CHAPTER TWO

THE WOMAN’S RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Here it must be remembered that Islam is a religion of knowledge. It was the Prophet’s recommendation that knowledge should be sought, “even in China”, China being looked upon as a symbol of remoteness. According to Islam, all knowledge is knowledge of God, and therefore it is a divine duty of every Muslim to seek it. It is no surprise then to learn that the Qur’an encourages Muslims to read and learn: “Read! In the Name of your Lord Who has created [all that exists]. He has created man from a clot [a piece of thick coagulated blood]. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught [the writing] by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not.” (96:1–5).

Islamic teachings cover all aspects of the life of a Muslim, as well as regulating all social activities. Although faith and worship are the main themes of all religions, including Islam of course, matters of social relations, as well as political, economic, legal and military aspects also form part of the teachings, and thus the entire life of a Muslim.

Muslim women, as well as men, are called upon to acquire extensive knowledge to understand and follow all the teachings of Islam, and to abide by the five essential religious duties known as the Pillars of Islam. A Muslim cannot perform these duties, which include the ritual ablution, daily prayer and the correct recitation of the creed, without first learning how to do so, and certain verses of the Qur’an have to be memorized in order to pray. Fasting is a duty which must be properly observed, and thus all Muslims have to learn when to stop eating and drinking, and when to break the fast. The giving of zakah (alms) and the performing of the Hajj (pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca) require, of both men and women, knowledge and understanding: knowledge and understanding of the Islamic creed, such as belief in God, His names and His attributes, including the teachings and the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur’an states: “So their Lord accepted of them [their supplication and answered them], ’Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female.’” (3:195).

In the Qur’an, Surah 33 v. 35 begins with the words “Inna al-
 muslimina waal muslimat…” and the entire verse translates to read:
“Verily, the Muslims [those who submit to Allah in Islam], men and women; the believers, men and women [who believe in Islamic Monotheism]; the men and the women who obey [Allah]; the men and women who are truthful [in their speech and deeds]; the men and the women who are patient [in performing all the duties which Allah has ordered and in abstaining from all that Allah has forbidden]; the men and the women who are humble [before their Lord—Allah]; the men and women who give Sadaqat [alms]; the men and the women who observe the Saum [fast—the obligatory fasting during the month of Ramadan]; the men and the women who guard their chastity [from illegal sexual acts]; and the men and the women who remember Allah much with their hearts and tongues, Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward [that is Paradise].”

It is in this verse that the Qur’an shows that God offered forgiveness and reward for men and women holding the described virtues, using the feminine gender to confirm women’s position in a society where previously they had been largely suppressed and ignored. It describes the men and women who will be rewarded by Allah: those who are monotheists and submit to Allah and obey Him, those who are true in word and deed, those who perform good deeds and avoid wrongdoing including unlawful sexual intercourse, and those who observe the obligatory fasting during the month of Ramadan.

As I have already mentioned, right from these early days, the women were anxious to learn about their religion, and asked the Prophet himself to fix a day exclusively for their own lessons, which fact is also quoted by al-Bukhari in his Collection of Hadith: “Some women requested the Prophet to fix a day for them as the men were taking almost all his time. On that, he promised them one day for religious lessons and commandments.” Again quoted by al-Bukhari, the Prophet also told the men that they should allow women to attend the prayers and lessons at the mosque, saying “If the wife of any one of you asks permission to go to the mosque, do not forbid her.” A further quotation included in the collection is “Whenever I stand for prayer, I want to prolong it, but on hearing the cries of a child, I would shorten it as I dislike to put his mother in trouble.” On another occasion, after the Prophet had been preaching at the pulpit, he went towards a group of women, and thinking they had not heard the sermon, proceeded to deliver it to them specifically. In one of the authentic Traditions of the Prophet, he was heard to say that three types of people would receive a double reward: firstly, a person from the people of the scriptures who