

CHALLENGES OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN *TAHFIZU'L-QUR'ĀN*: ILORIN AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The practice of Qur'an memorization, initiated by Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, has been perpetuated by Muslims across generations to harness its numerous spiritual and intellectual benefits. Today, Qur'an memorization has evolved to include global competitions that test and celebrate proficiency among Muslims. Despite both genders participating, female memorizers remain significantly underrepresented. This paper investigates the specific challenges faced by female Qur'an memorizers in Ilorin, Nigeria. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, the study employs interviews and observations as primary data collection methods. Respondents were randomly selected from among female students, teachers, parents, and coordinators of Qur'an memorization centers in Ilorin. Findings reveal that societal misconceptions about female roles and rights in Islam, coupled with a lack of female-sensitive institutional support, greatly hinder female participation in Qur'an memorization. The study suggests that addressing these challenges requires providing both physical and psychological support to female students and restructuring Qur'an memorization centers to be more inclusive and supportive of female learners.

Keywords: Female-gender, Qur'an Memorization, Challenges, Ilorin Community, *Tafidh*

Introduction

The Qur'an, regarded as the divine manual sent by Allah, serves to guide humanity towards salvation in this World and the Hereafter. It was revealed through angel Jibril to Prophet Muhammad, it was intended for dissemination and explanation for mankind's benefit. Understanding and applying its teachings necessitates its memorization, a practice profoundly encouraged by several *ahadith*(traditions) of the Prophet, highlighting its spiritual and other benefits.

The tradition of memorizing the Qur'an dates back to its revelation in 610 CE when Prophet Muhammad was taught its recitation and memorization, as outlined in Qur'an 75:16-19. This tradition has continued unbroken to the present day. The person who memorizes the entire Qur'an is known as a *hāfidh*, and the activity of Qur'anic memorization is referred to as *tahfidhu 'l-Qur'an*.¹ The term *tahfidh* is derived from the root *hafaza*, meaning 'to preserve, to protect, to retain in one's memory'.² Although now commonly associated with memorization, the concept of *hifdh* originally encompassed both understanding and practice.

¹ M. A. Dzulkifli and A. H. Solihu, 'Methods of Qur'ānicMemorisation (*Hifz*): Implications for Learning Performance,' *Intellectual Discourse*, 26:2 (2018) p. 938

² A. M. Gusau, "Effect of Qur'ānic Recitation Competition to the Contemporary Muslim Women in Northern Nigeria", *Book of Proceedings of the 2nd Annual International Qur'ānic Conference 2012*, Centre of Qur'anic Research (CQR)<https://eprints.um.edu.my/13982/1/%28179-202%29.pdf> p. 189

In classical Arabic lexicon, the term *hāfīdh* was not initially used to denote someone who had memorized the Qur'an. Instead, the term *hāmil* (i.e., one who carries) was used, while *hāfīdh* referred to scholars of hadith, specifically those who had committed 100,000 Ahadith to memory. A notable example is Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalaniy, who was famously known *asal-hāfīdh*.¹

The virtues associated with Qur'an memorization have inspired Muslims of all ages to embrace this practice. However, historically, this act has been more prominent among males, from the time of Prophet Muhammad to the present day. Only in recent times have females begun to participate more actively in this virtuous act, albeit in smaller numbers. This gender disparity is concerning, as it limits the benefits females can derive from this precious practice. Moreover, females often serve as the first teachers of every child, making their involvement in Qur'anic memorization particularly important.

This paper hence investigates the challenges encountered by female Qur'an memorizers, using the ancient Islamic city of Ilorin² as a case study. Employing a descriptive and analytical approach, the study utilizes interviews and observations as major research instruments. 80 Respondents were randomly selected; comprising of female students (35), teachers (15), and coordinators of memorization centers in Ilorin (5), parents (15), and others (10).

Virtues of Qur'ān Memorization

Memorization of the Qur'an is a revered act of worship through which a Muslim seeks honor and reward from Allah. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized the immense spiritual benefits of this practice, stating:

The one who recites the Qur'an and has learned it by heart will be with the noble righteous scribes (in heaven), and the one who exerts himself to learn the Qur'an by heart and recites it with great difficulty will have a double reward".³

This profound statement underscores the importance of Qur'anic memorization, making it an enviable tradition that has been highly valued since the time of the Prophet. More importantly, it has served as one of the most effective means of preserving the divine book to this day. Muslims of every generation have thus regarded memorizing the Qur'an as a duty in safeguarding the sacred text.⁴

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) constantly encouraged the regular recitation of the Qur'an and, crucially, acting upon its teachings to maximize the rewards attached to it.⁵ Beyond its spiritual benefits, memorization is also recognized as an effective tool for brain enhancement, as it engages

3 M.A. Dzulkifli and A. H. Solihu, 'Methods of Qur'an Memorization (*Hifẓ*)', p. 943.

2 Ilorin, a prominent Islamic city in Nigeria, has long been a center of Islamic scholarship and culture. Known as the "City of Scholars," it boasts a rich history of Islamic education and has produced many renowned scholars and religious leaders. The city is characterized by its numerous mosques, madrasahs (Islamic schools), and a community deeply rooted in Islamic traditions.

3 M. I. Al-Bukhari. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), Hadith No. 459.

4 S.L. Jimoh, *A Situational Appraisal of Qur'ānic Learning and Memorization in Lagos State* (Lagos: Jam'iyyah Junudu'd-Dini Islamiyyah, 2012), p. 2.

5 M. A. Dzulkifli and A. H. Solihu, 'Methods of Qur'ānic Memorisation (*Hifẓ*)', 944

memory and cognitive skills. For many Muslims, the act of committing the Qur'an to memory is the most accessible and profound means of possessing and internalizing divine knowledge.¹

Allah has granted special privileges to those who memorize the Qur'an, promising various rewards in both this world and the hereafter. The Prophet emphasized that the status of a person who memorizes the Qur'an will be commensurate with the last ayah (verse) they memorized on the Day of Resurrection.² Scholars have agreed that the highest abode in Jannah (Paradise) is equivalent to the number of verses in the Qur'an, and a believer will rise in status for each ayah memorized. Upon completing the recitation of the Qur'an, a hāfidh (one who has memorized the entire Qur'an) will attain the highest abode in Jannah.³

A hāfidh also takes precedence over others in leading the prayer, as commanded by the Prophet.⁴ On the Day of Resurrection, he/she will be adorned with a crown and garment of honor, symbolizing his/her esteemed status.⁵ In another hadith, the Prophet affirmed that the Qur'an will intercede for its memorizers on that day, and their parents will also be honored.⁶ This recognition reflects not only the individual's devotion and effort but also the communal and generational impact of their dedication. The virtues of Qur'anic memorization extend far beyond the individual act; they encompass profound spiritual rewards, intellectual benefits, and a lasting legacy within the Muslim community. This practice remains a cornerstone of Islamic tradition, embodying the deep reverence Muslims hold for the Qur'an and their commitment to preserving and living by its teachings.⁷

Female and Islamic Education in Ilorin

In Islam, female education is as important as male education. Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of acquiring knowledge for all Muslims, regardless of gender, saying, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim".⁸ From the time of the Prophet, women were encouraged to study the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and even the Arabic language. Whenever a verse was revealed, the Companions would memorize its laws and guidance, even if they did not memorize it word for word. Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, praised the women of Madinah for their boldness in seeking religious knowledge.⁹ This practice has been a motivating factor for Muslim women across the globe in every generation including Ilorin.

In recognition of the importance attached to Islamic knowledge, Ilorin has developed several educational centers with three systems of Islamic learning: Qur'an and Ilmi schools, Modernized Arabic schools, and public and private Western schools.¹⁰ In these institutions, there is no gender discrimination, as both male and female children are enrolled and actively participate in learning

¹ M.A. Yusuf, *Memorization as a Learning Style: A Balance Approach to Academic Excellence* (Malaysia: University Kebangsaan, 2008), p. 76

² S. A. Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2008), Hadith No. 1464.

³ M.I. Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), Hadith No. 2914.

⁴ M. I. Al-Bukhari. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Hadith No. 667.

⁵ S. A. Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith No. 1452

⁶ S. A. At-Tabaraniy, *Mu'jamu-l-Awsat*, (Cairo: Dāru-l-Haramayn, nd) Hadith No. 6741.

⁷ S. A. At-Tabaraniy, *Mu'jamu-l-Awsat*, p. 51.

⁸ M. Y. Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Maa'jah*, (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), Hadith No. 224

⁹ M. I. Al-Bukhari. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Hadith No. 101.

¹⁰ M. Yusuf. "Islamic Education in Ilorin: Historical Development and Challenges" *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2023, p. 56

activities. However, female attendance is usually lower compared to that of the male counterpart. This is due to various factors, including the usual assistance female children provide in household management and small-scale businesses of their mother. Despite these challenges, some female students excel in Qur'an learning and graduate alongside their male colleagues.¹

In *Ilmi* and modernized Arabic schooling system in Ilorin, female students are present in almost every school. They take subjects such as *Hifdh* (Qur'an memorization), *Tafsir* (exegesis), and *Tajwid* (science of Qur'an recitation), which are centered on Qur'anic texts and are part of the compulsory subjects. Consequently, these students must memorize verses and chapters specified in the curriculum and are periodically assessed both orally and in writing.² Additionally, in subjects like *Tawhid* (Theology), *Akhlaq* (Ethics), etc. they equally memorize several Qur'anic verses related to various topics therein.

The importance attached to Qur'an memorization makes some youths from Ilorin travel to places like Maiduguri, Kano, Jos, and Kaduna to further their Qur'anic memorization and perfect their recitation endeavor. While this practice has traditionally been more common among males, notable females are also participating. For instance, Firdaos Ridwanullah and Aisha Apaokagi are leading examples of females who have traveled to Kano to complete their Qur'an memorization.³

Female Participation in Qur'an Memorization Competition in Ilorin

From the time immemorial, the participation of females at various Qur'an learning centers in Ilorin received a very low turnout compared to that of their male counterparts. Obviously, this is born out of the fact that most parents do not place much priority to the need for a female child to learn the Islamic knowledge and their only focus is on her being trained on how to maintain the house as a prospective wife and mother.⁴ Hence, it is a popular belief that girls end up their careers in the kitchen and other matrimonial engagements while the male children have higher responsibilities at home and in the larger societies. This also has impact on female participation in the art of memorization.

A strong motivating factor which fertilized the growth of Qur'an Memorization in Ilorin was annual Qur'an Memorization competition during the last ten days of Ramadan on Kwara Radio Station tagged as 'Ramadan Village'. The program was initiated and anchored by Mall. Abubakar Imam Yakub Ali-Agan (now Prof. Abubakar Imam Ali-Agan). In the beginning, his program known as *Eeku-Ongbe*, he would solicit for gifts/prizes from the public for the participants and people responded with money as well as other materials including copies of the Qur'an. The program usually attracted a large number of participants. In 2001, the then governor of Kwara State, Alhaji Muhammad Lawal donated three Hajj tickets to the program for the first, second and third winners of the Qur'an competition. The beneficiaries of that year were: Sa'id Ahmad Katibi (now Dr. Sa'id Ahmad Katibi), Murtadha Yahya and AbdurRasheed Umar. In the following year, 2002, five tickets were given and won by: Khalid

¹ K.A. Adegoke, "Low Participation of Women in Islamic Education in Nigeria," *Al-Hadarah, LASU Journal of Arabic & Islamic Studies*, Vol. 8, (April 2012), p.76.

² Interview conducted with Shaykh AbdulHayy Nageri at Markaz Sunnah, Alagbado, Ilorin, 23rd April 2023.

³ Interview conducted through Phone with Aishah Apaokagi, 25th April 2023.

⁴ Y. D. Gambari, A. F. Salman and H. B. Elemosho, "An Assessment of Female Participation in Ad-Da'watu's-Salafiyyah in Ilorin," *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies, (IJOURELS)* Vol.10 No.2, 2020, p.45.

Bello Gambari (now Dr. Khalid Ishola Bello), Mall. AbdulwahidJibril, Abdullatif Sulaiman Offa, Ridwan Muhammad Jamiu Alfa Ibeji(now Dr.Ridwan Muhammad Jamiu) and Hassan AbdulQadir. In 2003, Senator RukayaGbemisolaFoworaSaraki also donated one Hajj ticket for the same purpose.¹

In Ramadan Village'sQur'ān recitation program, the records show the emergence of female participants, though very few. Prominent of these contestants includes:RisqatAkanbi II, AishaAkanbi II,Aisha Olagunju, Khadijah Muhammad Awwal, 'AishahAboto among others. The same was said of Annual Qur'ān recitation program of Ilorin branch of NACOMYO on every last day of Ramadan at Ilorin Emir's palace.² Other Islamic associations that organize Qur'ān competition occasionally at different areas of operation equally have female contestants.³ In recent time, each of the inter-institution Qur'ān competitions organized by the University of Ilorin Muslim Community, Al-Hikmah University and Kwara State University, Malete at their respective campuses, had many female participants.⁴

National Qur'ān Recitation Competition annually organized in Nigeria by the centre for Islamic Studies, Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto is another motivator. In the history of National Qur'ān Recitation Competition, Kwara State hostedthe event twice, in years 2000 and 2017. Automatically, the program always has positive impact on the hosting community. Unlike before 2000, there is great increase in the number of *huffadh* in Ilorin. The enrollment into in available memorization centers booms while many other centers emerge in addition to the existing ones.⁵

It is observed that female participation from Ilorin in Qur'ān memorization competition was very low from the start. According to the same source, there is no record of female participant emerging a winner from Ilorin metropolis in the past national competitions. Until recent time, the situation improves as Hajarat Oba Imam-Fulani and MaimunatDasuki emerged winners of the lowest categories in 2014 and 2017 at Jigawa and Kwara States respectively. More interestingly, the 2016 edition of Kwara State Competition held in Ilorin, all winning participants at virtually all female categories were indigenes of Ilorin. For instance, Maryam Muhammad Awwal, Aisha Ahmad Apaokagi and Maryam Imam Fulani representing Ilorin West Local Government are the overall winners of 2nd, 4th and 5th categories respectively. In the 6th category, MaimunatDasuki from Ilorin East won first position in the same competition.⁶

Challenges of Ilorin Females in Qur'ān Memorization

The challenges faced by females in Qur'ān memorization in Ilorin are multifaceted and varied; influenced by societal, educational, and personal factors. Some of the identified hindrance to female participation and performance in Qur'ān memorization are highlighted below:

¹ Interview conducted with Dr. Khalid Bello (Imam,General Hospital Mosque, Ilorin), 23rdApril 2023

² Interview conducted with the Secretary of NACOMYO,GRA, Ilorin, 24thApril, 2023

³ Interview conducted with Dr. Sa'id Ahmad Katibi, Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin, 23rd April 2023.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ A. M. Sifawa, "The National Qur'anic Recitation Competition over the Years: TheFeet and Challenges" *Book of Proceeding of the National Conference on National Qur'ānic Recitation Competition in Nigeria*,(Sokoto: Centre for Islamic Studies, Usman Dan Fodio University, 2017),p. 30

⁶"Final Result of 6thFemale Category of National Qur'ānic Recitation Competition 2017 Edition,"(Sokoto: Centre for Islamic Studies, Usman Dan Fodio University, 2017), p. 30

Ikhhlās (Sincerity of Intention): This is essential in every act intended to please Allah. The Qur'an states, "Say: verily, I am commanded to serve Allah with sincere devotion" (Qur'an 39:11). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also said, "Indeed all deeds are with intention."¹ On the contrary, some students in Qur'ān memorization schools exhibit intentions that are far from being sincere. Some student interviewees asserted that the primary aim of some of their colleagues was to gain prizes and pride through Qur'ān memorization exercise rather than seeking Allah's pleasure. They added that their colleagues see the exercise as means of accessing suitable suitors from among their male teachers and colleagues. This often led to frequent rivalry over potential marriage proposals from male tutors or students. This scenario often distracts them from their study. Sometimes, when such hopes are not realized, they often discontinue their studies.² This scenario undermines the sincerity required for this noble pursuit. In another instance, the indiscriminate marriage proposals, especially from within the *madrasah*, create psychological stress and distraction for the female students. Some other students are proud and boastful, thereby looking down on other colleagues who are slow learners. This happening, most often demoralize the average student who loses confidence in themselves and withdraw from school.³

Prioritization of Western Education: Most students attending Qur'ān memorization centers in Ilorin are simultaneously engaged in Western education, which often takes precedence. These students fall within the age range of 4 to 25 years, and very few are married. The emphasis on excelling in Western education often leads to a lack of support consciously or unconsciously from the parents. Parents who view Qur'ān memorization as a distraction from their children's Western educational careers typically offer little encouragement. This lack of support, coupled with the demands of Western education, greatly hinders performance in Qur'ān memorization.⁴ Students usually resume for school by 8:00am and return any time between 5:00pm and 6:00 pm coming with series of take-home assignments; they only lobby for Qur'an study between 5:00pm and time of salat (Maghrib). This implies that Western education consumes more than 70% of these students' time, leaving less than 30% for Qur'ān study education and other activities. The situation worsens at the tertiary level, where the demands of academic activities often cause students to forget what they have learned.

Shortage of Female Tutors: Another challenge is the lack of enough female tutors. Older female students often feel uncomfortable learning from male tutors, while younger students may prefer male tutors. Aisha Ibrahim, a 17-year-old student, mentioned the difficulty of discussing personal feminine issues with male tutors.⁵ Conversely, Muheedah Bello, a 20-year-old student, believed that male tutors can discipline students more effectively.⁶ Khaolah Qamaruddin highlighted the potential for *fitnah* (temptation) when learning from male tutors, which can distract from the primary goal of memorization. Her personal experience with a male tutor, where her refusal to entertain a marriage proposal led to setbacks, illustrates this issue. The scarcity of female tutors often forces students to either quit or struggle in their pursuit of memorization.⁷

¹ M. I. Al-Bukhari. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Hadith No. 1.

² The informant preferred their identities not mentioned.

³ *ibid*.

⁴ Interview conducted with Dr. Ali Miqdad Ali, Adewole Estate, Ilorin, 25th April 2023.

⁵ Interview conducted with Aisha Ibrahim, a 17-year-old student at Daru'l-Furqan Center for Qur'ān Memorization, Ilorin, 27th April 2023.

⁶ Interview conducted with Muheedah Bello, a 20-year-old student of Alh Yahyah Sanni Madras, Ilorin, 23rd April 2023.

⁷ Interview conducted with Khaolah Qamaruddin a 22-year-old student of Alh Yahyah Sanni Madrasa, Ilorin, 23rd April 2023.

Aftermath of Marriage: Marriage often leads to a cessation of Qur'ān memorization for many female students. Lack of encouragement from husbands and increased marital responsibilities contribute to this trend. Relocation due to marriage can also remove students from supportive environments. This problem is more pronounced in Yoruba-speaking communities, where marriage greatly hinders female participation. In contrast, in Northern Nigeria, married women, including pregnant and nursing mothers, often continue to participate actively in Qur'ān competitions.¹ Notable exceptions in Ilorin include HajiaHabeebahEleshin, who trained her daughters in memorization, and the daughters of Akanbi II, who excelled in competitions but faded from the scene after marriage.

Multiple Traditional Tasks of a Female Girl: In Ilorin, the traditional roles and responsibilities assigned to female children hinder their ability to memorize the Qur'an. These roles often include extensive domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger siblings, which consume a considerable amount of time and energy. Additionally, the preparation for marital responsibilities, which may involve learning various household skills and participating in family functions, further limits the time available for religious studies. This division of time and focus lead to a situation where Muslim female children in Ilorin find it challenging to dedicate the necessary attention to Qur'an memorization. The societal expectations placed on these young girls to fulfill traditional gender roles often compete with their academic and religious aspirations, creating a complex dynamic that influences their overall educational experience.²

Change of Residence: Relocation, whether prompted by parents' career changes, higher education admissions, or marriage, frequently disrupts the Qur'ān memorization journey of female students. The challenge intensifies when they relocate to areas lacking suitable madrasahs or structured Islamic education facilities, thereby halting their memorization progress. However, amidst these disruptions, there are instances where relocation can unexpectedly catalyze positive outcomes. A notable example is HajiaHabeebahElesin, who, upon moving to Saudi Arabia, found herself in an environment conducive to deepening her Qur'ān memorization. Inspired by this opportunity, she not only perfected her own memorization but also played a pivotal role in guiding her children on a similar path of Qur'ānic learning and memorization. HajiaHabeebah's experience highlights how relocation, despite its challenges, can sometimes lead to enhanced spiritual growth and educational opportunities in the pursuit of Qur'ān memorization.³

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the virtues of Qur'ān memorization and the challenges faced by female students in Ilorin. Key hindrances to the female participation include societal prejudice against female education, lack of female-centric infrastructure, and inadequate support systems. Societal norms and expectations often prioritize Western education over Islamic studies for females, limiting their time and energy for Qur'ān memorization. The expectation for women to focus on domestic roles further

¹For instance, in the 2011 edition of National Qur'ān Recitation Competition held in Jigawa State, Khadijah Yunus Ilyas and her daughter, Aminat Muhammad Awwal represented Kano State in the 2nd (60 *Hizb*) and 3rd (40*Hizb*) categories, and both held first positions in the two categories respectively. Another instance is the case of a 21-year-old mother of two kids, Aminah Zubayr Abdullahi who won the overall best position in the highest category (60*Hizb*with *Tafsir*) in the 25th edition of the National Quran Recitation Competition held at Sokoto State, 2009.

² Interview conducted with RafiatAfodun, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, 23rd April 2023.

³ Interview conducted with Habeebah Elesin, an *hafidha*, Tanke, Ilorin, 23rd April 2023.

impedes their progress. The shortage of female tutors creates discomfort and distractions, exposing female students to potential fitnah when interacting with male tutors. Overcoming these challenges requires unwavering support from families, communities, and institutions. Parents should prioritize Islamic education for their daughters. Qur'ān memorization centers need more female tutors. Flexible schedules that accommodate female students' unique needs are essential. Community leaders and policymakers must promote gender equality in religious education. Public awareness campaigns and funding can support the development of female-friendly educational infrastructures. Follow-up with female students after marriage to ensure continuity in their Qur'an memorization is highly required. The aforementioned recommendations will not only surmount the challenges faced by the female students but will enhance their participation *Tahfizu'l-Qur'ān*.

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