



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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“Economics, Education, Mobility and  
Space”

By Muhammad Eeqbal Farouque Hassim

This entry reviews how Muslim girls and women are taught Islam, formally and informally, in Southeast Asia, East Asia, Australia, and the Pacific. With diverse Muslim thought in these regions, *religious education*, which generally involves Islamic faith, praxis, and a psycho-spiritual reflection of Islamic history, is equally varied. To maintain their unique Islamic identity, most ethno-linguistic groups use their own language for *religious* instruction. Arabic is often used in institutions that specialize in the study of Islam and is cognate to *religious education*. Most Muslims study basic Arabic literacy, often without understanding, to recite the Qur'ān and carry out daily rituals. In most Muslim communities, *religious education* is still very stilted and by rote. Some cultural factors that affect women's *religious education* include: the religio-cultural views of Muslims on women in society, especially *religious education* and leadership; religio-cultural views on gender separation in public; and the relative homogeneity of Muslims in religio-cultural thought (diversity mostly prevents cooperation).

The Internet, with numerous *religious* knowledge sites in many languages, has revolutionized how Muslim women study Islam. A small number of Muslim women also take Islamic studies courses via correspondence, for example the American Open University, accredited by al-Azhar University, is a popular choice. However, some women still insist on traditional *talaqqi* (teachers instructing students directly).

Most girls begin their *religious education* at home by the age of six. Their parents teach them some Qur'ān and basic Islamic practice, especially prayer. Instruction is mostly strict, penalizing, and by rote. Older girls are usually taught Islamic rules for women after puberty by an older female relative. Structured *religious education* in the home beyond childhood is rare and only the most committed and knowledgeable Muslims attempt it, often led by the eldest or most learned male in the house.

In Indonesia, over 10,000 female *religious* scholars teach around six million women. Many mosques and Islamic organizations offer well attended *religious* classes, lectures, and discussion circles for women. Several non-governmental organizations have emerged to empower women's *religious education*, for example the Center for Pesantren and Community Development (P3M), Rahima, and Puan Amal Hayati. There are more female students in *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) and *pesantrens* (*religious* boarding schools), many of which now offer academic and vocational studies as well. The first women's *pesantren*, Pesantren Diniyah Putri Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, was established in 1923 by local women's *education* pioneer and female leader, Rahmah al-Yunusiyah. Since male *pesantrens* began accommodating women in the 1930s, many more female only *pesantrens* have emerged, for example the acclaimed Pondok Moderen Gontor dedicates four of twelve campuses to girls. More girls study Islam since they are more likely to remain home after marriage to educate their children and other women. These attitudes exist amongst Muslims in Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, and Singapore as well, who see *religious education* as an esteemed profession for women. For girls, more urban Muslims are choosing the new *sekolah Islam* (Islamic school), for example Sekolah Islam Al-Azhar, which places a practical emphasis on building Islamic character, rather than disciplinary Islamic studies as in *pesantrens*, within an academic curriculum.

The State Islamic Universities (UIN), State Institutes of Islamic Studies (IAIN), and State Colleges of Islamic Studies (STAIN) cater for over 30,000 Muslim women each year. Female graduates play a vital role in reforming women's *religious education* in Indonesia with their modern, non-denominational approach to studying Islam. Of enrollments in the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (LIPIA), a branch of Imam Muhammad b. Saud Islamic University, 25 percent are women, which is significant considering the male dominated scholarship. Muhammadiyah's university system offers courses in Islam, among others, to over 10,000 women. Openness toward women's *religious* scholarship and the availability of relevant infrastructure has meant that many women play a vital teaching and leadership role in Islamic *education*. Even puritanical Muslim women who emphasize gender segregation in public have good access to *religious education*. A similar situation exists in Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, and Singapore.

As Islam is Malaysia's official religion, the government and private *education* sectors emphasize women's *religious education*. Girls and women in cities study Islam informally in mosque schools, Islamic centers or organizations, or private homes. Those in rural areas often study in homes or a *pondok* (mosque school). Many girls attend State *Religious Schools* (SAR), which are mandatory for Muslim children in some states, for example Johor. There are *religious education* schools (SMKA), which also teach secular subjects. The International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) and its annexed Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization are common choices for Muslim women seeking advanced Islamic studies. Both are global institutions that actively promote women's scholarship. The University of Malaya (UM), the National University of Malaysia (UKM), the Technological University of Malaysia (UTM), the Scientific University of Malaysia (USM), Nilam Puri in Kelantan, and Sultan Zainal Abidin *Religious College* in Terengganu also offer qualifications in Islam popular amongst local Muslim women.

The feminist group, Sisters in Islam, supported by key Muslim feminists such as Amina Wadud, holds that whilst women's *religious education* is prevalent in Malaysia, much of it is taught from traditionally male dominant perspectives. Feminism is not viewed favorably by the generally gender conservative local Muslims. Many Muslim women the world over tolerate male dominated *religious education* without much question, almost accepting it as part of Islam. Many opponents to feminist trends in *religious education* are, interestingly, Muslim women themselves.

In Brunei, a stable Malay Muslim state, *religious education* is a priority. Regular classes and talks for women are held in Brunei's 100 or so mosques and Islamic organizations. Brunei society actively promotes women's *religious* scholarship. The state's *education* philosophy is based on Islam and all schools provide weekly *religious education*. The six Arabic schools place more emphasis on *religious education*. The Qur'ān Memorization Institute for secondary students has a separate girls' division with full-time, part-time, and Braille streams. The institute has produced many female graduates who have continued their studies locally, in the Middle East, and in the West. The *Religious Teachers College* (RTC) trains many female *religious* teachers. Based on the latest ministry of *education* figures, there are twice as many female as male teachers in Arabic schools, and an equal number of male and female *religious* teachers at the RTC. In private schools, there are four times more female than male teachers. The University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) offers degrees and diplomas in Islamic disciplines through the Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Institute of Islamic Studies, which allows many women to study Islam at advanced levels locally.

Muslim girls and women in Thailand mostly study Islam informally in mosques and homes. In the majority Muslim provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, Muslim girls study Islam in over 1,000 Islamic kindergartens and primary schools, 88 early childhood mosque institutes, 250 *pondoks*, and around 1,000 Islamic private and government schools. The ministry of *education* supervises the state school curriculum but private schools have greater autonomy. Some schools are housed in impressive complexes with over 4,000 students and 200 teachers, for example Attarkiah Islamiah School. Girls also attend Islamic schools in other parts of Thailand. With relevant infrastructure, a *religious* Muslim society and many female *religious* teachers, there is a wealth of *religious education* for girls and women. Most women also study openly under men. Muslim women can study Islam formally in *pondoks*, private colleges, or government universities, for example the College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkhla University, Yala Islamic College, and Princess of Narathiwat University.

In Singapore, most of the over 70 mosques and large Islamic organizations provide informal *religious education* with childcare for women. There are over 50 part-time *madrasahs* and kindergartens in mosques and Islamic centers, and many Qur'ān classes in homes. Women make up more than a quarter of PERGAS (Singapore Islamic Scholars and *Religious Teachers Association*) and the MUIS (Islamic *Religious Council* of Singapore) teachers' registry. Recently, there has been a mushrooming of Islamic *education* centers providing, among other services, after-school *religious education* to over 3,000 girls. MUIS is currently developing a Singapore Islamic *Education System*, which will also address women's *religious education*. Al-Ma'arif is the only all girls *madrasah* out of six full-time *madrasahs* and caters for *education* from kindergarten through grade 12. *Madrasahs* used mostly to teach *religious* subjects in Arabic but with the introduction of compulsory *education* in 2003, the ratio of *religious* and academic subjects is now equal. MUIS is presently standardizing *madrasah* Islamic studies in English. Several Islamic studies programs twinned with a Malaysian or Indonesian Islamic university have emerged in the last ten years and are popular among local Muslim women; for example, PERGAS offers a diploma enabling advanced entry into IIUM or al-Azhar University.

Most mosques and Islamic centers in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and other Filipino cities provide *religious education* to women and children. There are also over 2,000 formal, mostly coeducational, Islamic schools. In 2005, the government implemented a national *madrasah* framework, requiring *madrasahs* to also teach a standard academic curriculum. Public schools with more than 25 Muslim students may teach Islam and Arabic. Cumulatively, hundreds of women study Islam annually at the Zaid bin Thabit Quranic Memorization Center, Mindanao State University (MSU), the Institute of Islamic Studies in Manila, the King Faisal Center for Arabic, Islamic and Asian Studies at MSU, Shariff Kabunsuan College, Western Mindanao State University, and the University of Philippines. Local Muslim women have also assumed key *religious* and political positions. In July 2006, a female Muslim MP proposed the first state Islamic university to the House of Representatives. Two active women's organizations established mostly for women's *religious education* are Al-Nisa Women of Islam Organization and Philippine Association of Muslimah, Dar Eeman.

Most Cham Muslim women in Vietnam and Cambodia have little *education*, and mainly follow the dictates of *religious* leaders, elders, and their husbands (So 2005). Their *religious education* is mostly informal, in mosques and homes, but limited due to the lack of facilities and expertise. Many Cham view *education* as solely *religious* and most imams have little, if any, modern *education*. In Laos, informal *religious education* opportunities for women are few as the attitudes of some local ethnic South Asian Muslims toward women in society can be restrictive. However, Southeast Asian foreign workers are generally open to men teaching women. In Burma, Muslims have been oppressed by the ruling junta since the 1980s. The junta has destroyed mosques and *madrasahs*, detained Islamic scholars, and banned imports of Islamic texts. Several mosques still survive and a very few Islamic colleges remain in Buthedaung, Mandalay, and Hmawbi. These are male dominated institutions mostly for contextual, not religio-cultural, reasons and many women only study the basics of Islam at home.

Women's Islamic *religious education* has existed for 14 centuries in China, and the first 40 years of the 1900s saw the birth of many Islamic schools and Islamic normal schools for teacher training. The Mao Cultural Revolution (1966–76) saw the persecution of Muslims, but since the official pronouncement of *religious* freedom in 1978, Muslims have revelled in the freedom to study Islam. There are now over 40,000 mosques (at least 30,000 run a *madrasah*) and 24,000 students studying in formal Islamic schools. In Ningxia's autonomous Muslim region alone, there is one ethnic university, two ethnic colleges, and 120 Muslim schools. Informal mosque instruction is the most common form of *religious education*. Some mosque schools have modern complexes with qualified teachers, whilst those in poor areas are housed in decrepit mosques.

The Chinese government has established ten state Islamic colleges to train imams (*ahongs*) and *religious* teachers. Most colleges offer Islamic studies bachelor programs and intensive refresher courses for imams. The state also built eight provincial Qur'ānic institutes with university status for similar purposes. These institutes have large complexes and often cater for equal numbers of male and female students. Reservations about government controlled Islamic colleges led several Muslim communities to establish equally impressive, but cheaper, private Islamic colleges in the 1990s, with *religious* curricula often sourced from the Middle East.

Women have played a pivotal role in reviving *religious education* in China. Many graduates of Islamic schools and colleges have quickly established classes or schools. In Islamic colleges, more than one-third of teachers are women. More female *religious* teachers are becoming *ahongs* in women's mosques, found mostly in the Central Plain provinces. Some of these are over 300 years old and reflect an almost unknown practice as many patriarchal Muslim societies have undermined the tradition of women's leadership. Women *ahongs* have also emerged in gender conservative Ningxia and Gansu. Only girls and women study Islam in women's mosques. Female *ahongs* are not necessarily feminists, but have seized the opportunity to develop religio-social autonomy out of conservative cultural customs. For many girls, affordable mosque schools offer an otherwise elusive *education*. Most girls leave school early in order to help the household and learn homemaking skills in preparation for marriage.

Mongolian Muslims run some formal Islamic schools such as the one found in Olgiy's main mosque (Islamic Center of Mongolia). There are very few *religious* classes for women, who mostly gather in homes to study the Qur'ān with much enthusiasm. It is one of their few outlets for *religious education* and socializing in an Islamic setting. Due to a lack of *religious* scholars and infrastructure, girls and women are often restricted to the basics of Islam. Local Muslims see no need to embrace modernity and their *religious education* has not changed much for generations.

In Hong Kong, most of the seven mosques and Islamic organizations provide informal *religious education* to women and children through women's divisions and dedicated Islamic *education* centers. There are some Islamic kindergartens and primary schools but no formal *religious education* for women. Some Muslim communities, like the Chinese and expatriates from Southeast Asia, allow women to openly study Islam with men, thus maximizing the little *religious education* available. The Macau Islamic Association mosque provides *religious education* to children and adults. Open attitudes to gender segregation and practical constraints have meant that men and women usually study Islam together. The six mosques in Taiwan offer *religious education* to children and women. The over 30 *religious* scholars are all men, mostly from Indochina, and are open to teaching women. The Chinese Muslim Association has been actively teaching Islam to women and children since the Second World War. Limited funds have prevented Taiwan's Muslims from establishing more Islamic schools; Silat Mubai International offers academic and some *religious education* to boys and girls.

Apart from informal *religious education* for children and adults available in the 20 or so mosques and Islamic centers in Japan, there are no formal Islamic schools. Japanese Muslims are seeking to establish more mosques and Islamic centers but the high cost of real estate is a major impediment. The Islamic Centre of Japan (ICJ) plans to build the first Islamic school with Saudi support. In South Korea, there are eight mosques offering informal *religious* classes. Women do not have much access to *religious education* due to a lack of facilities and female teachers. The patriarchal aspects of Japanese and Korean society still linger amongst local Muslims and some Muslim foreign workers maintain their religio-cultural views on women, which can aid or hamper women's *religious education*.

In Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji, after-school *religious education* for children in mosques, Islamic organizations, rented school facilities, and homes is most common. These schools, mostly serviced by unqualified staff, are still popular, enrolling generally equal

numbers of boys and girls. In the Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Islands of Australia, Malay-Javanese Muslims are the majority. Their *religious education* is mostly basic, in mosque *madrasahs* or homes. *Religious education* during childhood is often deemed sufficient for adulthood, with very few *religious* classes for women.

Muslim women, with some difficulty, can find informal *religious* classes tailored to their needs in Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji via mosques, Islamic organizations, and homes. Many male scholars trained in majority Muslim areas do teach women but maintain that women should ideally teach other women. However, there is a lack of female *religious* teachers. Additionally, there are many Islamic rules specific to women, who are often shy about studying these with men. Most Muslims have limited *religious* knowledge, and many *religious* teachers born and trained overseas are out of touch with the needs of young Muslim women, for example good English. With growing Muslim numbers, many Islamic facilities can no longer accommodate women and their young children. To help advance women's *religious education*, Al-Farouqiyah Islamic Education Foundation of Australia is providing tertiary grants for Muslim women to enter Islamic studies.

Islamic schools in Australia and New Zealand collectively provide *education* from kindergarten through grade 12, although some offer only primary or secondary levels. There are 29 Islamic schools in Australia and one, Muslim Ladies College, is solely for girls. New Zealand has two Islamic schools, including Zayed College for Girls. In Fiji, there are over 15 small, mostly coeducational, Islamic primary and secondary schools. *Religious education* is mostly male dominated in teaching and content although there are often more girls than boys – local Muslims often see Islamic schools as safer for girls. The *religious* culture of a school also dictates how it educates girls in Islam. Some Islamic schools in Melbourne offer Qur'ān studies as part of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), a high school certificate. Recently, institutes offering certificates and diplomas in Islamic studies and Arabic have appeared in Australia, for example Al-Ghazzali Institute and Al-Kawthar Institute. These are popular among women due to religio-cultural notions similar to those in Southeast Asia.

Most New Caledonian Muslims are Javanese or from surrounding Pacific islands. Girls usually receive basic *religious education* in a mosque apart from the home. Most Muslims possess only basic *religious* knowledge, partly influenced by Javanese Muslim beliefs and practices, passed down through the generations. However, with better access to *religious* teachers, the *religious education* landscape is slowly changing. In Papua New Guinea, Muslim girls and women are able to access basic *religious education* via several Islamic centers and mosques. In Tonga, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, most of the handful of women do not attend *religious* classes although girls receive basic *religious* instruction from an *imam* or at home. This is not generally due to specific religio-cultural views but the lack of expertise and facilities.

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