

ROLE OF AL HUDA IN REVIVAL OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION AMONG URBAN WOMEN

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Abstract

This paper targets at the understanding and discovering the factors behind improving pattern of seeking Islamic knowledge by females in urban areas and the part that Al Huda is playing in teaching these females. The situation of Al Huda is mentioned because it is one of the most popular spiritual institutions serving the needs of the urban women. Evaluating the scenario of Al Huda, the research speaks about the effect of Islamic information acquired by these women on the way of lifestyle and way of lifestyle of females. The purpose for performing this analysis is to examine the ever improving popularity of spiritual academic institutions, other than the traditional madrasas, which provides an exciting and fascinating public sciences and anthropological subjects. The results from the study expose that females are drawn towards getting Islamic knowledge due to variety of factors which include the recent international and nationwide events; lack of Islamic knowledge; personal interest to comprehend Islam more thoroughly; and incident of a life enhancing event. Women are found to prefer Al Huda because of its unique philosophy which concentrates on linking Muslims to Allah by making the learners aware of their ethical responsibilities and the value of Islam for self- growth. The data presented in this paper was collected in Islamabad, Pakistan by using qualitative anthropological research techniques.

Key Words: Religion, Hadith, Fiqh, Dars, madrasas, education, logic, lifestyle,

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Introduction:

Al Huda follows the strategy of educating women about the Islamic teachings in a way that can help them apply those teachings to their own lives, reform themselves, and share the acquired knowledge with others including their families and friends (Hashmi, 2006). At the same time, Al Huda also emphasizes the importance of non-religious education amongst women as it helps in gaining scientific reasoning and logic. This is why modern educational tools like management studies and marketing skills are also taught in the institute (Mushtaq, 2010). This amalgamation of Islamic and modern education has been one of the primary factors in attracting urban women from Islamabad to join the Institute.

Many of these women belong to educated middle and upper middle classes. These women when once become the part of the institute not only learn from the institute but also contribute back in terms of taking up administrative positions in the institute, volunteering in social events organized by the institute, and take part in other formal and informal activities. The wealthier women also make donations to the institute to keep the institute running and helping in its expansion, which is seen through its branches in US and Canada

One of the major influences on the female students is the personality of the owner and forerunner of Al Huda, Ms. Farhat Hashmi, who is seen by many women as their role model and they try to emulate her. Social organization which commands the social relationships and interactions amongst the women is also an important factor to be considered while understanding the impact of Islamic education on urban women.

Locale

The present research was conducted in Al-Huda institution Islamabad located in H-11/4 on A.K.Brohi Street. On the very close to Al-Huda institution, FAST University, new campus, is also situated. As it have many other grounds and divisions too. Since there are two divisions in Islamabad, one in F-8/4 and the second one is in H-11/4. So my location of analysis was H-11/4 school.

Research Methodology

By 'research methodology', we mean the philosophy of the research process. This includes the assumptions and values that serve as a rationale for research, and the standards or criteria the research uses for collecting and then interpreting data and reaching conclusions. Whereas by 'method' we simply mean the techniques or tools used to gather data. Methodology for the collection of empirical data for the current research was based upon qualitative anthropological research methods, which include socio-economic survey, participant observation, and key informant interviews, interviews of the respondents, case studies, and focus group discussions. We choose of two key informants from the institute on the basis of the personal judgment, taking into account their familiarity with most of the inhabitants of the institute as well as the socio-economic conditions of the area. Participant observation was used in order to get first-hand and accurate information about the institute. In-depth interviews were conducted with the working staff of the institute to get detailed information. Structured interviews were used to collect information from students and teachers. Case studies were conducted to secure more detail.

Importance of Islamic Education:

The importance of Islamic education has been deep rooted in our society for centuries. However, with the increased trend of globalization and westernization, masses started considering religious institutes as damaging and lethally divisive by promoting various different sects of Islam. Another deterrent that pushed many of the people of our society away from acquiring Islamic education was the increased concept that religious schools are incompatible with equipping the population with skills and scientific knowledge needed to successfully run the economy. The segregation of Islamic education and the scientific/ secular education have divided the Pakistani population into different school of thoughts. Islamic education is considered compulsory amongst the masses as long as it includes recitation of Quran and learning basic Islamic education. The specialized religious education which includes Fiqh, Hadith, etc. is only limited to the Madrasa system which is criticized by many from the educated class.

During the research, one of the issues that were identified during the literature review was the importance of Islamic education as perceived by the population in addition to professional education. When asked, all of the respondents confidently approved of the importance of Islamic

education in addition to the professional education. On further investigation, it was found that despite the importance given to Islamic education, the negative stereotypes associated with Madrasas, as well as segregation of Islamic and scientific educational institutes hinder people, specially females from pursuing Islamic education. It is a fact that scientific and professional education is important for earning a better livelihood, but at the same time, Islamic knowledge is needed to strengthen the value system of our generations, pointed out Mrs. Khursheed, one of the respondents. Lack of focus and government support for female education in general and female religious education in particular, is a few reasons that our females lag behind in religious knowledge. Saima Aftab, one of the students at Al Huda, pointed out the fact that due to less number of female religious schools many women become content with praying 5 times a day and fasting 30 days a month. She further added that they never try to focus on understanding the religion at a deeper level. However, with the addition of many institutes that offer religious education facilities to females in an enlightened manner, the trend of religious education is increasing amongst women.

Dars as a part of Religious Education:

Female religious gatherings are becoming a common practice in many households. These religious gatherings, known more commonly as Dars, have been an informal way for women to gather together and learn about Islam. However, these Dars gatherings do not follow a systematic pattern of Islamic education. Since Dars gatherings are offered in an informal way, the information exchanges that take place during these gatherings are heterogeneous in nature. The reason why it is important to understand the concept and significance of Dars is that it plays an important role in contesting, propagating, reinforcing, and reaffirming the notion of Islam by these women (Ahmad, 2009). Women may indulge in such activities due to various different reasons like exploring Islam in a discussion based environment, or socializing and networking with other women. Dars gatherings are not restricted to Pakistani society alone, but are also very common way of women gathering together to learn Quran or discuss religious issues in other parts of the Muslim world as well. Nadwah in Yemen and Rowzeh in Iran are the terms used for such gatherings. Since Muslim men get a chance to gather in mosques to offer prayers, they do not need such religious gathering as do women. On the other hand, women find such gatherings appealing because they find a good space to discuss different issues, Islamic and general, as well as learn different facets of Islam collectively. Many of Al Huda graduates start offering Dars at

their homes once they graduate. This practice is adopted because they are encouraged to propagate Islamic teachings and transfer their knowledge to other human beings as well (Ahmad, 2009).

Perception of Madrasa before Joining Al Huda:

Perception of madrasa in our culture is based on the stereotypes and skewed judgments. Boy's Madrasas are seen as the academies of terrorism and violence. However, there is a different perception for girl's madrasas. Sikand and Winkelmann carried out a study on girls' madrasas in India. They claimed that these madrasas present solely for girls are playing a great role in educating the illiterate girls of the region through training them as guardians of pure faith which will eventually lead them to learn their rights and enter into modernization. Similarly, in Pakistan, there is a lack of girl's madrasa, and thus people mostly perceive the madrasa as a place where a moulti (cleric) teaches Quran to the students, regardless of the fact if the students understand it or not. The Deobandi Madrasa, which is one of the oldest and widely spread madrasa systems in Pakistan, largely focuses on delivering strictly Islamic education to children. The education delivered to the students in these madrasa ranges from Hifz e Quran, Alim and Alima degrees, Fiqh, and Hadith. However, this religious education is either acquired by people belonging to highly religious families, or those who want to specialize in the Islamic knowledge. A recent wave of Madrasa stream, of which Al Huda is also a part, offers a unique blend of religious education whereby not only specialized fields of Islam are taught to the interested students, but short courses and certifications, as well as Dars type lectures are also offered to people who want to practice Islam in their daily lives through connecting to Allah.

While carrying out the research, one of the primary questions that became the focal point of research was to know the perception of women about Al Huda before they joined the institute. This question was raised not only to understand how the perception of people change after joining the institute and benefitting from it, but also to understand how the institute is positioned in the minds of the laymen.

The open ended question regarding the perception of Al Huda before joining it produced different responses from the participants. About 60% of the participants perceived it as a Deeni Madrasa (religious educational institutions) very much like other madrasas working in the

country offering specialized Islamic education (e.g. Deobandi Madrasas). 20% participants mentioned that due to the name of the institute (Al Huda International), they thought it to be different than the general perception of Madrasa, while the rest of the participants (20%) claimed that they had not heard of Al Huda earlier and thus did not have any specific perception. It was pointed out by the respondents that over the last few years, where the perception of Madrasa has deteriorated in general, the name of Al Huda has observed a remarkable fame because of the class it targets, and the style of teaching it follows.

Inclination towards Acquiring Islamic Education:

Over the last few years, Pakistani society has experienced a new wave of Enlightened Moderation whereby Madrasas are being highly criticized by academics, researchers, and more specifically international researchers. They are not only criticized for promoting fundamentalism, extremism, and violence, but also are accused of being the training camps for Taliban. At the other end of the picture is the increasing number of those educated Pakistani families who are rediscovering Islam and trying to incorporate the religious teachings in their daily lives. During the research it was found that the recent wave of war against terror and US raids on Muslim countries was one of the reasons which raised many questions in the minds of the educated middle or upper income classes. One respondent, Maha, who belongs to a well of family residing in Islamabad, quoted that the events of the past decade increased her interest to learn more about Islam and led to her religious inquiry.

Table.1: Inclination towards acquiring Islamic education

1= very strong to 5= not at all	1	2	3	4	5
Personal Interest in religious education from early age	2	5	13	20	10
Post 9/11 global and national events	23	14	10	3	0
Family pressure	0	3	11	9	27
Lack of knowledge of Islam led to religious enquiry	17	10	15	7	3
Some particular life changing, or thought changing event of your life	4	6	13	12	15

Source: Field Data.

The table shows the responses of the study sample. It can be seen that unfolding of the recent events is one of the major contributor of motivating women towards studying Islam. Since the study targeted women belonging to educated, middle income and high income classes, the results

revealed that many of them did not have much interest in Islam from the early years of their lives, but developed the interest in later years. Family pressure, however, did not influence the decision to pursue Islamic education amongst this socio economic class of women. Another important factor that was identified by the study sample was the lack of Islamic education and many unanswered questions about religion that increased interest in acquisition of Islamic education. While some of the students also cited that some personal incident also proved to be life changing and motivated them to study Islam. A 21 year old respondent, Javeria, told that the reason she was convinced to study Islam is that she finds Quran intriguing and interesting. While studying science at her college, she learnt that Quran is not only about religion and the code of life, but also explains science, mathematics, and other scientific fields of study. This linkage of Quran with every aspect of science motivated her to study Islam at a deeper level. Another respondent, Mrs. Rahat cited that she was in search of a method of understanding Islam, but did not find the traditional Madrasas appealing and in line with the needs of the present era.

Decision to Join Al Huda:

As opposed to other Madrasa's in Pakistan where students from poor and lower middle class groups are found mostly because of the lower fees of these institutes, the reasons for joining Al Huda are very different. The demographics of the respondents showed that these women hail from families having sound financial strength. These women cited different reasons to join the institute. The personality of the owner, Ms. FarhatHashmi was one of the most cited reasons for joining this particular institute. Most of these women got inclined towards seeking Islamic education because they felt hollow inside, or observed lack of direction in their lives. One of the female student quoted that the fame of Ms. FarhatHashmi amongst women of Islamabad is one of the major reasons that she decided to join Al Huda. A respondent, Shazia, quoted that she used to go to the Darsmehfils organized by neighboring families; however, she didn't find the method of delivering the Islamic information effective. This led her to look for Islamic education online and in different books. At one instance, she came across a lady who was delivering lecture during a Dars who she found more tolerant, interactive, and well-studied. The lady was a former student of Al Huda, and thus motivated Shazia to join Al Huda. Maha, a respondent from the study sample, identified that the women belonging to wealthy and educated class prefer more tolerant varieties of Islamic education. The traditional madrasas teach Islam by focusing more on the punishments for wrongdoers, while at Al Huda; the focus is on the rewards from Allah on

doing the right thing. This is one of the major reasons that motivate women from wealthy class to connect to Allah in search of a better life in this world and hereafter. Ahmad (2009) points out that the uniqueness of Al Huda lies in the “uniqueness” of Al-Huda lies in its ability to provide a system of religious education that has attracted middle and upper income classes of urban areas, which other religious schools and groups have failed to accomplish. These religious groups are perceived by many as extremely narrow in interpretation of Islam.

Reaction of Family Members:

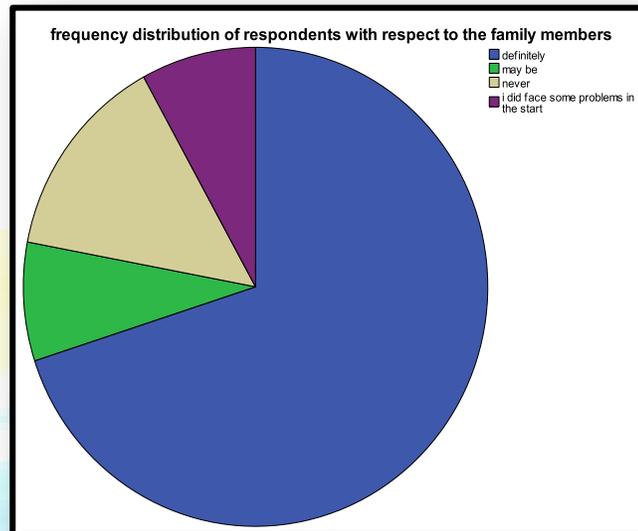
Women studying at Al Huda come from diverse backgrounds including wealthy educated families. Many of these women are working in different organizations at different managerial levels. Support of family members is very important for women in Pakistani society, regardless of the socio economic class they belong to. Out of the sample population, 70% of the women did not face any problems as a result of joining Al Huda. 8% of the women were not confident if their family members were happy with their decision to pursue Islamic education by joining the institute. A small percentage of women, though, faced resistance from their families including husbands, siblings, or parents. A detailed investigation revealed that the resistance was either due to the modern lifestyle of the family, or their perception of Al Huda as an institute propagating rigid Wahabi sect of Islam. 8% of the students said that they had faced problems in the initial days, but later on their families accepted their decision. These results imply that the people in the educated middle income and upper middle income classes are becoming more tolerant and open minded with regard to female Islamic education. The concept of religious education is changing where this specific socio economic class is embracing the teachings of Islam as an important component of education.

Table 2: Reaction of Family Members on Joining Al Huda

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Definitely	35	70.0	70.0
May be	4	8.0	78.0
Never	7	14.0	92.0
I did face some problems in the start	4	8.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	

Source: Field Data.

Figure 1: Reaction of Family Members on Joining Al Huda



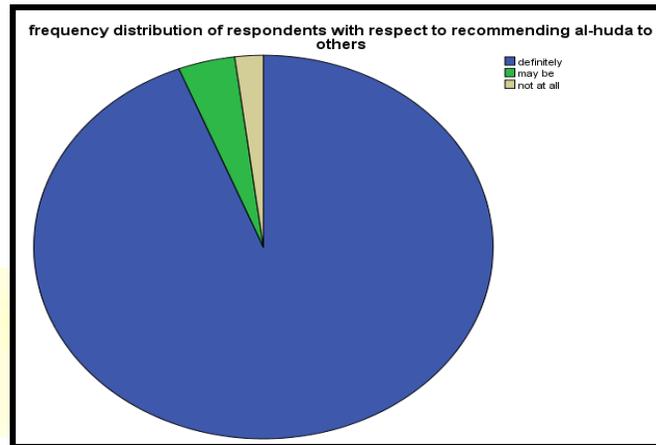
Inclination to Recommend Others to Join Al Huda:

When asked the respondents if they would recommend other females from their family, friends, or social circle to join Al Huda for religious education, 94% of the respondents said they would. 4% of them were not sure if they will or not, while 2% said that they will not recommend others to join Al Huda.

Table 3: Recommend Al Huda to Others

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Definitely	47	94.0	94.0
May be	2	4.0	98.0
not at all	1	2.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	

Source: Field Data.

Figure 2: Recommend Al Huda to Others

The high inclination of women to recommend others to join the institute as well imply that they are satisfied with the quality of education, the modes and methods of teaching, and the social values taught by the institute. Lambek (1990) points out that written knowledge is crucial for wielding religious authority, but is not sufficient. It is therefore essential for religious teachers to adopt the mechanism of teaching where the students could relate to the teachings as well as the teacher. During the research, many women pointed out that they prefer Al Huda over other religious institutes present in the city and other parts of the country mainly due to the reason that they can identify and relate to the teachers at Al Huda. Many of them were of the view that FarhatHashmi's ability to communicate and connect with them during which she uses easy Urdu as well as a few English words makes the whole teacher student interaction much more fruitful and constructive. According a respondent, who hails from an upper middle class background, she finds the teaching style followed at al Huda very effective as the teachers and Ms. Hashmi speak at the intellectual level of students. They make the process of connecting to Allah easy to follow, comprehensible, and something everybody could relate to. According to one of the students, the teachers make Quran relevant to lives of all of us, thus motivating us to incorporate the teachings of Quran and Sunnah in our daily lives and normal dealings. Another major determinant for the inclination of women to recommend Al Huda to other Muslim sisters was found to be the unbiased approach of the institute towards different sects of Islam. The tolerance and openness to everyone and everyone unifies women coming from different sects to sit together and engage themselves in a healthy debate.

Planning to Preach Islam after Obtaining Islamic Education:

The teaching pattern of Al Huda is unique in the sense that it follows a rigorous pattern of educating women through different techniques and tools. Al Huda's pedagogy is one of the critical success factors of the whole Al Huda movement. Ahmad (2009) writes in her book on the story of Al Huda that the students who earn degree from the institute are trained to offer Dars to the local population using the same pedagogical tools employed by Al Huda. This pedagogy of Al Huda emphasis on the language of instruction and teach through translating Arabic verses to help students learn it easily. This knowledge that is extracted from this study of Quran helps Muslims live a virtuous life based on a straight, narrow, and true path (Ahmad, 2009). Thus, the students graduating from the institute are motivated and encouraged to take part in social activities and preaching of the true teachings of Islam. The survey on students studying at Al Huda revealed that as much as 70% of the students had plans to start preaching Islamic education to their families, friends, and social circle, and the locality. 30% of the respondents did not show any inclination to do so. However, they mentioned that they will try to influence people in their social circle to adopt the teachings of Islam in their lives. This shows that the religious education acquired at the institute not only affects the individual lives of the female students (this is discussed in next chapter in more detail), but also evolves into a system of Islamic education which is transferred to the masses through informal techniques like Dars gatherings.

Table 4: Plan to Preach Islam

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	35	70.0	70.0
No	15	30.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	

Source: Field Data.

Conclusion

Al Huda Worldwide is one of the popular spiritual institutions particularly established to entice the elites and the knowledgeable type of the Pakistani community. The reason many women from center and higher category be a part of Al Huda in search of Allah is both motivated by international and local aspects. Despite the criticisms which distribute the idea that becoming a member of such institutions and Dars events have become a yet another latest pattern followed by top level women, the changes both noticeable and unseen in the lifestyles of these women confirm otherwise. The women becoming a member of Al Huda show that the improved tendency to engage in Islamic knowledge by city, knowledgeable, and top level women is mainly motivated by the fact that new type of academic institutions are now starting up which do not follow the autocratic program that conventional Madrasas are stereotyped with.

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