

Fātimah Al-Fihri and Religious Fraternity in Al-Qarawiyy in University: A Case Study

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Abstract

The status of Muslim women is a sensitive issue which has always provoked a lot of debates and controversies. A commonly notion among, feminists, scholar-activists and academics, western and non-western is the claim that Muslim women in most of the Muslim world are oppressed and systematically suffer from discriminatory patriarchal gender system and male domination culture. Many western researchers attribute such oppressive conditions to the interpretation of Islamic texts in ways that support patriarchal social relations. Contrary to that claim, conservative Muslim activists and religious scholars deny any sort of mal-treatment and oppression that Muslim women received. Interestingly, most of the literature related to this issue lacks female representation. Trying to draw a third line between these two spectrums, in which western prejudices and ulterior motives are avoided and Islamic self-praise and exaltation is averted, the present inquiry digs in the medieval history of Islam to highlight the role of the philanthropy contributions of Fātimah al-Fihri of Fes, crowned in history annals as the founder of the world's very first university. Needless to state that the Islamic history preserved several examples of successful Muslim women who contributed to their societies and were able to play an active social, economic, and political role in their local communities. Shedding light on the contributions of Fātimah al-Fihri is expected to help in breaking the stereotypes, misconceptions, and prejudices surrounding the image of Muslim women in both, Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. Furthermore, highlighting the legacy of Fātimah al-Fihri would help in understanding and appreciating medieval Islamic culture of learning, in which education was considered as a powerful tool in solidifying religion, unifying people and building civilization.

Keywords: Fātimah al-Fihri, education, interfaith dialogue, al-Qarawiyyin University

Introduction

In a report prepared by the Federal Research Division for the Central Intelligence Agency (FRDCIA) and few other American security and science related offices it was stated that more than half a billion of the women in the world are Muslims. It also highlighted that monolithic stereotypes of Muslim women have long prevailed in the West, distorting the enormous interregional, intraregional, and class variations in their circumstances and status.¹ Contrary to wide spread belief, early Muslim historians gave considerable exposure to women in their writings. They did not, as might be expected, talk about them only as mothers and daughters of powerful men. General history books, genealogies and chronicles identified women as active participants and fully involved partners in historical events including the crucial emergence of Islam.²

Although Islamic rhetorical heritage emphasizes men's supremacy over women, drawing them as genuine makers of history and builders of Islamic civilization, the contribution of Muslim Women in the early, medieval and late Islamic history was significant, and overlaid almost all aspects of life. A number of Islamic history books recorded events of immense contributions made by extraordinary Muslim women in different fields of knowledge.

¹Priscilla Offenbauer, for Federal Research Division, Woman in Islamic Societies: A Selected Preview of Scientific Literature. (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. November 2005), 1

²Mernissi Fatima, Woman in Muslim History: Traditional Perspectives and New Strategies. In Woman and Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology. Edited by Haideh Moghissi. (Routledge: London and New York, 1edn., 2005), 37

Names such as Al-Shifa bint Abdullāh, Rufaydah al-Aslamiyyah, Nusaybabint al-Harith al-Ansari, Labana of Cordoba, Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, Fātimah al-Fihri ...etc stand tall in an assemblage of distinguished Muslim women. In the case of the prestigious Qarawiyyin University, the historical conditions of its establishment, and the role it played in disseminating knowledge will not be completely understood without delving into the early phase of its erection and reviewing some milestones of the biography of its founder, the pious woman Fātimah al-Fihri.

Fātimah al-Fihri's biography

She is Fātimah bint Mohammed al-Fihri al-Kairawani. Given the agnomen Umm al-Banin- Mother of the Children. History books confirm that “She migrated with her father Mohamed al-Fihri from Kairawan in Tunisia to Fes in Morocco.³She was a member of a wealthy and educated Muslim family. Although history books do not offer many details about her life, it was well documented that Fātimah al-Fihri grew up with her sister, later she followed the educational tradition of that time by attending circles of *fiqh*- Islamic Jurisprudence and *hadith*-prophetic traditions. Inheriting a considerable amount of money from her father, Fātimah build a mosque for her community in the year 859CE, in accordance with another Islamic tradition of contributing to the community by notable, rich and powerful people. The same mosque was later transformed to a university that is still functioning up to today. Apparently she was a woman of high virtuous and religious piety. History books also reported that she took upon herself to fast for the sake of God until the construction of the mosque is complete.”⁴ Among the nicknames given to her beside Umm al-Banin, she was also referred to as an entrepreneur⁵ and princess.⁶

Al-Qarawiyyin University: A historical profile

Islamic worldview emphasized the concept of *ummah* –Muslim community. It underlined its homogeneity and uniqueness. Accordingly, the survival, strength, and supremacy of such an *ummah* over the other communities shall be maintained at all cost, and every activity that contributes to that purpose comes under the exigencies of the Islamic Jurisprudence. Without that “lives of Muslims cannot be straightened in a good order. Among these activities we may cite security, defense, health, justice, and educational facilities.”⁷ Even though no direct or explicit religious texts related to spending on the educational projects were found, Muslim legal authorities classified such projects under the exigencies and the priorities which shall be undertaken by the Muslim *ummah*. Generally, financing of education in Islam occurs in two ways:

- a. Individual and voluntary sponsoring, which is normally driven by religious motives.
- b. State based financing, which is supervised by the *khalifah* or by the ministers in the state of *khilafah*. Across the Islamic history, *waqaf*⁸-pious and charitable endowment played an important role in funding Muslim society's general service projects such as *kuttab*, wells, graveyards and most importantly *masjids* -mosques. In fact, founding *masjids* was a practice followed by men and women of power and influence as part of their personal legacy and in many instances an attempt to secure more religious credibility and social recognition. Therefore establishing al-Qarawiyyin mosque with an associated school, called *madrasa*, in the year 859CE, was part of a larger tradition of women establishing *waqaf* for founding mosques and other community-needed services in the Islamic history. In fact al-Qarawiyyin “is a mosque and a university at the same time... This university has continued its activity from that time till today.”⁹

³Salim al Hassani. Women's Contribution to Classical Islamic Civilization: Science, Medicine and Politics. Muslim Heritage retrieved from <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/womens-contribution-classical-islamic-civilisation-science-medicine-and-politics> [9/11/2016]

⁴Ibid

⁵Science in school. (2006). 1000 years of missing science. *Science and society*, (3), 67-70. Retrieved from <http://www.scienceinschool.org> [21/11/2016]

⁶John, A., Shinde, S.V. (2012). Educational Status of Women in India. *Review of research*, 1(VI), 1-8.

⁷Ghazi Enayah, Usol al-Infaq al-'Am fi al-Fikr al-Mali al-Islami: Dirasah Muqarana, [Principles of General Spending in the Islamic Financial Thought: Comparative Study], Dar al-Jil (Beirut: Lebanon, 1st edn, 1989), 25

⁸In the Islamic legal context *waqaf* was an endowment made in perpetuity by male and female individuals.

⁹Heba Mohammed Al-Zawahrah, Amani H. Abulhasan and Rudaina A. Al-Mirbati. (2013, November 29). Mariam set bases for transportation, communication. *Arab Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.gust.edu.kw>[20/11/2016]

Regardless of the debate between the Islamic historians who advocate al-Qarawiyyin as the first ever built university in the history of mankind and the skeptical western narratives there is no doubt that this institution was one of the oldest and leading universities working in the tradition of the Islamic higher learning colleges *madrassa*.¹⁰ Students traveled there from all over the world to study Islamic studies, astronomy, languages, and sciences. Arabic numbers became known and used in Europe through this university. This is one important example of the role of women in the advancement of education and civilization.¹¹

Mosques and other medieval educational institutions provide permanent places of instruction, residence, and employment for teachers and students, and also provided lasting endowments to pay the salaries and stipends for both and maintain the building costs. It is argued that this patronage contributed to a large extent to the institutionalization and professionalization of Islamic education in medieval age, an aspect that was missing in the earlier stages.

It was reported that “The foundation of the mosque (al-Qarawiyyin) was to provide, in addition to a space for worship, a learning center for the Qarawiyyin community. Like any mosque, Al-Qarawiyyin soon developed into a place for religious instruction and political discussion, gradually extending its education to all subjects, particularly the natural sciences.”¹² It had the oldest, and possibly the first university in the world. It was also reported that it was built and enlarged throughout different phases. Therefore the first Al-Qarawiyyin was built by Fātimah al-Fihri during the reign of The Idrisid dynasty of Morocco (788 - 974). Fātimah al-Fihri herself was behind the choice of the piece of land where the mosque was built. “She was very happy when they discovered that the same chosen piece of land was a source of a good quality yellow stones and soil perfect material for building”¹³ which was a perfect material for building. In her efforts to finish her task with complete by observing the *shariah*'s teaching “she was very keen that the sources of funding of this mosque are all *shariah* complying sources It was also reported that breaking the ground for building started in the first of Ramadhan (245 H/ 859 CE)¹⁴ as a symbolic gesture to seek Allah's blessing. In fact Fātimah al-Fihri was supervising the construction of the mosque and also planning for its future sustenance. “She allocated a piece of land on the northern part of the mosque to be a *waqaf*, in order to sponsor water supply furnishing the mosque with carpets and lamps.”¹⁵

Later, al-Qarawiyyin was enlarged during the reign of Ahmad bin Abi Bakr al-Zanati (345H/956 CE) ¹⁶. Historians believe that al Qarawiyyin started the process of teaching and learning immediately after its completion, due to the fact that there were many scholars who lived in Fes at that time, to whom people used to come in order to learn. Such as al Imam Yahya al-Awal (296 H), Abu abd al-Rahman Bakr bin Hamad al-Tahirti (296 H) and Yahya al-Rabi' (307 H)”¹⁷ Another characteristic of Al-Qarawiyyin is that education never stopped in this mosque/university even during times of renovation works. This explains the continuity of *halaqat al-dars* on one side and of course at a macro level the continuity of al-Qarawiyyin' existence itself until today compared to other Islamic universities.¹⁸ Indeed al-Qarawiyyin is known to be the oldest continually operating university and pre-dates for example the University of Bologna (established in 1088). It remains one of the leading spiritual and educational centers for Islamic studies in North Africa¹⁹

¹⁰Refer to Goerge Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and in the West*, Edinburgh University Press, dn., 1981)

¹¹Salim al-Hassani. *Women's Contribution to Classical Islamic Civilisation: Science, Medicine and Politics*. Ibid

¹²Al Qarawiyyin Mosque and University. By FSTC Limited . Retrieved from <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/al-qarawiyyin-mosque-and-university> [17/11/2016]

¹³Abd al-Hadi al-Tazi. *Al-masjid wa al-jamiah bi madinat Fes; mawsoua' li tarikhiha al-mi'mari wa al-fikri*. (The Mosque and the University in the city of Fes ; An Encyclopedia of the history of its architecture and Thought). (Daar al-Ma'rifah 2000, Rabat , 1 st edn. 1972), 47

¹⁴ For more information refer to Walid Taha . *Al-Masajid fi al-Islam (Mosques in Islam)* Dar al-Ilm Lilmalayiin

¹⁵Abd al -Hadi al-Tazi *al masjiswa al jamiah bi madinat Fes; mawsoua' litarikhiha al mi'mariwa al fikri*. (The Mosque and the University in the city of Fes ; An Encyclopedia of the history its architecture and Thought). Ibid.132

¹⁶Abd al-Hadi al-Tazi *Jami' al-Qarawiyyin*. (Daar al-Kitab al-Lubnani 1st edn. 1972), vol. 1, 46

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Glenn Hardaker & A'ishah Ahmad Sabki *INNOVATIVE PRACTICE An insight into Islamic pedagogy at the University of al-Qarawiyyin*. *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal* 2012 Vol. 6 Iss 2 pp. 106 – 110. Retrieved from <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/17504971211236308> [9/11/2016]

The exercise of liberal culture of learning in Al-Qarawiyyin

“Wherever a man who knew how to read met another who was not quite so fortunate, yet willing to learn, a school was organized. It may have been under a palm tree, in a tent, or in a private house; nevertheless it was a school.”²⁰ Indeed, this is a perfect description of the state of learning, seeking knowledge and the flexibility and tolerance in exercising them in Medieval Islam. This is the image of the society Islam wanted to build, a society that venerates knowledge-seeking and all the activities related to. It was Apparent, that teaching and learning in medieval Islam was not regarded by both *shuyūkh* and *tullāb* as a job for the former and potential source of income after graduation for the latter. On the contrary, they took teaching and learning as a noble mission in life, which brings social veneration in this life and Allāh’s reward in the other. It is in this liberal culture of learning that the Qur’an was compiled, the prophet’ Sunnah was sorted out, numerous schools of *fiqh* appeared, the debate about the most important issues of *al-aqidah* took place and the great works of Muslim scholars which contributed tremendously to the human knowledge in general had emerged. The pious scholars of Islam, men and women collectively known as the *ulamā*, were the most influential element of society in the fields of Sharia law, speculative thought and theology. Their pronouncements defined the external practice of Islam, including prayer, as well as the details of the Islamic way of life. They held strong influence over government, and especially the laws of commerce. They were not rulers themselves, but rather keepers and upholders of the rule of law.²¹

In this tradition the Muslim society had embarked in a magnificent and unique quest for knowledge where by a liberal spirit dominated the world of academia. “Education was considered a ministry within Islam and those who entered it did so out of dedication and a genuine interest in the life of the mind.”²²

Informal and formal instruction was available for pupils in their own homes or in the private houses of learned scholars and wealthy individuals. Seeking knowledge became a collective concern. In the early stages of Islam scholars were offering their knowledge voluntary and free of charge, inspired by the religious principle of seeking Allāh’s pleasure and practicing the Islamic principle of disseminating knowledge and fearing the divine punishment for those who conceal it as it is mentioned in *Al-Baqarah*, “*Those who conceal the clear (Signs) We have sent down, and the Guidance after We have made it clear for the people in the Book on them shall be Allah’s curse of those entitled to curse.*” [Qur’an: 2, 159]. With the spirit of ‘*fi sabil Allah*’ men and women took the task of financing education and founding centers of learning, *ulamā* impart their knowledge *fi Allah* and students strive to learn also *fi sabil Allah*.

Generally speaking “the bearer of knowledge was naturally honored in a society which showed great reverence to knowledge itself. The person of a scholar was regarded as a blessing from God for the whole world and even the fishes in the water and birds in the air mourn his death along with mankind.”²³ In such sublime distinction, learning and learners were elevated by the Islamic tradition. Seeking knowledge was unmatched honorable task that does not require forcible effort from the state. In the contrary, it was regarded as a genuine individual right and persons only have the final say on what, when, and where to learn. If assessed by the devotion of scholars and *tullab* in the pursuit of knowledge and its dissemination, such liberal, informal and flexible traditions of teaching and learning in early and medieval Muslim world were extensively successful. Despite students’ social divide and association with large religious and sectarian spectrum, that included Muslim Sunni (Malikite, Shafi’ite, Hanafite), Muslim Shi’a, all of them got access to education in al-Qarawiyyin. This tolerant policy flourished, partially due to the existing social responsibility expressed in *zakat*²⁴, *waqaf* (endowment), and *sadaqa* (charity). Such social solidarity was in a position to cover the financial incapability of some social classes.

²⁰ Khalil A. Totah, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education*. (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1926), 12

²¹ Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam; Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. (The University of Chicago, 1974), vol 1, 238

²² Charles Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period A.D 700-1300*. (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. 1990), 33

²³ Munir-ud-Din Ahmed, *Muslim Education and the Scholar’s Social Status up to the 5th Century Muslim Era (11th Century Christian Era) in the Light of Ta’rikh Baghdad*. Verlag Der Islam, Zurich 1968 (without edition), 194.

²⁴ Basically means, an Islamic tax of different rates levied on a number of items beyond a certain limit.

“Poor students were enabled to study at home and abroad through the liberal scholarships which were made possible by the endowments.”²⁵ Although education was not fully institutionalized, al-Qarwiyyin imposed on its applicants not to join and attend *halaqāt al-dars* (learning circles) unless they have finished their education at *al kuttāb*, in which they have finished memorizing al Qur’an, formed an idea about the fundamental religious teachings and of course mastering the Arabic language skills. In fact this was the practice of all medieval *madrasas* working in the tradition The *Nizamiyah madrasa*²⁶ established by the Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk. “Before attending *madrasas*, potential candidates had to memorize the whole or some considerable parts of the Qur’an and able to read and write. Qur’an, sciences of Qur’an, *hadith*, sciences of *hadith*, *fiqh*, Arabic, history, Genealogy, poetry, narratives, proverbs and maxims, medicine, astronomy, languages were among the subjects that medieval *madrasas*.”²⁷ As for the method of imparting knowledge *halaqāt al-dars* were the common way.²⁸ “The open study circles visually represent the intimacy of the teacher-student relationship and illustrate the traditional method of teaching that has continued since the time of the Prophet Muhammad.”²⁹

Another important characteristic of al-Qarawiyyin is the upholding of the policy of tolerance and the promotion of fraternity and co-existence among scholars and students, who usually come from different Islamic *madāhhib* and from different religions as well. “On the world stage, Al-Qarawiyyin played, in medieval times, a leading role in the cultural exchange and transfer of knowledge between the Muslims and Europeans. Pioneer scholars include Ibn Maymun, also known as Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) who was taught at Al-Qarawiyyin by Abdul Arab Ibn Muwashah. The famous Al-Idrissi (d.1166 CE) is said to have settled in Fes for considerable time suggesting that he must have worked or studied at Al-Qarawiyyin. Sources also list a number of peers such as Ibn Al-'Arabi (1165-1240 CE), Ibn Khaldun (1332-1395 CE), Ibn Al-Khatib, Alpetragius, Al-Bitruji, Ibn Harazim, and Ibn Wazzan are said to have all taught in Al-Qarawiyyin. Some historic accounts also spoke of Ibn Zuhr (d.1131 CE) spending a great deal of time travelling between Andalusia, Fes, and Marrakech.”³⁰

As for al-Qarawiyyin curriculum, it consisted of three streams; religious sciences, Arts and pure sciences³¹ Thus students traveled there from all over the world to study Islamic studies, astronomy, languages, and sciences. Arabic numbers became known and used in Europe through this university.³² “The Islamic political control spread over much of southern Europe sporadically from 711 AD to 1492 AD, and its effects are found in the development of Western thought; we have simply chosen to ignore the exploration of this history. It would shock many scholars to note that the oldest degree granting university in existence, the University of Al-Karabuine or Al-Qarawiyyin, established in 859 AD, was founded by an Arab woman, Fatima al-Fihri.”³³ In addition to the intellectual freedom and the spirit of fraternity, it is worth mentioning here that the *ulama* and *tullab* were free to choose what they want to learn, how to learn and from which books or resources they want to learn. This academic freedom continued to be the main trait of learning in al-Qarawiyyin until the year 1789 during the rule of *sultan* Mohammed the third, who ordered the scholars to precisely identify the subject to be taught and the books to be used in teaching.

²⁵ Khalil A. Totah, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education*. Bureau of Publications. (Teacher College. Columbia University. New York from the Edition 1926, First AMS published in 1972 U.S.A), 44

²⁶ For more details refer to Ali Muhammad al-Salabi, *Dawlat al-Salajiqā' wa Buruz Mashru' Islami li Muqawamat al-Taghalghul al-Batiniwa al-Ghazaw al-Salibi*, [Seljuk State and the Emergence of an Islamic Project to Counter the Esoteric penetration and Crusade Invasion], *Silsilat Tarikh al-Hurub al-Salibiyah*, (Mu'asat Iqra': 1st edn., 2006), 28. And Goerge Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and in the West*, Edinburgh University Press, dn., 1981), 162-163

²⁷ Tahraoui Ramdane. *Education and Politics; A Comparative Inquiry of the Fatimids and the Ayyubids in Middle age Egypt*. (Lap Lambert Academic Publishing. USA & UK. 2011), 240

²⁸ Hardaker, G., Sabki, A.A. (2011, December 14). *Reflections on Islamic Pedagogy*. Beyondlabels Press. Retrieved from <http://beyondlabels.typepad.com>

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and University. By FSTC Limited . Retrieved from <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/al-qarawiyyin-mosque-and-university> [17/11/2016]

³¹ Mohammed al-Qatri. *Al-Jamiaat al-Islamiyah* (Islamic universities) pg. 110 as cited in Ahmad Shalabi, *Tarikh al-Tarbiya al-Islamiyah* (History of Islamic Education)

³² Salim al-Hassani. *Women's Contribution to Classical Islamic Civilisation: Science, Medicine and Politics*. Ibid

³³ Dossett, R.D. (2014). *The historical Influence of Classical Islam on Western Humanistic Education*. *International journal of social science and humanity*, 2(4), 88-91.

Regardless of the changes that have occurred in al-Qarawiyyin throughout its history it is evident “the glory of al-Qarawiyyin ... was its body of scholars, the ulema... al-Qarawiyyin attracted great numbers of students from all over North Africa, Spain and Sahara.”³⁴ All were eager to learn and defy their ideological and sectarian schism in a unique ambiance adorned by tolerance, peace and intellectual freedom which prevailed under the roof of al-Qarawiyyin.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above that the contribution of Fātimah al-Fihri to education and knowledge was significant. The idea of establishing a mosque-university had preoccupied the mind of a Muslim woman was realized due to her dedication and commitment. The same idea has led to the foundation of a great hub of knowledge, tolerance and fraternity where Muslims and non-Muslims enjoyed academic freedom. Indeed it is a source of pride that a Muslim woman managed to break the stereotyped depiction of Muslim women in miniatures as beautiful creatures, sex objects who are confined to their bed rooms, harem of sultans and men’s entertainers to successful women who contributed to their societies and played an active social, economic, educational and political role in their respective local communities and nations. It is time to Release these personalities from the history books and get to know them better. This will definitely help to break the stereotypes and misperceptions produced based on prejudices and ignorance which surrounded the image of Muslim women in the imaginary of Muslim women themselves and in the minds of others. Knowledge, business, management, poetry, military skills and entrepreneurship were not a manly monopole. The examples of sayidah Khadijah, Aisha, Sakina Bint al-Hussein, and other influential leaders like the Fatimid Sit al-Mulk, Asmā and Arwa the Sulayhids in Yemen, and Shajaratul Dur of the Mamlukids. Arts and education also witnessed great female contributions, such as the poetry masterpieces of walladah Bint al-Mustakfi in Andalusia, the mathematician and head of library Lubna of Cordoba and Fātimah al-Fihri of Morocco whose name still being associated with one of the oldest and greatest Islamic university al-Qarawiyyin. It is also a source of pride to know that “According to UNESCO, Al-Qarawiyyin University is the oldest existing, continually operating, and the first degree-awarding, educational institution in the world.”³⁵ It is also crucial to mention here that with a high level of certainty we can say that free intellectual dialogue is the key to peace and also to bring people together. The legacy of Fātimah al-Fihri takes us back to medieval Islam when the liberal Islamic culture of learning was prevailing and education was considered as a powerful tool in solidifying religion, bringing people together and building civilization.

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³⁴Muslim Heritage <http://www.muslimheritage.com/uploads/ACF2C23.pdf>[9/11/2016]

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