

Al-Muhaddithat: A web-app for learning about the women narrators of hadith

Ayah Aboelela and Remy LeWinter

Background and User Guide

Historical Background

The first 3 centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. were when the intellectual tradition of Islam and Islamic sciences were being formulated. What began as a largely oral tradition in the time of the Prophet was now being further developed orally and textually, by converting memorized sayings of the prophet into textual collections and collecting the verses of the Quran into one, verified document. The first generations of Muslims, called the “companions” or contemporary followers of the Prophet, passed down his teachings to the next generation (the “tabi’een,” or those who have never met the Prophet but have met his companions), who passed it down to the following generation, and so on.

Because of their diligence in recording narration chains (chains that show who a scholar received information from that usually goes back to the Prophet or companion) and verifying the authenticity of the knowledge they received, we have many records of scholars involved in the early centuries of Islamic intellectual development.

This is especially the case when it comes to hadith—the teachings of the Prophet via words or actions. Early Muslim scholars understood that the Prophet’s teachings made up a significant part of Islam as a religion—they would be used to shape social norms, laws, government policies, economic transactions—almost every aspect of life and society. Therefore, these scholars undertook several efforts to preserve hadiths and gauge their authenticities.

So today, we have records of tens of thousands of individuals involved in this intellectual movement of hadith sciences—people who narrated hadiths, recorded them textually, developed methodologies to gauge authenticity, learned hadiths from other scholars, and taught them to their students. While most of the recorded people involved in this movement are men, our project seeks to emphasize the role of women in the preservation of hadith.

There were several women companions of the Prophet—some were his family members, and others were neighbors in Madinah or Muslims who simply came to learn from him. Since his wives had a perspective on his life that no other companion—male or female—could have, the hadiths they narrated give intimate glimpses into the Prophet’s lifestyle: what kind of clothes he wore, how he did household chores, how he treated children, how he ate, how he slept, how he worshipped and prayed in the privacy of his home. The subjects of hadiths narrated by women were not limited to this though; they also narrated about different jurisprudential topics like hajj, military practices, financial etiquette, Islamic burial rites, requirements for bodily purity (for both men and women), and several others.

For this web-app, we selected 14 women narrators of hadith to build graphs that display networks of scholars, specifically who their students and teachers were, so that users can see the influence they had upon the Islamic intellectual tradition. There are also short biographies for each of the narrators that show their educational background and impact upon hadith scholarship, as well as selected hadiths that they narrated. Our goal in developing this web-app is to educate those with a preliminary familiarity with hadith about the significant roles of women in hadith scholarship.

Reliability Chart

Classical scholars of hadith have formulated grading systems to rank the reliability and authenticity of hadiths. These grades were given based on various factors, like whether the content of the hadith contradicts other reliable hadiths or Quranic teachings (in which case it wouldn't be graded very highly), whether the isnad (narration chain) was verifiable, and the reliability of the narrators in the isnad chain themselves.

In fact, a separate grading system was formulated to gauge the reliability of the narrators themselves, and included 12 categories that consider their strength of memory, whether they were known as liars, whether they were considered righteous, and other factors. These categories ranged from being a “Companion” (contemporary of the Prophet), narrators who were known to be honest and trustworthy, narrators about whom very little is known, and, the lowest two categories, narrators accused of lying and narrators accused of fabricating hadiths. According to Mohammad Akram Nadwi, no women narrators were ever categorized in these lowest two categories.¹ The reliability of the narrators influenced the grade that would be given to a hadith. Table 1 shows the 12 narrator grades as defined by Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, which are widely accepted in Islamic scholarship. For this project, we are including scholars with the following grades: no doubt (Companions), thiqah thiqah (Awthaqun Nas), thiqah (Thiqat), sadooq (Saduq), sadooq/delusion (Saduq Yahim), maqbool (Maqbool/Layyin), not thiqah (Majhool al-haal/Mastur), and undefined grade. We are excluding scholars with the following grades: abandoned (Matruk), accused liar (Muttaham bi'l kadhīb), liar (Kadhdhaab, waddaa'), weak (Da'eef), and unknown-majhool (Majhool).

The most influential hadith scholars, like Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim, used and developed the hadith grading system to assign a score to each of the thousands of hadiths they textually recorded in their collections. Table 2 shows 4 grades that were used to determine the authenticity of hadiths. For our project, any hadiths collected were labelled as either “Sahih” or “Hasan” to ensure reliability.

Table 1: Narrator Grades	
Label	Explanation
Sahaba	The first generation of Muslims did not need testimony to their knowledge or

¹Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, Interface Publications, 2007.

(Companions)	character as Allah the Most High has already done so in the Qur'an.
Awthaqun Nas (Thiqa Thiqa) (most trustworthy)	These are the most trustworthy of people outside of the first generation of Muslims and this is the highest rank. They were learned scholars who were also of the most upright moral characters.
Thiqat (trustworthy)	These narrators are trustworthy in all areas including good retentive memory, but not to a superlative degree like those in the second rank.
Saduq (truthful)	Truthful but less than rank three (Thiqat).
Saduq Yahim (generally truthful)	Those who are trustworthy but who sometimes made mistakes in narrating hadith, or have some delusion.
Maqbool/Layyin (acceptable)	Those who are accepted or acceptable. They transmitted a smaller number of hadith, and we do not have proof against their reliability (or for them to be extraordinarily sound).
Majhool al-haal/Mastur (not Thiqa)	Those whose situation is not precisely known. They had students who transmitted hadith from them, but they did not have tawtheeq, or a testimony of trustworthiness, from the scholars of hadith. There is nothing wrong with them from what is apparent, but we don't really know anything about them.
Da'eef or weak	This means that there is nobody speaking positively on their behalf, and some of the scholars have spoken against them.
Majhool or unknown	This is not the same as majhool al-haal. The majhool al-haal had more than one student narrate from them; the majhool is narrated from by only one individual, and we know nothing of them or their honesty.
Matruk or abandoned	This rank covers a few categories of narrators. This includes those who committed many mistakes, those who had detailed criticisms against them from scholars, or those who did not meet the requirement for moral character. Also included here are those with major sins (the fasiq) and those who are unintelligent.
Muttaham bi'l kadhib (accused of lying)	The one who was accused of lying and/or making up fake hadith. The hadith he narrates are considered <i>batil</i> (cannot be quoted, used, or referred to).
Kadhdhaab, waddaa' (confirmed to lie)	These are actually called liars or fabricators. Being labeled with such a title is not the same as merely being accused of committing those acts in some instances. The hadith they narrate are considered maudu or fabricated.
Source: http://muslimscholars.info/	

Table 2: Hadith Grades		
Label	English Translation	Explanation
Sahih	Sound	Hadiths verified for authenticity, based on their content and sound isnad (chain of narrations) up to the Prophet himself.
Hasan	Good	Hadiths whose content is not problematic or contradictory with the Quran and other <i>Sahih</i> hadiths, but whose narrators may not have the same level of memory
Daif	Weak	Hadiths whose isnads are not fully verified
Maudu	Fabricated	Hadiths that have been proven to be fabricated and falsely attributed to the Prophet

How to use the app

To start using the app, select a narrator from the drop down menu in the top left. The left sidebar will be updated with a biography about the selected narrator, as well as some sample hadiths that she narrated.

In the center of the layout, the graph visualization of the network of the selected narrator's teachers and students will be displayed. The red nodes indicate female narrators, and the gray ones indicate male ones.

The edges indicate teacher-student relationships. An arrow pointing *from* one Node A and *to* Node B indicates that Node A taught, or narrated to, Node B.

The graph can be zoomed in to more clearly see edges and nodes.

When a node is clicked, some information about the narrator it represents will be displayed in the top right corner, including name, generation, and gender.

Use the reset button to reset the zoomed view of the graph.

Learning Assessment

To help guide students and learners through the app, here are some questions that can be considered in a class setting before and after using the app. We encourage educators to use these questions for reflection and discussion.

Questions to consider before using the interactive app:

- What notions do you have about women's roles in hadith narrations?
- Who do you think women narrated from and narrated to?
- What types of hadiths do you think women mostly narrated? Family-related, legal rulings, details about the Prophet's life at home, or other topics?

Questions to consider after/while using the interactive app:

- Did any of your notions on women's roles in hadith narrations change? How so?
- Do you notice any patterns/trends in who the women narrators taught or learned from?
- Were certain narrators more likely to narrate from certain other narrators? Did any teacher/student relationships within the women narrators network stand out to you? Or perhaps between women and men?

Resources and references used for bios and hadiths

- *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* by Mohammed Akram Nadwi
- www.muslimscholars.info
- www.sunnah.com
- www.abuaminaelias.com
- <http://qaalarasulallah.com/>
- Nuriddeen Knight, "Barred from That Which You Love: Lessons from the Life of Umm Salamah." *Yaqeen Institute*. April 21, 2020.
<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/barred-from-that-which-you-love-lessons-from-the-life-of-umm-salamah>
- "Hafsah bint Seereen (Part 1)." *Ideal Muslimah*.
<http://idealmuslimah.com/personalities/womenscholars/559-hafsah-bint-seereen-part-1.html>
- Zainab bint Yunus. "Another Man's Daughter: The Story of Zaynab bint Abi Salamah." *My Iddah*.
<http://my-iddah.com/another-mans-daughter-the-story-of-zaynab-bint-abi-salamah/>
- "Hasan al Basri: The Paradigm of Piety and Eloquence." *Miftaah Institute*. November 14, 2018. <https://miftaah.org/articles/2018/11/14/hasan-al-basri>

Glossary

ﷺ : Arabic calligraphic symbol for "peace be upon him," used respectfully when the Prophet's name is mentioned

Id or Eid: an Islamic holiday

Ansar (singular: Ansari (m) or Ansariyyah (f)): literally, the "helpers," or the group of Muslims who were already residents of Madinah, as opposed to the "Muhajirun," or the immigrant Muslims who migrated to Madinah with the Prophet ﷺ from Makkah.

Faqeeh/Faqeeha/Fuqaha: a faqeeh is someone who studies fiqh, Islamic jurisprudence. "Faqeeha" is the singular feminine form (so, a *woman* who studies fiqh) and "fuqaha" is the plural version (gender neutral).

Fatwa: a legal opinion on Islamic jurisprudence given by a scholar

Fajr: dawn, or the dawn prayer

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence

Hadith: oral traditions about the Prophet's teachings. They can be his quotes or speeches, or quotes from companion describing an action they witnessed him doing.

Hajj: the pilgrimage to Makkah that all Muslims are required to undertake once in their lives if they have the means (wealth, health, transportation, safety, etc.) to do so.

Hijrah: migration, usually in reference to the migration with the Prophet ﷺ from Makkah to Madinah

Isnad: the chain of people who narrated a hadith

Masjid: mosque

Muhaddith: someone who studies and/or narrates hadith

Muhaddithat: feminine plural of "muhaddith" - the women scholars and narrators of hadith

Rak'ah: one unit of prayer

Sahaba: the companions of the Prophet ﷺ – his contemporaries, the first generation of Muslims

Salam: "peace," or the greeting used by Muslims

Seerah: the biography of the Prophet ﷺ

Sunnah: the lived practice of the Prophet ﷺ – his habits and way of life

Surah: a chapter of the Quran

Tabi' and Taba' tabi': The Tabi's are the generation succeeding the companions: Muslims who never met the Prophet ﷺ but met his companions. The Taba' Tabi's are the generation succeeding the Tabi's. A **Tabi'iyah** is a female Tabi'.

Tafsir: exegesis, or interpretations/explanations of the Quran.

Umm al-Muminin: literally, "The Mother of the Believers," a title used for the wives of the Prophet ﷺ