unreliable than those of men, the law should have consistently discriminated against the statements of women, whether in normative or in the political domain. Furthermore, if the law deemed a woman's rationality to be so defective that even in the recollection of facts she was not to be trusted, it would seem that the law should a fortiori reject her interpretations of revelation as being necessarily defective. **In fact, however, we have seen that a woman's legal opinion [fatwa] was considered to be on par with that of a man** [19](#)

Dr. Mohammed Fadel also writes:

There was **complete agreement among Sunni jurists that women could be mufti.** It was as a result of the law's acceptance of women as mufti, moreover, that al-Tabari was led to argue that a woman could be a judge in all areas of the law. [20](#)

[16](#): M. Fadel: "Two Women, One Man: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in Medieval Sunni Legal Thought", in "International Journal of Middle East Studies" [1997], vol. 29, no. 2, p. 191

[17](#): Ibid. , p. 192

[18](#): Ibid. , p. 194

[19](#): Ibid. , p. 190

[20](#): Ibid. , p. 200

Conclusion:

A close examination of the Prophet's clarification related to these "deficiencies" mentioned in the hadeeth clearly shows us that the Prophet's words were never meant literally, nor did the Prophet refer to a woman's intellectual nature, ability to think or brain capacity when he talked about this deficiency in "aql". On the contrary the hadith in question tells us that the Prophet's women audience asked him to clarify what he ment by this deficiency in "aql". The Prophet then went on to define precisely what he meant by it. His clarification pinpoints certain aspects that suggest no intellectual inferiority whatsoever. The Prophet told the women that this deficiency in "aql" is only a reference to the fact that the Holy Qu'ran in Surah Al Baraqa, verse 282, stipulates that: " two women witnesses are recommended in place of one-man witness". This stipulation however refers only to business transactions, i.e. matters in which women are generally less versed then men due to their inexperience in it, and the role of each gender in the society. Therefor the Holy Qu'ran stipulates in relation to financial contracts that one of the two male witnesses may be replaced by two women witnesses. The reason given is that "*if one of them forgets, the other can remind her.*" Thus the basis of the rule is that women, being generally less involved in business matters, may be more prone to forget the details of a deal. This [and nothing else] is the meaning of the deficiency in "aql" mentioned in the hadith. This conclusion is also consistent with one of the meanings of the Arabic verb 'aqala:

the verb '*aqala* has the following meanings:..... To be or to bring something within the grasp of the mind, to comprehend, to understand. Also, to be reasonable, have intelligence,**The word can also mean, to have memory of something** .Thus "*la a'qal hadha*" means "I have no memory of this." [21](#)

The word 'aql in the context of this hadith does not refer to instinctive reason, practical reason or general intellect, but to memory. The Arabic word ['*aql*] is not used in it's literal or general sense by the Prophet here, as pointed out by Shayk G.F. Haddad, see:

the hadith here uses two figures of speech: the first is hyperbole [mubalagha] meaning exaggeration in the words "even a prudent, sensible man might be led astray by some of you" i.e. a fortiori an ordinary man. The second figure is synechdoche [majaz mursal] **consisting in using the whole for the part:** "intelligence" to mean the specific legal testimony of a woman, and religion to mean the prayer and fast at the time of menses. [22](#)

If the Prophet was using the word in it's general or literal sense, and thus was referring to a woman's general intellect or practical and instinctive reason, than for sure the Prophet would have never allowed women to teach men or to give fatwa [legal opinions in Islamic Law]. However our beloved Prophet [upon him blessings and peace] allowed for women all these things that require a lot of intellect, practical reason and / or instinctive reason. Therefor the narration in question is only referring to a woman's weaker memory on issues related to "business dealings". This is moreover supported by the fact that one cannot judge someones's level of practical reason or instinctive reason by his / her testimony as a witness [Qur'an 2:282]. On the other hand one can judge or measure someone's memory by his / her testimony as a witness. Therefor it's not correct to interpretate the word "aql" in this hadith as a reference to someone's general intellect, practical reason or instinctive reason [such an interpretation would contradict with the Qur'an, historical Islamic facts and Islamic Law which allows women to teach men, see pp. 6 t/m 11 of this booklet]

[21: See, - http://www.islamicperspectives.com/Fikr.htm#_ftn2 -](http://www.islamicperspectives.com/Fikr.htm#_ftn2)

[22: See, - http://www.livingislam.org/k/wiha_e.html -](http://www.livingislam.org/k/wiha_e.html)

Secondly many of the English translations of this hadith are not very accurate. The word used to translate the Arabic word 'naqs' is deficiency, which brings about associations such as something being 'wrong' with you, whereas if the word is translated literally, it means 'lacking'. This makes a difference, as "deficient" is a much much stronger and loaded word. Everyone can be lacking in something [like patience, empathy, memory etc.] without them having something "wrong" with them. So the word "deficiency" is not an accurate translation of the word 'naqs' here. The word naqs [in the context of this hadith] could also mean "relaxation" or "reduction" , as pointed out by Shehzad Saleem in one of his writings. [23](#)

And finally a woman's weaker memory on issues related to "business dealings" is [as pointed out earlier] caused by "sociological factors" and not "biological" ones, because the hadith in question needs to be interpreted and understood in the light of Surah Al Baraqa , verse 282, on which Dr. Mohammad Fadel comments in his paper :

in the light of the preceding evidence, moreover, one can no longer simply assume that modernist interpretations of Qur'an 2:282 represent a radical break from Islamic law ; indeed, from the perspective of fiqh, the sociological interpretation, not the natural or the psychological one , **is the only plausible reading of the verse.** [24](#)

Dr. Mohammad Fadel refers to the interpretation of Mohammad Asad and others who argue or state that: "...The stipulation that two women may be substituted for one male witness does not imply any reflection on woman's moral or intellectual capabilities: it is obviously due to the fact that, as a rule, women are less familiar with business procedures than men and, therefore, more liable to commit mistakes in this respect..." In his work Dr. Mohammed Fadel concludes that this sociological *interpretation* from the perspective of *fiqh* [Islamic Law] is the '*only*' plausible reading of the verse. Therefor the cause for women's weakness in memory on issues related to business dealings [to which the prophet was referring in the hadith] are sociological factors, not biological ones ! Therefor the hadith in question does "not" discriminate against women as a gender, nor does the hadith in question put down or discuss a woman's general intellect and / or instinctive and / or practical reason ! Women's intellectual skills are "not" put down in this hadith !

In conclusion, we need to remove the meaning of the words of the Prophet [sasws] from our contemporary context of sour feminism and the clash of the sexes, and replace it into its proper context: namely, a parting, wartime exhortation using certain figures of speech which are not meant literally, nor are women the issue although they are addressed pointedly and, as it were, by the scruff of their gender; but rather, to trigger among wealthy and sensible citizens acts of generosity for the greater good while reminding them that life is fleeting and thankfulness a surer way to Paradise than despair. [25](#)

Another Possible Interpretation:

Mr. Shehzad Saleem [Director Al-Mawrid] writes in the Islamic Journal Renaissance: "...The following Hadith is generally presented to support the view that women are less sensible than men:

[23](#): See, - <http://www.renaissance.com.pk/mayq994.html> -

[24](#): M. Fadel: "Two Women, One Man: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in Medieval Sunni Legal Thought" , in "International Journal of Middle East Studies" [1997] , vol. 29, no. 2 , p. 191

[25](#): See, - http://www.livingislam.org/k/wiha_e.html -

Abu Sa'id Khudri narrates that the Prophet while once talking to a group of women on the occasion of Eid ul Fitr or Eid ul Adha said: "and I have seen no one more than you rob even a resolute man of his senses in spite of being **Naqisati 'Aql wa Din'**. They said: 'O Allah's Messenger, what is this **Naqs** in religious and worldly affairs?' He said: 'Is not the evidence of a woman equal to half of a man's'. They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'This is their **Naqs** in worldly affairs'. He said: 'Is it not a fact that when they enter the period of menses they neither pray nor fast'. They said: 'Yes'. Whereupon he said: 'This is the **Naqs** in religious affairs'.

This misconception has arisen because of a wrong translation of the Arabic phrase Naqisati 'Aql wa Din. The word 'Naqs' has generally been translated as 'defective' keeping in view the Urdu meaning of the word. However, in Arabic, the verb "Naqasa" means 'to reduce' and the word 'Aql' here means 'worldly affairs' since it is used in conjugation with the word "Din" [religion]. Keeping in view, both these aspects, the correct translation of the above phrase, if the context is also taken into consideration, is that women have been given a relief and reduction in their worldly and religious affairs. The relief in worldly responsibilities, as is mentioned in this Hadith, is that women have not been dragged in certain activities and spheres. For example, the Qur'an urges men to testify on legal documents so that women are relieved of appearing in courts and wasting their precious time on affairs which others can handle. Only if men are not available should a society involve women in such affairs. The relief women have been given in religious affairs is that they are not required to pray or fast during their monthly periods as is mentioned in this Hadith. So what must be kept in mind is the fact that the meaning of a word does not always remain the same in two different languages.....

Moreover, people who think that women are less sensible than men on the basis of this Hadith do not realize that the Hadith is not merely saying that women are Naqisati 'Aql', it is also saying they are "Naqisati Din". If "Naqisati 'Aql" means that there is some defect in their 'Aql [intellect], then by the same token, "Naqisati Din" should mean that there is also some shortcoming in the religion they follow ! This of course is absurd and as referred to above is the result of keeping the Urdu meaning of the word in consideration...." [26](#)

Biblical view on a woman's intellect:

In Islam we have seen that women are given the right to teach men. In other words Islam believes that women are equal to men in their intellectual skills. If this was not the case, Islamic Law would have never allowed women to teach men. In the Bible on the other hand we read that women are not allowed to teach men. Paul writes in one of his letters to the church: "... But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression..." [1 Timothy 2:11-14]. It's important to point out that this passage forbids women from two activities, not one [as some tried to argue]. Paul's grammatical structure indicates that it is not merely exercising authority over men that is prohibited, but also the teaching of men by women. Dr. R. Fowler White [Prof. of the New Testament] writes:

the text of 1 Tim 2:12 places restrictions on two activities [teaching and ruling], not one [teaching authoritatively]. As such, **the text does not support** the concept of "authoritative teaching" often derived from it. [27](#)

[26](#): Shehzad Saleem: "Islam and Women: Misconceptions and Misperceptions", in "Renaissance", February 2005, Vol. 15, No. 2

[27](#): R. Fowler White: "The Concept of Authoritative Teaching and The Role of Women in Congregational Worship", in "Ordained Servant" [Jan. 2001], vol. 1, no. 1, p. 13

Why are women not allowed to teach men ? Paul gives us the next argument for his statement in his letter: "...For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression..." [1 Timothy 2:14] In other words, Paul wants to remind his audience that it was a woman who was so foolish that a garden snake was able to trick her. For this reason he argues that it is not proper for her to teach men. So here we clearly see that the Bible views women "intellectually" inferior and weak compared to men. Christian Theologians have confirmed this "Biblical" fact:

there was more wisdom and courage in Adam..... It was not Adam who went astray. **Therefor there was greater wisdom in Adam**, than in the woman. [28](#)

Saint Robert Bellarmine comments:

"....it was the intention of the Apostle in this passage to demonstrate **that women are not so strong in judgement or in vigor of mind as men** and therefore they ought not to teach in Church, but to learn from men...."..."....Then, that woman ought to learn, not teach, he proves from: Because man was not seduced, but woman, having been seduced, is in transgression. Which argument goes to show **that woman is of a simpler nature, with less prudence and judgement than man**, for [as Chrysostom notes in his commentary on this passage] , the Apostle preferred to say, "*man was not seduced, woman was seduced*" rather than "Adam was not seduced, Eve was seduced." He said this in order to show that what happened to Adam and Eve came about from the different nature of man and woman, and that men **are naturally more prudent and of better and more mature judgement and temperament than women**, and for this reason women, who are more easily seduced, are not suitable for teaching...."..."....St. Augustine's opinion which we followed in an earlier chapter is very true: that is, that strictly speaking **Adam was not seduced**, and that the words of the Apostle ought to be received without any special addition "properly and formally" [to use scholastic terms] , when he says, Man was not seduced, woman was seduced in transgression...." [29](#)

Another great Christian figure, Cornelius a Lapide writes:

"....woman must remain silent and learn, that is not teach, and be subject to her husband, because the man excels her, first because of the dignity of being the first creation: for Adam was created first, then Eve from Adam; **secondly because of the strength of his intelligence. For Eve allowed herself to be seduced so easily and imprudently**, but not Adam. Chrysostom said the same thing, noting that, following the example of the first woman Eve, all women are here implicitly accused of imprudence and levity.... Adam was not seduced, but the woman was seduced in sin...This means that Paul is saying the following: One - **Woman, as having been seduced by the Serpent, is inferior to man in reason and prudence**, and should be subject to him. Two - Therefore God also rightly subjected her to her husband as a punishment for her sin through which she had enticed the man to sin. And, as Chrysostom and Oecumenius point out, on this one occasion a woman taught badly and corrupted the man and everything else, therefore she should not teach any more, but be silent, and learn from man to speak well and act well..." [30](#)

[28](#): Martin Luther, lectures on 1 Timothy, trans. Richard Dinda, in "Luther's Works" , vol. 28 , pp. 277-78

[29](#): Saint Robert Bellarmine, "*De Controversiis Christianae Fidei*" [re-published Rome 1840] , vol. IV, pp. 166-168

[30](#): Cornelius A Lapide: "*Commentaria in Scripturam Sacram*" [Paris, 1891] , vol. 19, pp. 205-206