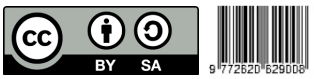
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Women's Agency and Equitable Access to Knowledge: A Sociohistorical Reading of the Hadith on Women's Educational Gatherings during the Prophet's Lifetime

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Abstract

This study examines women's agency and equitable access to religious knowledge through a sociohistorical reading of the hadith concerning women's request for a designated educational gathering with the Prophet Muhammad. Employing qualitative textual analysis, the study examines the narration of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, selected parallel reports, and relevant historical scholarship. Drawing on theories of agency and participatory justice, the analysis identifies three interconnected findings. First, women's collective request demonstrates their capacity to recognize unequal educational opportunities and negotiate access to prophetic instruction. Second, the Prophet's accommodation illustrates pedagogical responsiveness through differentiated instructional arrangements. Third, the ensuing dialogue reveals women's active participation in clarifying religious teachings. These findings suggest that women's educational agency operated within, rather than necessarily against, established religious authority. The study contributes to hadith and gender scholarship by conceptualizing educational equity through the interrelationship of learner initiative, pedagogical accommodation, and dialogical participation. Although limited by the textual and historical scope of the selected narrations, the study offers a historically cautious framework for reconsidering women's participation in Islamic educational traditions.

Keywords: *Women's Agency; Educational Equity; Prophetic Pedagogy; Hadith Studies; Sociohistorical Analysis; Gender and Knowledge.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between gender, religious authority, and access to knowledge constitutes a significant area of inquiry in contemporary Islamic studies. Although the pursuit of religious knowledge occupies a central position in Islamic intellectual traditions, opportunities to acquire, interpret, and transmit such knowledge have historically been shaped by social hierarchies, institutional arrangements, and gendered expectations. Consequently, the recognition of education as a religiously valued activity does not necessarily establish that educational opportunities were equally distributed among members of Muslim communities. Ahmed (1992) demonstrates that gender relations in Islamic history developed through interactions between religious discourses and changing social circumstances, while Sayeed (2013) identifies considerable historical variation in women's participation in the transmission of religious knowledge. These findings suggest that women's educational experiences cannot be adequately understood through either an assumption of

continuous exclusion or an idealized narrative of uninterrupted equality. Rather, they require historically situated investigations into the ways women encountered, negotiated, and occasionally transformed the conditions governing access to religious learning.

The historical participation of Muslim women in religious scholarship complicates conventional assumptions that the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge were exclusively male activities. Sayeed (2013) traces women's involvement in hadith transmission from the formative period of Islam through subsequent centuries, demonstrating that their participation fluctuated in response to transformations in scholarly authority, educational institutions, and social practices. Berkey (1992), examining educational networks in medieval Cairo, similarly reveals that the transmission of knowledge depended on interpersonal relationships and educational arrangements extending beyond formal institutions. More recently, Sayeed (2023) has emphasized that the study of women as transmitters of religious knowledge provides an important perspective on Islamic education, social mobility, and the construction of religious authority. These contributions establish women's participation as a historically significant dimension of Islamic intellectual life. Nevertheless, reconstructing women's scholarly achievements does not fully explain how access to instruction was initially requested, negotiated, and accommodated within particular educational encounters.

Within the formative Muslim community, the Prophet Muhammad occupied a distinctive position as both the recipient of revelation and the principal source of religious instruction. His teaching activities involved the communication of religious obligations, ethical guidance, and practical responses to questions arising from the community. Hadith literature preserves accounts of these interactions, although their historical interpretation requires attention to the processes through which reports were transmitted, selected, organized, and understood. Brown (2017) explains that hadith scholarship involves complex questions concerning textual transmission, historical reliability, and the relationship between prophetic reports and subsequent religious authority. Salem (2023), meanwhile, demonstrates that narratives concerning women in hadith literature illuminate their participation in the early Muslim community when examined within broader textual contexts. Accordingly, reports describing women's encounters with the Prophet may be investigated not only for their normative teachings but also for the social relationships and educational practices represented within their narratives.

A particularly relevant narration appears in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, hadith no. 101, transmitted on the authority of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī. According to the report, a group of women approached the Prophet and stated, Ghalabanā ʿalayka al-rijāl (men have occupied more of your attention than we have), before requesting that he designate a day specifically for them. The Prophet responded by arranging a meeting during which he provided instruction and admonition. The narration subsequently records his teaching concerning the spiritual reward associated with the loss of children and a woman's follow-up question about whether the same promise applied to the loss of two children. The report is situated within Kitāb al-ʿIlm (the Book of Knowledge), under a chapter concerning the allocation of a separate day for women's instruction (al-Bukhārī, hadith no. 101). This placement foregrounds its educational significance, although the narrative itself encompasses several interconnected themes, including access to instruction, collective initiative, pedagogical responsiveness, bereavement, and dialogical learning.

The women's request is particularly significant because it represents them as participants who articulated their educational needs rather than merely receiving instruction passively. Their statement identifies a perceived imbalance in opportunities to engage with the Prophet and proposes a practical arrangement intended to address that imbalance. The narrative therefore permits an interpretation of agency as the capacity to recognize a constraint, formulate a collective demand, and participate in negotiating an educational response. However, such an interpretation must distinguish between what the narration explicitly records and what contemporary analytical categories allow researchers to infer. The text establishes that women requested a designated meeting and that the Prophet accommodated their request; it does not independently demonstrate the existence of a comprehensive system of gender-based educational exclusion. This distinction is consistent with the historical caution advocated by Ahmed (1992) and the contextual approaches to gendered hadith interpretation discussed by Abou El Fadl (2023).

The concept of agency offers a productive framework for examining the significance of this interaction. In her influential reconsideration of agency, Mahmood (2005) challenges approaches that identify meaningful action exclusively with resistance to established authority, demonstrating that agency may also operate through practices situated within particular religious and ethical traditions. This insight is especially relevant to the narration under investigation, since the women neither rejected prophetic authority nor positioned their request outside the prevailing religious framework. Instead, they exercised initiative through direct engagement with the recognized source of instruction. Their intervention may consequently be understood as an expression of situated agency, in which religious commitment and the articulation of educational needs were not mutually exclusive. Such a reading avoids imposing a simplistic opposition between submission and resistance while preserving the women's observable capacity to influence the organization of their learning opportunities.

Beyond agency, the narration raises questions concerning the relationship between equality and equity in educational access. Equal recognition of individuals as legitimate learners does not necessarily eliminate differences in their actual opportunities to participate in educational activities. Fraser (2008) conceptualizes justice through the interconnected problems of redistribution, recognition, and representation, offering a framework for examining how participation may be constrained by institutional and social arrangements. Although this theoretical formulation emerged in a different historical context, it provides a useful analytical distinction for interpreting the women's request. Their demand was not simply for an abstract acknowledgment of their entitlement to knowledge, but for an identifiable opportunity to receive instruction. The Prophet's accommodation may therefore be examined as a differentiated pedagogical response to an expressed need. Such an interpretation does not imply that modern theories of educational equity were consciously formulated in seventh-century Arabia; rather, it employs contemporary conceptual tools to investigate the structure and significance of a historically transmitted educational encounter.

The pedagogical dimensions of the report extend beyond the allocation of instructional time. The narration presents an educational interaction involving collective communication, direct teaching, moral guidance, and a learner's follow-up question. The woman's inquiry concerning the loss of two children indicates that the instructional setting allowed participants to seek clarification about the scope of a prophetic statement. This feature is important because access to knowledge involves more

than physical presence within a learning environment; it also concerns opportunities to ask questions, interpret explanations, and engage with the instructor. Salem (2023) highlights the importance of examining women's participation within the wider narrative contexts preserved in hadith literature, while Berkey (1992) demonstrates the historical importance of interpersonal relationships in Islamic educational transmission. Read together, these perspectives encourage an understanding of prophetic instruction as a relational practice in which learners' expressed concerns could influence both the organization and development of educational encounters.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of gender relations in hadith literature requires methodological caution. Prophetic reports are simultaneously religiously authoritative texts and historically transmitted narratives whose meanings have been shaped by collection practices, chapter headings, commentarial traditions, and subsequent scholarly debates. Brown (2017) emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical development of hadith scholarship, while Abou El Fadl (2023) draws attention to the tensions between emancipatory possibilities and patriarchal interpretations within the broader hadith tradition. Rehman (2024), through her reconsideration of ʿĀ'isha's authority, further illustrates the significance of critically examining the representation of women in inherited scholarly narratives. Accordingly, the present study does not treat a single narration as sufficient evidence for reconstructing the entirety of women's educational experiences during the Prophet's lifetime. Instead, it approaches the report as a specific textual witness whose historical implications must be assessed through close reading, comparison with related narrations, and consideration of its transmission and interpretive contexts.

Existing scholarship provides important foundations for this inquiry, but its dominant analytical emphases leave room for a more focused investigation. Sayeed (2013, 2023) offers a historical account of women's participation in religious knowledge transmission, whereas Berkey (1992) examines the social organization of Islamic educational practices in a later historical setting. Ahmed (1992) situates Muslim women's experiences within broader transformations of gender discourse, and Salem (2023) foregrounds women's roles within the hadith corpus. Contemporary research by Ali (2021) further demonstrates how women negotiate interpretive authority through participation in religious learning environments. These studies differ substantially in their historical periods, evidence, and theoretical orientations. Taken together, however, they suggest the value of examining the relationship between women's initiative and the organization of educational access. The present article develops this line of inquiry through a concentrated reading of the educational encounter preserved in al-Bukhārī's narration.

The specific research gap addressed here concerns the analytical relationship between collective female agency, negotiated educational access, and prophetic pedagogical responsiveness within a single hadith narrative. The proposed contribution is not based on a claim that previous scholarship has ignored women's education in early Islam, nor on an assertion that the narration has never been discussed. Rather, it lies in integrating three dimensions that are often treated separately: women's articulation of educational needs, the accommodation of those needs through a designated instructional arrangement, and the participatory character of the ensuing teaching encounter. This integration also permits a more precise distinction between access to an authoritative teacher and the subsequent acquisition of scholarly authority. As Künkler (2020) demonstrates in her historical discussion of female religious authority, women's intellectual participation and the recognition of

their authority have varied across institutional and social contexts. The narration under examination provides a focused starting point for exploring the earlier dynamics of participation without assuming that access automatically produced equivalent authority.

Against this background, the article investigates how the hadith of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī represents women's agency in requesting religious instruction and how the Prophet's response may be understood in relation to equitable access to knowledge. It addresses three interconnected questions: How is women's collective initiative articulated within the narration? What forms of educational accommodation and learner participation are represented in the reported encounter? To what extent can these features inform a historically responsible understanding of educational equity in prophetic practice? Employing qualitative textual analysis within a sociohistorical framework, the study examines the narration's language, narrative structure, placement in the hadith collection, and relevant interpretive contexts, while drawing selectively on theories of agency and participatory justice. Its intended contribution is to move beyond generalized affirmations of women's educational rights toward a more specific account of how educational needs were voiced, acknowledged, and accommodated within a reported encounter from the formative Muslim community.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis and a sociohistorical approach to hadith interpretation. Its primary source is the narration of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī recorded in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 101), which describes women's collective request for a designated educational gathering with the Prophet Muhammad. The research treats the narration as both a religiously authoritative text within the Sunni hadith tradition and a historically transmitted account requiring contextual interpretation. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the entire educational system of the early Muslim community from a single report, the study concentrates on the interaction between women's expressed educational needs, the Prophet's response, and the forms of participation represented in the narrative. This methodological orientation draws on Brown's (2017) discussion of hadith transmission and interpretation and Sayeed's (2013) historical investigation of women's participation in Islamic religious scholarship.

The first stage involves close textual examination of the primary narration, supported by comparison with relevant parallel reports (riwāyāt) and classical hadith commentaries (shurūḥ al-ḥadīth). Particular attention is given to the expressions ghalabanā ʿalayka al-rijāl (men have occupied more of your attention than we have), fajʿal lanā yawman min nafsika (designate a day for us), and fawaʿadahunna yawman (he promised them a day). These expressions are examined in relation to their linguistic meanings, narrative sequence, and implications for educational access. The analysis distinguishes the reported actions and statements from the compiler's chapter heading and subsequent commentarial interpretations. Parallel narrations are used to identify textual similarities, variations, and additional contextual details without assuming that every reported variation necessarily describes an identical historical occasion. This procedure seeks to establish a textually grounded interpretation before introducing contemporary theoretical categories.

The second stage applies sociohistorical contextualization to examine the educational interaction within the broader social circumstances of the early Muslim community. Historical studies of women's participation in religious learning, particularly those of Ahmed (1992) and Sayeed (2013), provide comparative perspectives on gender relations, access to religious instruction, and the development of scholarly participation. The analysis considers the social significance of women's

collective initiative, the practical arrangement of a designated teaching session, and the opportunities for questioning represented within the narration. However, historical contextualization is conducted with explicit recognition of the chronological and evidentiary limitations of hadith literature. Later institutional arrangements and medieval educational practices are not projected uncritically onto the Prophet's lifetime. Instead, historical scholarship is used to clarify plausible interpretive contexts while maintaining a distinction between directly attested narrative features and broader historical inferences.

The final stage employs an interpretive framework integrating women's agency and substantive educational equity. Mahmood's (2005) conceptualization of agency informs the examination of women's capacity to articulate needs and initiate action within an established religious authority structure, while Fraser's (2008) account of participatory justice provides analytical categories for distinguishing formal recognition from effective opportunities for participation. These theories function as contemporary interpretive instruments rather than concepts presumed to have been explicitly articulated by the historical actors. The narration is analyzed through three interconnected categories: collective articulation of educational needs, pedagogical accommodation, and dialogical participation. Interpretive conclusions are assessed against the wording of the primary report, relevant textual variations, and historical scholarship, with attention to alternative explanations and the limits of generalization. Through this procedure, the study seeks to develop a historically responsible account of women's educational agency without conflating a specific prophetic encounter with a universal description of gender relations in early Islam.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Women's Collective Agency in Negotiating Access to Prophetic Knowledge

The narration of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 101) presents a significant instance of women's collective initiative in seeking religious knowledge during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime. Its opening statement, ghalabanā ʿalayka al-rijāl, identifies a perceived imbalance in access to prophetic instruction and establishes the circumstances motivating the women's request. Rather than remaining silent about their educational situation, the women approached the Prophet and articulated a specific concern regarding the distribution of his instructional attention.

عن أبي سعيد الخدري قال: قال النساء للنبي ﷺ: غلبنا عليك الرجال فاجعل لنا يوما من نفسك، فوعدهن يوما لقيهن فيه فوعظهن وأمرهن، فكان فيما قال لهن: ما منكن امرأة تقدم ثلاثة من ولدها إلا كان لها حجابا من النار، فقالت امرأة: واثنين؟ وقال: اثنين.

Narrated Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri: Some women requested the Prophet (ﷺ) to set a day for them, as the men were taking up all his time. On that, he promised them one day for religious lessons and commandments. Once during such a lesson, the Prophet said, "A woman whose three children die will be shielded by them from the Hell-fire." On that, a woman asked, "If only two die? He replied, even two will shield her from the Hell-fire.

This narrative feature is analytically important because it portrays women as actors capable of identifying limitations within an existing educational arrangement. Their intervention did not challenge the legitimacy of prophetic authority; instead, it sought more effective participation within the religious learning opportunities that authority provided. Read through the historical perspectives developed by Ahmed (1992) and Sayeed (2013), the episode illustrates the importance of examining women's educational participation through concrete interactions rather than relying exclusively on generalized claims about gender equality or exclusion.

The expression ghalabanā ʿalayka al-rijāl requires particular attention because its significance extends beyond a literal comparison between male and female participants. The verb ghalaba conveys a sense of prevailing, overcoming, or gaining the upper hand, while the broader sentence indicates that men had enjoyed greater opportunities to engage with the Prophet. Nevertheless, the narration does not specify the precise institutional or social mechanisms producing this imbalance. It would therefore be methodologically inappropriate to interpret the expression as definitive evidence of an organized policy excluding women from religious instruction. The statement more securely establishes the women's perception that existing arrangements did not sufficiently accommodate their educational needs. This distinction between reported experience and inferred social structure is essential for a historically responsible interpretation of hadith narratives. Brown (2017) emphasizes the importance of attending to the textual and historical dimensions of prophetic reports, while Sayeed (2013) demonstrates that women's participation in religious scholarship must be examined in relation to changing circumstances rather than predetermined assumptions.

The collective character of the women's intervention constitutes another important finding. The narration attributes the initial request to al-nisāʾ, a plural designation referring to women, rather than presenting it as an isolated appeal by a single individual. Although the report does not identify the participants, their number, or the process through which the request was formulated, its collective attribution suggests that the educational concern was communicated on behalf of more than one woman. This feature permits a distinction between individual intellectual curiosity and collective articulation of an educational need. The women are represented as recognizing a shared difficulty and proposing a common arrangement through which that difficulty might be addressed. Their initiative consequently illustrates a form of collective agency grounded in the practical organization of religious learning. Mahmood's (2005) analysis of agency is useful here because it directs attention to forms of meaningful action exercised within established religious relationships rather than only through explicit resistance to authority.

The request fajʿal lanā yawman min nafsika further clarifies the nature of the women's initiative. The imperative fajʿal expresses a request for action, while the phrase lanā yawman specifies the allocation of a day for their instruction. The women therefore did not merely express dissatisfaction with existing circumstances; they proposed an identifiable response to the difficulty they had described. This movement from recognizing a problem to requesting an arrangement is central to understanding the narrative as an account of educational negotiation. Their proposed solution addressed the availability of instructional time rather than demanding a transformation of the entire social order. The distinction is analytically significant because it grounds the interpretation of agency in the reported actions themselves. Instead of attributing modern political intentions to the participants, the study identifies their capacity to formulate a request and influence the immediate conditions under which religious instruction would occur.

The women's conduct also complicates the assumption that agency must be expressed through opposition to religious authority. Mahmood (2005) argues that agency cannot be reduced to resistance against dominant norms because meaningful action may emerge through participation in ethical and religious traditions. This theoretical insight provides a productive framework for understanding the women's request. They acknowledged the Prophet's instructional authority while simultaneously asserting their need for more accessible opportunities to learn from him. Their actions demonstrate that recognition of authority and initiative in shaping educational arrangements need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, the narrative suggests that the women's confidence in approaching the Prophet was compatible with their commitment to his religious leadership. The resulting interaction may therefore be described as negotiated participation within an authoritative educational relationship, although the report does not establish the broader extent of women's influence over other communal arrangements.

A comparison with Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 7310) strengthens this interpretation by providing a more explicit formulation of the educational purpose underlying the request. In that narration, a woman asks the Prophet to designate a day when women can gather to receive instruction in what God has taught him. The report also describes the Prophet identifying a particular time and place for the meeting. These additional details reinforce the connection between women's initiative and the practical organization of learning. At the same time, the variation between a collective request in hadith no. 101 and an individually articulated request in hadith no. 7310 should not be overlooked. The two accounts may represent different narrative emphases within the transmission of the same educational episode. Their comparison supports the centrality of women's initiative while cautioning against reconstructing a detailed sequence of events beyond what the available texts establish.

The broader hadith corpus provides further evidence that women actively pursued religious understanding through direct questioning. In Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (hadith no. 332c), the account of Asmā''s questions concerning ritual purification concludes with ʿĀ'isha's favorable observation that the women of the Anṣār did not allow modesty to prevent them from acquiring religious knowledge. Although this narration concerns a different educational setting, it offers a relevant comparative perspective on women's willingness to seek clarification from the Prophet. Its significance lies not in proving that all women experienced identical educational opportunities, but in demonstrating that female initiative appears in more than one transmitted account of early Muslim learning. Sayeed (2013) similarly emphasizes the historical importance of women's participation in the acquisition and transmission of religious knowledge. Taken together, these materials challenge representations of women as exclusively passive recipients of instruction while preserving the diversity of their educational circumstances.

The distinction between access to knowledge and possession of recognized scholarly authority must nevertheless remain clear. The women in the narration sought an opportunity to learn directly from the Prophet, but the report does not indicate that they subsequently assumed formal teaching positions or acquired recognized authority within emerging scholarly networks. Sayeed's (2013) historical analysis demonstrates that women's participation in hadith transmission developed through changing relationships between learning, scholarly recognition, and social institutions. This broader history cautions against treating one educational encounter as sufficient evidence of enduring equality in intellectual authority. The present narration more directly documents the possibility of initiating access to religious instruction than the subsequent distribution of interpretive or institutional power. Its contribution is therefore best understood at the level of educational participation, while the historical development of female scholarly authority requires additional evidence.

An additional consideration concerns the anonymity of the women involved. The principal narration does not provide their individual names, social positions, or personal circumstances, and this absence limits attempts to reconstruct their identities. Nevertheless, anonymity does not eliminate their significance as historical actors within the transmitted narrative. Their collective request remains central to the episode, and the Prophet's response is presented as arising from that initiative. From a methodological perspective, the narrative permits analysis of the women's reported actions without claiming access to their private motivations or individual biographies. Ahmed (1992) cautions against treating Muslim women's experiences as historically uniform, while Mahmood (2005) encourages attention to the particular forms through which agency becomes observable. Applied to this narration, these perspectives support a restrained interpretation that recognizes meaningful action without inventing details about the participants.

The first major finding, therefore, is that the hadith represents women as active participants in negotiating access to prophetic knowledge. Their agency appears through three identifiable actions: recognizing an imbalance in instructional opportunities, communicating a collective educational

need, and proposing a specific arrangement to address it. These actions demonstrate a form of initiative exercised within an acknowledged religious authority structure rather than against it. The comparison with related narrations further establishes that the request concerned access to instruction and was followed by an organized educational encounter. Nevertheless, the evidence does not justify a generalized conclusion that early Muslim society had achieved comprehensive gender equality in education. The significance of the report lies instead in its representation of a concrete moment when women articulated their needs and obtained an educational response. This interpretation provides the foundation for examining the Prophet's pedagogical accommodation as a distinct dimension of educational justice.

2. Pedagogical Responsiveness and Equitable Educational Opportunities

The Prophet's response to the women's request constitutes the second principal finding of this study. According to Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 101), the Prophet promised the women a day, subsequently met them, and provided religious instruction. The narrative therefore records more than verbal acknowledgment of their concern; it describes an arrangement through which their request was translated into an actual learning encounter. This distinction is important because educational access cannot be evaluated solely through statements affirming the importance of knowledge. It also depends on whether learners can participate in instructional opportunities under circumstances responsive to their needs. The Prophet's response may accordingly be examined as an example of pedagogical accommodation, understood here as the adjustment of instructional arrangements in response to an expressed difficulty. The concept is an analytical description of the reported interaction rather than a claim that the narration articulates a fully developed modern theory of inclusive education.

The phrase fawaʿadahunna yawman laqiyahunna fīhi indicates a sequence involving a promise followed by a meeting. Its narrative structure is significant because the educational response was not confined to an expression of sympathy or encouragement. The Prophet is represented as allocating time and subsequently fulfilling the arrangement through direct instruction. The wording supports an interpretation of practical responsiveness, although it does not specify how frequently such meetings occurred or whether they formed part of a permanent educational schedule. This limitation matters because the establishment of a single designated session should not automatically be equated with the creation of a continuous educational institution. Nevertheless, the reported meeting demonstrates that the women's request had consequences for the organization of instructional time. The educational significance of the episode therefore lies partly in the movement from expressed need to concrete accommodation.

The more detailed account in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 7310) provides additional evidence concerning the organization of the encounter. In this version, the Prophet directs the women to assemble at an identified time and place, after which they gather and receive instruction. These details are especially relevant because they connect educational participation with the practical conditions that make learning possible. Time and place are not merely incidental features of instruction; they determine when and where learners can encounter a teacher and engage with educational content. The narration thus suggests that the women's educational needs were addressed through an identifiable arrangement rather than through an abstract declaration of equal entitlement. Nevertheless, the report does not establish whether the location was exclusive to women, whether similar meetings occurred regularly, or how the participants' domestic and social responsibilities affected attendance. Such questions remain beyond the available evidence.

The distinction between equality and equity provides a useful conceptual framework for interpreting this response. Equality, in a narrow formal sense, concerns the recognition of individuals as entitled to participate, whereas equity directs attention to the circumstances influencing their effective

opportunities to do so. Fraser's (2008) theory of justice emphasizes the conditions necessary for meaningful participation and challenges approaches that equate formal recognition with the elimination of structural disadvantage. Applied cautiously to the hadith, this distinction suggests that providing a designated opportunity for women may be understood as a response to a perceived imbalance in access. The Prophet did not merely repeat a general principle concerning the value of learning; he accommodated the request through a specific instructional arrangement. This interpretation does not attribute Fraser's theoretical vocabulary to the historical actors but uses it to clarify the difference between recognizing learners and addressing the practical conditions of their participation.

The narration also invites consideration of whether differentiated educational arrangements necessarily imply unequal educational status. A designated learning session for women could be interpreted superficially as evidence of separation between male and female learners. However, the text does not identify separation itself as the purpose of the request. Instead, the women explicitly sought additional access to prophetic instruction because they perceived that men were receiving more of the Prophet's attention. The arrangement therefore appears within the narrative as a response to an expressed need rather than as a statement that women were inherently incapable of participating in other educational settings. This distinction is essential for avoiding the projection of later debates about gender segregation onto a specific early Muslim encounter. The report supports the conclusion that a differentiated instructional opportunity was provided, but it does not establish a universal rule requiring separate educational institutions for women.

The pedagogical implications of this differentiation become clearer when educational justice is understood in terms of participation rather than identical treatment. Fraser (2008) argues that justice requires attention to the conditions under which individuals can participate as peers in social life. Although the historical setting of the hadith differs substantially from the modern contexts addressed by Fraser, the conceptual distinction helps illuminate the relationship between instructional arrangements and opportunities to learn. If learners experience unequal access to an instructor, treating everyone according to an unchanged schedule may leave the underlying imbalance unresolved. By contrast, an additional opportunity directed toward those who identify a disadvantage may expand their effective participation (Tauhid, et.al, 2026). The narration provides a limited but meaningful example of such responsiveness. Its significance lies in the adjustment of access, not in proof that all broader gender inequalities had been resolved.

The Prophet's pedagogical responsiveness also has a relational dimension. The women approached him with a concern, and the subsequent narrative describes a response that acknowledged their request through action. This interaction suggests that the educational relationship represented in the report was not exclusively characterized by the one-directional transmission of information. Learners could communicate needs that affected the organization of instruction, even though the Prophet retained his recognized authority as teacher. Mahmood's (2005) analysis of agency within religious traditions is relevant because it permits recognition of meaningful learner initiative without requiring the abandonment of hierarchical relationships. The encounter therefore illustrates how an authoritative teaching relationship could accommodate requests from participants. Such responsiveness should not be romanticized as evidence of unrestricted educational negotiation, but neither should it be overlooked simply because the relationship remained asymmetrical.

The content of the instruction provides another dimension of pedagogical analysis. The principal narration states that the Prophet admonished and instructed the women before recording his teaching concerning the spiritual significance of losing children. The expressions fawaʿaẓahunna wa-amarahunna indicate moral exhortation and instruction, although the narration does not preserve a complete account of everything communicated during the meeting (Tauhid, et.al, 2026). Consequently, the surviving report offers only a partial view of the educational content. The specific

teaching concerning bereavement suggests that the gathering included ethical and spiritual guidance relevant to experiences encountered within the community. Nevertheless, it would be unwarranted to infer that women's education was limited to motherhood, bereavement, or domestic concerns. The narration records one example of instruction, not a comprehensive curriculum. This distinction is especially important when evaluating the relationship between gender and educational content.

Comparison with the report preserved in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 1249) further clarifies the relationship between narrative context and thematic interpretation. Whereas hadith no. 101 appears in Kitāb al-ʿIlm, the related narration in hadith no. 1249 is situated within Kitāb al-Janāʾiz, where the emphasis concerns the merit associated with the death of one's children. The different chapter placements demonstrate how a single reported encounter can support distinct thematic readings. In the first context, the allocation of instructional time receives particular attention; in the second, the spiritual teaching concerning bereavement becomes central. These placements are significant features of the compilation and interpretation of hadith, but they should not be confused with independent evidence of the original historical circumstances. Brown's (2017) account of hadith scholarship underscores the importance of examining the relationship between transmitted narratives and the scholarly frameworks through which they are organized.

The second major finding is that the Prophet's response, as represented in the narration, illustrates pedagogical accommodation directed toward an articulated educational need. The allocation of a designated meeting, its subsequent implementation, and the provision of instruction together demonstrate a practical response to the women's concern about access. When interpreted through the analytical distinction between formal equality and substantive equity, the encounter suggests that differentiated opportunities can serve the broader objective of meaningful educational participation (Tauhid, et.al, 2026). This conclusion remains limited to the reported episode and should not be transformed into a comprehensive historical judgment about all educational arrangements in the early Muslim community. Nevertheless, the narration provides a textual foundation for understanding educational justice as involving not only the recognition of learners but also attention to the practical circumstances enabling them to learn. The third dimension of the analysis concerns what occurred once access had been obtained, particularly the opportunities for questioning and clarification within the instructional encounter.

3. Dialogical Participation and the Construction of Women as Active Learners

The third principal finding concerns the dialogical character of the educational encounter recorded in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 101). After describing the Prophet's instruction, the narration reports a woman's question concerning whether the promised spiritual reward associated with losing three children would also apply to the loss of two. This exchange is important because it portrays the participant as actively engaging with the content of the lesson rather than merely receiving information. The question sought clarification about the scope of a statement that had just been communicated. The Prophet's affirmative response completed a brief but meaningful instructional dialogue. Although the narration does not provide a comprehensive description of the session's teaching methods, the preserved exchange demonstrates that questioning formed part of the reported encounter. Educational participation therefore extended beyond attendance to include engagement with the substance of instruction.

The question wa-ithnayn? is particularly significant because of its concise but interpretively focused character. The participant did not introduce an unrelated topic or simply request repetition of the original statement. Instead, she asked whether a teaching expressed in relation to three deceased children also applied when the number was reduced to two. Her inquiry therefore concerned the scope of a religious proposition and its relevance to a different circumstance. Such questioning reflects a form of interpretive engagement in which the learner seeks to determine how a general

statement applies beyond its initial formulation. The narration does not establish the woman's level of prior knowledge or the personal circumstances motivating her question. Nevertheless, its structure supports the conclusion that she actively pursued clarification rather than treating the initial statement as the end of the educational exchange.

The Prophet's response further reinforces the dialogical character of the encounter. By affirming that the promise also applied to two children, he addressed the participant's specific concern and expanded the scope of the instruction as represented in the report. The significance of this response lies not only in its theological content but also in its pedagogical function. The learner's question prompted an additional clarification that became part of the transmitted teaching. This interaction illustrates how questions arising during instruction may contribute to the formulation of knowledge subsequently preserved in religious literature. Nevertheless, it would be excessive to describe the exchange as evidence of unrestricted interpretive autonomy, since the authoritative determination remained with the Prophet. The narration more precisely depicts active questioning within a recognized relationship of religious instruction.

A comparison with Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 7310) adds an important textual dimension to this analysis. In that version, the woman's question about two children is reported with greater emphasis, including repetition of the inquiry and the Prophet's corresponding affirmation. This variation strengthens the portrayal of the participant's concern with the applicability of the teaching. However, the difference between the concise exchange in hadith no. 101 and the expanded formulation in hadith no. 7310 must be interpreted carefully. The additional wording may reflect variations in narrative transmission or emphasis, and the available evidence does not justify constructing a precise psychological account of the woman's intentions. What remains consistent across the reports is the presence of a female participant who seeks clarification and receives a direct response. This shared narrative element supports the interpretation of the encounter as participatory rather than exclusively monological.

The question-and-answer structure also reveals an important relationship between religious instruction and the experiences of learners. The Prophet's teaching concerned the spiritual significance of bereavement, and the participant's question focused on a variation within that experience. The narration does not establish whether the woman herself had lost two children, and such a biographical inference would exceed the evidence. Nevertheless, the question demonstrates concern with the practical and spiritual implications of the statement. Religious knowledge in this encounter was not presented merely as information detached from the circumstances of those receiving it. Instead, the recorded dialogue shows how a learner's question could refine the application of a teaching to a particular situation (Tauhid, et.al, 2026). This feature contributes to an understanding of prophetic pedagogy in which clarification and responsiveness were integral to the reported educational interaction.

The broader hadith tradition provides a relevant comparison through the account of Asmā''s questions concerning ritual purification in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (hadith no. 332c). In that narration, a woman asks the Prophet about practical aspects of religious observance and seeks further clarification when necessary. The report concludes with ʿĀ'isha's favorable assessment of the women of the Anṣār, whose modesty did not prevent them from acquiring religious understanding. This episode differs from the designated educational gathering described by Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, particularly in its subject matter and immediate narrative setting. Nevertheless, both accounts represent women as learners who actively seek clarification from the Prophet. Their comparison indicates that female questioning was not confined to a single transmitted episode. Sayeed's (2013) historical examination of women's religious learning provides a broader framework for recognizing the importance of such encounters without assuming that they were equally accessible to all women.

These accounts also invite reconsideration of the relationship between modesty and intellectual participation. In some interpretive frameworks, modesty has been associated with silence or limited public engagement, particularly in discussions of women's religious conduct. However, the narration concerning the women of the Anṣār explicitly presents the pursuit of religious understanding as compatible with modesty. This observation is significant when read alongside the collective request for instructional time in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (hadith no. 101). In both cases, women are represented as participating actively within a religious framework rather than positioning educational initiative as an alternative to religious commitment. Mahmood (2005) offers a useful theoretical perspective by demonstrating that ethical commitments and agency may coexist in ways that resist simplistic distinctions between obedience and autonomy. The hadith evidence supports a similarly nuanced interpretation of women's participation in religious learning.

The dialogical exchange further suggests that access to an instructor and meaningful participation in instruction are analytically distinct. The designated meeting provided an opportunity for women to encounter the Prophet, but the subsequent question demonstrates an additional dimension of participation within that opportunity. A learner may be physically present in an educational setting without being able to seek clarification, express uncertainty, or influence the development of discussion. Conversely, the ability to ask questions can transform attendance into active engagement with the subject matter. Fraser's (2008) emphasis on the conditions of participation provides a conceptual basis for recognizing this distinction. Applied cautiously, the narration suggests that the significance of educational access should be evaluated not only through opportunities to attend but also through opportunities to participate meaningfully in the learning process. The evidence establishes one such instance of participation, rather than a comprehensive pattern across all prophetic teaching encounters.

The preservation of the woman's question within the hadith also has implications for the historical visibility of female learners. Although the participant remains unnamed, her inquiry is retained as an integral component of the transmitted religious teaching. The narration consequently preserves not only the Prophet's initial statement but also the question through which its scope was clarified. This feature gives the woman's intervention a continuing textual presence within the hadith tradition. Nevertheless, the distinction between participating in the production of an instructional exchange and possessing independent scholarly authority must be maintained. The woman contributed a question that shaped the recorded dialogue, but the report does not establish her subsequent role as a transmitter or interpreter of hadith. Sayeed (2013) demonstrates that the historical recognition of women as religious scholars developed through processes extending beyond individual encounters with authoritative teachers. The present narration therefore illustrates an important but limited form of participation in the formation of transmitted knowledge.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the hadith presents women's educational participation through three interconnected dimensions: the articulation of collective needs, the accommodation of access, and active engagement through questioning. These dimensions form a coherent narrative sequence without requiring the imposition of a fully developed modern educational theory onto the historical text. The women's request initiated an adjustment in instructional arrangements, while the subsequent dialogue demonstrated that participation could extend to clarification of religious teachings. The comparison with related reports reinforces these observations while identifying the limits of historical reconstruction (Tauhid, et.al, 2026). The article therefore argues that the narration offers a valuable textual basis for understanding women's agency and educational equity as relational practices within prophetic instruction. Its broader contribution lies in demonstrating that discussions of women's access to Islamic knowledge should examine not only whether education was religiously endorsed but also how opportunities to learn were requested, organized, and experienced within particular historical encounters.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the hadith concerning women's request for a designated educational gathering with the Prophet Muhammad provides a significant textual basis for examining the relationship between women's agency and equitable access to religious knowledge in the formative Muslim community. Through a sociohistorical reading of the narration transmitted by Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, three interconnected findings emerge. First, the women's collective request reflects their capacity to identify an imbalance in educational opportunities and articulate a practical response. Second, the Prophet's accommodation of their request illustrates pedagogical responsiveness through the allocation of a specific opportunity for instruction. Third, the subsequent question-and-answer exchange demonstrates that women's participation extended beyond attendance to active engagement with religious teaching. Taken together, these findings suggest that the educational encounter represented in the hadith involved a dynamic relationship between learners' initiative, instructional authority, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

The study contributes to contemporary scholarship on gender and Islamic education by moving beyond normative affirmations of women's educational rights toward an analysis of the processes through which access to knowledge was requested, negotiated, and accommodated. The integration of women's agency, pedagogical responsiveness, and substantive educational equity offers an interpretive framework for understanding prophetic instruction as a relational practice responsive to learners' expressed needs. Importantly, the findings challenge the assumption that religious authority and women's agency necessarily operate in opposition. The narration instead represents women's initiative as exercised within an acknowledged religious framework, while their questions contributed to the development of the recorded instructional exchange. Nevertheless, this interpretation does not establish that the formative Muslim community possessed a comprehensive system of gender-equitable education. Its theoretical significance lies in identifying historically transmitted practices that can inform, without directly determining, contemporary discussions of educational justice and inclusive Islamic pedagogy.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, the analysis centers on a specific hadith and selected parallel narrations, which cannot independently represent the full diversity of women's educational experiences during the Prophet's lifetime. Second, the historical reconstruction depends primarily on transmitted textual accounts rather than contemporaneous documentary or material evidence, limiting the extent to which the reported encounter can be situated within broader social structures. Third, variations in wording, narrative emphasis, and thematic placement across hadith collections introduce interpretive complexities that cannot be completely resolved through textual comparison alone. Fourth, the application of contemporary theories of agency and participatory justice to a seventh-century religious context carries a risk of conceptual anachronism. Although the study addresses this concern by distinguishing textual evidence from theoretical interpretation, its conclusions remain interpretive rather than definitive historical generalizations. These limitations underscore the need to differentiate the educational practices represented in prophetic reports from claims about the overall distribution of gendered authority in early Muslim society.

Future research should extend the analysis through a systematic examination of additional hadith narrations documenting women's educational initiatives, direct questioning, and participation in religious instruction. Comparative studies involving different hadith collections and classical commentaries could clarify how women's educational agency was represented, transmitted, and interpreted across successive generations of Muslim scholarship. Further investigation should also examine the relationship between access to prophetic instruction and the subsequent development of women's authority as hadith transmitters, teachers, and interpreters. From a contemporary perspective, research may explore how the principles of learner initiative, pedagogical responsiveness, and meaningful participation can inform educational practices in Islamic institutions without reducing historical narratives to prescriptive modern policies. Such inquiries would help develop a more historically grounded understanding of gender and knowledge in Islamic intellectual traditions while opening productive dialogue between hadith studies, gender scholarship, and theories of educational justice

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