Circulating Knowledge
Receiving, Transmitting and Employing, a Gendered Perspective

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In 2014, Rukayya Khan published an article with the provocative title: "Did a Woman Edit the Quran? Hafṣa and Her Famed Codex."[2] In response, Aisha Geissinger published an article with a similarly provocative title: "No, a Woman Did Not Edit the Quran: Towards a Methodologically Coherent Approach to a Tradition Portraying a Woman and Written Quranic Materials."[3] In it, Geissinger challenged Khan's arguments and offered different readings of some of the texts presented by Khan. However, whereas Geissinger criticised Khan for asserting a woman's role in editing the Qurn, it appears that Khan's central thesis was more about considering the possibility and plausibility of such an occurrence. By exploring this issue, Khan suggested that the outright dismissal of the notion that a woman might have contributed to the Quran's compilation has led to neglecting other narratives and possibilities. Sources referencing Hafṣa as a contributor to the editing of the Quran are systematically excluded. This results in the loss of valuable insights into this process, such as the interests of various groups and individuals, and their potential involvement. Khan's perspective resonates with Joan Wallach Scott's emphasis on the significance of a gendered lens in historical analysis.[4]

Haifaa Khalafallah argues that modern scholars often exhibit a bias against women's participation in community life and the circulation of knowledge. Furthermore, such scholars misrepresent medieval authors' intentions and even words. One striking example is the translation into English of a *Ḥisbah* manual (directions for the *muḥtasib,* the market inspector) written by Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328). The market inspector is the person responsible for the correct weight and contents of goods sold in the marketplace. The *muḥtasib* is also responsible

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[2] Khan 2014, 174–216.

[3] Geissinger 2017, 416–445.

[4] Scott 2019, 28–50.

for monitoring the moral behavior of those who enter the public sphere. In fact, one of their main roles is to "command the good and forbid the evil", an important Quranic commandment.[5] Khalafallah compared the original Arabic text, written by Ibn Taymiyyah, with its English translation. She found that the translator (a Western convert to Islam) added a further requirement into the list of requirements: being male. This requirement is not part of Ibn Taymiyyah's original text. Khalafallah argues that the entrenched modern belief that women lack the authority to lead or instruct men may influence such interpretative biases.[6] Zohar Hadromi-Allouche, in her study of the events surrounding Muhammad's first revelation, follows both the medieval Islamic narrative, and the modern historical narrative. She contends that while medieval texts usually recognized Khadījah as the first to affirm, and support, Muhammad's prophecy and, in most narratives, the first convert to Islam, contemporary western scholarship tends to ascribe these roles to male figures such Waraqah (Khadījah's cousin) and ʿAlī, Muhammad's young male cousin (aged ten or eleven years old at the time). These scholars diminish Khadījah's leadership role, strip her of any public agency, and confine her to the domestic sphere due to their bias concerning the feasible status of a Muslim Arab woman.[7]

These and other studies illustrate a problematic tableau. Women's contributions and their involvement in the public sphere, in particular with regards to issues related to authority, or what might entail authority, over men, is heavily marginalized by medieval authors, but not less (at times even more) so by modern scholars. By doing so modern scholars may be adopting the medieval narrative and succumb to the notion that there is little information about women and their actions. Coupled with the ongoing debate regarding the authenticity of medieval texts, the result is that it is easier to leave out women's experiences rather than finding tools to incorporate their stories into the general narrative.[8] The marginalization of women and disregard of their experiences results in an all too partial narrative.

The present study reconsiders the place of women among the first converts to Islam, particularly their participation in the circulation of knowledge, either as having specific knowledge, its recipients, or sharing their knowledge with others. Through a close reading of available information from currently attainable sources, I will demonstrate that women were part of the circulation of knowledge that deserves further investigation. To do so, I will recount several anecdotes from early Islamic literature, mainly from the eighth to tenth centuries (a short digression to the thirteenth century will be explained later). Some

[5] For this role, see Cook 2000.

[6] Khalafallah 2014, 115; see also El Cheikh 2007, 57–72; Sayeed 2013, 57.

[7] Hadromi-Allouche 2023, 275–307.

[8] For an explanation regarding the scholarly debate concerning the authenticity of early sources in Islam see e.g. El Shamsy 2000, 187–206.

of the women and events presented here also appear in later texts. However, focusing on the earlier texts is more productive for a number of reasons. Most importantly, as Doris Decker demonstrated, women's contributions to events in early Islam tend to be glossed over in later sources: Women's names are deleted, direct speech is turned into paraphrasing, and so on. Thus, the later the sources are, the lesser are the chances of encountering women in the narrative.[9] In discussing the events that these early sources depict, I will not maintain that these described events represent valid historical facts or that they necessarily happened. Rather, these anecdotes represent the values, boundaries, and social norms of the time of their narration. Therefore, the portrayal of women and the roles ascribed to them reflect a plausible representation of the expected conduct of a woman as perceived by the authors.[10]

When modern scholars discuss knowledge, they follow two particular threads: religious knowledge, or scientific knowledge. With regards to the former, there is a large and yet growing body of research discussing women's participation in the transmission of *ḥadīth* (Muhammad's sayings and actions that are used as precedents for legal rulings) in early Islam. Hence, I will not discuss this particular aspect of religious knowledge.[11] There are also several studies discussing other aspects of religious knowledge attributed to women (e.g. jurisprudence), or teaching unknown subject matter to women, though these usually relate to much later periods, from the 15th century onward.[12] In this paper, I will focus on other aspects of the circulation of religious knowledge, e.g., studying the Quran or teaching its commandments to others.

The second thread – the cultivation of scientific knowledge – presents an even greater challenge. It is commonly agreed that there was little interest in science prior to the late eighth century. This assumption stems from yet another premise, that the Arabs of the Hijaz did not engage with science in any significant form before their emergence from the Arabian Peninsula. Only after their conquests and encounters with people of other lands did they become aware of scientific knowledge, or at least able and willing to acquire this kind of knowledge. This encounter led to the translation movement (8th–10th century) initiated by the Abbasid Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775).[13] As for women, even within this time frame, they are not mentioned as contributing to the cultivation of science or engaging with science. No work of translation or original scientific treatise is attributed to a woman, and no woman is the focus of a modern

[9] Decker 2013, 204–205.

[10] El Cheikh 2000, 314; Sayeed 2013, 20.

[11] El Cheikh 2007, 57–72; Roded 1994; Sayeed 2013.

[12] See for instance Berkey 2014; Rapoport 2005.

[13] Several sources mention that under Khālid ibn Yazīd (d. after 84/704) there was some interest in science, though there is no clear information what the extent of this interest was. For the translation movements, see Gutas 2012. For interest in science prior to the eighth century, see Gutas 2012, 20–28.

study of early Islam and sciences. I will not argue against these assumptions; I will, however, argue that should we include non-Galenic medicine into the category of science, our understanding of medicine before the eighth century will expand. Moreover, it might also be possible to find women practicing such crafts.[14]

A close reading of early Islamic sources indicates that some women were involved in instructing others in Islam and maybe even in cultivating other forms of knowledge, such as healthcare. I will begin by discussing several women depicted as having some form of religious knowledge and teaching it to others.

1. Women Instructing Others in the Fundamentals of Islam

An effective way to learn about women as instructing others, or becoming knowledgeable of, the fundamentals of Islam is through stories of conversion. Ibn Saʿd's (d. 845) biographical dictionary – *Book of the Great Generations* – provides us with the biographies of early converts to Islam. In many cases, these biographies include the circumstances of their conversion. In some cases, the agent of conversion is a woman. For example, Umm Ḥakīm explained to ʿIkrimah (d. c. 634), her husband, that he would do well to convert, since Muhammad was a just and benevolent person.[15] Bint Ḥātim told her brother that it would be politically advantageous to join Muhammad.[16] There are stories of mothers who cut off connections with their sons or refused their gifts because of their reluctance to accept Islam, e.g. Ruqayqa bt. Ṣayfī who converted to Islam, and was "the harshest of people towards her son, Mukhramah," who did not convert.[17]

Other women led men to conversion by explaining the fundamentals of Islam and the correctness of its beliefs. For instance, Umm Sulaym (d. 650) is

[14] Though the mother of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861) ordered a translation of a medical treatise. See Abbou Hershkovits 2014, 121–136. As for the early modern period, Margaret Gaida argues that modern scholars ignored women scholars and practitioners of science. She demonstrates that in contrast to the prevailing concept according to which no women cultivated science in the Muslim world prior to modern times, the sources do refer to several such women. However, the scholars' perception is askew due to the fact they look for women scholars in the same manner as they look for men scholars. Since women were in general marginalized, our search should be different: different key words, different sources, and probably also different questions. Moreover, she advocates a change in what is currently considered to constitute science. See Gaida 2016, 197–206.

[15] Al-Tabari 8:185; 39:17–18; Faizer 2013, 418–419. See also Al-Ṭabarī 39:17–19.

[16] Ibn Hishām 2: 579–582; Alfred Guillaume 1983, 636–638.

[17] Ibn Saʿd 10:51–52. Though this conflict was probably short timed as Mukhramah is known to be one of Muhammad's companions.

said to have instructed her son, Anas, and raised him to be a believer, against her husband's command: "I believed in this man. I began to teach Anas. I told him to say: 'There is no god but Allah,' and to say: 'I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.' He did that."[18] She also explained to her suitor, Abū Ṭalḥa, how wrong it was to worship idols, and only after he understood that worshipping idols was wrong and that Allah was the only god, would she agree to marry him. [19]

Salmā bt. Qays (d. 659),[20] one of Muhammad's maternal aunts, gave refuge to Rifāʿa b. Samawʾal, a man from the Banū Qurayẓah, a Jewish tribe from Medina, whose members were sentenced to death and enslavement by the Muslims. Salmā addressed Muhammad and said: "O Messenger of God, he would pray with me and eat the flesh of a camel," thus proving he no longer follows Jewish dietary laws.[21] Since it was Salmā who bore witness to his prayer, it is plausible that she was the one who taught him how. At least in one case we learn of a woman who studied a verse of the Quran, and had its copy written on a sheet (*ṣaḥīfa*). As in many other cases, the story is not intended to praise her piety, or her knowledge, but to provide the background for the conversion of her brother, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.

ʿUmar's conversion was an important event for the early Islamic community. He was a strong, violent person, who used his fists and tongue mercilessly. The story of his conversion has several versions. The two earliest ones are recorded in Ibn Hishām's (d. 833) recension of Ibn Ishāq's (768) *Life of Muhammad*, and Ibn Saʿd's *Book of the Great Generations*.

The Ibn Saʿd version relates that ʿUmar heard that his sister, Fātimah bt. al-Khaṭṭāb, and her husband, Saʿīd, have accepted Islam. Furious, he went to her house to see what was going on. The narrator informs us that Fātimah and her husband were in a room where Khabbāb ibn al-Aratt[22] was reciting the Quranic chapter Ṭā Hā (Q. 20). Khabbāb was an early convert, as is evident from his participation in the first Muslim migration to Abyssinia. This, in turn, puts him in a position to instruct others in the fundamental beliefs of Islam and in verses of the Quran. However, upon hearing ʿUmar approaching, Khabbāb hid himself in one of the rooms of the house.

> ʿUmar entered the house and asked: 'What is this mumble that I heard in your house?' They were reading [*kānū yaqraʾū*][…]. His brother-in-law told him, 'Is it possible, O ʿUmar, that the truth is not with your religion?' ʿUmar jumped on his brother-in-law and beat him severely. His sister came, trying to defend her husband and he hit her, and she bled. […] ʿUmar

[18] Ibn Saʿd 10:395–404

[19] Ibid. Here and other quotations from Ibn Saʿd I followed Bewley's translation with some small amendments. See Bewley 8:278.

[20] Al-Ṭabarī, 39:206.

[21] Wāqidī, 252–253.

[22] The events take place in 616. Aerts 2022, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_35414, accessed April 17, 2024.

was desperate and said: 'Give me this manuscript [*kitāb*] that you have so that I can read it.' He [ʿUmar] said: For ʿUmar read books [*kutub*] [i.e. he was literate].[23]

Fāṭimah refused to give him the sheet, arguing that he [ʿUmar] was not [ritually] clean. After he performed ablutions, Fāṭimah gave ʿUmar the sheet, whereupon he was struck by its contents and went to find Muhammad to learn more and, ultimately, become a Muslim.

A similar narrative is recorded in Ibn Hishām's recension of the *Life of Muhammad*. Here, too, once he learnt that his sister and her husband have joined Muhammad, ʿUmar went to find out whether it was true. Upon hearing ʿUmar's voice, Khabbāb, who had a sheet [*ṣaḥīfa*] from which he has been reading, the Quranic chapter Ṭā Hā, hid himself in a small room. Fāṭimah then took the sheet, and hid it under her thigh. ʿUmar, who has heard voices as he approached the house, asked upon entering: "What is this balderdash that I heard?"[24]

Here, too, ʿUmar hit both the husband, who tried to answer his question, and his own sister, making her bleed. Regretting his actions, ʿUmar then asked for the sheet "which I heard you reading, just so I may see exactly what it is which Muhammad has brought." Fāṭimah refused to give it to him: "My brother, you are [ritually] unclean in your polytheism, whereas only the clean [person] may touch it." Only after he has washed did ʿUmar receive the sheet, and read a verse from the Quran. After reading, he wished to meet with Muhammad and eventually accepted Islam. [25]

This narrative includes four prominent figures: ʿUmar, Fāṭimah, her husband Saʿīd, and Khabbāb. Both versions, as well as later ones, depict Khabbāb as hiding himself and leaving Fāṭimah and her husband to cope with ʿUmar. Although he had a greater knowledge of Islam, Khabbāb did not reach out to ʿUmar, and was not the one who convinced him to convert. Instead, it was Fāṭimah who held the sheet and determined under which terms it might be handed over to ʿUmar. Fāṭimah was not only studying the Quran herself but also in a position to circulate her knowledge further. Nonetheless, the author of the entry on Khabbāb in the latest edition of the Encyclopeadia of Islam, EI-THREE, attributed Khabbāb with instigating ʿUmar's conversion.[26]

The events surrounding ʿUmar's acceptance of Islam also reveal his literacy. As for his sister, it is unclear whether she could read. In Ibn Hishām's version, Khabbāb is reading to Saʿīd and Faṭīmah. But Ibn Saʿd's version says all three of them were reading together: "they were reading [*kānū yaqraʾū*]." It is not clear whether, in Ibn Hishām's version, Khabbāb was reading to Fāṭimah and her husband because they were illiterate, or perhaps he was teaching them

[23] Ibn Saʿd 3:248

[24] Ibn Hishām 1: 371; Ibn Isḥāq / Guillaume 1955, 156–157.

[25] Ibn Hishām 1: 371; Ibn Isḥāq / Guillaume 1955, 156–157.

[26] Aerts 2022, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_35414, accessed April 17, 2024.

the verses, or they were all reading together. Either way, Khabbāb appears to be the instructor of Fāṭimah and her husband, whereas Fāṭimah emerges as the instructor of ʿUmar, in particular concerning the ritual aspect of approaching the divine revelation.

Little is known about literacy among women in early Islam. That the skill was not widespread is probably a safe assumption. Yet precisely how many men and women were literate is difficult to estimate. Al-Balādhūrī (d. 892), a Muslim historian who wrote in his *Futūḥ al-Buldān* ("The Conquest of the Countries") about the origins of the Islamic state, included an appendix titled "The Art of Writing," discussing the beginnings of using the Arabic script, and its spread. He detailed how the form of the Arabic alphabet came to be and who was known to be literate during the lifetime of the Prophet. He names seventeen men and seven women. Two of these seven women did not actually live during Muhammad's lifetime but at a later period. Of the remaining five women, three were wives of Muhammad: ʿĀʾishah bt. Abī Bakr (d. 678), Umm Salamah (d.ca. 680), and Ḥafṣah bt. ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 665). The other two women were Shifāʾa bt. ʿAbdallāh (d. 640), who was related to ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and Umm Kulthūm bt. ʿUqbah (d. 654), who was related to ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 656).[27]

The social and familial relations among the men and women mentioned by Balādhūrī were studied by Frolov. His main argument is that literate men and women can be traced to families among the Quraysh (siblings, father and offspring, or master and clients), rather than stand-alone individuals.[28] Hence it seems safe to assume that once literacy was introduced to certain families in Mecca, both men and women within these families became literate. Geissinger observes that "[w]hile sources of this type give little reason to suppose that partial or complete literacy was widespread among women in Arabia at that time, they do present it as a specialized accomplishment of a few Qurayshi female aristocrats."[29] For now, though, any conclusion must be partial, if only because the above list is probably fragmentary. For instance, in an anecdote discussing the death of one of Muhammad's fiercest opponents, Abū Jahl (d. 624), the narrator describes his mother, Asmāʾ bt. Mukhribah, as a perfume seller who exchanged a written note with one of her customers.[30] According to Ibn Saʿd, Umm Waraqah bt. ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥārith collected the Quran and led her household in prayer.[31] While these mentions are too few to make sweeping observations, they indicate to us that such comments exist, and it is for us to

[27] Balādhurī / Hitti / Murgotten 1968, 270–274.
[28] Frolov 1997, 133–139.
[29] Geissinger 2015, 252.
[30] Faizer 2013, 45.
[31] Ibn Saʿd 10:424.

look for further information. An active search for depictions of literate women may yield additional names.

Nadia Maria El Cheikh also indicated the linkage between family relations and literacy. Her examination of women's access to education (Quran and Quran recitation, hadith, Arabic language, and to a far lesser extent also jurisprudence) in later periods demonstrated that a woman's likelihood to be literate depended on whether this skill was available within her family. Most women studied with their fathers or brothers, though some also with husbands and even grandfathers, and to a lesser extent, with aunts, grandmothers, and mothers. El Cheikh also points out the difference between education and literacy. Not all educated women were literate; moreover, some women could read but not write.[32]

Robert Houston who studied literacy in early modern Europe, suggests that scholars should be looking for literac*ies* rather than literacy. He argues that reading and writing is but one aspect of education or engagement with knowledge. Prior to the early modern period, most people (rich and poor alike) were illiterate in terms of reading and writing. Measuring knowledge only according to the ability to read and write excludes other forms of engaging with knowledge that these people used to exercise, e.g. observation, listening, reciting, and other non-verbal modes of communication. Instead, Houston suggests looking at a hierarchy of skills rather than at distinct categories.[33] El Cheikh concurs and argues that the same applies to the medieval Muslim world. She demonstrates that biographical dictionaries do not take it as a given that a teacher (or a student, for that matter) was literate or that if a person could read, they necessarily could also write.[34] Moreover, prior to the ninth century, most teaching was conducted orally. The preferred and more acceptable form of learning was from a teacher (that is, orally rather than from a written text).[35] Hence, literacy was not a prerequisite for education.

2. Women as Healthcare Providers

Once we accept that reading or writing is not a necessary component, or even an expression, of education, we may also reconsider what constitutes knowledge worthy of our attention. It was mentioned earlier that most modern

[32] El Cheikh 1994, 6–63.

[33] Houston 2002, 4–8.

[34] El Cheikh 1994, 62.

[35] The writing down of hadith narrations and learning from a written text versus learning from a teacher, were at the center of a heated debate. Though it seems that hadiths were probably written ever since the seventh century, it was less common to learn from a written text. See Cook 1997, 437–530.

scholars follow two main threads: religious knowledge and scientific knowledge. It was also mentioned that we are hard pressed to find evidence of the cultivation of science in seventh-century Arabia. However, that notion may be challenged. In a recent publication, a roundtable of experts in the history of science in the Islamicate world asked, among other questions, what should be classified as scientific knowledge? One of their points is that the occult was never taken into consideration, for various reasons. But while in the Western world, this assumption is long abandoned, and the occult is considered to be part of science, this is not the case for the Islamicate world.[36]

The current state of scholarship does not allow for an evaluation of women's involvement in magic or the nature of their knowledge. The same can be said about men's practices and scope of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is of significance to draw attention to what is already known and available. Biographical dictionaries inform us of at least one woman who used incantations as a form of healing, Shifāʾa bt. ʿAbadallah. Her biography is of special interest since it is told that she was also literate and that she taught Ḥafṣah, one of Muhammad's wives, who was mentioned earlier, both how to heal with incantations and how to write.

There are several versions narrating the circumstances in which Shifāʾa taught Ḥafṣah to write. These are also the sources relating her knowledge of healing incantations. According to Ibn Barr (d. 1971), the Prophet Muhammad told her: "Teach Ḥafṣah healing incantations just as you taught her writing (*kitāb*)".[37] In Ibn Saʿd's version, Muhammad does not mention the writing, but only asks Shifāʾa to teach Ḥafṣah healing incantations.[38] The anecdote generated much interest, as it is forbidden in Islam to use magic. Hence, the idea that Muhammad asked one of his wives to learn how to use incantations seems outrageous. However, is seems that most scholars agree that this narration is in the category of "reliable."[39]

It is not clear what Shifāʾa's knowledge was exactly, nor do we know who taught her this skill. However, we know that she used this knowledge for medical purposes. In his examination of midwifery, Avner Giladi briefly notes that women accompanied Muhammad's campaigns as nurses., and that they tended to the wounded. Giladi's description illustrates a somewhat gendered division in the battlefield: men fighting, and women "extending support and medical treatment to male fighters."[40] Leila Ahmed offers a less dichotomist picture,

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[36] Fancy et al. 2023, 123–178.

[37] Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, Al-Istīʿaāb fī maʿrifa al-Asḥāb, Abdallah Ibn al-Muhsan al-Turki (ed.) (Markaz Hajr li-l-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat al-Arabiyya wa al-Islamiyya 2019) 8:269–270.

[38] "The Prophet entered Ḥafṣah's [home] and a woman named Shifaāʾ was there, she knew healing incantations. The Prophet told her: 'teach Ḥafṣah [incantations]'". Ibn Saʿd 10: 83. For English see Bewley 1997, 8:59.

[39] For the debate see Geissinger 2015, 252.

[40] Giladi 2015, 114.

demonstrating women in various capacities in the battlefield. She mentions their role as fighters but also as those responsible for "removing the dead and the wounded"[41] as well as for "tend[ing] the wounded."[42] Although both authors commend these women and recognize the significance of their contributions, they also categorize their actions within traditional gender roles. During wartime, women served as nurses on the battlefield – a role that suggests assistance rather than primary medical intervention and outside the battleground, they served as midwives, and cared for women and infants.

Peter Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith extend women's role and assert that women were the main carers (mind you, not physicians) in pre-Islamic Arabia. However, they also admit that there is little information pertaining to their actual actions and the treatment practiced or how they came about their knowledge. Indeed, while there is little information regarding pre-Islamic Arabia, one of the main sources is poetry, where women are depicted as providing care and nourishment, but also cures and medication: "female practitioners are referred to as physicians (*ṭabāʾib*, singular *ṭabībah*; *awāsin/ āsiyah*), soothsayers (*kawāhin/kāhinah*), and sick-nurses (*ʿāwāʾid/ʿāʾidah*)."[43] Such terminology may add to the confusion and difficulty in asserting the nature of their treatment. For instance, was it at all different from the medical care provided by men? Was there a hierarchy?

Many of these questions are relevant for later periods as well. However, it is significant to bear in mind that al-Rāzī (Latinized Rhazes, d. 925) mentions three characteristics of a charlatan: ignorant in medical matters, low social status and female gender. For al-Rāzī, their gender excludes women from providing healing. For instance, he relates the story of a man who asked a doctor to heal an abscess that required a long treatment. The patient got angry and would not wait for it to cure, and opted to ask the help of: "women and common folk". There are several other cases where al-Rāzī argues that women offer medical assistance, but in fact it is only trickster, with no actual knowledge of medicine.[44]

Pormann explains that the fact that women were singled out as inadequate healthcare providers actually hints that they posed competition to physicians (according to al-Rāzī, those will be male and from a higher echelon). Al-Rāzī was not the only physician to rant against charlatans and to include women as a particular group. Patients are warned against seeking the help of women, as they are ignorant and cause harm. Pormann is also careful in his wording: "However, it is difficult to make general assertions about women in medical

[41] Ahmed 1992, 53

[42] Ahmed 1992, 69.

[43] Pormann / Savage-Smith 2007, 8.

[44] MS Mh 280 fol. 51b lines 2–9. I also consulted Steinschneider's German translation, see Steinschneider 1866, 581.

and paramedical professions in the period and region discussed here, owing to the dearth of research in the topic of female practitioners in the classical period of Islam seem to be one of the blind spots of scholarly attention."[45] And yet, it seems that Pormann sees women as mainly addressing the medical issues of other women and infants, rather than the population in general.

As mentioned, the dearth of available information is a valid deterrent from considering women as healthcare providers, or to limit their medical practice to the realm of women and infants. Medieval sources are not generous with information but are not completely silent either. In al-Iṣfahānī's (d. 967) *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, we learn that a man with inflammation in the eyes approached a woman who used to be the physician of the Banū Awd. He relates his story: "I consulted a woman of the Banū Awd and asked her to treat an inflammation of the eyes (*ramad*) from which I was suffering. She applied some salve." While she was treating him, he recited a few poetry lines referring to a woman whose medical knowledge and expertise earned her a poem: "Will the vagaries of Fate take me away before I visit the physician of the Banū Awd, Zaynab, in spite of the distance?"[46] Then Zaynab burst out laughing and told him that the poem was dedicated to her and that the poet who wrote it was, in fact, his uncle.

The story is told through a chain of transmitters, one of whom is Ibn Kunāsa, an Iraqi poet and scholar (d. 823 or 824), who says that the source of the anecdote was his grandfather. The poem and some further information also appear in a biographical dictionary dedicated to physicians, Ibn Abī Usaybiʿa's (d. 1270) *ʿUyūn al-Anbāʾ fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā* ("Fountain of Information about the Generations of Physicians").[47] He mentions that the source for the information is *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, and then continues to name the people who transmitted the story, the source being Ibn Kunāsa's grandfather.

Zaynab's biography is included in Chapter 7, under the title: "Arab and Other Physicians of the Earliest Islamic Period," which indicates the general period of this chapter: the time of the Prophet up to the Umayyad Caliphate, which translates to the mid-seventh to mid-eighth century. According to the chain of transmitters, the protagonist is Ibn Kunāsa's grandfather. Considering that Ibn Kunāsa lived from 741 to 823, his grandfather must have lived sometime during the second half of the seventh century, which falls within the time

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[45] Pormann 2005, 226.

[46] The poem was translated in: E. Savage-Smith, S. Swain, G.J. van Gelder eds., A Literary History of Medicine (Leiden 2020), https://doi.org/10.1163/37704_0668 IbnAbiUsaibia.Tabaqatalatibba.lhom-tr-eng1 (accessed April 10, 2024). See al-Iṣfahānī 13: 242.

[47] There is one earlier dictionary dedicated only to physicians: Ibn Juljul's (d. 994) *Generations of Physicians and Scholars*, as well as one dedicated partly to physicians: Ibn al-Qifṭī's (d. 1248) *History of Learned Men*. But neither mentions Zaynab. Nonetheless, Ibn al-Qifṭī was probably aware of her, as he did include her in another dictionary which will be discussed later.

frame of Ibn Abī Usaybiʿa's chapter. The details are identical to those presented in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* with some additional information at the beginning of the entry:

A woman who was known as 'the physician of the Banū Awd'. She was a skilled medical practitioner, and was particularly renowned among the Arabs for her expertise in treating sore eyes and wounds.[48]

A similar anecdote, also mentioning the name of Ibn Ibn Kunāsa but this time as the protagonist rather than the transmitter of the story, appears in another biographical dictionary, this one dedicated to grammarians. The anecdote appears under the entry devoted to Ibn Kunāsa, which might explain why the author, Ibn al-Qifṭī (d.1248), described him as the protagonist. Ibn Kunāsa relates: "I consulted a woman of the Banū Awd. She applied some salve." Here we have a shortened version of the story, with no mention of the illness, only of the remedy. Once again, the patient recites the verses, and Zaynab informs him that the poem is dedicated to her. It is unclear if Ibn al-Qifṭī means to say that Ibn Kunāsa was, in fact, the person who met with Zaynab, or only neglected to mention the entire chain of transmission since he included Zaynab's story in Ibn Kunāsa's biography and thought it better to leave it so.[49]

It is puzzling to find Zaynab's story buried deep in a book dedicated to grammarians, since Ibn al-Qifṭī authored one of the most comprehensive dictionaries dedicated to scholars of the various philosophical sciences: *The History of Learned Men*. Did he not deem her important enough to be given her own entry? Did she not fit the criteria he formed for inclusion? Unfortunately, we don't know what his criteria for inclusion or exclusion were. We do know that not all physicians actually found their places in biographical dictionaries, so that may not be particularly exceptional. It is possible he did not really believe she was a good enough doctor. Though that may be less plausible, as he had no compunctions about stating the inadequacies of physicians, even well-known ones. Or maybe he did not think she was a doctor at all.[50]

The differences between the two versions also cast some ambiguity regarding the period of her life. Iṣfahānī and Ibn Abī Usaybiʿa situate her as living at some time in the eighth century, but if Ibn al-Qifṭī's version is more accurate, then she lived a little later, towards the end of the eighth or first half of the ninth century. But a greater puzzle is: Why is no modern study dedicated to further exploring Zaynab and her medical skills?

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[48] Savage-Smith, Swain, Van Gelder 2020 (accessed April 10, 2024), https://scholarlyeditions.brill.com/reader/urn:cts:arabicLit:0668IbnAbiUsaibia.Tabaqatalatibba.lhom-tr-eng1:7.10/?q=zaynab&qk=form&right=lhom-ed-ara1.

[49] Ibn al-Qifṭī 3:161.

[50] A case in point would be Abū Quraysh's biography, where Ibn al-Qifṭī argues that Abū Quraysh had little medical knowledge. Ibn al-Qifṭī 431.

Ibn Abī Usaybiʿa is the only author to mention Zaynab in the context of physicians, and he is also the only one to locate her in a general chronological period. Moreover, he elaborates on the knowledge and traits of other physicians belonging to the same time frame. There are a total of ten doctors mentioned in the chapter, nine males, and one female. Zaynab is also the only female in the entire book and as far as I know, the only female physician to be mentioned by name in any dictionary dedicated – exclusively or partly – to physicians or philosophers.

Was her biography any different from the others? Was her medical knowledge described differently? Comparing the features attributed to her and to other figures associated with medicine at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, may shed some light on this matter.

The only other physician mentioned in the time of Muhammad and in the Hijaz is an almost mythical figure, Ḥārith ibn Kalada from Ṭaʾif. Modern scholars are skeptical as to whether information regarding Ḥārith should be considered reliable. Gerald Hawting concludes that it is possible that such a person existed, and maybe that he even practiced medicine. However, what kind of medicine and whether or not the various anecdotes associated with his name are to be considered valid is a whole new quest, for which there is no good answer. The main problem is that while his name is mentioned in early *Sīra* literature, the information is sparse and inconsistent. Only later sources, tenth- to thirteenth-century biographical dictionaries focused on physicians, provide additional information about his medical expertise and knowledge.

For instance, Ibn Abī Usaybiʿa mentions that Ḥārith studied in Jundīsabūr – where, according to Islamic historiography there was a hospital, and a school of medicine.[51] This information is completely absent from earlier narratives.

The chronological distance between these dictionaries, the time of Ḥārith, and the sudden appearance of new information raises doubts. Thus, Hawting prefers to explain the appearance of this information with the contemporary need to justify resorting to medicine in the first place. By associating between Ḥārith and Muhammad and his Saḥāba, medicine is validated.[52] According to Hawting, Ḥārith's medical practices were commonsensical and self-reliant, rather than based on theoretical medical knowledge, which may be hinted at when attributing his knowledge to the medical center in Jundisābūr.[53] This may indicate that medical knowledge did not require special studies or apprenticeship. In other words, Hawting does not reject the possibility of a Ḥārith who practiced medicine, but only that his medical knowledge was in fact based on Galenic theories. It is possible that those who provided medical treatment were members of the family, with knowledge being circulated within the family,

[51] Pormann / Savage-Smith 2007, 20–21.
[52] Hawting, 1989, 127–137.
[53] Hawting, 1989, 128.

perhaps even the extended family. Should we accept that Ḥārith did provide healthcare services outside his family, it seems there is little reason to reject female practitioners who are mentioned as having provided similar services, or to downplay their services as nothing but holding the hands of the dying.

Though biographical dictionaries pertaining to physicians do not mention other women practicing medicine in the time of the Prophet or later on, biographical dictionaries pertaining to early converts to Islam, as well as other historical genre (e.g., *maghāzī*, *sīra*) do mention women practicing medicine. Some indeed are mentioned in passing, as women who went to the battlefield and treated the wounded, while others receive a more elaborate description.

An interesting case in point is Umm Sinān, who requested to join one of Muhammad's expeditions according to *The Book of Expeditions* by al-Wāqidī (d. 823). In her plea, she said: "O Messenger of God, I will set out with you in this direction of yours. I will string the water bags, care for the sick and wounded, and if they are wounded – it will not be – I will watch the saddles."[54] With these phrases it seems that she simply wishes to do her part for the war effort, as she is listing the ways she is able to contribute, and revealing to us what was realistic for a woman to do on the battlefield.

We learn that she can facilitate the fighting effort by providing various services: she can be a guard, she can fix broken water skins, and she can treat the sick and wounded. She is not the only one who is mentioned as going on to the battlefield, and not the only one who volunteers to treat the sick and wounded. Umayya bt. Qays b. Abī al-Ṣalt al-Ghifāriyya was also reported to have gone to Khaybar with Muhammad with a group of women from the Banū Ghifār to "treat the wounded and help the Muslims as much as we can."[55] Similarly, Umm Waraqa bt. ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥārith asked for permission to join Muhammad on his campaign at Badr (624) to "treat the wounded and nurse the sick."[56] Umm ʿAṭiyya al-Anṣāriyya said: "I went on seven expeditions with the Messenger of Allah. I prepared food for them and repaired their saddles, treated their wounded, and cared for the wounded."[57] Umm ʿAṭiyya makes an interesting differentiation, between treating wounds and caring for the wounded. Here too, we cannot make any sweeping arguments, but this suggests that there might be a difference between holding the hands of the sick and wounded, and actually providing medical care. An active search for more examples may help us understand this better.

The above mentioned Umm Sinān is one of the very few of whom we know *what* they actually did. Al-Wāqidī further elaborates that the Prophet granted

[54] Al-Wākidī 338.
[55] Al-Wākidī 337.
[56] Ibn Saʿd 10:277.
[57] Ibn Saʿd 10:422.

her permission to join the campaign, where she indeed treated wounded men with medicine that "came from my family and they recovered."[58]

This is a rare glimpse of the source of any medical knowledge of the time, a family recipe. As in the case of literacy, we learn that women had knowledge because this knowledge circulated within the family. They were not excluded, or at least not totally excluded, from this circulating knowledge.

Kuʿayba bt. Saʿd b. ʿUtba is also mentioned by both Ibn Saʿd and al-Wāqidī. Al-Wāqidī mentions Kuʿaybah three times in his book, once as one of twenty women who accompanied Muhammad on his campaign against Khaybar (628) and twice when presenting the circumstances concerning the decision to execute the members of the last Jewish tribe in Medina, the Banū Kurayẓah (627, after the Battle of the Ditch).[59] As is his custom, he provides several versions of the event, told by different narrators. Sometimes, they differ in detail, sometimes not. In this case, al-Wāqidī presents the circumstances surrounding the decision and where it occurred. In both cases, the events occur in Kuʿaybah's tent in the Mosque of Medina. But we understand why only in one of the versions.

In the first version, Khārijah b. ʿAbdallāh relates that it was agreed that a man from the tribe of Awd would be the judge of what shall be done with the Banū Kurayẓa after they were accused of treason. They chose Saʿd b. Muʿādh to be the judge. At the time, Saʿd was at the Mosque in the tent of Kuʿaybah, who "used to treat the wounded and clean up the messy persons."[60]

The second anecdote pertaining to Saʿd is provided without a chain of transmitters, al-Wāqidī only says: "They said." The events are after Saʿd passed judgment and decided to kill the men of the Banū Kurayẓah and sell the women and children into slavery. This time we learn that "he returned [after judging] to the tent of Kuʿaybah bt. Saʿd al-Aslamiyya, for Ḥibban b. al-ʿAriqa had shot him." This version clearly sets him in a place where he was to be given medical treatment (though it is not so clear what the nature of his injury was). We do learn that he was in Kuʿaybah's tent, that he was injured, and that the Prophet cauterized him twice. However, Saʿd is reported to have said that after fulfilling

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[58] Ibn Saʿd mentions she went on the expedition but does not offer any further information regarding her actual treatment. She is not said to have actually treated wounded men. See Ibn Saʿd 10: 276. Similarly, al-Ṭabarī mentions al-Wāqidī as the source for information, but provides only the first part, that Umm Sinān joined the campaign, without noting her actions there. Al-Ṭabarī 39: 203–204. As mentioned earlier, later authors tend to omit women's direct speech, and even their presence. Hence, this is of little wonder. However, further investigation in other genres and texts may shed more light on this matter.

[59] For the Battle of the Ditch see Watt 2012, https://doi-org.bengurionu.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4188 (Accessed 19 April 2024); for the Banū Qurayzah, see Kister 1986, 61–96.

[60] Faizer 2013, 250

his role in the Prophet's campaign against the Banū Kurayẓah, that he is ready to die. And indeed, he died peacefully during the night.

While the details of Saʿd's role in condemning the Banū Kurayẓah to death and slavery is of little significance to us, where he was and where he died is. Kuʿaybah is mentioned as a person who treats the sick and the wounded, and she had a designated place for that. Moreover, the fact that Muhammad was there and performed medical treatment himself, adds to the credibility that the place was indeed intended for treating the wounded.[61]

Ibn Saʿd also refers to Kuʿaybah's medical skills: "She was the one who had a tent in the mosque where she treated [*tudāwī*] the sick [*al-marḍā*] and the wounded [*al-jarḥā*]. When Saʿd b. Muʿādh was wounded in the Battle of the Ditch, she treated his wound until he died."[62]

This narrative not only reiterates the location – it also puts her in the position of the provider of treatment (though once again, the outcome is the same, and Saʿd dies). The phrasing here is quite clear, she helped people when sick or wounded, while in al-Wāqidī's phrasing, the details are somewhat ambiguous. It is not clear what it means that she "cleaned the messy persons." It is possible that al- Wāqidī refers to people who were beyond medical help, or maybe people on the cusp of death and in need of cleansing before burial, or people too sick to clean themselves after a battle, and most probably people with no family available to clean them.

Kuʿaybah's story may indicate that most current assumptions regarding the medical help provided by women may be correct, that all women could do was provide as comfortable conditions as possible to the dying, but little in terms of actual cure. However, it is yet to be proven that male practitioners were able to provide a different kind of service, or that men did not provide similar services. In other words, it is not clear that the role attributed to Kuʿayba was gender specific.

3. Conclusion

It seems, then, that there are several hurdles for conducting a study pertaining to women being part of the circulation of knowledge. One is sources; our sources do not share much information about women in general, and in the matter of women teaching or learning, they are even more problematic. Teaching and learning in the premodern Islamicate world were conducted in informal spaces (the teacher's home, for instance). We learn of a person being a teacher

[61] Interestingly, Ḥārith b. Kalada is the only other healthcare provider mentioned by al-Wāqidī, and once again, he is not depicted to as administering the treatment but is given instructions from Muhammad as to what this treatment should be. Faizer 2013, 546.

[62] Ibn Saʿd 10:276; English translation, see Bewley 8:203.

or a student if that information is passed on and the person is of sufficient interest to be recorded in the chronicles. Furthermore, the relation between teacher and student was of a personal nature, which posed a significant problem to women as teachers and as students.[63] Therefore, if knowledge was disseminated among women, the chances of learning about this are slim unless the author had personal acquaintance with the woman or if she had a male student – preferably a well-known one. Otherwise, the names of women-teachers or women- students are mostly lost to oblivion.

The anecdotes and biographies discussed in this paper positioned women in various roles and situations, these situations were most probably considered to be in accordance with what was perceived as appropriate and acceptable for women of the time. They are in their homes studying the Quran, or besides their husband in the battlefield.

Through these descriptions we learn that some women practiced forms of healing, some were literate. We learn that women were part of the circulation of knowledge, and were active in different spheres. However, they were not always deemed important enough for their story or knowledge to be put into writing. A woman's expertise and knowledge would most likely be recorded if it had some influence on the community or a person of interest (e.g., Kuʿaybah's treatment of the sick or Shifāʾa's teaching one of Muhammad's wives). Should we maintain that most people were educated by their family, it is most likely that women who only taught other female family members remained anonymous unless they came into contact with an important figure.

Margaret Gaida demonstrated that modern scholarship ignores evidence pertaining to women's engagement with science in the early modern Muslim world.[64] Though her study focuses on the early modern era, it seems that her argument is valid for earlier periods as well. Gaida proposes expanding the definition of science, as well as the sources consulted. Some of her suggestions may not all apply for the early Islamic period (e.g. miniatures, dedications on manuscripts). However, her call to search actively for women having a skill, teaching it to others, or practicing it, is valid indeed. From the short survey presented here, it seems that a re-evaluation of women's involvement with the circulation of knowledge is called for.

[63] El Cheikh 1994, 66.

[64] Gaida 2016, 197–206.

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