Unearthing and Representing Women Scholars through Ṭabaqāt Works

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For my Abboojee,

And for the women who feel left out of text.

ABSTRACT

This thesis brings a corrective to the secondary literature that addresses women's participation in the Islamic intellectual tradition in premodern Islamic societies. While some studies have discounted the role of women in Islamic intellectual production, other studies have affirmed that large numbers of women obtained advanced training in religious sciences in the premodern era, especially in *ḥadīth* studies. This latter observation has depended predominately or entirely on positivist readings of *ṭabaqāt* sources (biographical dictionaries) as historical data.[1] They have noted particular chronological trends in the levels of women's educational participation. Specifically, they have described women's education to be limited from roughly the mid eighth to eleventh centuries and flourishing from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. I investigate this characterization of a chronological fluctuation against the backdrop of the *ṭabaqāt* source(s) consulted. To do this, I consider the existing scholarship on the *ṭabaqāt* form, and draw attention to the evolving nature of this source, providing context for changes in its intention, content and form. I highlight how these textual evolutions impacted women's representations within them.

By connecting the observed trends in women's educational opportunities to observed trends in the written record that depicts them, I draw attention the limitations of positivist readings of *ṭabaqāt* sources for the retelling of women's lives. Chronological shift in levels of Muslim women's religious education, as depicted in the secondary literature, reflect changes in the primary sources employed by these studies rather than women's lived realities. Faced with the inadequacy of positivist readings of biographical materials for the history of women in Islamic intellectual thought, I offer instead other critical ways of reading these dictionaries through the lens of their evolution and transformation. I locate points of silence, where women are conspicuously absent, and provide novel avenues for reconstructing women's histories at these moments of silence. By highlighting the textual basis for women's shifting representations in *ṭabaqāt* sources, I raise queries about the historiography of the study of women in premodern Muslim societies at large. I end with a discussion of the importance of fully incorporating women's history into the greater project of modern historical writing.

[1] For example, Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, Boulder: Lynne Rinner Publishers, 1994; Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.; Muhammad Nadwi *Al-Muhaddithat*, London: Interface, 2007.

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I dedicate this work to women who struggle to find their voice. You have inspired this journey. You are unbelievably strong. Never for a moment think you are incapable of anything.

INTRODUCTION

" Say [O Prophet], "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" None will be mindful [of this] except people of reason." (Quran 39:9)

In the beginning, only the men learned. In this long-gone time, the entirety of women-kind remained passive recipients of a tradition, culture and legal system which they were barred from interpreting or engaging with. And as so, the popular narration of Islamic educational history unfolded, and has lingered to this day. Muslim women in the modern era who claim their right to become members of Islam's traditional intellectual circles are often hailed as trail blazing revolutionaries. And yet in the volumes of dense, and sometimes dry Islamic biographical literature from the eighth century onwards that has survived, the names of thousands of educated women have been recorded and preserved. These women are principally remembered for being learned in traditional religious sciences, that is the Quran, *ḥadīth* (prophetic narrations) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Against the backdrop of the widely held belief of women's absence from the Islamic intellectual tradition, how have modern scholars managed to reconcile the existence of these copious amounts of traditionally learned women listed in medieval Islamic biographical dictionaries?

When studies highlighting the lives of traditionally learned women became popular in the early 1990s, scholars provided several varying and sometimes contradictory accounts of the nature of their education. Areas of debate opened up deliberating the type of education such women might have received, and how they obtained, taught and interacted with their religious knowledge. Was it a formal education comparable to that of their male counterparts, or did it unfold in an ad-hoc and informal setting? Did women learn in seclusion, or did they interact with non-family men? Did they teach, or did they only passively acquire knowledge? Were paid positions available to them, and if not, what does that mean? Were women able to hold authority on the basis of their

knowledge as men did? Another question, and one that will serve as the focus for the large part of our study, is one of chronology. If women were in fact educated in traditional sciences, was this a phenomenon that was consistent across time in the premodern period, or did it fluctuate?

Once studies began emerging acknowledging that women did participate in the traditional intellectual spheres—at least to a certain extent—a few scholars noted that this participation was not significant in every era. Ruth Roded, who published one of the earliest works highlighting women's education in the premodern era, noted briefly that women's participation appeared to have declined starting in the Abbasid era (750-945 CE), and then increased greatly in the Mamluk Period (1250-1500 CE).[2] Twenty or so years later, Asma Sayeed's book on women *ḥadīth* scholars highlighted this chronological pattern in more detail.[3] While women in the first Islamic century (622-722 CE) have been recorded as participating in the transmission and development of traditional knowledge, women are noted as being scarcely recorded during the following two centuries, and then gradually increasing in representation afterwards.[4] This chronology of participation has not been noted by every scholar in the field. Like the previously mentioned inquiries, the issue has been mulled over by only a few of the scholars who have acknowledged women's education, and there are no definite answers. This might be in large part due to the particular source(s) that the scholars have depended on—the biographical dictionaries in their various forms—not addressing these questions explicitly, and therefore interpretation being needed.

While we do have a small but growing volume of scholarship on the topic of pre-modern Muslim women's access to education, we do not currently have any significant historiographic

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[2] Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections—From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who* (Boulder: Lynne Rinner Publishers, 1994), 58
[3] Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)
[4] Ibid, 186.

analysis of the scholarship on the topic because the field is still emerging. Especially, there lacks an analysis of how the primary sources are being mined for the relevant information. The following study is an attempt to catalyse a conversation about the historiography of the scholarship on premodern women's education. I revisit the scholarship on Muslim women's education, and more particularly, the perceived decline in participation during the High Caliphal Period of the Abbasid era (750-945 CE) that is contrasted with a strong revival during the Mamluk era, as well as the original biographical sources upon which this argument of chronology rests. I give careful consideration for the distinct ways in which these sources were being used by the scholars who produced them, and the context within which their narratives were employed. Attention will be placed primarily on women's education and transmission of knowledge in the area of *ḥadīth,* as it is in this area that we have the most data. Nonetheless, women's education in legal or Qur'anic studies will also be considered where it is relevant.

As a general rule, wherever I refer to the "scholarship" or "studies" in discussions on the "scholarship on women's education" or the "scholarship on premodern Muslim education," I am referring to modern scholarship taking place primarily in Western academic institutions. I do not mean to refer to premodern Islamic scholarship. In the few sections where I am referring to such premodern scholarship, notably in Chapter 2, the distinction is made clear.

I use the historical time divisions of medieval Islamic societies delineated by Marshall Hodgson in his important work *The Venture of Islam.*[5] He refers to the years of Abbasid political and cultural domination as the High Caliphal Period (750-945). The period following the Abbasid political fragmentation is referred to as The Early Middle Period (945-1250) and the period

[5] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam Vol.1 & 2*. (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1974)

coinciding with Mongol-Mamluk domination is referred to as the Later Middle Period (1250-1500).[6] This last time period is also referred to as the Mamluk era throughout this work.

The first chapter of this study provides a survey of the modern scholarship on premodern Muslim women's education. I assess the approaches taken toward women's education in studies dealing with education in premodern Islamic societies at large, as well as specific studies on gender and Islam. I then turn to studies focused specifically on the topic of women's education and provide a brief overview of the discussions and debates surrounding it. I close the chapter with an analysis of the portrayals of Muslim women's education in modern scholarship and discuss in more depth the chronological trends offered by these studies, which form the backbone of my historiographical analysis.

The second chapter turns to the source which lies at the center of nearly all scholarship affirming the existence of Muslim women's religious education during the premodern era, namely, the biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt/ tarājim*). I turn to the secondary scholarship on the source to provide an overview of the form itself, followed by a discussion of the theories of its origin, its uses and evolutions over time and region. By situating the development of the writing form in its political and intellectual contexts, I set out to better grasp the motivations of its authors, and the reasons for its shifting contents. In doing so, I am able to make links between the changes undergone by the source and the fluctuating number of women recorded within them. The chapter closes with a consideration of the interface of gendered education studies and the evolution of the primary source on which they rely, namely, the biographical dictionary.

The third chapter considers scattered evidence of women's learning, especially during the High Caliphal Period, that might call into question positivist readings of the biographical

[6] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam Vol. 2*, p. 3-4.

dictionary. It considers the education of slave-women and ascetic women, two groups often overlooked in discussions of traditional Islamic learning. It offers fresh ways of accessing primary sources in order to draw out women's representations, and suggests ways of reconstructing an educational history for premodern Muslim women through careful readings and an attentiveness to moments of silence.

This study closes off with a chapter discussing the issues surrounding women's representation in the discipline of History. It considers problems of erasure and highlights the importance of expanding revisionist critiques of the scholarship on women's education and drawing upon the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of women's and gender studies critically. There is also another important implication of this study; namely to assert and claim women's productive and multifaceted roles as students, teachers, and shapers of traditional Islamic knowledge. This may have important implications for the present: their right to engage and interpret the traditions that often shape their lives.

CHAPTER 1:
A SURVEY OF THE SCHOLARSHIP ON WOMAN'S EDUCATION IN EARLY ISLAMIC HISTORY

For the intrigued student, studies on education in premodern Islamic societies are not hard to come across. Political situations globally have propelled the topic into the spotlight and have generated interest in it.[7] It has even been argued that education might be considered the cornerstone of Islamicate civilization.[8] During the first half of the twentieth century however, this question did not receive considerable attention from scholars. In a book dealing with Islamic education written during the 1950s, the author emphasizes the scarcity of modern studies on the topic, noting that "the topic is not researched".[9] Today, there exists a sizeable body of scholarship on premodern Islamic education, although a comprehensive study on it and its periodization is lacking.[10] Furthermore, the existing scholarship focuses primarily on male education. Women's education remains neglected, and hence it is a field open to critical inquiry, especially since it is riddled with vagueness and contrasting viewpoints.

General Studies on Premodern Islamic Education

This chapter offers a brief review of the scholarship on premodern Islamic education, specifically in connection to women. General studies on premodern Islamic education have been growing in the last few decades, despite several difficulties in accessing primary sources, as well as the sometimes-inadequate approaches and handling of those sources by scholars. These have resulted in barriers to producing a complete and nuanced picture of the field.[11] A. L Tibawi and

[7] Wadad Kadi, "Education in Islam - Myths and Truth," *Comparative Education Review* 50, no.3 (August 2006): 311.
[8] Kadi, "Education in Islam," 312.
[9] Ahmed Shalabi, *History of Muslim Educatio*n (Karachi: Indus Publications, 1979), 5.
[10] Kadi, "Education in Islam," 312.
[11] A. L. Tibawi. "Origin and Character of al-Madrasah." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 25 (1962): 225-226.

George Makdisi are some of the early and well-known scholars specializing in Muslim education, and they often wrote in opposition to one another. George Makdisi took the approach that Muslim education in the premodern era was an organized system that was comparable to the "college" and thus a precursor to the "university" as it took form in Western intellectual history. His book *The Rise of Colleges* (1982) offers a detailed description of medieval Islamic legal education and is a staple in the field.[12]

This work is valuable for its information pertaining to Islamic education, including organization of institutions, methods of instructions, subjects covered, motivating ideals, and avenues of endowment (*waqf,* pl. *awqāf*). It provides a description of the evolution of Muslim learning from the mosque, the *kuttāb/maktab* (elementary schools, especially for the learning of reading and writing[13]), the *khānaqāh* (traveller lodges or sufi convents) to finally, the *madrasa* (endowed seminaries), the "institution of learning par excellence", to which he assigns a systematic nomenclature.[14] For Makdisi, the *madrasa* was an institution designed primarily for the teaching of *fiqh* (jurisprudence).[15]

Tibawi contested Makdisi's approach to Muslim education and argued that it provided a distorted picture of Muslim learning, as it forced modern rigid stratification on free and informal systems of learning that remained separate from the state.[16] Rather, Tibawi preferred to characterize Islamic education as in informal process in which the *madrasa* was not the focal point. His study, *The Origin and Character of al-Madrasa* (1962), described the *madrasa* as an offshoot of the mosque, the *majālis* (learning circles) and the *khānaqāh,* which remained important centers

[12] George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981)
[13]Tibawi, "Origin and Character of al-Madrasah," 225.
[14] Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, 9.
[15] Tibawi, "Origin and Character of al-Madrasah," 227.
[16] Tibawi, "Origin and Character of al-Madrasah," 225-226.

for learning.[17] The topic of women's education is not brought up explicitly by Tibawi in his general discussions of Islamic education. When he describes the educational circles known as the *ḥalqa'*s and their liberal approach to learning, being "open to whoever can profit from it, irrespective of age or academic standard"[18] we cannot be certain that he is including women as benefiting from this accessibility. Rather, considering the commonly held view at this early time that women were not contributors to the Islamic tradition during its formative period, we can assume that he is not including women.

George Makdisi also offers little insight into the role women played in such institutions. When he argues that "Muslim institutionalized education was religious, privately organized, and open to *all* Muslims who sought it",[19] we once more cannot confidently assume that women are being included in his generalized statement. Again, it is safer to presume that women are not being referred to in his broad discussions on education, its structure and accessibility. Therefore, the information found in this, as well as other general studies are not adequate for informing us about the educational possibilities for women in the premodern era.

Michael Chamberlain's work on education and the ulama in Ayyubid Syria, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus* (1994),[20] offers a social analysis for the role and position of the *madrasa* for the ulama classes (scholarly classes). While detailing the informality of Islamic education in the period under investigation, as well as the arenas of competition and the social uses of knowledge by the ulama, it is not clear if Chamberlain holds that women competed in the same ways as men are described to have in his study or whether the social uses of knowledge are applicable to them as well. Dana Ephrat's book, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition*

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[17] Tibawi, "Origin and Character of al Madrasah," 227.
[18] Tibawi, "Origin and Character of al-Madrasah," 230.
[19] Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, 281.
[20] Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus 1190-1350* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

(2000), also explores the social significance of institutionalization for the ulama in elventh century Baghdad. Her work deals with methods of learning, forms of social affiliation, mechanisms of inclusion into the ulama class, and the ulama's role in the public sphere. In none of these discussions however, can we assume that the characterizations being presented can refer satisfactorily to learned women. Women are not referred to directly in either of these works on the social practices of the ulama class, apart from acknowledgements of their funding of madrasas through *waqf* endowments.[21]

The *Encyclopedia of Islam*'s entry for "*madrasa"* provides a useful overview of the development of educational systems in Islamicate societies.[22] A general understanding of the consumers and producers of knowledge is reflected in statements such as: "everyone was absolutely free to join the *ḥalqa* in the mosque in order to hear a teacher".[23] It is not clear, and it is likely not the case, that such "general" observations, refer to women's educational possibilities as well, and this renders the general information incomplete for scholars interested in women specifically. Nevertheless, acknowledgements of women's education are provided, and the entry mentions that exceptionally, we do hear of women scholars, such as one who participated in Imam al-Shāfiʿī's *majlis* (learning circle), and that such activities might not have been rare in the earliest centuries.[24]

Wael Hallaq also offers valuable insight into the characteristics of premodern Islamic education from the perspective of the formation of legal schools in Islam. In his work *Origins of Islamic Law* (2004),[25] he describes the methods of instruction in, and evolution of legal schools,

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[21] Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition: the Sunni `ulama' of the Eleventh Century Baghdad* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 26-27.
[22] Pedersen, J., Makdisi, G., Rahman, Munibur and Hillenbrand, R., "Madrasa", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Accessed August 2, 2018, http://dx.doi.org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0610
[23] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa," Section 1.8.
[24] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa," Section 1.8.
[25] Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

and describes in detail the student-teacher networks and the progression from personal learning to formal depersonalized schools. Hallaq's important contributions to the topic of legal education do not bring to light women's role in this environment, if they had any at all. While it is an important work for the study of Islamic education generally, it offers little insight into women's roles in the formative period of the legal schools.

Our modern scholarly output on premodern Islamic education rarely engages with or illuminates aspects of women's scholarship and tends to leave women out of depictions of education as a whole. Jonathan Brown's discussion on *ḥadīth* scholarship in his book *Hadith* (2009) includes discussions on the processes of transmitting and collecting *ḥadīth*, the convention of *ijāzas* (license given by a teacher to her/is student to transmit knowledge of a text(s) or doctrine), and the compilation and canonification of the *ḥadīth* literature.[26] The assumption that is expected to be made is that these outlines of the general characteristics of *ḥadīth* scholarship are referring for the most part to the endeavours of male scholars, and are not necessarily applicable to women. Wadad Kadi's article on education in Islam describes the "great freedom students had in choosing what classes or circles they wished to attend"[27], and the process by which ambitious students might become leaders in their field, but again, it is unlikely that she had women in mind, when she made this statement, or that in the rest of her essay, she meant to apply her observations to women students as well.

Ahmed Shalabi was one of the of the earliest modern scholars to give some thought to women in his book, *History of Muslim Education* (1954).[28] Having published his book before the increased interest in women's education unfolded, is a testimony to the importance of Shalabi's endeavors. He lists the names of a few women he had come across in his research and discusses features of

[26] Jonathan Brown, *Ḥadīth: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).
[27] Kadi, "Education in Islam," 314.
[28] Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*

their learning and accomplishments.[29] Despite these examples of well-learned women, Shalabi maintains that women did not receive education in any noteworthy capacity.[30]

Shalabi's dismissal of the significance of woman's education does not part ways from the mood of the field at the time. His broader discussions appear to be centered around the male pursuit of knowledge, for he uses strictly male pronouns to describe the students' identity, life conditions and aims. Often, he emphasizes the complete access to education for Muslims from all walks of life, including the poor and the orphans, but in other sections he holds that women did not have this same access to education.[31] When discussing the history of Muslim education at large, he would write that, "in the history of Muslim education equalitarianism was fully recognized, and poverty was never a hindrance in the way of gifted students, […] every Muslim had free admission to the lectures in the mosque".[32] Yet his observations elsewhere of the restricted nature of women's education suggests that he is implicitly excluding women from this "general population", and that "hindrance" had in fact, significant gendered features. The prevalent narrative remains that women's education was not occurring in any meaningful way or did not exist at all.

Jonathan Berkey also belongs to a minority of scholars who discuss women's access to education in a work devoted to medieval Islamic learning. Women scholars are allotted an entire chapter in his book, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo* (1992), and he discusses them further in related articles.[33] In one such article, he acknowledges how thoroughly integrated women were in the intellectual circles of *ḥadīth* transmission.[34] Yet, when he turns to capture the

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[29] Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*, 192-193.
[30] Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education,* 190.
[31] Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*, 164-165.
[32] Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*, 164.
[33] Jonathan Porter Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Learning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Jonathan Porter Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period," in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikkie Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991)
[34] Jonathan Berkey "Al-Subki and His Women," *Mamlūk Studies Review* http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_XIV_2010-Berkey-pp1-17.pdf, Vol. 14 (2010), 15.

'typical' or normative patterns of education outside of women's activities, his generalizations tend to indirectly exclude women as well. When women are highlighted, they are also qualified as existing in an informal, non-authoritative zone.[35] Berkey employs the typically male parameters of professionalization and public life to assess the status of women's education, and uses women's seclusion, lack of paid positions, as well as woman-to-woman transmissions as examples of the lesser nature of women's education.[36] Despite his recurring downgrading of women's scholarship, Berkey found women's education important enough to include in a study on premodern Islamic education as a whole.

With the expansion of scholarship on pre-modern Islamic education through the efforts of such figures as Makdisi, Hallaq, and Berkey, insights into the structures, modes, aims, and conditions of learning have broadened considerably. Yet, this did not have a significant bearing on familiarity with women's education and the nature of their participation in transmitting knowledge. We continue to be faced with silences and gaps in the narrative, for "general" statements about the *madrasa*s and forms of learning are not in fact general. They refer to men and not women. When the authors of these studies make statements such as "education was inclusive, and all could sit in the gathering, rich or poor"[37] we should presume that they are referring only to males. While some of these works might include a section dealing with women's education, they tend to dismiss its importance, or not offer much information about its nuances and characteristics. Much of the scholarship that treats Muslim education broadly, and not specifically as it relates to women, entirely ignores the topic of women's access and interactions with it. This applies to all discussions related to education, including learning structures, student-teacher relationships, study content, and locations of study.

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[35] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 165-166.
[36] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge*, 178-181.
[37] Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*, 167.

By investigating general studies on the history of Islamic education, and delving into their recurrent tendency to ignore questions about women's learning within and outside the male-centered educational circles, we can begin to grasp the flaws in the current scholarship, and thus seek new conceptual and methodological paths. Why is women's history important? Women represent half of humanity and are important contributors to Islamic society. Historical studies, which overlook their presence or insist on making generalizations about the nature of education in medieval and early modern Islamic society with unspoken assumptions that these generalizations address men only, are at best incomplete, and at worse, actively erase women from the historical narrative. Scholars of gender and women studies have acknowledged the vital importance of telling women's history and have produced valuable scholarship specifically dedicated to Muslim women in both the premodern and modern eras. We turn to a few of these works to observe what they have to offer in regard to Muslim women's education.

Studies on Islam and Gender

The scholarship on premodern Muslim societies that endeavoured to center women, emerged in sizeable quantities during the 1990s, though it had been gaining traction since at least the 1970s. These studies arose with the intention of recovering the role of women in the history and traditions of Islam. They tended to question common assumptions made about Muslim women by earlier scholars and challenged them through the lenses of post-colonial studies, neo-Marxist theory, post-structuralism, as well as feminist theory.[38] Amongst the early pioneers in the project to retrieve the lives of early Muslim women was Nabia Abbott, who published several works dealing with early Muslim women.[39] Leila Ahmed is another prominent scholar who problematized the issue of

[38] Saadia Yacoob, "Women and education in the pre-modern Middle East: reconstructing the lives of two female jurists (faqīhāt)," MA thesis (McGill University, 2006), 4.
[39] Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad : Mother and Wife of Hārūn Al-Rashīd* (London: Al Saqi, 1986); *Aishah, the Beloved of Mohammed*. (London: Saqi Books, 1998)

gender in Islam. Her important work *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) provides an overview of the history of gender is Islamic societies, by tracing the developments of Islamic discourses relating to women in the Islamic world.[40] Arab feminist scholar Fatima Mernissi also contributed to the scholarship in this area, producing several books retrieving the lives and histories of past Muslim women.[41]

A considerable portion of the scholarship that aimed to recover the history of women in Islamic societies, acknowledges an initial participation of women in educational pursuits, especially during first century of Islamic history. Specifically, the women of the companion and first successor generation to Prophet Muhammad are described as having played a prominent role in the preservation and cultivation of the main sources of Islamic knowledge, the Qur'an and *sunnah* (prophetic practice).[42] These early women are known to have been memorialized in the traditions, either as narrators of prophetic *ḥadīths*, or as notable scholars of these traditions, and sometimes even as jurists.[43] They are also highlighted for having exerted political influence.[44]

'A'isha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad is the most prominent of these women, and there are a number of studies devoted to her and the elaboration of her historical memory.[45] Having narrated hundreds of *ḥadīth*, she was considered among the most knowledgeable of the traditions in her time.[46] Feminist scholars argue however, that an environment in which women were unequal

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[40] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)
[41] See for example: Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1996); *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), Fatima Mernissi and Mary Jo Lakeland. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Acls Humanities E-Book. (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1991)
[42] Zainab Alwani. "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars: A Historical Survey," In *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, ed. Ednan Aslan, et al. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 45.
[43] Roded*, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 65.
[44] Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion*, 81-83.
[45] For studies on 'A'isha, See Aisha Geissinger, "'A'isha bint Abi Bakr and her Contributions to the Formation of the Islamic Tradition." *Religion Compass* 5, (2011); Denise Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past : The Legacy of 'a'isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Nabia Abbott. *Aishah, the Beloved of Mohammed*
[46] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 61.

to men, and thus, sidelined in the making of culture, came to replace this earlier tradition in which women were active and full participants.[47] Women are characterized as having lost the esteemed public roles they had claimed during the earliest generations.[48] These scholars posit that women's scholarly activism was, with time, suppressed and weakened.[49] After the early Islamic era in which women enjoyed a certain amount of freedom, they were consistently downgraded in intellectual circles and religious scholarship until the institution of modern reforms.[50]

The High Caliphal Period of Abbasid rule emerges in many of these studies as a particularly ill-fated moment for Muslim women.[51] New ideas and ideals are said to have been introduced into the social fabric at this time, which were detrimental to women's status.[52] Specifically, the political might and economic prosperity of the Abbasid state resulted in women's subordination to men, especially due to the institution of slavery.[53] Slave commerce is posited to have reached a peak during the Abbasid era.[54] For Abbott, the Abbasid era was especially harmful to elite women due to the combination of concubinage, polygamy and women's seclusion.[55] A harmful ideology of gender which emerged as a result of these developments, is argued to have become inscribed into the textual productions and legal systems emerging at this time, in the form of prescriptive utterances or assumptions about the nature of women.[56]

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[47] Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion,* 94.
[48] Alwani, "Muslim Women as religious Scholars," 49.
[49] Alwani, "Muslim Women as religious Scholars," 45.
[50] Roded, *Women in Biographical Collections,* 46; Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002)*,* 86-87.
[51] Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 9.
[52] Alwani, "Muslim Women as religious Scholars," 49.
[53] Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion*, 14.
[54] Matthew S. Gordon. "Introduction: Producing Songs and Sons." In *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, eds Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 4.
[55] Abbott, *Two Queens,* 8.
[56] Ahmed, *Women and Gender,* 82, 83-87

Some scholars have contested these depictions of a powerless woman in the Abbasid era. Nadia El Cheikh in her article "Revisiting the Abbasid Harem" has questioned the depictions of the harem as a place of passivity, enslavement and seclusion, and argues the harem has not been properly historicized.[57] Scholars have pointed out that women's conditions and possibilities during the High Caliphal Period were not one sided. Rather, the norms about women which are thought to be fixed and unchanged since that time do not necessarily tell us about women's real conditions.[58] However, the predominant narrative remains that women's lives were increasingly circumscribed during the Abbasid era. Within such theories, the male scholarly classes, along with the state, defined meaning and historical memory in ways that were detrimental to women and allowed for repressive practices against them.[59]

The learned classes during the Abbasid era are argued to have promoted ideas and laws that were disadvantageous to women.[60] Several scholars of gender and Islam have focused on the study of *fiqh* and *tafsīr* (exegesis), suggesting that historically, both these fields did not include women.[61] Instead, the derivation of religious laws and exegesis further inscribed women's perceived inferiority.[62] Amina Wadud, author of *Quran and Women* (1999),[63] and *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006),[64] argues that women were left out of the process of Qur'anic interpretation, and that exegesis was produced exclusively by male scholars which tended to disadvantage women. Asma

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[57] Nadia Maria El-Cheikh. "Revisiting the Abbasid Harems." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 3 (2005)
[58] Pernilla Myrne. *Narrative, Gender and Authority in Abbasid Literature on Women*. (Goteborg: University of Gothenburg, 2010), 243.
[59] Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam,* 86-87.
[60] Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion,* 14.
[61] For example see Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010)
[62] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 49.
[63] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)
[64] Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad : Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006)

Barlas takes a similar position in her work, *Believing Women in Islam* (2002).[65] She argues that commentaries on the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* were produced in a male-centred environment during the early centuries of Islam, which nonetheless is referred to normatively, as the Golden Age of Islam.[66]

Some scholars working outside the rubric of Gender and Women's Studies appear to have corroborated these arguments. Joseph Schact, for example, asserted that Islamic law considered women to be inferior to men, and assigned them a subordinate status. This resulted in women being offered lesser rights and duties in religious matters.[67] The palpable implication of these assessments is that women were not part of the development of the exegetical or legal traditions, and as such, may have been negatively impacted. The intellectual atmosphere that dominated at this time is described by one author as one where "women were robbed of their common sense, disenfranchised from their social responsibility, and reduced to a self-denying and masochistic experience of naive religiosity."[68]

In the realm of education, the characterisation of a progressively increasing discrimination against women also endures.[69] Women's education is characterized as limited, and intellectual circles in pre-modern Islamic societies are described, generally, as excluding women. Women in this era are depicted as textually invisible, and "conspicuous for their absence from all arenas of the community's central affairs".[70] The learned classes specifically, are attributed a major role in the degradation of women's opportunities in society.[71] Deep rooted conceptions of women as

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[65] Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*.
[66] Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*, 9.
[67] Joseph Schact, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1982), 126.
[68] Ednan Aslan, "Early Community Politics and the Marginalization of Women in Islamic Intellectual History." In *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, ed. Ednan Aslan, et al. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 39.
[69] Aslan, "Early Community Politics," 40.
[70] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 79, 87
[71] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, Chapter 5

inferior are said to have become influential in religious discourses.[72] This resulted in women losing their place in these religious discourses[73] and being excluded from the formational process of religious traditions during the Abbasid Era.[74] It is thus argued that women were relegated to a marginal role in society, shut out from public life, and barred from authoritative knowledge.[75]

Despite this enduring theme of an intellectual sidelining, some of studies in the realm of Women's Studies acknowledge that least some women were able to attain high levels of education.[76] Huda Lutfi's study of a fifteenth century biographical dictionary for the social and economic history of women, which we will discuss further in the next section, is one such study in this field.[77] Leila Ahmed also acknowledges that scholarly interaction between men and women did take place throughout history, although she points out that details of these pursuits are not clear and suggests that the topic merits further investigation.[78] The general contours and patterns of possibilities for women's lives are depicted as having remained more or less the same across time and space.[79] Only a few of these studies can be said to have addressed the topic of premodern education in depth. Most of the scholarship still holds that after the early Islamic era in which women enjoyed a certain amount of freedom, they were consistently downgraded in intellectual circles and religious scholarship until the institution of modern reforms.[80]

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[72] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 49.
[73] Aslan "Early Community Politics," 40.
[74] Aslan "Early Community Politics," 39.
[75] Aslan "Early Community Politics," 41.
[76] Ahmed, *Women and Gender,* 74.; Aslan "Early Community Politics," 40.
[77] Huda Lutfi, "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa' as a Source for the Social and Economic History of Muslim Women During the Fifteenth Century AD." *The Muslim World* 71, no.2 (1981)
[78] Ahmed, *Women and Gender,* 114-115.
[79] Ahmed, *Women and Gender,* 102.
[80] Roded, *Women in Biographical Collections,* 46; Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam,* 86-87.

There are several articles and books published by scholars of gender and Islam, which focus on Muslim women's education in the modern period, but they are beyond the scope of this thesis.[81] Yet the underlying assumption in these works, namely, that Muslim women's education is relatively new, is relevant to the survey of premodern education. Ayesha Chaudhry in her critical historiography of Islamic legal studies writes that, "Muslim women's voices are finally part of the production of Islamic knowledge after centuries of silence through erasure."[82] In *Muslima Theology* (2014), which is a valuable resource for exploring women's engagement with theology in the modern era, both Zainab Alwani and Ednan Aslan argue that while initially women participated in the intellectual tradition, they were sidelined for most of the premodern era.[83] Marcia Hermansen, in the same book, elaborates that while historically there were no barriers to females commenting on and interpreting Islamic sacred texts, after the first generation of Muslims, women did not interpret the traditions, but rather transmitted them.[84] Discrimination against women in education is depicted as continuously characterizing the theological and religious norms of Muslims until the modern era.[85] These scholars conclude it is only with modernity that Muslim women began to access education and acquire the methods and tools needed to engage in interpretive theology meaningfully.[86]

Scholarship focusing on gender in Islam is valuable for insights into women's social history, their place in legal thought, the history of royal women, slave-women, singers and mystics, as well as the history of the first generations of Muslim women. Conversely, it is not as fruitful for those

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[81] See Masooda Bano. *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) and *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Edition, 2014)
[82] Ayesha Chaudry, "Islamic Legal Studies: A Critical Historiography" in *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law,* ed. Ahmed, Rumee, Anver Emon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.
[83] Aslan, "Early Community," 40.; Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 45.
[84] Marcia Hermansen, "The New voices of Muslim Women Theologians" In *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, ed. Ednan Aslan, et al. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 11.
[85] Aslan, "Early Community," 40.
[86] Hermansen, "The New voices of Muslim Women Theologians," 11.

interested in the characteristics of women's education beyond the earliest generations, and specifically their education in religious sciences. The general impression in the field of Gender and Women Studies remains that women suffered in this realm due to the normative, legally-based, "orthodox" framework of Islam during the medieval era. Women's ability to shape public life and their roles in the public sphere are marked as nearly non-existent. One possible reason for this depiction, is the absence of self-produced written texts from learned women of the eras in question. Since women have left no written records, we have no means of knowing what their lived experiences were like, including their access to education.[87] The emphasis on searching out women's voices and female-produced texts is what leads many scholars specializing in Gender or Women's Studies to assert that historically, women have not significantly participated in the formation and propagation of traditional Islamic scholarship.

Both those studies focusing on premodern Muslim education and those dealing with gender and Islam, as noted earlier, have either overlooked traditionally learned women or dismissed them; according them little credit in participating or shaping traditional forms of learning and knowledge production. Scholars that deal directly with Muslim women's education on the other hand, who are discussed next, have found ample examples of women participating in traditional education networks beyond Islam's first century. Through this scholarship, an extensive number of women are 'uncovered' who had participated in educational pursuits. Various authors differ, however, in their analysis and depictions of this participation.

Scholarship on Premodern Women's Education

Huda Lutfi's work "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa' as a Source for the Social and Economic History of Muslim Women" (1981), was one of the earliest works to comb through pre-modern

[87] Ahmed, *Women and Gende*r, 121.

biographical dictionaries and extract instances of women's education. Lutfi highlights the educational accomplishments of certain women in al-Sakhāwī's (d. 1497) fifteenth-century dictionary, *al-Ḍawʾ al-Lāmiʿ fī Aʿyān al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿ*. While acknowledging the educational status of these women, she maintains that women were only afforded social power through their male associates,[88] and that their contribution to intellectual life was marginal compared to men's activities.[89]

In the 1990s, numerous other studies also employed the biographical dictionaries in order to uncover the educational opportunities afforded to women. Jonathan Berkey's work was among the first in this cohort. Aside from the book chapter devoted to women's education, which I mentioned earlier, he produced valuable articles such as "Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period" (1991), where he draws out the names of women who achieved scholarly prominence during the Mamluk period. Once again, the primary source exploited for this information is the biographical dictionary. He has followed up on the topic over the years. An article published in 2010 details the women teachers of a fourteenth-century *Shāfiʿī* scholar, Tāj al-Dīn al Subkī. They are extracted from his *mashyakha,* a list of an individual's teachers on whose authority he transmitted texts. His work brought to light the large number of women scholars of *ḥadīth* who are recorded in biographical dictionaries dating to the Mamluk era. Berkey's contribution to the field of women's education is important, especially his decision to include their role in a general historical study of Islamic education.

Ruth Roded's work, *Women in Biographical Collections,* published in 1994 provided the first thorough study of women's representation in Islamic biographical dictionaries. Roded provides copious information on learned women in these sources, as well as quantitative data about

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[88] Huda Lutfi "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa' as a Source for the Social and Economic History of Muslim Women During the Fifteenth Century AD." *The Muslim World* 71, no.2 (1981): 124.
[89] Lutfi, "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa'," 123.

women's representation within them. She describes the plethora of women discussed in these dictionaries, and the characteristics that are often associated with them. Her tables, which lay out numerically the ratio of women included in several important dictionaries are especially useful for nuanced studies on women's education. Her detailed work is a valuable contribution to the topic of women's education as well as women's representation in historical sources.

In the first decade of the 21st century, scholarship on women's premodern education picked up once again. Omaima Abou Bakr deals with women's education specifically in her article "Teaching the Words of The Prophet: Women Instructors of the Hadith" (2003). This article looks at women *ḥadīth* scholars from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a similar time period under study by Berkey. It explores the role of women *ḥadīth* scholars through an examination of their biographies and argues that these women were authoritative in their field rather than passive transmitters of text and were important contributors to the social, cultural, intellectual and educational domains of their societies. [90] Another later article by the same author follows up on this position.[91]

Yossef Rapoport's work in social history is also a fruitful reading for those interested in Muslim women's education. His article "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society" (2007) describes an unrestricted female education in the Mamluk era.[92] Employing biographical sources and *fatwā*s (legal rulings), Rapoport produces a fascinating study of women's social history, which includes valuable information pertaining to education. He argues that while women might have often occupied separate spheres of society, and although the lack of surviving sources might hide women's roles, women played a far from marginal role in religious life. They were-recipients of

[90] Omaima Abou-Bakr, "Teaching the Words of the Prophet: Women Instructors of the Ḥadīth (Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries)" *Hawwa* 1, no.3 (2003): 326.
[91] Omaima Abou-Bakr, "Articulating Gender: Muslim Women Intellectuals in the Pre-Modern Period" *Arab Studies Quarterly* 32 no. 3 (2010)
[92] Yossef Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," *Mamluks Studies Review* (2007), 39.

religious knowledge and exhortations, through oral preaching and recitation, and, among the traditionalist Sunni elite, through reading and study of religious literature.[93] Women were also active participants and contributors to religious life and were on equal footing with men in the transmission of *ḥadīth*, a popular and non-professional pious activity.[94]

Al-Muḥaddithāt by Muhammad Nadwi, published in 2007, was one of the most comprehensive books dedicated specifically to premodern women's education at its time.[95] In this work, the author highlights women *ḥadīth* scholars from the premodern era as described in traditional sources, especially the biographical dictionaries. He covers several topics, including the contents of women's education, locations of learning, their teachers, their students, and changes across time and location.

In 2013, Asma Sayeed published an extremely thorough book on Muslim women's *ḥadīth* education, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, which drew on previous scholarship and provided novel insights. This study is broad, covering nearly ten centuries and a wide geographic region, in an attempt to provide a comprehensive assessment of women's education in the field of *ḥadīth*. In it the author highlights chronological shifts in women's contribution to the intellectual tradition. The central thesis of this study is that women's initially unregulated participation was halted in the early eighth century by the professionalization of this field but was revived in the mid eleventh century with the entrenchment of "traditionalism" in Sunni Islam.[96] She arrives at this conclusion by examining women's representation in chains of transmission in *ḥadīth* literature, as well as biographical dictionaries. She supplements this data

[93] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 37.
[94] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 37.
[95] Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (London: Interface, 2007)
[96] Sayeed, 186.

with social history and feminist theory to explain the changing fortunes of women in *ḥadīth* education.

The overwhelming majority of scholarship devoted to women's education in the premodern era employ biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt/tarājim)* as their main historical source. In these compilations of biographies, large numbers of women are recorded as having been learned individuals. These women are elevated for their vast knowledge, hold social prestige and are even remembered as being the teachers of well-known male Islamic scholars.[97]

From the biographies of these women, specifically of women scholars of *ḥadīth*, we learn that these women were experts in the field, obtaining permission to teach several collections of *ḥadīth* that were in circulation then, including the *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound) compilations. They engaged in professional and scholarly dissemination of these canonical *ḥadīth* collections to male and female learners.[98] Many of these women began their studies at a young age and obtained *ijāza*s (authorization/license) to teach various texts to students and scholars. For this reason, they were often sought out in the later years of their lives by prominent male *ḥadīth* scholars for the coveted shorter *isnād*s (chains of transmission) they held. [99] For Berkey, this popularity at old age is one of the main reasons for their success as *ḥadīth* scholars.[100] The women are remembered as trustworthy and pious *shaykha*s (women religious scholars/spiritual authorities), who were sought out for their religious learning.[101]

Women studied in houses, as well as in mosques and sometimes schools. Other places of learning included bookshops and *ribāṭ*s (monasteries).[102] Many of these learning environments

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[97] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 67.
[98] Omaima Abou Bakr, "Teaching the Words of the Prophet," 128.
[99] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 169.
[100] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 177.
[101] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 4.
[102] Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat*, 78.

were co-educational, and within them, women attended classes, as well as taught men.[103] The *ribāṭ*s specifically were women focused, and existed in great numbers during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[104] Rapoport describes them as an exclusively female religious house, which might have acted as sister institutions to neighboring *madrasa*s or *khānaqāh.*[105] *Ribāṭ*s were often endowed by women, were assigned women teachers, and were populated by an already pious group of women. However, they have often been overlooked in studies on education, likely because of their designation as informal, mystic or subversive, which are connotations which are pervasive in descriptions of women's premodern religious activities.[106] Rapaport takes a differing position, arguing that the gendered spheres of women were complementary, rather than subordinate, to those of men and that notions of female dependence and passivity in medieval Muslim society is not supported by the evidence of the medieval sources.[107]

A main point of contention in the scholarship is whether women's education might be considered formal and authoritative, or informal, and non-authoritative. Scholars like Berkey, while highlighting the significant numbers of women who were part of the learned community, also hold that women's education was persistently informal, and carried with it no authority.[108] Huda Lutfi also takes this position, as well as several of the scholars listed above to a certain extent. A common stance is that as traditionists women might have transmitted, repeated and memorized traditions, but did not contribute original, analytical or interpretative insights to their fields of expertise[109] Rapoport on the other hand, emphasized the complementary but gendered spheres of

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[103] Roded, *Women in Biographical Collections,* 138.
[104] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 41-42.
[105] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 41-42.
[106] Andrew Prevot. "No Mere Spirituality: Recovering a Tradition of Women Theologians." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 1 (2017)
[107] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 45.
[108] Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education," 146.
[109] Delia Cortese, & Simonetta Calderini. *Women and the Fatimids in the world of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni Press, 2006), 208.

women's social life, including education pursuits[110], while Abou Bakr holds that women were active, authoritative and contributing members of the traditions, at least in the 14th and 15th centuries.[111] Other studies have also found a few instances where women were consulted in legal manners, debated on rulings, and even taught in the mosque.[112]

Another inquiry within this topic is whether women were teachers, and whether they were remunerated for their work. Several studies have found examples of women acting as teachers,[113] although there are not as many highlighting official posts or remuneration. Berkey affirms that women were integrated into the world of *ḥadīth* transmission, both as pupil and teacher.[114] While usually described as being sidelined by the all-male *madrasa*, a few women are known to have been assigned *ribāṭ*s in which they were the teachers of women.[115] Ribāṭ al-Baghdādiyya in thirteenth-century Cairo is among the most famous of *ribāṭ*s devoted exclusively to women, and was endowed for the benefit of a female mystic called Zaynab al-Baghdādiyya. Nadwi has found a few cases of women learning within *madrasa*s.[116] Most scholarship maintains however, that in general, women did not occupy teaching positions in *madrasa*s and were typically not stipended students within them.

Women's access to education was dependent on their position in society, much like men. Socioeconomic status as well as urban vs rural settings directly impacted women's educational opportunities.[117] The extent of literacy among women was conditioned by social and financial

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[110] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 45.
[111] Abou Bakr, "Teaching the Words of the Prophet," 318.
[112] Yacoob, "Women and education in the pre-modern Middle East"
[113] See Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat, 259;* Jonathan Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, 176; Abou Bakr "Teaching the Words of the Prophet," 317.
[114] Berkey, "Al-Subki and his Women," 15.
[115] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 41.
[116] Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat*, 259.
[117] Manuela Marin and Randi Deguilhem, "Introduction: Visibility, Agency, and the consciousness of Women's actions: To What Extent?" In *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, eds. Randi Deguilhem, and Manuela Marin, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002), xvi.

status in addition to family background.[118] Upper class women were more likely to be taught to read and sometimes to write by family members or private tutors.[119] Family connections were also useful in giving women access to scholarly circles and teachers. Some scholars have held that women's education took place almost exclusively within the seclusion of the home and was facilitated by male familial relations, while others have argued that this is not indicated by the textual evidence.[120] Many biographical dictionaries highlight unrelated male students and teachers of women scholars, and do not speak explicitly on the issue of these women's segregation.

Nearly all the scholarship on women's education is dealing primarily with *ḥadīth* scholarship. The women who are remembered in the biographical sources which are the backbone of the majority of studies on premodern Islamic education, are primarily women specialized in *ḥadīth*. A few studies exist which focus on Muslim women's legal learning, and have found some examples of this occurring, although they are much fewer than the cases of women's *ḥadīth* scholarship.[121] In these cases of women's legal learning, women can be seen to have attended men's *majālis*, were consulted on or won legal rulings and taught in mosques, with no indication in the biographical sources that their gender inhibited them from accessing these spaces.[122]

Chronological Trends for Women's Education

One trend which several of the studies on women's education in the premodern Muslim world highlight is the alternating fortunes for women in education. Most studies on either gender and Islam, or Muslim women's education, have highlighted the significant role played by women

[118] Cortese and Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids*, 208.
[119] Cortese and Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids*, 208.
[120] Berkey "Women and Islamic Education" 150 emphasizes women's private learning venues. Other scholars have found women learned in public spaces as well, see Abou Bakr "Teaching the Words of the Prophet" 316, Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat*, 259; Yacoob, "Women and Education," 67-68.
[121] See Yacoob, "Women and Education in the pre-Modern Middle East"
[122] Yacoob, "Women and Education," 50.

in the earliest generations of Islam. Although depending on non-contemporary sources, the image of the seventh and early eighth century is that of women's involvement in the development of the tradition, and as conveyors of the Prophet's teachings.[123] A few works are available that highlight the role of 'A'isha, the wife of the Prophet, or early women mystics.[124] However, despite this possible early involvement, women are described as being sidelined by traditional scholars, at least by the end of the eighth century, which saw the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate.

Feminist scholars have described the Abbasid era as being uniquely harmful to women, with women being absent from the intellectual developments that took place at that time.[125] Several studies on women religious scholars which have employed biographical dictionaries, have indeed observed that during the High Caliphal Period, there is scarcely any record of women's participation in the orthodox legalist educational circles.[126] Muhammad Akram Nadwi notes that during the Abbasid era women were not noted for their education in traditional sciences, but in the eras preceding and following the Abbasid heyday, women were prolific in such fields.[127] Studies on women scholars of the religious sciences have noticed a decrease in the names of contemporaneous women in textual sources from the mid eighth to eleventh century.[128] After the eighth century, women nearly disappear from *isnād*s as later links in chains of transmission, and very few are recorded in biographical dictionaries as being experts of *ḥadīth*, a trend which persisted up until the end of the tenth century.[129]

From the eleventh century onwards, women are described by Sayeed as having a newfound success in the traditional sciences, being recorded in significant numbers in biographical

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[123] Aslan, "Early Community Politics", 36.
[124] See Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*; Abbott, *Aishah, The Beloved of Muhammad.*
[125] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 83-87.
[126] Asma Sayeed. *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 3.; Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 66.
[127] Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat*, 250.
[128] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 7.
[129] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 105.

dictionaries.[130] A study of women in Andalusian biographical dictionaries shows that women's representation within them increases from the twelfth century onwards, but was limited prior.[131] Roded notes that the number of women recorded in biographical collections increases after the thirteenth century.[132] The studies that have paid attention to the nuances of periodization have also noted a second decline in women's educational opportunities after the sixteenth century.[133] After this moment, barely a dozen women traditionists are reported.[134] This period of decline might not be particular to women, but rather reflect a scholarly decline in Muslim societies more generally.[135] By the fifteenth century, Muslim writers were noticing a decline in education, with the centers of Andalusia and Iraq waning in importance.[136] The decline of interest in education became general, and the learning of that time is described as having lacked vitality due to the effects of political conditions.[137] Leo Africanus observed in 1517 that while Cairo's lecture rooms were large, the attendance numbers were low.[138]

Various explanations have been put forth for the stark disappearance of women from the textual records from roughly the mid eighth century to at least the eleventh century. Asma Sayeed who focuses on the chronology of women's education in the most depth, puts forth a series of explanations for the observed phenomenon of decline. She suggests that it was the increasing professionalization of the field of *ḥadīth* scholarship that resulted in the participation of women

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[130] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 5.
[131] Maria Luisa Avila, "Women in Andalusian Biographical Sources" in *Writing the Feminine : Women in Arab Sources*, eds. Randi Deguilhem and Manuela Marin (I.B.Tauris, 2002), 153.
[132] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 58
[133] See Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat*, 246, 260; Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 180; Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 135; Avila, "Women in Andalusian Biographical Sources," 53.
[134] Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features & Criticism* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 151.
[135] Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat,* 246.
[136] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa"
[137] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa"
[138] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa"

being sharply curtailed.[139] Women were especially disadvantaged by the emphasis on legal thought during this period, as they suffered from negative perceptions of their legal acumen, insufficient linguistic training, difficulties in face to face contact and obstacles in undertaking the long journeys which were so central at this time.[140] For Sayeed, the observed absence of women in the records can be contextualized with developments in social, political and intellectual history, and the evolving social uses of knowledge.

Sayeed and others have also suggested that as this was a time when the authority of *ḥadīth* traditions were being critically examined, the decline in female traditionalists might indicate a preference for male transmitters.[141] When traditionalism eventually prevailed over other competing strands of religious legitimacy, and the *ḥadīth* works became formalized and authenticated, women were able to enter into the fold of the traditions once more.[142]

It does not escape notice that the time-frame outlined in certain studies for the disappearance of women from intellectual circles, coincides neatly with the High Caliphal Period. Thus, another explanation for first the suppression, and then the re-emergence of women, is the arguably patriarchal practices of the Abbasid state.[143] The Abbasid patronizing of *Muʿtazilī* (rationalist) scholarship as the preferred theology of the religious sciences might also have worked against women, as the *Muʿtazilī*s appear to have eschewed women's active participation in the furthering of their ideology.[144] There are nearly no records of female *Muʿtazilī* scholars, and thus the decline of this theology might have opened up space for women generally.[145] If we follow this theory of the negative attitudes towards women rampant in the Abbasid Empire, including amongst

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[139] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 3.
[140] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 4.
[141] Roded*, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 72.
[142] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 184.
[143] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 105; For women in Abbasid era see Ahmed*, Women and Gender*, Chapter 5.
[144] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 8.
[145] Sayeed*,* 8.

its ruling and intellectual elite, then the disintegration of the central Abbasid state in the mid tenth century could explain why the tide turned in favor of women. Roded has posited that during the second observed decline, it was the increased bureaucratization of the state with the rise of the Ottoman empire that barred women from attaining high levels in *ḥadīth* studies.[146] It is these shifts in depictions of access to education that I wish to explore in the remaining chapters. Specifically, I hope to put more attention on the primary sources that are being employed in the above studies, in order to better understand the reasons for changes in female representation within them.

Studies such as Sayeed's and Nadwi's assume that first the decrease, then increase, in records of women in the textual sources reflects the actual experiences of women in their societies. That is, when women are recorded less in the sources, they are presumed to have participated less in the field and might even have been barred from accessing it. These assumptions have several weaknesses. The simple theories of initial participation followed by continuous decline assume that after the early Islamic era in which women enjoyed relative freedom and independence, they were marginalized by Islamic societies until the institution of modern reforms.[147] The more nuanced studies, which bring to light a revival of women's education following the initial decline, are also weak due to a failure to deal critically with the sources.

Roded points out that the biographical sources' silence in regards to women during certain centuries does not reflect the actual activities undertaken by women.[148] She notes that no women were recorded as being politically influential during the Ottoman era, despite it being an era known as "the rule of women" during which the Sultan's consorts effectively ruled.[149] None of these women have been memorialized in biographical dictionaries. Why is this the case, and might a

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[146] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 72
[147] Roded*,* 46.
[148] Roded, 46.
[149] Roded, 72.

similar erasure have occurred with scholarly women? With Roded having hinted at the weakness in biographical dictionaries in painting the full picture of politically powerful women during the Ottoman era, it is important to examine this form of writing to search for answers regarding scholarly women's absence from dictionaries in the ninth and tenth centuries, and their later emergence in large numbers.

Nearly all the studies which highlight a significant occurrence of women's education have made extensive use of *ṭabaqāt*, or biographical dictionaries. Asma Sayeed, who is the principal author highlighting the shifting fortunes for women's education, depends primarily on these sources, although she also makes use of *isnād*s in canonical *ḥadīth* collections. Roded's work which drew out significant numbers of women in Islamic history, focused entirely on these biographical dictionaries. Berkey primarily drew out women's education from these sources as well. Nadwi also makes extensive use of these biographical dictionaries, although he also employs other documents including class attendances and *ijāza*s. What is clear is that any study which amplifies the educational opportunities enjoyed by women in the medieval era almost certainly depends on biographical dictionaries. In fact, I found no substantial study of premodern women's education which draws out examples of women's education and does not employ these sources. It is arguable then, that these sources are indispensable for those working to reconstitute women's educational lives, and in their absence, we are left with very little from which we can develop a picture of the topic.

Conclusion

Given the scarcity of self-produced textual sources by premodern Muslim women, the biographical dictionaries have proved useful for scholars looking for details on women's lives, which seem to be absent elsewhere. This form constitutes one of the major literary sources for

medieval Islamic history in general. [150] Nearly all studies that deal with women's scholarship during the medieval era also depend on this genre as their primary source, not only because it is believed to be the only source available that tells us about this topic, but also because of the sheer amount of information found within them. The biographical dictionary *al-Ḍawʾ al-Lāmiʿ fī Aʿyān al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿ* written by historian and *ḥadīth* scholar al-Sakhāwī for example, contains 1, 077 entries on women scholars, primarily *ḥadīth* scholars, of the fifteenth century,[151] while Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's (d.1448) *al-Iṣāba fī Tamyīz al-Ṣaḥāba* listing companions of the Prophet includes a total of 1543 women.[152] While the entries within these works can offer us a glimpse into the lives of women scholars, it must be noted that all these sources are male authored, and do not allow us a definitive understanding of women's lived experiences. Rather, what they can tell us are the recording trends and patterns of the class that produced them.

Most of the scholarship on the education of premodern Muslim women depends on positivist readings of the biographical dictionary. The question I wish to examine is whether such readings of this source are valid. I will do this by raising new distinct questions, and by focusing closely on the nature of the inclusion of women as well as the moments of exclusion, and the implications of these observed chronological trends. Were biographical dictionaries compiled to provide us with dates and nuances for the educational opportunities of women? A closer examination of the form of the biographical dictionary and its history is needed in order for us to understand what can and cannot be a basis for understanding women's history, and how can we write Muslim women's history better.

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[150] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 4.
[151] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 3.
[152] Abou Bakr, *Teaching the Words of the Prophet,* 309.

CHAPTER 2:
BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARIES: EVOLUTION AND ADAPTATION

Diverging theories pertaining to the characteristics of women's education in the premodern Islamic world have been drawn primarily from representations within a form of writing categorized as biographical dictionaries or *ṭabaqāt*. Despite the internal variations and diversity in the characteristics of these dictionaries during the medieval and late medieval period, and across various parts of the Muslim world, they share significant attributes and epistemic features that can be safely unified under a "premodern" rubric. These dictionaries constitute some of the richest surviving textual sources on aspects of premodern Muslim life, and especially the practices of the scholarly class.[153] The modern scholars at the forefront of discussions on women's education have employed this genre of writing at length.[154]

Scholarly readings of biographical dictionaries for the purpose of 'unearthing' women's history have tended to be generally positivist. The presence or absence of women in the dictionaries, as well as the characteristics of their education as described in the texts are extracted and presented as historical data on women's education. Detailed and judicious source analyses of biographical dictionaries, its original and later forms, the concerns and expectations of those who composed and interacted with them, as well as its evolution over time, are still lacking in the scholarly narratives of women's history extracted from this source.[155] These inquiries however, are imperative for better grasping the nature of information drawn from them. Values that are comprehensible only to those who produced these works impact the content and structure of the

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[153] Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice,* 178.
[154] Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education*";* Roded *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections;* Avila, "Women in Andalusian Biographical Sources"; Abou-Bakr, "Teaching the Words of the Prophet"; Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat;* Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge.*
[155] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility, Agency and the Consciousness of Women's Actions", xviii.

works themselves, and reflect the intentions and uses of their authors and readers.[156] The connection between text and context cannot be separated, nor the connection between text and the intentions of the people who produced them.[157] Studying textual sources as a reflection of positivist and empirical information without nuance and analysis can result in flawed judgements.[158] Such sources should be contextualized and analyzed themselves, and should not be used in isolation from other complementary sources.[159]

This chapter focuses on the evolution of the textual form of biographical dictionaries, in order to better grasp what it tells us about women's history. Specifically, I attempt to classify the biographical dictionaries into three time periods and demonstrate the ways in which the dictionaries evolved in use and form over time. By focusing on the theme of chronological fluctuation in women's access to education, I aim to show that the constraints of the primary source do not allow us to uphold theories of women's decline and then subsequent re-emergence in educational circles.

What is a Biographical Dictionary

In my discussion of biographical dictionaries, I am referring to those works which are generally referred to in Arabic as *ṭabaqāt,* or *tarājim*. I use "biographical dictionary" interchangeably with these terms in this study. Specifically, I am focusing on those compilations of biographical notices of individuals of a chosen group, often, but not exclusively, produced by the religious scholarly communities. In this study, these forms of writings refer to all types of biographical dictionaries that place people in *ṭabaqāt*, literally, classes or strata, reflecting various

[156] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility," xvii
[157] Ephrat, *A Learned Society*, 14.
[158] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility" xvii.
[159] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility," xvii.

organizational schemes, despite the fact that the earliest of such dictionaries divided individuals on the basis of generation.

Biographical sources are notably people-centric rather than time-based, and can be organized in different ways, including by geography, millennia, area of expertise, or generation. Entries within them can vary from a few words to several pages and typically include the subject's name, town, genealogy, contribution to Islam, teachers and students, information of their death as well as other relevant information.[160] While many dictionaries are dedicated to religious scholars or jurists, dictionaries also exist for poets, *qāḍī*s (judges) or philosophers, as well as dictionaries surveying all noteworthy individuals in a certain region or century.[161] There is no standard designation of these collections in scholarly literature, and they have been referred to as a genre, form, literary form, or all three.[162] There are also no clear boundaries for which texts might be included within this genre. Certain aspects of the source, such as origin, purpose or style remain controversial.[163] They have been classified by some scholars as prosopography and are differentiated from individual biographies of a detailed nature known as *sīra* (biography).[164] Two generally accepted features of the biographical dictionary is that they are a form of historical writing, and an indigenous creation of the Muslim community.[165] In this discussion, we focus on the recording of women as religious scholars in these dictionaries, although women have also been recorded within these compilations as poets, singers and mystics, especially in earlier collections.[166]

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[160] For more information see William Heffening "Tabaqat" in *The First Encyclopedia of Islam.* Eds. M.TH. Houtsma, A.J. Wensinck, H.A.R. Gibb, W. Heffening and E. Levi-Provencal (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 214-215.
[161] Lutfi "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa'," 105.
[162] Wadad Al Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History of the Muslim Community." In *Organizing Knowledge, Encyclopaedic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Islamic World*, ed. G. Endress (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2006), 24.
[163] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 4-5.
[164] Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xxv.
[165] Al Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 25.
[166] See Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*

Biographical dictionaries emerged early in Muslim societies. The origins of the *ṭabaqāt* form are contested. Some have tied this form to pre-Islamic traditions, specifically the interest in poetics transmission and genealogy, as well as the bureaucratic demands of the early Islamic *dīwān* register.[167] Its rise has more commonly been associated with the early collective demand for *ḥadīth* collection and verification.[168] The necessity of verifying the reliability and life span of *ḥadīth* transmitters is said to have spawned the interest in collecting biographies of individuals with certain standard information.[169] '*Ilm al-rijāl* or the "study of men", which emerged in response to the needs of *ḥadīth'*s *isnād* verification is thus argued to be an important factor in the development of biographical writings. Others have held that the genre is an offspring of both the Islamic discipline of traditions (*ḥadīth*) and history (*tā'rīkh*)[170]. Despite the diverging origin theories, the biographical dictionaries can be considered a form of historical writing that is a unique production of Arab Muslim culture.[171]

The *ṭabaqāt* genre is not a monolith in intention, style and content. Its combined historical and *ḥadīth*-driven impetuses impacted and shaped the form over time, causing it to constantly evolve with changing circumstances and with the needs of the scholarly classes. One such evolution was the shift away from employing *ṭabaqāt* for organizing scholars within professional specialties (most importantly *ḥadīth* transmitters) towards employing dictionaries for purposes of historicizing the scholarly community. This shift in purpose rested on two assumptions that lead to problems, and resulted in changes to the form.[172] The first assumption was that knowledge was

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[167] Tarif Khalidi *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Heffening, "Tabaqat", 214-215.
[168] Tarif Khalidi, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: A Preliminary Assessment" in *The Muslim World* 63 (1973):53.
[169] Khalidi, 53.
[170] Khalidi, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries," 53.
[171] Sir Hamilton Gibb, "Islamic Biographical Literature." In *Historians of the Middle East*. Eds. Bernard Lewis and P.M. Holt. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 54-58.
[172] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 25.

the true achievement of the Muslim community, which lent itself to be exclusionary.[173] The second assumption was that knowledge resided in individuals rather than institutions, which created problems for the institutionalizing and historicizing of their class.[174] Over time, the dictionaries adapted to these problems in various ways, which affected the content and style of the text.[175] In this chapter I divide the dictionaries into three rough temporal cohorts based on these shifts in intention and form, and link these evolutions to unfolding political and social developments. In doing so, I show that perceptions of rises and decline in women's educational opportunities more aptly reflect the evolving dictionary rather than women's lived realities. In addition to the evolving intention and content of the dictionary, the sheer quantity of the production of biographical dictionaries shifted significantly over time, with certain eras leaving behind considerably higher numbers of the source than other eras. These evolutions of the textual source altered the representation of women within them.

The First Cohort (750-1000): *Ṭabaqāt* from the High Caliphal Period

Some studies on women's education in *ḥadīth* and other traditional sciences have found women to be nearly absent in these fields from the mid eighth to the end of the tenth century.[176] This time-frame extends around fifty years past the High Caliphal Period (750-945), and will serve as the time division for the first cohort of biographical dictionaries.

The Abbasid Caliphate was officially established in 750 when Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ, the first Abbasid Caliph, overthrew the ruling Umayyad dynasty. The ushering in of the Abbasid Caliphate brought in a spell of prosperity and intellectual growth to the Muslim world, a time that is fondly remembered as the Golden Age of Islam. This is the era when many important

[173] Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History," 33.
[174] Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History," 34.
[175] Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History," 34.
[176] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 66; Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat*, 250.

philosophical, medical and mathematical works were translated into Arabic.[177] The *Muʿtazilī*s (rational theologians) were especially prominent at this time, and enjoyed the patronage of several ruling Abbasids, especially al-Maʾmūn (r.813-833) and his successor al-Muʿtaṣim (r.833-842), who have been remembered for their support of philosophy, translation and science.[178] Traditional *ḥadīth* scholarship was also thriving at this time, although its relationship with the ruling court was strained. It was under the Caliphs al-Maʾmūn and al-Muʿtaṣim that the *miḥna* (inquisition) took place, which persecuted the traditionalist scholars on the basis of their position on the doctrine of the created-ness of the Qurʾān.[179] Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, who would become the founder of one of Sunni Islam's four religious schools, was among the traditionalists persecuted during the *miḥna*. Traditionalist *ḥadīth* scholarship flourished nonetheless, and the *sharīʿa* was being expounded and consolidated at this moment. Several prominent ulama worked within the Abbasid palaces, notably the Hanafi jurist Abū Yūsuf who was appointed *qāḍī al-quḍāt* (supreme judge) by Hārūn al-Rashīd.[180] The biographical dictionaries emerged at this time, when Islamic civilization was beginning to develop its self-image and formalize its stances.[181] It is also in the midst of this "Golden Age" of unparalleled intellectual advancement that women are perceived to be absent from scholarly records as participants in the formation of tradition.

Ṭabaqāt literature from the this first cohort is scarce, although it is during this time that the earliest surviving *ṭabaqāt* work was produced.[182] The *ṭabaqāt* form was preceded by the individual biography, notably the *sīra* (biography) of the Prophet Muhammad.[183] The earliest surviving work

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[177] Abbott, *Two Queens*, 6.
[178] Ali Bahramian, Rahim Gholami, Sadeq Sajjadi, "ʿAbbāsids", in: *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, Editors-in-Chief: Wilferd Madelung and, Farhad Daftary (online: 2008)
[179] Bahramian, Gholami and Sajjadi, "ʿAbbāsids"
[180] Ahmad Pakatchi and Maryam Rezaee. 'Abū Yūsuf'. In *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, eds. Wilferd Madelung and and Farhad Daftary. Accessed August 9, 2018. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-9831_isla_COM_0164.
[181] Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History," 30,
[182] Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* Vol 9. (Leiden: Brill, 1904-1940)
[183] Wadad al-Qadî, "Biographical Dictionaries: Inner Structure and Cultural Significance," in *The Book in the Islamic World*, ed. George N. Atiyeh (The Library of Congress: State University of New York Press, 1995): 97.

which is classified as a *ṭabaqāt* is the *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* by Ibn Saʿd (d.844) which emerged in the ninth century.[184] Another work that has survived from this period is Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ's (d.856) *Ṭabaqāt Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ*.[185] Both these works have been linked to the *ḥadīth* tradition and its particular demands, as they primarily focus on the biographies of transmitters.[186]

The practice of *ḥadīth* collection and authentication which took place at an increased rate in the 9th and 10th centuries, required a detailed knowledge of transmitters within the *isnād.* In the early stages of the transmission of *ḥadīth,* a critical task for specialists was the distinguishing of genuine from spurious *isnāds*.[187] Biographical dictionaries emerged at least partly as a result of the elaborate science known as '*Ilm al rijāl*" which developed in order to assess the authenticity of transmissions.[188] Thus, many scholars attribute the impetus for the initial development and growth of the biographical genre in Muslim societies to collective socio-religious and scholarly demands, especially the need for the evaluation and study of *ḥadīth*.[189]

Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt* was preceded by at least one other dictionary which has not survived, the *Tā'rīkh al-Fuqahā'* by al-Wāqīdi (d.823)*,* Ibn Sa'd's teacher.[190] This work was most likely devoted to specialists of *fiqh* (Islamic law), indicating that dictionaries were not being produced solely for *ḥadīth* scholars and transmitters.[191] Nevertheless, dictionaries from this era tended to be more exclusive than inclusive, and aligned across professional field, rather than time or geographic

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[184] Ibn Sa'd, *al-ṭabaqāt*
[185] Zakkar, S. 'Ibn Khayyāṭ Al-ʿUṣfurī'. In Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, et al. Accessed September 1, 2018. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3256.
[186] Juynboll, G.H.A. 'Ridjāl'. *In Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman (Volumes X, XI, XII), Th. Bianquis (Volumes X, XI, XII)
[187] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge*, 32.
[188] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge*, 32.
[189] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 17; Hafsi, "Recherches sur le genre "tabaqàt " in La Littérature Arabe," *Arabica* 23 (1976), 227; Heffening "tabaqat"; Khalidi, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries" 53.
[190] Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History" 29.
[191]Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History" 29.

region.[192] Groups that dictionaries were compiled for included poets, *qādīs,* legal scholars and *ḥadīth* scholars, amongst many others.

Women in the First Cohort of *Ṭabaqāt* (750-1000)

The few surviving *ṭabaqāt* that were produced during High Caliphal Period did include entries for significant amounts of women, but these women are nearly entirely from the first two generations of Islamic history.[193] Those early women that are included are almost always listed in a separate volume devoted to women.[194] There are very few contemporary women included in this first cohort of *ṭabaqāt* works such as those authored by Ibn Saʿd (d.845) or Ibn Khayyāṭ (d.856), despite the hundreds of earlier women remembered within them.[195] There are only around ten women identified as transmitters of learning from the ninth century, and the quantity and quality of information about them is less than women of the earlier generations.[196]

One indication that Ibn Saʿd's dictionary did not set out to detail the lives of contemporary women is apparent from the fact that there are at least 16 traditions narrated in his dictionary in which a woman was third or fourth link in the *isnād* but no biographical entry exists for any of them.[197] Furthermore, when one draws out the instances in which women are mentioned in men's entries in these works, their number dramatically multiplies.[198] It should be noted that what has survived of Ibn Sa'd's *ṭabaqāt* is incomplete and many dictionaries from this early time have not

[192] Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History" 38.
[193] In Ibn Sa'd's ṭabaqāt, 623 out of 629 women included are from the first 2 generations (see Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 45).; Ibn Ḥibbān's (d.964) dictionary goes only as far as the third generation, and 312 out of 324 women included are from the first 2 generations (see Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 65-66)
[194] Both b. Khayyat and Ibn Sa'd's collections include women in a separate volume.
[195] Roded 66
[196] Roded *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 58, 66
[197] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 66.
[198] Arezou Azad, "Islam's Forgotten Scholars" in *History Today* 66, no. 10 (2016), 24.

survived in their entirety, if at all.[199] The practice of collecting women's biographies in a separate volumes from men's increased the possibility of their biographies being lost collectively over time.

While there was slightly more *ṭabaqāt*s being produced in this time in Umayyad Spain than in Abbasid territories, overall these texts are not rich sources for the lives of women living in those eras.[200] So inadequate are these surviving early *ṭabaqāt* at including biographical entries for the women in their societies, that the information we have of the several learned women who are remembered from the eighth to tenth centuries are nearly always obtained from later dictionaries of the Mamluk period since they do not show up in earlier ones.[201] This absence of women from dictionaries of the High Caliphal Period has led some scholars to conclude that women were not obtaining a religious education in significant levels at this time.[202] It is only after the disintegration of the Caliphate in the tenth century that women are thought to have gradually reemerged as scholars of religious sciences.

The Second Cohort (1000-1250): *Ṭabaqāt* from the Early Middle Period

In the tenth century, the Abbasid Caliphate was in crisis. Turkic mercenary soldiers who had been recruited into the caliphal armies since at least the time of Hārūn al-Rashīd (d.809), began to be employed in even larger numbers under al-Muʿtaṣim (d.842). These Turkic soldiers broke free from the control of the caliphs, establishing autonomous dynasties of their own in several outlying regions of the Caliphate.[203] The new Turkic and Persian militant rulers of the Būyid and

[199] Al Qadi, "Scholars Alternative History" 47.
[200] For a study on Andalusian biographical sources see Virginia Vázquez Hernández, "Local scholars in a global work: Andalusi biographical dictionaries in Ḥajjī Khalīfa's "Kashf al-ẓunūn"." *Anaquel de Estudios Árabes* 29, (2018); Avila, "Women in Andalusi Biographical Sources"
[201] For example there are barely any details of famous woman mystic Hafsa bint Sirin (d.718) life in Ibn Sa'd's dictionary, while in the 14th century she is highly praised in dictionaries. "Hafsa's renown is amplified over time in the historiographical tradition" (Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 74)
[202] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 66.
[203] Bahramian, Gholami and Sajjadi, "ʿAbbāsids"

Ḥamdānid dynasties depended on symbolic backing from the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, but the caliph no longer had any power in those regions.[204] Closer to home, Ismāʿīlī revolts were widespread. The Ismāʿīlī Fāṭimids had taken over Cairo and established themselves as the rulers of North Africa by the mid tenth century. The Caliphate was fragmented and unstable. By 950, the era referred to as the High Caliphal Period, the Classical Caliphate, and the Golden Age of Islam, was over.

Economic and agricultural grievances were also developing during this time. The system of iqṭāʿ land grants, which assigned lands to military rulers to tax and profit from exclusive from the state, devastated the peasants and reduced the fertility of the lands.[205] As the burden of staying on the land under the dominion of sometimes tyrant military landowners grew too much, peasants would leave the land or revert to pastoralism.[206] This precariousness of the agricultural class resulted in an un-stabilized tax and revenue for the central authorities, for the cities, and by extension, for the intellectual classes.[207] With the collapse of the caliphate's military power and the diminishing of their wealth, the ulama were forced to further lessen their dependence on the court, its patronage and posts, adjusting to the new reality with several practices.

Several prominent *ḥadīth* scholars and traditionist jurists across the Sunni *madhāhib* (schools of law), but especially the Ḥanbalīs, had stood against the Abbasid court since the *miḥna* (833-848), that is, the inquisition initiated by the Muʿtazilī-leaning Caliph, al-Maʾmūn. It is during this phase, that they seem to have become conscious of their collective identity as leaders and spokesmen of the community.[208] Traditionalist intellectuals, especially *ḥadīth* scholars, ultimately

[204] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2*. (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1974), 12.
[205] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2,* 80.
[206] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2,* 79.
[207] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2,* 8.
[208] al Qadi, "Scholar's Alternative History" 30.

won out against the rationalist and Muʿtazilī forces.[209] From this point in time, Islamic scholarship tended to bend to the will of traditionalist sensibilities.

As a result of the ever-increasing decentralization, the former caliphate evolved into a constantly expanding, culturally and linguistically international society.[210] This era is described as one in which power was relatively undifferentiated, and which lacked specialized institutions and state agencies.[211] The new society was not held together by a single political order, language or culture, but despite this fragmentation, remained consciously and effectively a historical whole, experiencing rapid expansion into new territories.[212] There was a common Islamicate social pattern which brought together the fragmented parts, and allowed for a circulation of ideas and manners throughout its expanding borders.[213] Particular forms of political authority and legitimacy, reflected in what came to be described by Hodgson as the Jamaʿ-ī Sunni 'orthodoxy' received wide reinforcement in the emerging Sunni international order, and was a rallying force in the middle of a fractured caliphate.[214] Islamic education was taking place in a world in which cultural and institutional barriers were being dissolved, and a dynamic network of various social groups was formed under the banner of this new Sunni order.[215] This encompassing and comprehensive network proved greatly effective in forging common Muslim cultural identity and transmitting knowledge.[216]

This period between the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate by the end of the tenth century and the sacking of Baghdad by the Il-Khanid Mongols in 1258 is referred to as the Early

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[209] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa"
[210] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2,* 3.
[211] Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice,* 176.
[212] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2,* 9.
[213] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2,* 12.
[214] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam V.2,* 10, 255.
[215] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 20.
[216] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 20.

Middle Period by Marshall Hodgson in his history of Islamicate societies.[217] It is in this time frame that I situate the second cohort of *ṭabaqāt.* This period was one of tumultuous change for the scholarly communities, during which they needed to readjust their practices in order to remain relevant and influential. State agencies became ineffective in their strategies of social reproduction and historicizing, and as a result, other methods were employed.[218] One of these methods was employing the *ṭabaqāt* form as a vehicle for preserving their practices and memory.[219] Thus, in the Islamicate order which emerged from the fractured Abbasid Caliphate in the eleventh century, the *ṭabaqāt*s underwent an evolution, especially in use and content.

The *Ṭabaqāt* and the New Sunni International Order

The second cohort of dictionaries appeared with the emerging Sunni international order of the Early Middle Period (1000-1250).[220] Because the scope of what these dictionaries could cover was in theory limitless and it was a flexible form that could be constantly expanded to include more people and more regions, this genre was conducive to the new Sunni international order, with its multi-ethnic multi-geographical and fluid spirit.[221] In this era we see the introduction of more generalized dictionaries that aligned across geographical regions such as Ibn ʿAsākir's *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (d.1176) and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's (d.1071) *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*. These dictionaries covered a wider selection of people than the preceding field-aligned dictionaries.[222]

[217] Hodsgon, *The Venture of Islam V.2.*
[218] Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice*, 176.
[219] Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice,* 178.
[220] Marshall Hodsgon delineates the Early Middle Period as from 945-1250. Fluctuating trends for women's representation, which see increase from the 11th century, suggest a second cohort from 1000-1250,
[221] al Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 27.
[222] al Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 44-45.

They also displayed a clear historical intention and are among the first in which biographical entries were arranged alphabetically.[223]

Biographical collections now began including more generalized and varied information, including anecdotal information and tales.[224] Information from chronicles and from preceding dictionaries might now be mixed together to provide more elaborate biographies.[225] The emergence of alphabetically organized dictionaries also takes place at this moment, indicating a turn in the direction of more general accessibility.[226] The focus was no longer only on companions of the Prophet or *ḥadīth* transmitters, but could include Sufis, poets, individuals of a city or a trade. Important compilations of Muslim mystics emerged in this time, including Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī's (d.1038) *Ḥilyat al-Awliyāʾ wa-Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyāʾ* and Ibn al-Jawzī's (d.1201) *Ṣafwat (Ṣifat) al-Ṣafwa.* Although the dictionaries were no longer always delineated by field, they still tended to be exclusive rather than exhaustive, with the authors focusing on only the most famous (*al-mashāhīr*) individuals of a region or time.[227] The transition towards inclusion had begun however, with the dictionaries moving beyond the specialized needs of *ḥadīth* transmission and the preservation of the first generations of Muslims, to needs of historicizing the contemporary scholarly class and other groups.

In the aftermath of the *miḥna*, with the weakening of the Abbasid caliphate and the increasingly precarious economic situation, the ulama groups were forced to look to new forms of survival. One conduit for this was the *ṭabaqāt*. Although *ṭabaqāt* have been compiled for classes other than the ulama, it is primarily associated with them and their specific needs.[228] The *ṭabaqāt*

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[223] Hartmut Fähndrich, "The Wafayàt al-A'yàn of Ibn Khallikàn: A New Approach," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973), 437.
[224] Yacoob, "Women and Education in the Pre-Modern Middle East," 11
[225] al Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 67
[226] al Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History 67
[227] Khalidi, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries" 60.
[228] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 4.

have been described as vehicles of the ulama's self-preservation.[229] They gained traction as the scholarly class's communal response to the existing historical genre, the political chronicle, in a moment when political central authority was crumbling.[230] In addition to the chronicle's precarious position in a fragmented political situation, the ulama class also might have felt sidelined by this literary form, which was exclusionist due to its focus on events and members relating to the ruling court.[231]

To counter the chronicle, the *ṭabaqāt* was turned to, and utilized as a vehicle through which the ulama could instead historicize their class.[232] Biographical dictionaries were free from nearly all the strictures which constrained chronicles.[233] With the shift from the political chronicle to the *ṭabaqāt* as a form of political writing for the religious class, the history of the community shifted from rulers and dynasties, to the contribution of individuals who were forming the Sunni international world-view and culture.[234] In this era of fragmentation, the ulama class ensured their longevity through the *ṭabaqāt*. This form then, could be considered an expression of the ulama class's practices of social survival in a moment of political instability.[235]

Women in the Second Cohort of *Ṭabaqāt* (1000-1250)

Although *ṭabaqāt* works were increasing in quantity at this time and were no longer focused solely on companions and transmitters of *ḥadīth,* contemporary women were still conspicuously underrepresented.[236] In fact, because there is no dictionary comparable to Ibn Sa'd's *ṭabaqāt* for the Prophet's Companion and Successor generations, the dictionaries from this period

[229] Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice,* 3.
[230] al-Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 25.
[231] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 71.
[232] al Qadi, "Scholar's Alternative History," 71.
[233] al Qadi, "Scholar's Alternative History," 26.
[234] al Qadi, "Scholar's Alternative History," 32.
[235] Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice,* 3.
[236] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 69

all hold far less women than the few dictionaries of the first cohort.[237] The dictionaries where more than a handful of women are 'remembered', such as Ibn al-Jawzī's *Ṣiffat al-Ṣafwa* and Ibn 'Abd al Barr's (d.1070) dictionary, appear to have been devoted to Sufis and Companions, respectively.[238] When women are included, they are continued to be placed all together in a volume separate from the one covering men's biographies.[239]

In general, apart from a few scattered references, women from this period are not particularly remembered in these dictionaries for being scholars of *ḥadīth* or contributors to any other Islamic discipline. The non-companion women who are included were often mentioned on account of their kinship ties to the compiler, or else tended to be royal or ascetic women.[240] Despite the fact that many of the dictionaries' authors during this period list several women among their teachers, they fail to account for them as such in the body of their dictionaries.[241] In most cases, the women's accomplishments, as scholars of *ḥadīth* in particular, are noted in dictionaries from the later Mamluk period.

The Third Cohort (1250-1500): *Ṭabaqāt* from the Later Middle Period

In 1258 the Īl-Khānid Mongols sacked Baghdad. The great loss to Islamic intellectual production due to this event became an enduring topos.[242] Bayt al-Ḥikmah, the famed library established during the heyday of Abbasid rule was said to be burned to the ground, and the Tigris

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[237] Roded 3
[238] Roded, 3, 58.
[239] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 3.
[240] Richard Bulliet, "Women and the Urban Religious Elite in the Pre-Mongol Period," in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800,* ed. Guity Neshat and Lois Beck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 68
[241] al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī for example is said to have had studied with at least 4 women, although less than 1% of the individuals in his massive dictionary devoted to individuals from Baghdad are women. See Roded 67; Ibn ʿAsākir lists at least 80 women amongst his teachers, while only 2% of the individuals covered in his even more massive dictionary devoted to the city Damascus are women. See Shalabi, *Muslim Education*, 194.
[242] Elias Muhanna, *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic* Tradition (Princeton, Princeton Univeristy Press, 2018), 17.

is described as having run black from the ink of all books tossed into the river.[243] The turbulent situation that the communities of ulama in their various compositions, ranks, functions, and scholarly activities, now found themselves in continued until at least the fourteenth century. In 1300 the Tatars are said to have destroyed many madrasas.[244] Despite the fact that commercial and social-intellectual renewal was witnessed under the Īl-Khānid Mongols in Iraq and Iran, this did not take place except decades after this phase of destruction. Amidst the devastation experienced by several Muslim cities at the hands of the Mongols, the Mamluks gained power in Cairo and were now its rulers. During their rule, the Crusaders were pushed out of Muslim territories, and the Mongols pushed back on several frontiers.

This period of Mongol-Mamluk domination also referred to as the Later Middle Period, which stretched from 1250 to 1500, is when the third and final cohort of dictionaries I consider were produced. Following the Mongol conquests, *ṭabaqāt* works underwent further changes in form and content. Evidently, the historicizing uses of biographical collections intensified during this period and took a more complex form. These collections came to play a crucial role in regulating the transmission of knowledge and access to the ulama through their preservation of student-teacher networks.[245] The dictionaries which emerged from the thirteenth century especially, were key receptacles that carried and safeguarded the memory of the scholarly community, as it aimed to be remembered. Here we begin to see the emergence of centenary dictionaries—dictionaries that were centered not on profession, generation or geography—but on all important individuals of a given century.[246] Centenary dictionaries were by nature comprehensive and exhaustive, allowing a larger number of individuals to be remembered within

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[243] Muhanna, *The World in a Book*, 16
[244] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa," "the Tatars in 699/1300 destroyed many madrasas"
[245] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 5.
[246] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 42.

them in an unprecedented manner.[247] Biographical dictionaries significantly increased in both size and sheer quantity.[248] They would span several volumes and would in turn spawn abridgements and inspire additional or complementary dictionaries.

Ibn Khallikān's (d.1282) general dictionary *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān* is amongst the earliest biographical works of this era, and could be considered one of the earliest "general" dictionaries.[249] Evidently, the intention of the text had moved past the specific needs of the *ḥadīth* collectors, and it instead acted as a historical work.[250] What differentiates it from dictionaries of the preceding cohort is that rather than including individuals from a defined group, either professional, temporal or geographic, this thirteenth-century dictionary simply offers a presentation of varied famous individuals, indicating a different outlook by the author and a different function of the work.[251] Ibn Khallikān's biographical dictionary was general in scope, organized alphabetically and included anecdotal details about the individuals' lives.

Additions and abridgements to the work continued to be made in the centuries following its release.[252] Supplemental works were often titled *dhayl* (literally "tail", that is, an extension or addendum)*, takmila* (supplement) or *ṣila* (attachment).[253] Encyclopedic dictionaries which were self-described as exhaustive and definitive, also increased during this time, and were typically titled *wāfī,* or *dhayl wa takmila*.[254] These exhaustive works could themselves be added upon, demonstrating the formidable flexibility of the form.[255] Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān* for

[247] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 45.
[248] Roded, 68.
[249] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 45.
[250] Fahndrich "The Wafayàt al-A'yàn," 437.
[251] Fahndrich "The Wafayàt al-A'yàn," 437.
[252] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 50.
[253] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 48.
[254] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 48.
[255] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 48.

example, was followed by an encyclopedic supplement by al- Ṣafadī (d.1363) in his work *al-Wāfī bi 'l-Wafayāt.*[256]

Women in the Third Cohort of *Ṭabaqāt* (1250-1500)

In the Later Middle Period, women appeared in large numbers in biographical collections, both those devoted to the early generations, and those dedicated to contemporary scholars. Al-Dhahabī's (d.1348) *Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ* contains nearly 100 women who have appeared in various societies throughout Islamic history, and whom he considers to be noteworthy. More significantly, he includes several contemporary learned women in his work.[257] The women's entries are also interspersed with the men, as opposed to past dictionaries where women were almost always grouped together in a separate volume. Al- Ṣafadī's, al-Maqrīzī's (d.1442) and al-Suyūṭī's (d.1505) dictionaries, as well as al-ʿAsqalānī's (d.1449) centenary dictionary, all contain the biographies of women interspersed with entries of men.[258]

In works that are devoted to the earliest generations of exemplary Muslim individuals, women are often placed in one section separated from men as had typically been the format in the past.[259] Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's dictionary devoted to the Companions includes a volume devoted to 1551 women Companions, nearly triple the 530 or so women found in Ibn Sa'd's ninth-century *ṭabaqāt*.[260] There was a need to edit, assess, supplement and build upon the earlier dictionaries in order to account for mass-based Muslim pietistic scholarly practices, reflected primarily but not solely, through the preservation and transmission of *ḥadīth*. In this context, women fared particularly well as integral contributors and participants. It certainly appeared to the scholars of

[256] Al-Qadi "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholar's Alternative History," 50.
[257] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*.
[258] Roded, 3.
[259] Roded, 3.
[260] Roded, 3.

this period that women scholars from earlier centuries were not adequately or fully recorded in their own contemporaneous textual sources. It was not only women from the Companion generations who were found in higher numbers in Mamluk dictionaries, but also those from the eighth to thirteenth centuries, who were not always sufficiently represented in dictionaries of their own eras.

The Historicizing Impetus and Growth in Women's Representation

Between the late medieval and early modern period or roughly between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century, women started to be included in dictionaries in unprecedented numbers. This increase, I would argue, was tied to shifts and transformations in the specific form of the *ṭabaqāt* genre, and discursive changes in various traditions of Islamic scholarship, particularly historical writing, ultimately shaped by new social and political realities. The most apparent feature of this evolution was the increase in scale of the biographical dictionaries.

The Mamluk period is particularly rich in biographical collections as well as historical chronicles of various kinds. New links were forged between the chronicle and the *ṭabaqāt* during this time. We get plenty of historical detail about Aleppo, and a reference to Aleppo's "history", for instance, in the biographical dictionary of the Ayyubid notable, Ibn alʿAdīm (d. 1262), titled, *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Tārīkh Ḥalab*. We also get a list of Egypt's Ayyubid and Mamluk rulers, and a piece of political history of Egypt in *Nuzhat al-Asāṭīn fī man Waliya Miṣr min al-Salāṭin* by al-Malāṭī (d. 1514).[261]

Tarif Khalidi correctly argued that, "the biographical dictionaries have thus become integral to the writing and conception of history in the Mamluk period – so much so, in fact, that biography *was* history in the view of many of its practitioners…But above and beyond questions

[261] Class Discussions with Rula Jurdi Abisaab

of style and judgement was the visible desire to select or include a cross-section of the community deemed worthy of enumeration and arrangement in ranks."[262]

The compiling of such dictionaries reflected a specific literary legacy drawn from the wider *adab* tradition. Due to this collective initiative, Mamluk historiography on the whole, is more thoroughly developed than its counterparts during other periods of Islamic history.[263] Naturally, modern historians sought these works and used them avidly because they seemed to record in an unprecedented way detailed features of the lives, studies, travels, relations, and production of the ulama.[264]

The noted surge in women's representation in the Mamluk era was then directly related to the increase in the number of male scholars devoting themselves to the biographical genre at that moment.[265] When modern historians note a decline of women's scholarship from the mid-eighth to eleventh centuries, and an increase in scholarship after the eleventh century, they are in fact mirroring the timeline of ṭabaqāt production. Prior to the eleventh century we simply do not have the same quantities of dictionaries, and the ones that do exist have been identified as being primarily concerned with specialized fields, especially *ḥadīth* verification, rather than historicizing the scholarly community.

The Mamluk period on the other hand, which spanned the mid-thirteenth to end of the fifteenth century witnessed an increase in popularity of writing culture and reading practices.[266] It can be argued then, that at this moment, the number of women recorded increases dramatically largely because of the male scholars who devoted themselves to the biographical genre.[267] Between

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[262] Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 210.
[263] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 1.
[264] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 14.
[265] Roded, 68.
[266] Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 3
[267] Roded, 68

the 16th-21st centuries the levels of biographical collections again dropped significantly, so as to result in a single volume devoted for each century.[268] Simultaneously, there are once again very few women traditionists from these centuries who have been memorialized.[269]

The Widening Scope of Ṭabaqāt Works

Another consideration in regard to women's fluctuating representation in *ṭabaqāt* works is the progressive shift towards inclusion and comprehensiveness from the eleventh century onwards. This shift was to overcome the problem of exclusivity.[270] It was intended to show that the production of knowledge and scholarship was a pervasive and communal phenomenon, which it increasingly was in the Jam'a Sunni order, and not a phenomenon reserved for the elite.[271] During the Mamluk era, the world of learning and transmitting knowledge itself was largely open, and drew into its fold many segments of society.[272] This broadened parameters for access to the ulama, and widened the doors of inclusion within *ṭabaqāt*.

The scholar's recognition of the importance of access to knowledge resulted in structural changes made to biographical dictionaries.[273] This partly explains the momentous shift which saw women being included in biographical collections as scholars of the traditional sciences in unprecedented numbers from the thirteenth century. Earlier dictionaries employed stricter criteria for inclusion of individuals into collections, which negatively impacted women's chances of inclusion.[274] They tended to align across professional fields and were more exclusive in their selection, while later dictionaries that aligned across time or locality tended to be more inclusive.[275]

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[268] Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat*, 260.
[269] Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature*, 151.
[270] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 72
[271] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 42
[272] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 188.
[273] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 25.
[274] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 154.
[275] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History, 44-45.

The centenary dictionary which emerged only after the thirteenth century, is the epitome of this shift towards inclusion, and the proliferation of such works greatly increased women's representation as scholars.[276] Women who are included in later dictionaries are generally learned, indicating their inclusion based on the criteria of knowledge and connections to the scholarly classes, rather than women from earlier dictionaries who were often remembered as Sufis or companions of the Prophet.[277] The biographical entries for women in later Mamluk era dictionaries reaffirm the extent to which women were integrated into the world of formal religious learning and especially *ḥadīth* scholarship.[278]

A further change related to widened parameters of inclusion in the dictionaries, was the demand for expansions, supplements, and additions. A pursuit for comprehensiveness also emerged, with encyclopedic dictionaries setting out to cover individuals of regions or times exhaustively.[279] These encyclopedic and supplementary tendencies are apparent from the thirteenth-century onwards where famous biographical collections began to be expanded upon by later authors. Both trends positively impacted women's chances of being included within them, especially retroactively.[280]

Maria Luisa Avila, who studied Andalusian biographical collections, found that later extensions of preceding collections tended to relax requirements for entry into works, and as a result women who were not included by authors of their time, were remembered in later extensions.[281] The authors' eagerness to build upon and complete their predecessors' works was a main drive behind this development.[282] Avila discussed certain works where new entries on

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[276]Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History, 45.
[277] Ahmed Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women in the Medieval Middle East" in *Hawwa* 8 no. 2 (2010): 205.
[278] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 15.
[279] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History, 48.
[280] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 154.
[281] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 154.
[282] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 154.

women surfaced. For example, the *Kitāb Takmilat al-Ṣila* by Ibn al-Abbār and the *al-Dhayl wa-l-Takmila li-Kitābay al-Mawṣūl wa-l-Ṣila* of al-Marrākushī of the theirteenth-century, composed to supplement the eleventh-century dictionary, *Ta'rīkh 'ulamā' al-Andalus*, written by Ibn al-Faraḍī, included for the first time, several prominent women from the late tenth-century and earlier.[283] Of these forty-one women, only two are mentioned by Ibn al-Faraḍī. The rest appear in later additions.[284] Al- Ṣafadī's *al-Wāfī bi 'l-Wafayāt* contained nearly 300 women while the dictionary it was adding onto included a mere 7 women.[285] Sometimes these overlooked women were drawn from other types of sources such as historical chronicles.

The vigor with which the compilation of these later dictionaries were undertaken produced a marked thoroughness and complex forms of inclusion, which were somewhat lacking prior to the thirteenth-century.[286] This vigor positively impacted women's chances of being memorialized in later biographical collections. It also reaffirms the insufficiency of earlier dictionaries in detailing the lives of contemporary women scholars, and the flaw in positivist or statistical readings of these sources for descriptions of women's education.

Grouping Women with Men

As the *ṭabaqāt* works engaged with and promoted a Sunni international order, their authors tried to address the problem of historicizing amorphous groups of individual scholars. The *ṭabaqāt* began grouping individuals with common factors, making these individuals act together as institutions rather than isolated individuals.[287] Although knowledge was viewed as residing primarily in individuals and not institutions, individuals who engaged in similar activities were

[283] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 154.
[284] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 154.
[285] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 3.
[286] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 43.
[287] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 38.

presented as forming an institution-like body with shared features.[288] When individuals were recorded together, they became a category that could be historicized like any other institution.[289] With this development, women could now be grouped together with male scholars, their commonality as scholars of traditions superseding gender differences.

Whereas the earliest *ṭabaqāt* books nearly always grouped women together regardless of profession, in a section separate from male traditionalists, from the thirteenth century onwards we begin to see women's biographies interspersed among men's entries, under common specializations.[290] With the evolution of the *ṭabaqāt* genre into a historicizing form of survival for the ulama, the religious knowledge of these women allowed them to be included amongst their male counterparts in order to construct an institutional whole. Dictionaries that had a historical impetus such as centenary dictionaries or those devoted to contemporary scholars now nearly always mixed men and women in their volumes.[291] Dictionaries, however, which still had a strong *ḥadīth* impetus such as those devoted to transmitters, continued to include women in a separate section, in keeping with the form of earlier dictionaries focusing on *ḥadīth* transmission and transmitters, such as Ibn Sa'd's *ṭabaqāt*.[292]

Ensuring Continuity and Women's Idealized Representations

Another way the genre attempted to historicize individuals rather than institutions or political events, was through the channeling of knowledge in specific styles.[293] By selecting information that reflected the general and stereotypical aspects of the subjects included in the

[288] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 38.
[289] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 39.
[290] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 3.
[291] Roded, 3.
[292] Roded, 3.
[293] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 58.

dictionaries, the authors were able to emphasize commonality.[294] Entries in a dictionary began to follow similar structures, and share features, so that when taken as a whole, the individuals could highlight the institution-like continuity of the scholar's activities and thus allow them to be historicized.[295]

Modern scholars have noted, usually with dismay, that the Arabic biographical tradition was concerned only with individuals as representatives of classes or stereotypes, and not with the individuals themselves.[296] However, the impersonal and formulaic features of the biographical entries, considered by some modern historians to have reduced their value, were actually intentional.[297] These texts acted as an archive for practices of ulama households and persisted over time precisely because of their standardized styling.[298]

Modern scholarship has also pointed out the idealized way in which women are described in Mamluk *ṭabaqāt* works.[299] Many scholars who have focused on women's education have highlighted the limited and generic biographical data available.[300] The notices are described as edited according to standard patterns and often only have three variables, the name, place of birth and date of death.[301] Arezou Azad who considered the life of a celebrated ninth-century mystic woman, Umm 'Ali, found that her image was changed progressively over time.[302] While

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[294] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 58.
[295] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 58.
[296] Dwight Reynold and Kristen Brustad *Interpreting the Self :Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition,* ed.. Reynolds and Brustad (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 41.
[297] Al-Qadi "Scholar's Alternative History," 58.
[298] Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice,* 178.
[299] Asma Afsaruddin, "Reconstituting Women's Lives: Gender and the Poetics of Narrative in Medieval Biographical Collections" in *The Muslim World* 92, no. 3–4 (2002), Lutfi,"Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa'," 123; Azad, "Islam's Forgotten Scholars," 131.
[300] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 15; Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 152.
[301] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 152.
[302] See Arezou Azad "Female Mystics in Mediaeval Islam: The Quiet Legacy." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56, no. 1 (2013).

contemporary dictionaries depicted her as independent and assertive woman, by the Mamluk era her image became one of a subservient wife.[303]

Afsaruddin who compared Ibn Sa'd's ninth-century biographical dictionary with Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's fourteenth-century dictionary also argued that there is an editorial tendency in later works that altered the depiction of prominent women's lives.[304] Later works, she noted, are manipulated to conform to rules of seclusion as portrayed by later jurists. The female image that emerges from them, reflects a masculine wish list of desirable qualities in the respectable Muslim woman.[305] For Afsaruddin, these shifts in representation are a culmination of incremental transformations of societal conceptions of ideal feminine conduct. These conceptions, while in flux before, become firmly entrenched in Mamluk and Seljuk societies.[306]

I argue that the formulaic nature of women's representations was a reflection of the evolution of the genre itself and does not have to be interpreted as a deficiency, a reflection of female marginalization, and hence, lamentable. For one, the generic information found about women scholars', mimics accounts of the lives of male scholars, and as such, it is not specific to women.[307] The stereotypical generalizations created, in the case of women and men, an institution out of individuals, which was necessary for emphasizing the continuation and development of pietistic traditions and scholarly practices defining Islam. This way, the *ṭabaqāt* genre would serve its social, political and intellectual purposes as preservers and promoters of a Sunni international order.

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[303] Azad, "Forgotten Scholars," 31.
[304] Afsaruddin, "Reconstituting Women's Lives"
[305] Afsaruddin "Reconstituting Women's Lives," 464.
[306] Afsaruddin "Reconstituting Women's Lives," 474.
[307] Berkey, "al-Subki and his Women," 15.

Reconciling the Differing Theories of Women's Education

How can we reconcile the various arguments and findings on women, their shifting representation in the biographical dictionaries, and their contributions to Islamic education and scholarship? One perception of women's education, advanced by feminist scholars (and perhaps by historians of Islamic education, by implication of their silence) argues that their possibilities in traditional scholarship were quickly limited after the first century of Islam.[308] These depictions place emphasis on the militarization of society, the devaluing of women at the caliphal courts, and the rise of new patriarchal restraints during the High Caliphal Period.[309] Traditional branches of *ḥadīth*, law and Qur'anic exegesis are described as both excluding women, and detrimentally affecting their lives.[310] Such arguments depend less on biographical sources, which we have noted are not plentiful from this time. Rather, legal and exegetical works as well as historical chronicles are the primary textual sources for such arguments.

Other scholarship, particularly the works of Nadwi and Sayeed, have turned to the biographical dictionaries to trace the patterns of fluctuating levels of women within them, and have attributed moments of scarcity to women's low participation in religious education.[311] Women's engagement in education is thus depicted as varying markedly across time period, and descriptors such as "intensified", "declined" and "revived" are employed in its characterization.[312] This scholarship points out that women are well represented in biographical collections in both the first century of Islamic society (7th-8th c.), and the Mamluk era (13th-16thc.), and are underrepresented

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[308] Several scholars take this position of initial participation followed by continuous decline, see Chapter 1, Islam and Gender Studies. For example Aslan, "Early Community Politics," 40; Alwani. "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 45; Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*; and Ahmed in *Women and Gender*, Chapter 5
[309] Abbott, *Two Queens*, 8; Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion*, 14; and Ahmed in *Women and Gender,* 82-87.
[310] See Wadud, *Quran and Women*.; Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam,* 86-87.
[311] Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat,* 250-252.; Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Knowledge,* 76; Richard Bulliet "Women and the Urban Religious Elite in the Pre-Mongol Period," in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800,* ed. Guity Neshat and Lois Beck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 75.
[312] Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat,* 245

in the Abbasid era (9th-11th c.).[313] Ruth Roded also notes this volatile inclusion, but, like me, is more reluctant to draw conclusions about women's participation in religious education from them.[314]

A contrasting argument presented by Afsaruddin, and collaborated by Azad, suggests that women's educational possibilities became increasingly limited by conservative ideals from the 9th century onwards.[315] This argument is extracted from the noted conservatizing of women's representation in biographical works.[316] The Abbasid time era is interestingly argued to be one in which women's potential in the public sphere was not yet circumscribed by idealized concepts of seclusion and a relegation to the private sphere. Because of this, representations of women from this time are considered potentially more accurate.

I argue here that all the above positions are unsatisfactory, especially since they treat the dictionary as the main yardstick for deciphering characteristics of the activities of the female ulama. Rather, we must more thoroughly assess the nature of changes occurring in the dictionaries themselves, in order to understand the context for changes in women's representation. When the dictionaries expanded and developed into more complex compilations, women started to appear in greater numbers. More importantly, women from earlier periods were 'dug up', without having been mentioned in the sources of their own societies and times. If we consider that idealized or formulaic biographies were a new feature of the *ṭabaqāt* as it tried to institutionalize and historicize scattered individuals, we might understand why at the moment when women's representation increased, it also became increasingly standardized and less "rough around the edges".

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[313] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge* 66, 76; Roded *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 58, 68, 135; Nadwi *al-Muhaddithat,* 245; Bano, *Female Islamic Education Movements,* 2.
[314] Roded, 45.
[315] Afsaruddin, "Reconstituting Women's Lives" 468; Azad "Islam's Forgotten Scholars," 31;
[316] Afsaruddin 468

Conclusion

I have shown that specific changes in the *ṭabaqāt* genre were conducive to increased representation of women within them. I did this by attempting to periodate the form, by dividing the dictionaries into three cohorts, each of which had different implications for women's inclusion within them.

The first cohort (750-1000 CE) represents the earliest surviving dictionaries which emerged during the High Caliphal Period. Dictionaries from this time tended to be exclusive, and aligned across field, predominantly the field of *ḥadīth* transmission (but not limited to it). Women are represented well in such dictionaries, but primarily from the first two generations of Islamic history. Contemporary women are hardly represented in this first cohort of dictionaries. The second cohort includes dictionaries produced in the aftermath of the Abbasid disintegration (1000-1250 CE) and within them a historicizing impetus becomes apparent. The parameters for inclusion in these dictionaries are increasingly broadened, and are aligned across locality, and occasionally, time. Women are included in such dictionaries primarily as Sufis or as the Prophet's Companions, but contemporaneous women scholars are still not well represented. The last cohort of dictionaries (1250-1500 CE) represents the most inclusive and broadly delineated dictionaries, and women, both from earlier and later generations, are included in unprecedented numbers.

The changing fates for women's representation are due to evolutions of the genre itself. The genre was increasingly employed by the ulama as preservers and promoters of the Sunni international order. They saw it as a vehicle for historicizing the scholarly community in a politically unstable, constantly expanding and multi-faceted world. The *ṭabaqāt*s' male authors increasingly began acknowledging (if not looking for) women's historical and contemporary contributions to draw out the personal (student-teacher), professional, familial, communal, and institutional (*madrasa*s) rubrics that sustain and promote Islamic knowledge and scholarship.

These aims pushed them to overcome problems of exclusivity, and narrow criteria for organizing scholars. They gradually began broadening the scope and basis of inclusion. The emergence of general dictionaries, supplementary dictionaries and encyclopedic dictionaries are all results of this tendency towards comprehensiveness. This shift towards inclusion culminated in the centenary dictionaries which began emerging in the thirteenth century. The appearance of the massive, all-encompassing centenary dictionaries greatly improved the chances of contemporary women scholars to become memorialized in text.

If the changing levels of women's inclusion in biographical dictionaries reflect changes in the source itself, what can we know about the possibilities of women's education in the Middle Ages? Were women engaging and contributing to the intellectual traditions, especially *ḥadīth* studies, in notably large numbers from the eleventh century onwards, following an absence from the field in the preceding centuries? Unfortunately, due to the insufficiency and limitations of the sources it is difficult to come up with definite conclusions.

It is possible that an increased representation of women in texts produced by the male scholarly community would have fostered an environment in which even more women entered the field, adding complexity to patterns of women's scholarship. It is also possible, however, that the dictionaries might have finally included women due to the sheer number already participating, which reflected the fluidity of scholarly authority and collective educational ideals and practices within the Sunni international order. The women may have been consciously underrepresented in the earlier period. This phenomenon has been observed in other contexts as well, with historians focused on women's education in Canada noting that idealized depictions of women teachers were

accepted only after the numerical dominance of women teachers in the schools was already a reality.[317]

Alternatively, one may contend that participation levels did not vary so significantly from century to century. We cannot know with full certainty. The dictionaries themselves never make explicit that women's participation in scholarly circles was a new or innovative practice. For the future, one may have to turn to clues outside the biographical compilations, and thus consult literary, historical, and artistic sources if possible to postulate on the validity of chronological theories of Muslim women's participation in education. For the moment, however, they remain postulations only.

What the changing tides, as far as the offering biographies on women, tell us confidently, is that women educators of various kinds existed in large numbers in the Mamluk era, and likely earlier, and contributed to the education of several famous male scholars. The inclusion of women in male-authored biographies had at least one positive impact for women on the ground, and that is the reassurance that their roles as scholars, whether something new or long lasting, was considered legitimate and worthy of being memorialized.

[317] Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers: A Retrospect" in *Women Who Taught : Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*, eds. Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2000), 6.

CHAPTER 3:
READING THE SILENCES, RETRIEVING THE WOMEN.

"Ibnat Saʿīd al-Ballūṭī, sister of the qadi Mundhir b. Saʿīd (9th c.) [was a specialist in teaching women]. She lived in Los Pedroches, leading a life of devotion in the mosque. According to her biographer, the old women of the area and virtuous women came to her to pray and to study fiqh and the life (siyar) of the 'abidun." [318]

In the above depiction of one of the few women memorialized from the ninth century for their knowledge, we are offered a glimpse into women's educational practices at this time. Ibnat Saʿīd is described as spending her life in the mosque, and teaching others there. Specifically, she is described as teaching *fiqh* to other women, but those women who learned from her remain anonymous and unrecorded beyond this indirect mention. As such, women's engagement with traditional fields of learning was evident, but accounting for the educational environment and features of this engagement remained unsatisfactory. Ibn Sa'd's (d.845) *ṭabaqāt,* which lists hundreds of women from the first two generations of the Islamic community, barely devotes any biographical entries to women scholars from his own time. Nonetheless, there are narrations in his text which list women as later links in *isnāds,*[319] and there are thousands of women found in the biographies of the male entries, suggesting a continued participation of women in the field. [320] For one reason or another, it appears that women scholars from this era were not deemed worthy of being given their own entries in the biographical dictionaries or viewed as integral contributors to the scholarly authority of the early Islamic community. When searching for clues about women's education in those eras where the textual sources are lacking, indirect allusions such as these are the strongest leads.

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[318] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 57.
[319] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 66.
[320] See Azad, "Islam's Forgotten Scholars," 24, where he notes that while there are 629 women in Ibn Sa'd's dictionary, when one reads through the male biographies, we can discern over 4250 women, constituting nearly a quarter of the scholarly community.

In this chapter, I will touch on the possible characteristics of women's education in the era when contemporaneous women were not being remembered in significant numbers in biographical dictionaries, that is from 750 CE to 1000 CE. I do this by employing a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of reconstruction.[321] The hermeneutic of suspicion pays attention to biases and silences in the inherited texts, calling into question accepted interpretations of the historical narrative.[322] I undertake this by drawing attention to the women who are noticeably absent in the biographical dictionaries, as well as the processes which have allowed women's religious contributions to have been downgraded. These are, the marked silence on woman to woman learning activities, as well as the possible bias against women in *isnāds* during the era of *ḥadīth* verification and compilation.

The hermeneutic of reconstruction involves "unearthing underlying images of women from predominantly male-centered-records, with the goal of both redressing the broader silences and marginalization of women's lives and retrieving powerful and empowering images of women".[323] I turn to the impressive qualifications of the few women scholars from this era with dedicated biographical notices, as well as women's representation as Sufi and slave women, to argue for new ways of reconstructing women's educational history.

The following compilation of scattered allusions from diverse sources of women's learning during the mid-eighth to eleventh century is not an attempt at a comprehensive study. It serves rather as a rudimentary counter proposal to the chronological narrative extracted from positivist readings of biographical dictionaries. These following discussions are gathered together with the aim of demonstrating that biographical dictionaries were not repositories of exact knowledge about

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[321] Sadiyya Shaikh *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 25-26.
[322] Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 26-27.
[323] Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 27.

learned women or effective tools for memorializing them during this era. As a result, women's exclusion from them do not necessarily reflect women's lived realities.

Women and Learning during the High Caliphal Period

As seen in the second chapter, women living in the mid-eighth to lat- tenth centuries have rarely been recorded as learned scholars in the few biographical dictionaries that have survived from this time. This is despite the established precedence of women narrating and engaging in intellectual exchange in the first two generations of the Muslim community, as well as the inclusion of hundreds of these early women in the era's biographical dictionaries. There are some indications that women were learning at this time however, both from within these, or later dictionaries, as well as from other varied sources. This participation is to be expected, given the precedence of women's transmission which made women part of the received texts, and which would have allowed women to participate to some extent in learning even during what Leila Ahmed describes as the most misogynist periods.[324] Ahmed, who stresses the specifically negative attitudes of the Abbasid era toward women, concedes that women traditionists were found in Muslim societies during all periods, including the Abbasid one.[325]

Allusions to the education of girls at the peak of Abbasid dominion can be gleamed from scattered sources. There is no indication that people in the early centuries of Islam, paid less attention to the education of their daughters.[326] Ibn Saḥnūn wrote in *Ādāb al- Muʿallimīn* (Rules of Conduct for Teachers, 10th c.), "very often the father would teach his daughters as did Isa bin Miskin (d.890) who would call his daughters, nieces and granddaughters to teach them Quran and other knowledge."[327] Some modern scholars have argued that a girls education at this time mostly

[324] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 74.
[325] Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 74.
[326] Nadwi *al-Muhaddithat*, 250.
[327] Shalabi, *Muslim Education*, 191.

took place in the privacy of the home.[328] Other studies on education have argued that it was not unheard of for girls to attend schools alongside boys.[329] Al-Balādhurī (9th c.) reported from a school with girls and even adult women, that girls and boys were taught together in Kufa.[330] At least one story exists of a boy falling in love with a girl he saw in school.[331] By the eleventh-century there is reference to a wealthy merchant founding a girls school, although it is unclear whether this practice existed during the preceding centuries.[332] More advanced scholarly interaction between men and women took place as well, with women themselves teaching.[333] Many women are known to have studied with leading scholars of their day, including slave women, royal women and middle-class scholarly women.[334] Where might we draw out representations of the seemingly several learned women of this era if the biographical dictionaries do not provide entries for such women.

Reading the Silences

The participation of women in advanced scholarly circles might be gleamed from the offhand allusions and indirect mentions in biographical dictionaries. A certain al Jubbā'ī (d.916) is reported to have held a learning circle, which included women in attendance who asked many questions.[335] This anecdote is found in Ibn Khallikān's thirteenth-century biographical dictionary, but there are no corresponding biographies which might preserve the memory of these women who attended conferences at this time. We know that the learned women represented in early

[328] Shalabi, *Muslim Education*, 7.
[329] A. S, Tritton, *Materials on Muslim Education in the Middle Ages* (London: Luzac & Co., 1957); Azad, "Islam's Forgotten Scholars" 24.
[330] Aslan," Early Community Politics," 40, extracted from Abū al-Faraj al Iṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-Aghānī*
[331] Tritton, *Materials on Muslim Education,*1-26.
[332] Ephrat, *A Learned Society,* 87.
[333] Ahmed, *Women and Gender,* 115.
[334] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 66.
[335] Ibn Khallikān. *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary* Vol.2. Trans. William MacGuckin Slane. (Paris, Baron De, Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1843), 685.

Andalusian dictionaries taught both men and women, but while we have some information about the men they taught, we do not have entries for their female students.[336]

Often, educated women can be found in the biographical entries of their male relatives or students.[337] Although Ibn Saʿd's *ṭabaqāt* is not a rich source for contemporaneous learned women, when we consider the women mentioned in the biographies of their male relatives, the number of women included in his dictionary jumps from 629 to 4250.[338] The daughter of Imām Mālik b. Anas (d.845), Fāṭimah, is recorded as having memorized the entirety of her father *Muwaṭṭaʾ*, becoming narrator of *ḥadīth*.[339] A certain ʿAbd al Ghāfir al-Fārisī (d.1134) whose biography is included in Ibn Khallikān's thirteenth-century collection is reported to have learned from his grandmother Fāṭimah as well as from his mother Amat al-Raḥīm.[340] These two women teachers of ʿAbd al-Ghāfir do not have their own biographical entries in the same dictionary.

The project of approaching texts with "suspicion" with the intention of "reconstruction" requires a close attention to what is not said, and who is being excluded. The reconstructive approach requires "vigilance in detecting inconsistencies and moments of disruptions within the texts."[341] Gayatri Spivak encourages reading between the lines in order to explore the gaps, absences, and contradictions in textual sources.[342] Within this framework, representations of learned women in premodern Islamic societies might be able to be reconstructed from both indirect and anonymized mention of them in the texts, as well as through the mention of them which are found imbedded in male biographies. It is up to the judicious scholar to fill in the gaps of biographical dictionaries, which have seemed to overlook women.

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[336] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 157.
[337] Azad, "Islam's Forgotten Scholars," 24.
[338] Azad, "Islam's Forgotten Scholars," 24.
[339] Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat*, 250.
[340] Ibn Khallikān, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary* Vol 2, 185.
[341] Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 27.
[342] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "French Feminism in an International Frame." *Yale French Studies* 62, no. 62 (1981): 177–78.

Insight into the quality of women's education during the eras when women are not well represented in biographical sources might also be extracted from the noteworthy biographies of those few women with their own dedicated entries. In these entries, women are often shown to excel, engaging in advanced legal studies, as well as teaching and learning from the most celebrated scholars of their eras.

Women in Legal Studies

Legal studies and jurisprudence were one area of study that women from the High Caliphal Period and onwards engaged in. This is significant because these areas are often considered a highly professional and elite branch of Islamic learning, which women did not have access to.[343] There exists a number of women who can be considered notable figures among traditionists and jurists.[344] In Qayrawan, Khadīja b. Saḥnūn (d.883) was remembered as a *muftī* (juriconsult) and taught Maliki jurisprudence.[345] Her father, Saḥnūn b. Sa'īd al-Tanūkhī (d. 854), one of the most important jurists of his time, is said to regularly consult her for advice on issuing legal opinions.[346] Fāṭimah b. Yaḥyā b. Yūsuf al-Mahhāmī (d.931) was remembered as a legal scholar (*faqīha*) and was amongst the most knowledgeable and wisest individuals of her age. Her funeral, heavily attended, was among the most memorable in Cordoba.[347] Amat al-Wāḥid bt. al-Qāḍī 'Abū ʿAbdullāh al-Ḥusayn b. Ismāʿīl al- Maḥāmilī (d.988) studied *fiqh* of the Shāfiʿī school, the laws of

[343] Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education," 153-155, where he argues that in Mamluk society, women played virtually no role in higher legal studies because of its focus on analytical skills, disputation, and the authority it would endow women with over men.
[344] Shalabi, *Muslim Education,* 193.
[345] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 54.
[346] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 54.
[347] Mohamad Ballan, "Prominent Andalusi Muslim Women: A Short List from Ibn Bashkuwal's "Kitab al-Silla"" Ballandalus Blog Site, Last modified March 6 2014 https://ballandalus.wordpress.com/2014/03/06/prominent-andalusi-muslim-women-a-short-list-from-ibn-bashkuwals-kitab-al-silla/
Translated from Ibn Bashkuwal *Kitab al-Sila*, Vol.2 (Cairo: Al-Dar al-Misriyya li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama, 2008): 323-327.

inheritance, literature, Arabic and other fields of Islamic studies.[348] She is described as one of those who were the best graspers of *fiqh*, and all biographical entries pertaining to her mention that as a jurisconsult, she used to issue legal opinions.[349] Amat, Fāṭimah and other women known for their legal knowledge are described as having attended men's *majlis*, debated and won on legal rulings amongst men, taught men, were consulted on legal affairs, and might have even authored some works themselves.[350] Female jurists were an essential element of learned society, and were influential members of their social and intellectual circles by virtue of their status as jurists.[351]

Women as Teachers of Prominent Male Scholars

Another indication that women were likely involved in religious learning in the eras which have not recorded them are the extraordinary biographies of the few women scholars who are retained. Nafīsa b. al-Ḥasan (d.824) is one of the few women scholars remembered from the 9th century, and it is striking that she is recorded as having taught traditions to two eponymous founders of Sunni legal schools: Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.[352] Imām Shāfiʿī is reported to have visited her upon his arrival in Cairo and when he died, his body was brought into her house where she is said to have uttered funeral prayers upon it.[353] At least one woman was also a member of al-Shāfiʿī's study circle.[354]

Another woman, Um 'Umar al-Thaqafiyya, is reported to have transmitted traditions to the founder of the Hanbali legal school, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d.855).[355] Additional women are reported

[348] Yacoob, "Women and education," 55-56.
[349] Yacoob, "Women and education," 56, 59.
[350] Yacoob, "Women and education," 67-68.
[351] Yacoob, "Women and education," 55-56.
[352] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 66. See also Ibn Khallikan, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 3*, 578-579.
[353] Ibn Khallikān, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary Vol. 3*, 578-579.
[354] Pedersen J. et al. "Madrasa"
[355] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 67.

to have transmitted from him.[356] A certain Berber woman, Umm Ḥasan bt. Abī Liwāʾ Sulaymān b. Aṣbagh is reported to have studied with one of the important traditionists of the ninth century in Andalusia, namely, Bāqī b. Makhlad, who devoted one day a week to give her individual classes.[357]A certain al Jubbā'ī (d.916) is reported to have held a learning circle, which included women in attendance who asked many questions.[358] In Andalusia, a Rayhāna attended the classes of a noted Quranic reader, Abū 'Amr al-Dānā (d. 1053), although she did so hidden behind a curtain.[359]

That a few women traditionists from the eighth to tenth centuries preserved in biographical dictionaries are remembered for their legal learning and listed as teachers or students of the most famed scholars suggests that the scope of women's educational activities might have been significant at this time, and their legitimacy within the tradition may not have been disputed. As we turn to the 11th-13th centuries, we get the sense that women known to have participated in *ḥadīth* learning and transmission, were also not adequately presented in the dictionaries of their time. Evidence of women teaching well known male *ḥadīth* scholars can instead be found in the lists they compiled on whose authority they recited *ḥadīth*.[360] *Samāʿāt* records (certificate of audition) attached to *ḥadīth* books also indicate women teaching and learning in *ḥadīth* institutions by the thirteenth century.[361] It was the Mamluk biographers and historians who included these women in great numbers in their dictionaries, which preserved their memory. Their dictionaries showed that women's learning had taken place during the preceding era.

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[356] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 67.
[357] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 156.
[358] Ibn Khallikān, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary V*ol 2. 685.
[359] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 156
[360] Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education," 151.
[361] Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat*, 259.

We have already mentioned ʿAbd al Ghāfir al-Fārisī (d.1134) who is reported in Ibn Khallikan's dictionary to have learned from his grandmother as well as from his mother, who unfortunately do not have dedicated biographical entries in the dictionary.[362] In the mid eleventh century, a period where women are also not recorded in contemporanous dictionaries in significant numbers, Karīma bint Aḥmad al-Marwaziyya (d.1071) is described as the foremost authority on the *ḥadīth* text of al-Bukhārī[363] and was the teacher of the famous biographer, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d.1071), who studied Bukhārī's *ḥadīth* collections from her.[364] Despite this, al-Baghdādī, in his dictionary of nearly 8000 famous people of his time, includes only 31 women—less than 1% of the entries—showcasing the inadequacy of these dictionaries in preserving learned women's lives up until this time.[365]

Other women teachers of well-known scholars from this period include Nafīsa al-Bazzāza (d.1168), Shahda al-Kātiba (d.1178), and Khadīja al-Nahrawāniyya (d.1175) who taught *ḥadīth* to Ibn Qudāmah, an important scholar of the Hanbali legal school.[366] The study of traditions required that one study *ḥadīth* with scholars of wide knowledge and blameless reputation, in order to draw upon the teacher's authority and enhance one's reputation.[367] The provided cases of women being listed amongst the teachers of important Islamic scholars is significant as it shows just how thoroughly integrated women were into the world of learning, even in centuries where their participation is not recorded.

That women are remembered as being the teachers of the most famous jurists of Sunni Islam, or even jurists themselves, is no small detail. Women were presumably being educated at

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[362] Ibn Khallikān, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary V*ol 2, 185.
[363] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 67.
[364] Shalabi, *Muslim Education,* 194.
[365] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 3.
[366] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 170.
[367] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo,* 177.

advanced levels, and exhibiting marked expertise in literature, law, jurisprudence, and *ḥadīth,* among other fields, that the most luminous jurists of their times were benefitting from them to varying degrees. If the education of women was considered exceptional and atypical, instead of being generally accepted, then it is conceivable that only children or illiterate persons would have studied with women. A remarkable scholar would have found it also stigmatizing to include women among his teachers, if indeed women's education was frowned upon or rejected or deeply questioned.

Furthermore, in the case of the few women who are remembered from the ninth and tenth centuries, their biographies are penned without comment on the uniqueness or strangeness of their educational attainments.[368] Later Mamluk scholars who did highlight women's scholarship more readily, also did not allude to its novelty. While some preachers might have expressed dismay at women learning next to men in mosques, they did not condemn the education of women in itself.[369] Rather, these later dictionaries include numerous women scholars with no explanations either justifying or condemning the new phenomenon of women education. If indeed women had been absent from the entire field for centuries, we would expect that their re-emergence in the increasingly conservative environment of the eleventh and twelfth centuries to be something to merit some explanation.[370] The improved conditions of women's education, which several modern historians attributed to the Mamluk period may very well have been simply the continuation or affirmation of traditional patterns.[371] Social historians focusing on the Western context have found that traditional attitudes and patterns of work tended to persist in new settings in both Europe and

[368] Yacoob, "Women and education in the pre-modern Middle East"
[369] Berkey "Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period,*"* 149.
[370] See Hodsgon *Venture of Islam Vol 2*. for his characterization of a conservative intellectual environment in the New Sunni order
[371] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 48-49.

North America.[372] A similar trend might have taken place in the Muslim world. Despite these indications of continuity however, for one reason or another, scholars from the ninth to thirteenth centuries did not usually see it necessary to include those women who were learning and teaching around them, in their biographical compendiums.

Some studies on women's history in the Abbasid era have argued that a social taboo emerged at this time which restricted mention of free women in public and in text.[373] This erasure of free women, which was observed in poetry, is argued to have been the result of social changes in Arab society which impacted free women's ability to appear in public, whether physically or textually, without their honour being stained.[374] While a free woman's visibility as a social actor became increasingly hidden at this time, enslaved women faced less restriction, having relative freedom of movement, and being able to perform in mixed company.[375] It remained socially acceptable to refer to slave women in public, as well as in literature and poetry.[376] This Abbasid attitude towards free women, if it did exist, could partly explain why we have so few references to educated women from this time.

Some scholars have held that the lived experiences of free Arab women were in fact negatively affected by the increased prominence of slave women.[377] However, that slave women were more likely to be remembered for their education during this era can be attributed to the

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[372] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 48-49.
[373] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility, Agency, and the Consciousness of Women's Actions," xix-xx.
[374] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility," xix-xx.
[375] Lisa Nielson, "Visibility and Performance: Courtesans in the Early Islamicate Courts (661–950 CE)" In *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. Matthew S. Gordon, and Kathryn A. Hain. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 76.
[376] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility," xix-xx.
[377] Pernilla Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects in Abbasid Baghdad." In *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. Matthew S. Gordon, and Kathryn A. Hain. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 61. Where she notes that Mernissi and Bouhdiba are part of a scholarly tradition that attributes the decline in status of free women to the Abbasid institution of jawari. This argument claimed that men's fondness for slave women, "led to the degradation of the [Arab] woman and the disappearance of her pride and her independence of mind," and that they " lost their character with time."

theorized social more of silence, and does not imply that free women were barred from education or that they rarely cultivated a scholarly life.[378] Furthermore, that this theorized social norm was no longer a feature in the Mamluk era (male scholars from this era speak freely about women in their families) reaffirms that chronological fluctuations of women's representations in biographical dictionaries reflect changes in politics and gendered norms of representation rather than women's lived experiences.[379]

Slave Women and Education

Since it does appear to be the case that the sources from the Abbasid era more readily and extensively depicted educated slave women than educated free women, these educated slave women merit further investigation.[380] Slave women are the most frequently quoted Abbasid women in classical Arabic literature, which makes mention of young and talented slave girls being selected for further education.[381] The harems of this era are described as being were full of women from around the world who displayed their mastery of diverse skills and knowledge in order to climb up the social ladder.[382] Thus, an understanding of slavery is imperative for obtaining a full picture of the possibilities of women's education in The High Caliphal Period.[383] Allusions to slave women's education are found in chronicles, *adab* literature and compilations devoted to music and poetry, more often than in biographical dictionaries. Abū al-Faraj al Iṣfahānī's (d.967) tenth-

[378] Marin and Deguilhem, "Visibility," xix-xx.
[379] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 46.
[380] Jocelyn Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women and Gift Exchange in Abbasid Culture." In *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. Matthew S. Gordon, and Kathryn A. Hain. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 292.
[381] Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects," 52.
[382] Fatima Mernissi, and Mary Jo Lakeland. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 58.
[383] Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women," 292.

century *Kitāb al-Aghānī* and Al-Nuwayrī's (d.1333) *Nihāyat al-Arab fī funūn al-adab* are rich sources for depictions of these women.[384]

A story about a maid associated with the court of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd's illuminates complex aspects about women, education, and their marginalization in the dictionaries of the early period. Al-Rashīd ruled at the turn of the ninth century, a time when elite women were theorized by several modern historians to have been barred from cultivating the Islamic sciences. A maid who has been bought and offered to the caliph is reported to have undergone an examination where, "the most notable professors of theology, law, exegesis, medicine, astronomy, philosophy, rhetoric and chess examined her in succession and in each case she not only gave a satisfactory reply but ended by asking them questions which they could not answer".[385] Hundreds of slave girls owned by the caliph's wife are described as having memorized the Quran.[386] Educated female slaves played an prominent role in Abbasid society, and were viewed as a sign of status for their owners.[387] Their education typically involved the Arabic language, Quran, poetry and music.[388] Female slaves had the opportunity to take part in cultural salons where they mingled with the elite and had the opportunity to build networks.[389] They also had the opportunity to rise to positions of power.[390] This was accomplished though consciously employing their skill, wit and individuality, so as to be noticed by potential patrons.[391] The opportunities afforded to these learned slaves must have contributed to the expansion of women's education at large. [392]

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[384] Shalabi, *Muslim Education*, 197.
[385] Shalabi, *Muslim Education*, 201.
[386] Ibn Khallikān, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary* Vol 1, 574.
[387] Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women," 279.
[388] Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women," 279.
[389] Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women," 279.
[390] Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women," 279.
[391] Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects," 66.
[392] Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women," 279.

Allusions to the education of slave girls are not considered in studies of education, perhaps due to the tendency to paint slave women's learning as geared toward the pure individual consumption of their male masters, and therefore lacking agency.[393] However, these women did in fact demonstrate agency, doing their best to control the course of their lives though networking, and the exploiting of opportunities presented to them.[394] Slave women's education is indeed a forceful and valid example of women's engagement in learning, and it clearly unfolds in some capacity during those centuries when women were not recorded as having been learned or as teachers of learned men. Educated slave women receive significantly less attention than their free male counterparts, both in the biographical collections devoted to the learned classes, as well as in modern scholarship.[395] The prejudices of contemporaneous and later narrators likely distorted information about their lives.[396] If such a woman who passed al-Rashīd's test did in fact exist, then surely her sophisticated knowledge and intellectual abilities would merit her an entry in the dictionaries devoted to the learned elites. However, that is not the case, as no biographical dictionary remembers her, and her erudition is only included in an anonymous anecdote within a court chronicle.

Sufi Women and Learning

While biographical collections devoted to *ḥadīth* scholars and legists might not seem keen to include women, both free and enslaved, within them, dictionaries devoted to mystics or Sufis appear to be more amenable to women's representation.[397] Hagiographic collections of important

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[393] Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects," 52-53.
[394] Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects," 58, 66.
[395] Sharlet, "Educated Slave Women," 278.
[396] Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects," 62.
[397] Roded 3, 58. For further reading on early women's mysticism and acestism see Muhammad ibn al-Husayn Sulami and Rkia Elaroui Cornell (trans. and ed.), *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr An-niswa Al-muta'abbidāt Aṣ-Ṣūfiyyāt*. (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999); Margaret Smith's *Rabi'a, the Life and Works of Rabi'a and Other Women Mystics in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Maria Dakake, "'Guest of the Inmost Heart': Conceptions of

mystic figures depict the lives of several pious women, through dedicated biographical entries, as well as through representations of them as anonymous saintly figures in the entries dedicated to famous male mystics.[398] There is clearly a preference for a feminine depiction as a saintly figure, chaste and devoted to God.[399] In this area, women can be considered fully equal to their male counterparts.[400] Women often appear in the biographies of famous Sufi men, at times chastising them, and overshadowing them with their superior piety and wisdom.[401] Collections rich in depictions of such women include the *Dhikr al-Niswa al-Mutaʿabbidāt aṣ-Ṣūfiyyāt* of Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d.1021), the *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' wa-Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā'* (1031) of Abū Nu'aym al-Ḥāfidh al-Iṣfahānī, and the *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa* of Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201).[402] Ascetic women are notably named in these dictionaries.[403] These, and other similar collections, are significant, because they depict contemporaneous women enthusiastically in those centuries when other specialized dictionaries were not doing so.[404]

If Mamluk era dictionaries present idealized depictions of a restrained, well-bred scholarly woman, early hagiographic sources might be seen by some as a way to access more "true" depictions of women's activities. These sources tend to provide more information on female spiritual figures than other texts.[405] Scholars have argued that within the narratives of ascetic women, we can detect something of a genuine female voice.[406] The depicted women often shun feminine social norms and familial ties, habitually choosing seclusion from social life, avoiding

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the Divine Beloved among Early Sufi Women," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2007): 72–97, Annemarie Schimmel, "Women in Mystical Islam," *Women's Studies International Forum,* 5/2 (1982) and Schimmel *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam,* trans. S.H. Ray (New York: Continuum, 1997).

[398] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 19.

[399] Azad, "Islam's Forgotten Scholars," 29.

[400] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 17.

[401] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 96; Dakake, "Guest of the Inmost Heart," 82, 87.

[402] Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999); Sulami, *Early Sufi Women.*

[403] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women,* 20.

[404] Roded, 58.

[405] Azad, "Female Mystics," 64.

[406] Dakake, "Guest of the Inmost Heart," 80.

marriage, travelling on their own, or living with fellow female ascetics.[407] Entries in hagiographies can also include extensive narrations of women's wisdom, dreams or poetry, providing the closest portal we might have to the unmediated female voice.[408]

Women's depictions as mystics, ascetics, or as Sufis might also prove fruitful for those interested in women's learning in traditional sciences of *ḥadīth*, Quran and law. Some of these women are described as possessing expertise in the *ḥadīth* sciences and *fiqh*.[409] At least three women included in Ibn al-Jawzī's collection of hagiographies are remembered solely for their legal knowledge.[410] Umm 'Ali (d. late 9th c.), remembered in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* (13th c.), received an Islamic education of the highest level in her time.[411] She studied with a certain Ṣāliḥ b. 'Abdallāh and transmitted his book of Quranic exegesis.[412] Umm 'Ali also travelled to Mecca on her own, where she remained for seven years until she mastered all the branches of Islamic knowledge and was instructed in *ḥadīth*, similar credentials sought out by male scholars.[413] She applied creative and interesting strategies to access the highest levels of learning.[414] 'Abda and Āmina, the sisters of the Sufi Abū Sulaymān al Dārānī are said to have attained an exalted level of intellect.[415] Over 500 students are said to have formed the study circle of, or been the Sufi disciples, of 'Uwayna, the grandmother of the eleventh-century Sufi scholar, Abū Khayr al-Aqṭa the mid-tenth century.[416]

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[407] Dakake, "Guest of the Inmost Heart," 80.
[408] See Michael Cooperson translation of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's autobiography "The Beginning of the Career of Abı Abd Allah [the Sage of Tirmidh]" in *Interpreting the Self : Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition,* ed. Dwight F. Reynolds and Kristin Brustad (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 120. The author provides extensive narrations of his wife's dreams, written in the first person; Sulami, *Early Sufi Women* also includes several poems, sayings and tales attributed to women.
[409] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 97
[410] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 96
[411] Azad, "Female Mystics," 65-66.
[412] Azad, "Female Mystics," 65-66.
[413] Azad, "Female Mystics," 65-66.
[414] Azad, "Female Mystics," 54.
[415] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women,* section L1
[416] Ain al-Qudat al-Hamadhani *Complaint of a Stranger Exiled from Home* translated as *The Apologia of 'Ain al-Qudat al-Hamadhani,* trans. A.J Arberry (New York: Routledge, 1969) 67. accessed from https://archive.org/stream/ArberryAJASufiMartyrTheApologiaOfAinAlQudatAlHamadhani/Arberry-A-J-a-Sufi-Martyr-the-Apologia-of-Ain-Al-Qudat-Al-Hamadhani_djvu.txt

Biographical collections devoted to the scholarly community do not generally remember these women who achieved scholarly excellence, and they have only been memorialized as ascetics.

Studies on women's education in the Christian world have found that women were not adequately recorded in the history of learning, despite involvement and lifetime careers in formal schooling within female religious communities.[417] These women were instead customarily represented in hagiographic literature, under the category of "spirituality".[418] The relegation to the category of "spirituality" is contrasted with male pursuits of scriptural interpretation and normative theology.[419] A similar situation might have existed with respect to women's representation in the lines of transmission tied to scholarly authority during the medieval Islamic period. This would have resulted in hagiographic accounts, with their generalized and sometimes anonymized features and mystical focus, the most suitable form for remembering saintly-learned women.

It is possible to extract theological content from the lives of women who are quickly discarded as mere spiritual figures.[420] I suggest that hagiographical works need to be further examined, not just for depictions of women Sufis, but also for their related accounts on women's learning. Since ascetic women are known to have had a distinctive tradition of female solidarity and chivalry (*niswān*), carefully reading their biographies might also allow us to learn more about all-woman learning environments.[421]

Woman-Woman Learning and the Oral Tradition

Woman to woman learning links are almost never included in the textual sources, both from the High Caliphal Period, as well as in the later eras which recorded women scholars more

[417] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 23.
[418] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 23; Prevot, "No Mere Spirituality," 107.
[419] Emily A. Holmes, "Introduction: Mending a Broken Lineage" in *Women, Writing, Theology: Transforming a Tradition of Exclusion*. Ed. Emily Holmes and Wendy Farley (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011) 5.
[420] Prevot, "No Mere Spirituality," 107, 112.
[421] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women,* 12.

freely. In the biographies of women that do exist, female students of women scholars are almost never listed, nor are the female teachers of women scholars.[422] Notable women are remembered for being the students or teachers of notable male scholars, or else their relatives.[423] Kinship ties to famous men appears to be a significant factor for inclusion of women into biographical dictionaries and the community's textual memory.[424]

It is critical to highlight this editing tendency of the biographies, as it points to a major weakness in employing these textual sources for the purpose of informing us of the full picture of women's education. Women's education that did not involve notable men has by and large not been remembered. Wherever and whenever women might have been learning in predominantly women circles, there are no textual records existing to remember their names and activities. This needs to be considered for every moment in premodern Islamic history. It is apparent that knowledge that was passed between women was deemed unworthy of being remembered by male biographers, both early and later ones, except in the case where it pertained to the first three generations when women to women links were an indispensable part of *ḥadīth* transmission.

To look at one example, the scholarly links between ʻĀ'isha bint Abī Bakr, the Prophet's wife, and several women, including ʻAmra bint ʻAbd al-Raḥmān and ʻĀ'isha bint Ṭalḥa b. ʻUbayd Allāh, have been preserved.[425] In this case, woman to woman transmission was important for the sake of *isnād* verification, and thus was memorialized. Later woman to woman learning did not fair nearly as well. We can never know the number of women who were learning in woman-based

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[422] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 73-74.
[423] Asma Afsaruddin, "Literature, Scholarship, and Piety: Negotiating Gender and Authority in the Medieval Muslim World." *Religion and Literature* 42, no. 1/2 (2010): 118.
[424] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 22.
[425] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 68.

networks. The extent of women's contribution to Islamic learning remains difficult to measure because it is obscured by the private venue in which their teaching would have often taken place.[426]

In the Mamluk era, most aspects of society were segregated, with both men and women contributing to religious life in largely separate spheres of activity.[427] Despite the lack of textual sources on woman-centered education, there is sufficient evidence to show that women played an active role in religious life outside the all-male *madrasa* system.[428] Even in terms of educational institutions, there are indications that complementary schools existed for women, although there does not appear to exist much historical interest or importance in them.[429] Writings exist which outline regulations for boarding schools which mention that such institutions for girls should be placed in secluded areas.[430] *Ribāṭs* are a noticeable feature of Mamluk society: women-only institutions in which women engaged in learning.[431] This included the sharing of religious knowledge and exhortations through oral preaching and recitation, as well as though the reading and study of religious literature.[432]

It is likely that during the High Caliphal Period there also existed significant woman-to-woman learning networks, just as there was in the first century of Islam as well as in the Mamluk era. However, the teachers and students learning in women's circles, and not related to any prominent male scholars, do not appear to have been recorded. This does not mean that it did not take place, or that education that did not attach itself to male figures was inferior. Once again I will turn to scattered allusions of woman to woman learning in order to underscore its sure existence despite the silence in the textual sources.

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[426] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo,* 181.
[427] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 37.
[428] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 37.
[429] Ephrat, *A Learned Society,* 87
[430] Shalabi, *Muslim Education*, 222, taken from ibn jum'ah's *tadhkirat al sami.*
[431] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 37
[432] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 37.

We have already been introduced to Ibnat Saʿīd al-Ballūṭī of Los Pedroches, the sister of the *qādī* Mundhir b. Saʿīd, who is described by her biographers as having lived a life of devotion in the mosque, and as having taught the women of her area *fiqh* and the *siyār* (biographies) of the pious.[433] She is said to have founded her own monastery where women devoted themselves to religious scholarship.[434] None of her female students, who are described as having learned *fiqh*, are remembered by name in any textual source. This trend of not recording women who participate in women centered learning circles persists over time. In the eleventh century a certain Maryam b. Abī Yaʿqūb al-Fayṣūlī al-Anṣārī is described as an excellent poetess and teacher of literature whose circle was formed by ladies who flocked to profit from her knowledge.[435] ʻĀ'isha al Nīshāpūriyya, from the eleventh century as well, is said to have discoursed to women in Nishapur.[436] The biographical details of any of these women students do not exist anywhere. Fāṭimah b. Abbās b. Abū 'l-Fatḥ (d.1315) was a popular preacher with the women of Cairo and Damascus, and many women changed their lives on her account.[437] Several women are reported to have memorized the Quran under her. We know the names of two of these women, ʻĀ'isha, and Amat al-Raḥīm, and that is because they were the wife and mother in law of a well-known male author, Ibn Kathīr.[438] It is not difficult to believe that if these two women students of Fāṭimah were not attached to this famous male scholar, their names as women students of a woman scholar would never have been remembered.

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[433] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 157.
[434] Madeleine Pelner Cosman, and Linda Gale Jones. *Handbook to Life in the Medieval World*. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 154.
[435] Shalabi, *Muslim Education*, 195. (from al Maqqari *nafh al tib*)
[436] al-Hamadhani, *Complaint of a Stranger Exiled from Home*, 67. https://archive.org/stream/ArberryAJASufiMartyrTheApologiaOfAinAlQudatAlHamadhani/Arberry-A-J-a-Sufi-Martyr-the-Apologia-of-Ain-Al-Qudat-Al-Hamadhani_djvu.txt
[437] Yacoob, "Women and education in the pre-modern Middle East," 66.
[438] Yacoob, "Women and education in the pre-modern Middle East," 66.

Woman to woman networks of learning would have likely been oral based, and there are no texts which have adequately preserved the memory of such oral learning. Oral learning was a key feature of early Islamic learning, and the perceived superiority of personal one-on-one studies lies deeply embedded in the Islamic educational system.[439] Oral transmission continued to be the preferred vehicle for transmission long after written works gained popularity.[440] This preference for oral transmission urges us to look beyond formal structures of learning in our attempt to access the history of Islamic intellectual development.[441] Oral based transmission facilitated the participation of women in the transmission of Islamic learning.[442] Women *ḥadīth* transmitters held assemblies both in their homes and in the houses of others, as is apparent from *samāʿāt* (certificate of audition).[443] In these assemblies, men and women would participate alongside each other with no formal segregation.[444]

One aspect of oral based transmission of knowledge was the *mujālasāt*: essentially literary salons in which individuals came together to share knowledge and stories. This type of educational activity was especially popular during the High Caliphal Period, and women participated in them as well.[445] These gatherings are well reported to have taken place in palaces, but could also take place in gardens, homes and bookshops; and participation was semi private.[446] Abū 'l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī's *Al-Aghānī* is an important source for information on literary gatherings and the history of Arab music and poetry. Within it we find a few examples of women participating in literary salons.[447] In Andalusia and in the Western Islamic lands women occasionally participated

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[439] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 43.
[440] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 63
[441] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 43
[442] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge,* 43
[443] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 40.
[444] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 40.
[445] Samer M. Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010): 15
[446] Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons,* 15.
[447] Shalabi, *Muslim Education,* 8.

alongside men in mixed salons.[448] In the Arab East, women tended to take part in segregated literary salons.[449] This can be seen in the residential architecture from the region, which included separate salons for men and women.[450] Examples of such women's' salons can be found in Egyptian homes from the Tulunid and Fatimid periods (9-11th centuries).[451] This points to the existence of women based study circles, although the textual evidence is limited. Literary salons were expressions of the oral based tradition, in which knowledge was considered a social interaction and in which self-study did not play an important role.[452] In this oral tradition, it is presumable that a large proportion of women were engaging in face to face learning and preaching.

Woman to woman learning and activities in general are pervasively ignored in modern historical studies. Contemporary studies on education in the premodern Muslim era in fact mean male to male education. This ignoring and sidelining of female networks of learning is in part due to a presumed absence of sources, but also due to the perceived unimportance of woman to woman activities. In the rare times when women to women chains are noted in modern studies on Muslim education, it is often with a negative association.[453] Woman to woman networks are seen as reflecting an exclusion of women from real public education, or as showing their role as restricted and diminished.[454] Men to men networks which do not come in contact with women's presence are not treated in the same way.

Studies of on education in the Western context have found that women teaching in domestic settings and those that owned their own schools are the least represented in the historiography of education.[455] Historians interested specifically in women's education have

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[448] Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons,* 15.
[449] Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons,* 15.
[450] Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons,* 15.
[451] Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons,* 15.
[452] Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons,* 38.
[453] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 159.
[454] Avila describes women's relations being "restricted" to other women in "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 159.
[455] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 9.

tended to also overlook woman-centered learning.[456] Revisionist historians interested in women's' education in the Islamic context, much like those historians interested in women in the Western context, have sought out depictions of women's "worthwhile" education, education which was taken from or taught to important men, while ignoring that education which was deemed domesticated, informal, home-, or woman-based. This bias in historical writing must be realized and addressed in all studies of pre-modern women.

Ḥadīth Scholarship and the Isnād Exclusion

There are several other research inquiries that have yet to be explored which might further explain shifting fates for women in the biographical sources. One of these is the possibility of a pervasive *isnād* bias, which downgraded the strength of women's transmissions during the project of *ḥadīth* collecting and verification which was taking place from the eighth to tenth centuries.

Women from the first generation of the Muslim community are well represented in the *isnād*s of *ḥadīth*. The Prophet's wives particularly, occupy the primary link in many transmitter chains. It makes sense then, that they are also well represented in early *ṭabaqāt* works devoted to *ḥadīth* transmitters. A preference for male transmitters appears to have increased over time however. In the earliest surviving *ḥadīth* compilation, the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Mālik b. Anas (d.796), 25% of first narrators from the Prophet are women.[457] Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad* (d. 855), a later *ḥadīth* compilation, comes in slightly lower with 18% of first transmitters being women. Women fare even worse in those compilations which are considered canonical in traditional Sunni Islam, the *Ṣaḥīḥ*s of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī (d.870) and Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī (d.875), in which no more than 11% of their first narrators are women.[458] While 2065 *ḥadīth*s in the

[456] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 9.
[457] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 65.
[458] Roded*,* 65.

canonical collections have women as the first transmitter, there are only 525 *ḥadīth* with women listed in any later link.[459] The majority of these later women are found in the second link, and there is a stark decline of women by the 3rd link.[460] No women appear at all after the 4th link in the canonical collections.[461]

Roded has argued that the dramatic drop in the number of second generation female transmitters reflects a growing trend of relying on women as sources of information only when too few male transmitters can be found or when the women in question have a significant advantage.[462] At least some *ḥadīth* scholars in the first centuries of Islam are reported to have disliked narrations on the authority of women other than the wives of the Prophet.[463] The preference for men's transmissions can be noticed in the fact that after the second generation transmitters, an *isnād* never reverts back to a woman once it has passed through a man.[464] Debates about the legal value of *ḥadīth* at this time are said to have given rise to criteria which were disproportionately burdensome for women.[465] After the first generation, women's transmission to non-kin men were often excluded, as well as their transmissions to women.[466] Similarly, traditions that women traditionists acquired from non-kin men have also not survived in the canonical collections.[467] When the project of authenticating *ḥadīth* picked up in the 9th century, an aversion to women's authority as transmitters, as well as possible biases against co-educational transmission, might have excluded their transmissions from being canonized.

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[459] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 77-78.
[460] Sayeed, 79.
[461] Sayeed, 79.
[462] Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections,* 47.
[463] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 63.
[464] Sayeed, 65.
[465] Sayeed, 64.
[466] Sayeed, 67.
[467] Sayeed, 67 and 75.

The observed decline in women transmitters after the second generation has reaffirmed the position for some scholars, that women were not participating in *ḥadīth* learning after the first Islamic century.[468] Based on exclusion from *isnāds*, women's transmission of *ḥadīth* is described as being utterly restricted and negligible from the mid-eighth to tenth century.[469]

There are indications however, that such an absence from *ḥadīth* transmission might not have existed. Some women from the second generation onwards are reported to have transmitted *ḥadīth*, although their names do not show up in any *isnāds* found in the canonical collections.[470] One such woman is the Umayyad ʿĀtika bt. Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya (d.747) from the third generation of Muslims, who is remembered in certain biographical entries for having transmitted prophetic traditions.[471] However these traditions are not included in canonical collections, nor is Ātika included in dictionaries devoted to reliable transmitters.[472] Even traditions from second generation women often did not survive. Sukayna bt. al Ḥusayn is described as having transmitted to the people of her household as well as to Kufan traditionists, but none of these traditions are recorded in the canonical collections.[473] Another of the second-generation women who has been remembered in biographical works as a traditionist although her narrations have not survived is ʻĀ'isha bt. Ṭalḥa (d.719).[474] That *ḥadīth* transmitted from known women traditionists have not survived should cause us to be wary of defining women's educational activities through their representation in transmission chains of the canonical collections. Women gatherings for the

[468] See Sayeed *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,* 76 for an analysis of isnād trends. She describes a "profound and pervasive" decline in the quantity and quality of women's ḥadīth participation and argues that potential for female participation in ḥadīth transmission was rarely actualized, and their participation was marginal.
[469] Sayeed, 81.
[470] Roded, 54.
[471] Roded, 54.
[472] Roded, 54.
[473] Sayeed, 86.
[474] Roded, 53.

purpose of transmitting *ḥadīth* seem to have continuously took place.[475] Women are reported to have attended study circles of fellow women, but all the participants remain anonymous.[476]

If a preference against women's transmission did in fact exist, it would partly explain the exclusion of later women from the *ḥadīth* focused biographical texts produced in the eighth to eleventh centuries. It is during these years that the process of collecting verified and authenticated *ḥadīth* was taking place.[477] If women's transmissions in the generations after the companions was considered weaker than men's, then in the weighing of *isnād* strengths, women's links would be discarded in favor of men. As a result, fewer women would be included as transmitters in important *ḥadīth* collections. This in turn would lead to fewer women in biographical dictionaries devoted to transmitters of *ḥadīth*, especially those dictionaries devoted to transmitters in the canonical collections. Because women are then not found in these *rijāl* works, modern scholarship has argued that women's activities as *ḥadīth* transmitters during the eighth to tenth centuries was negligible, and that whatever activities did take place was not a part of the arena of "formal" *ḥadīth* transmission.[478] Furthermore, because women in *isnād*s almost always transmit to male authorities, some scholar have suggested that there is little evidence of intergenerational female networks of transmission after the successors.[479]

Conclusion

Readings of biographical dictionaries for the history of women's education have found a near absence of women scholars mentioned in the textual source from the 8th-10th centuries.[480] Some studies have extended this absence of women in traditional scholarship up until the 14th

[475] Nadwi, 73-74.
[476] Sayeed, 65.
[477] Brown, *Ḥadīth,* 31.
[478] Sayeed, 76, 81-82.
[479] Sayeed, 76.
[480] Sayeed, 186; Nadwi, 246 and 250; Roded, 58, 66, 83-85.

century,[481] while others have suggested women's participation picked up from the elventh century onwards.[482] This scholarship describes women's participation in the 13th-15th centuries as occurring on an unprecedented scale.[483] At this time, women are described as "re-emerging" or re-entering into the traditional class as legitimate scholars.[484] These theories emerge primarily from positivist readings of these medieval textual sources. In these sources, women are most represented in dictionaries produced from the 13th-16th centuries.

In this chapter, I have presented arguments that suggest that characterizations of women's absence or re-emergence are not suitable. There is no clear evidence that women did or did not become educated in the religious sciences in the period when their presence is not strongly reflected in the biographical collections. Women might very well have been participating in traditional learning, as their participation is alluded to, often indirectly, in various textual sources. These include accounts of educated slave women in court chronicles, educational guidelines in books on *adab*, educated women mystics in hagiographies, as well as in the impressive biographies of the few women included in dictionaries from this era.

Slave women are more readily discussed in the Abbasid era over free women, although their claims to traditional learning are not commemorated in biographical dictionaries. Women's piety is also shown to more commonly be marked as mystical, with rich textual sources for ascetic women. Extracting instances of learned women from these hagiographic sources, as well as in stories of well-regarded slave women, might prove a fruitful alternative area of research for those interested in women's roles in traditional scholarship.

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[481] Roded, 58.
[482] Sayeed, 66; Nadwi, 246.
[483] Nadwi, 246; Sayeed, 144, where she describes a "zenith of women's hadith participation"
[484] Sayeed, 108.

We have pointed out important features in the narratives pertaining to women's education. There is pervasive silence on woman-woman learning, as well as on learning that occurred in privately or orally. This silence on woman-woman links, and woman based oral learning will never allow us to access the full extent and possibilities of women's educational opportunities in the premodern Islamic world. Furthermore, scholars must be aware of potential preferences against women's transmission in the realm of *ḥadīth*, which have potentially disadvantaged women in text. This bias, if it did exist might also explain why women were not memorialized in the early field-specific dictionaries.

It is not easy to derive facts about women from this era, and there were undoubtedly several ways to be a woman.[485] No one type of the surviving male authored sources can adequately portray women's realities. Studies which engage with multiple types of texts are most suitable. A combination of historical-critical research, literary and textual analysis, as well as a nuanced understanding of the community that produced the texts we employ in historical research, can provide better readings of women's history.[486] Engagement with various frameworks in an integrated approach, including social history and gender theory are all indispensable to scholars wishing to access women's history. Despite the difficulties, an increased focus on women's history in Islamic Studies is urgent and direly needed.

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[485] Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority,* 243.
[486] Laury Silvers. ""God Loves Me": The Theological Content and Context of Early Pious and Sufi Women's Sayings on Love." *Journal for Islamic Studies* 30, no. 1 (2010), 36.

CHAPTER 4:
OVERCOMING ERASURE: LOCATING AND WRITING PREMODERN MUSLIM WOMEN'S HISTORY

The history of women is one of erasure. In mainstream historical narratives, the focus has traditionally been on political power and public life, from which women were allegedly excluded. Women have been sidelined in various historical narratives about nation, state-building, and the production of culture resulting in a trivializing of women in much of the inherited historical canon.[487] This is the case within the field of Islamic history as well. The productivity of women in premodern Islamic societies, much like that of peasants, goes unnoticed.[488] Representations of the Islamic past narrated as an action plan have no place for women.[489] In many such mainstream histories, women are not depicted as doing anything, and as having no distinctive religious expression.[490] Rather, they are depicted as passive recipients of cultures formed in their exclusions, and of political and social changes. The history of humankind necessarily includes the history of women. Any work which does not recognize this has not painted a full picture. As historians, it is imperative to take responsibility for the exclusions that occur in historical writing since "meanings are constructed through exclusions."[491]

Conclusions

There is much work to be done on the study of women's education in premodern Islamic societies. In the first chapter, I provided a brief overview of the available scholarship on the topic. In most general studies on education in premodern Islamic societies, discussions of women's education are absent. The allegedly comprehensive descriptions of characteristics of premodern

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[487] Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 17–24.
[488] Talal Asad."The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 14.
[489] Talal "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 14.
[490] Talal "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 14.
[491] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1999), 7.

Islamic education outlined in these studies cannot satisfactorily be taken to represent women's educational experiences. Scholars focused on gender on the other hand, have paid more attention to the possibilities of women's lives. However, these studies depend more on political chronicles or else legal or exegetical works, to map out women's lives. As such, they have found the Abbasid era to be notably disadvantageous for women, and usually suggest that unfavorable circumstances, including in scholarly pursuits, persisted up to the modern era. A third cluster of scholarship, which focuses on women's education specifically, has uncovered rich details of the lives and prospects of learned women. This scholarship has depended primarily on positivist readings of biographical dictionaries, in which learned women can be well represented. Based on these positivist readings, some scholars have suggested fluctuating possibilities for women's education, arguing that women participated during the early years of Islam, but were eventually sidelined during the High Caliphal Period (750-1000). Women are then seen to slowly re-emerge, culminating in unprecedented level of participation and representation in the Mamluk era (1250-1500).

In the second chapter I argued that biographical dictionaries were not intended to act as the repositories for historicizing the practices of learned women. Rather, they were employed in multiple ways by the evolving male scholarly community, according to its members' shifting needs shaped by an array of socio-political conditions. I periodized the textual sources, grouping them into three cohorts, each of which have distinct characteristics which affected the quantity and types of women represented within them. The first cohort, which represents dictionaries produced from 750-1000, were aligned predominantly according to specific professions, often, but not always, dedicated to *ḥadīth* specialists. These dictionaries were exclusive and included several past companion women but less frequently contemporaneous women. The second cohort covers those dictionaries produced from 1000-1250, which begin to show more historicizing tendencies. These dictionaries include more women apart from companions, including royal women and Sufis, but

are still not the richest sources for recording contemporaneous traditionally learned women. The final and most expansive cohort covers dictionaries which emerged from 1250-1500. These dictionaries are even more inclusive than their predecessors, resulting in more contemporaneous women being included than ever before. Descriptions of women's lives within these dictionaries are argued by some to be idealized. The idealized depictions of women's lives, as well as the inclusion of women in larger numbers can be tied to evolutions of the form, as it became increasingly employed for historicizing purposes. In light of this evolving role of the biographical dictionary which led to changes in its form and content, I argued that current positivist readings of the textual form are not suitable.

In the third chapter I considered the question, might women have been participating in educational pursuits in those centuries when they are not prominently mentioned in biographical dictionaries? I turned to indirect allusions to women in biographical works and considered the women who are noticeably absent from dictionaries. I suggested that recollections of the qualifications and activities of mystical or "Sufi" women, as well as slave women might be one fruitful method for recovering learned women's history. I brought attention to the crucial detail that silences in the textual sources on woman-to-woman learning networks and orally transmitted knowledge, will not allow us to ever reconstruct a full picture of women's educational possibilities. I ended the chapter with a consideration of a possible preference of men's *ḥadīth* transmissions over women's, which might explain why women's names were not being recorded in specialized *ḥadīth* dictionaries at certain moments.

Existing historical studies dealing with women's education in the medieval era have not paid adequate attention to the limits of the dictionary as a source of knowledge about their lived experiences and practices. These studies have not given adequate consideration to temporal nuances of the source, and have instead approached them as an unchanging monolith. Modern

studies of medieval women's education and the conclusions made about the quality and value of their knowledge, have suffered as a result. We are as such faced not only with the need to question the perceived marginality of women's education in medieval and late medieval Islamic societies, but also to push back against the unwriting of women in modern historical studies dealing with the *madrasa*s, intellectual output, and scholarship in Islam.

The study of women's education, their scholarly formation and authority, as well as their engagement with teaching in premodern Islamic societies is fraught with difficulties and barriers. More specifically, accessing the history of women in premodern Islamic societies is faced with two hurdles which in turn feed into each other in a circular manner. The first is an absence of female-authored textual sources from which we can draw out suitable narratives as well any other primary textual sources that explicitly set out to outline and preserve the characteristics and levels of women's learning. The second hurdle is the modern project of writing history, which has only further reinforced the exclusion of women from Islamic history.

Modern historical scholarship, which has overlooked or downplayed women's contributions to Islamic societies, has perpetuated stereotypes about both Islam and women. This is the case despite the fact that the notion of female dependency and passivity as a mark of medieval Muslim society goes against the evidence of the medieval sources.[492] Muslim women did help shape Islam, whether as religious scholars, poets or learned members of their communities, and this contribution was often acknowledged in the writing of their male colleagues at times.[493] The male scholarly classes are nonetheless perceived to have had inhibitions about the representation of women, and this at least partially due to a modern lack of interest in editing and publishing works that are deemed trivial, mundane or that depict private lives.[494]

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[492] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 45.
[493] Afsaruddin, "Negotiating Gender and Authority," 128.
[494] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 3.

Ayesha Chaudhry has described the field of Islamic studies to be dominated by two types of historiographies, namely, White Supremacist Islamic Studies (WhiSIS), and Patriarchal Islamic Legal Studies (PILS).[495] Both have further reinforced the sidelining of women from Islamic history through academia. White colonialist Islamic studies taking place in Western academic institutions is able to do this by designating medieval male elite voices - being captured in the texts produced by them- as the most authentic expression of Islam, while downplaying women as non-actors.[496] This writing of history is an active process which chooses to exclude some and include others. This in turn produces an accepted canon of knowledge which is particularistic, rather than complete, universal or objectively determined.[497] This marking of women as outside of the active formation of culture extends to their role in education and learning.

Women and Education: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Studies on women's education in the European context have noted that there is a silence on women's roles in education, with the school mistress left out of the mainstream historical narratives on education.[498] The definition of schools themselves presented difficulties, as they are typically male-focused, with emphasis placed on size, continuity, corporate existence and the accumulation of professional titles.[499] Other studies on women's role in Christian theology have found that religious women have persistently been sidelined from the collective memory as legitimate religious authorities.[500] Women's theology is often pushed to the margins, and marked as informal "spirituality" or "mysticism" rather than theology proper.[501] This perpetuates an

[495] Chaudhry, "Islamic Legal Studies," 1.
[496] Chaudhry, "Islamic Legal Studies," 5.
[497] Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 7.
[498] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 3.
[499] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 22.
[500] See Prevot, "No Mere Spirituality" and Holmes, "Mending a Broken Lineage" 5.
[501] Holmes, "Mending a Broken Lineage," 5.

enduring yet problematic construction of the "feminine" as "spiritual" and the masculine as theologian, remaining in charge of that which is normative and scriptural.[502]

Both these trends are also applicable to the modern history writing of premodern Islamic education and intellectual thought. Most major works in the fields of education and religious scholarship ignore women altogether, or else relegate them to a sentence, or if generous, a chapter. Women are excluded from modern descriptions of the general trajectory of Islamic intellectual development. In cases where women are remembered, they are often classified as mystic or ascetic. Selective histories which overlook women, reinforce particular values and perspectives.[503] Highlighting the silences in text, and reclaiming women's place in history and specifically in Islam's intellectual history is imperative.

Recovering Her-story

Women's history, which some have dubbed "her-story", involves the recovery of important female figures, their lives and learning, and literary production if available.[504] This offers a way to update history, and open up distinctive and innovatory pathways for the field of historical writing.[505] Scholars devoted to women's history put forth new approaches and questions to historical materials.[506] Woman-centered histories are interested in actual experiences of women's lives rather than men's descriptions of it, and as a result they prefer to employ women-produced sources such as letters, diaries, autobiographies and oral history sources.[507] In the field of medieval Islamic History, such sources are nearly non-existent. The recovery and interpretation of the stories

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[502] Prevot, "No Mere Spirituality," 107.
[503] Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 25-26
[504] Hermansen," The New Voices of Muslim Women Theologians" 18. For further reading on a Muslim herstory see Azizah al-Hibri. "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or how did we ever get into this mess?" *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, no. 2 (1982), 207-219.
[505] Peneople J. Corfield, "History and the Challenge of Gender History" *Rethinking History* 1, no. 3 (1997), 241.
[506] Lerner, "Placing Women in History", 10.
[507] Lerner, "Placing Women in History," 10.

of women then presents significant methodological and theoretical problems since the sources are scarce and varied.[508] A combination of historical-critical research, literary and textual analysis as well as an understanding of the methods and goals of the producers of texts, can lead to fruitful results.[509] Allusions to women's lives can be found when rereading and searching through the nooks and crannies of literary sources from the medieval period.[510] In sifting through these sources it becomes apparent that women in medieval Muslim societies were not necessarily marked by dependency and passivity.[511]

At the same time, in writing history we must be cognizant of the challenges women might have faced within potentially oppressive structures that maintained a patriarchal order. Writing history in a way that both acknowledges these roadblocks while affirming that women's only role in the history of their communities was not as passive victims of oppression is challenging but imperative. Chaudhry has argued that there is a need for an Intersectional Islamic Studies to counteract the colonialist and patriarchal Islamic studies already in place in academic institutions (IIS).[512] Intersectional Islamic studies would consider the "various intersecting layers of multiple identities that compound the privileged and oppressions that influence scholars and their scholarship".[513] New readings are needed which counteract the overlooking of women's activities in the inherited historical canon.[514]

Writing women into the historical narrative necessitates a responsible consideration of these issues. It must involve a shift away from a male oriented consciousness in order to arrive at new interpretations.[515] In regard to the history of women in the premodern Islamic world, the

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[508] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 9.
[509] Silvers, "God Loves Me," 36.
[510] Afsaruddin, "Negotiating Gender and Authority," 128.
[511] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 45.
[512] Chaudhry, "Islamic Legal Studies" 20.
[513] Chaudhry, "Islamic Legal Studies" 6.
[514] Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 25-26.
[515] Lerner, "Placing Women in History," 10.

project is not easy, especially in light of the absence of primary sources which might capture the female consciousness. Inadequate inclusion is more desirable than historical exclusion and silencing, and therefore, the writing is still needed despite the difficulties. As we do so, however, it is important that we not fall into several of the problems that plague the writing of women's history.

Perpetuating Stereotypes through Historical Writing

In the areas of education and theology, historical writing has arguably perpetuated certain stereotypes.[516] This happens when women's history is written and marked as separate from general histories of the world which remain male-centered.[517] In descriptions of their access to education, women are described as "outsiders" whose lives were "circumscribed by a variety of legal and social restrictions", which impacted the quality of their education.[518] Men's education in such narratives represents the universal, non-outsider's interaction with knowledge and tradition. Feminist writer Joan Scott warns about this flaw of women studies when she writes that, "new facts might document the existence of women in the past, but they do not necessarily change the importance attributed to women's activities. The separate treatment of women could serve to confirm their marginal and particularized relationship to those male subjects already established as dominant and universal."[519]

In the Western context, the chief concern of the historians appeared to be the male educator as he represented the professionalism of the occupation more readily than the school mistress.[520] The concentration on professional status and ideal types emerged from a narrow focus of

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[516] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 3, footnote 2.
[517] Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges" in *Feminist Studies,* 3(1/2) (1975): 9.
[518] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo,* 161.
[519] Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 3.
[520] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 3.

traditional educational history.[521] Such deficiencies in mainstream historical works on education which have overlooked women's role for the perceived more professional male educators also plague the histories of education written by scholars of Islamic society.

Several studies that have focused on women's access to education, have stressed the informality of women's education.[522] Many have also compared the forms of women's education to that of men's and argued that there is a fundamental difference between the two.[523] Men's education is marked as professional, formal and organized.[524] Women's education on the other hand is depicted as ad hoc, informal and inconsequential.[525] Some scholarship has dismissed women's learning due to it being woman based and ascribed to private or familial locations.[526] Others have emphasized the completely different type and quality of a woman's education.[527] The primarily non-professional expressions of their learning, and their participation in woman to woman networks as well as in private learning environments are all factors that cause women's learning activities to be persistently downgraded.[528] Men who learn in private venues including the home, those who engage in men to men learning networks that depend on familial relations, and those who choose to forgo official posts do not evoke similar sentiments. They are not seen as exhibiting deficient educational credentials or practices.[529]

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[521] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 4.
[522] Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education"
[523] Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education," 153.
[524] Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education," 153.
[525] Sayeed, *Transmission of Religious Knowledge*, 65.; Avila "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 159.
[526] See Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," p.159 where she described biographies of learned women as random nobodies.
[527] Lutfi, "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa'," 121: "women teachers stood on a much lower level than men scholars in general" and suggest that since women were not able to occupy salaried posts in educational institutions attests to the fact that "women participation in the public social domain was but a peripheral one"
[528] Lutfi, "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa'," 121.
[529] For example, Berkey in his book *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo*, extolls memorization, ḥadīth scholarship, familial networks in his discussion on men, but takes a different tone when talking about these topics in regards to women.

One study of women in Andalusian biographical dictionaries, which lists several examples of learned women, went so far as to state that in the highly personalized environment of the medieval Islamic cultural world, "the presence of the woman constitutes a factor which is highly unusual and marginal, almost distorting. When a female link appears in the chain, it very frequently marks the beginning of a dead end. The woman does not normally pass her knowledge on to anybody. If she does so, *it is to another woman* until sooner or later— most probably, sooner— one of the women breaks the chain."[530]

In another case, women's education is argued to have occurred so that women might reel in suitable husbands, or so that women might more readily accept religious norms that dictate their social behaviour.[531] This marking of individuals as victims of their own education does not occur in discussions of men, although legal ruling also regulated their lives. One finds that women teachers in the Western context were depicted by historians as naïve and malleable, while male educators were perceived as mature, energetic and professional. [532] It is equally true that women in the Islamic world are also depicted as passive and malleable recipients of knowledge. Depictions of passivity or dependence have been read into primary sources, despite their contradicting evidence.[533] These characterizations are not made explicitly in the biographical dictionaries but are theorized by modern day scholars. In the writing of history, scholars have reinforced stereotypes and the downgrading of women's place and contributions to society. Harmful depictions of women's roles have ramifications on how women are allowed to access and engage with tradition in the present.

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[530] Avila, "Andalusi Biographical Sources," 159. (Italics mine)
[531] Lutfi, "Al-Sakhawi's 'Kitab al-Nisa'," 121.
[532] Prentice and Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers," 4.
[533] Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 45.

History and Interpretative Authority

The process of writing history into a narrative that excludes or compartmentalizes women has ramifications in today's world. Talal Asad describes Islam as a discursive tradition, which continuously engages with the past in order to establish correct beliefs and practices in the present.[534] In this tradition, engagement with preceding texts ties a person to the tradition and allows them to enter into it as a legitimate interpreter. Legitimacy is accessed backwards and by tracing women's engagement with the tradition to past exemplars, their work can be legitimized. Ahmed Ragab has argued that the validity of interpretation is a function of the epistemic authority of the interpreter in a dynamic relation to the text as seen through previous interpretations.[535]

Colonialist and patriarchal studies of Islam have designated medieval male elite voices as the most important and authentic expression of this tradition eternally.[536] For new interpretations, including those emerging from women, legitimate epistemic access to text is obtained only through this legitimization of the interpreter.[537] Since "the epistemic authority of women is built through the accumulation of precedence and the interpretation of these precedence at various historical junctures,"[538] recovering the history of learned women is not inconsequential.

For Muslim women who operate within this framework that depends on the past to guide the future, finding and retelling the lives of women of the past who excelled in education becomes especially relevant.[539] Some have argued that an exclusively male dominated Islamic scholarship has allowed for patriarchal interpretations to prevail.[540] The implication is that if there are more women scholars engaging in the tradition, we might change the ways women are subjected by its

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[534] Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,"15.
[535] Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women," 185.
[536] Chaudhry, "Islamic Legal Studies" 5.
[537] Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women," 185.
[538] Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women," 189.
[539] Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 25-26.
[540] Ahmed, *Women and Gender, 79.*

rulings. Delving into the untold lives of Muslim women scholars from centuries ago lends justification from within the tradition, for women religious scholarship in the present.

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