Can a woman become an alima? While there is a vast amount of information and literature on the subject of Muslim men’s learning in madrasas, this is not the case for the women’s religious schools. A visit to a women’s madrasa called Jamiatul Banaath, located in India’s sixth largest city, Hyderabad, is the basis for further research on this topic.

Making an appointment to visit the madrasa requires a great deal of patience. For a week, almost every phone call went unanswered, and those that were answered often revealed that the person in charge was absent. On the last possible day, with the help of an editor of the local Urdu newspaper Siasat, which is also known for its affiliated educational trust, some goodwill materialized as one of the teachers of the Jamiatul Banaath offers me a handful of brochures about the school, adding that he would appreciate my coming from a different cultural and religious background could still be genuinely interested in this project, we went on to talk about the school. The girls can study up to the university level at the Jamiatul Banaath and are awarded the alima degree after four years of Islamic studies and the fazila degree after two more years. The syllabus encompasses subjects similar to the standardized syllabus of the madrasas for men. In other words, the girls study Arabic and Islamic literature, the Qur’an, tafsr, the hadith traditions and fiqh, but in addition to these subjects the teaching includes English as well as ‘Home Science’ (childcare, sewing and cooking). Most of the teachers are former students of the Jamiatul Banaath.

It seems that the aim of the Jamiatul Banaath is not merely to shape the students into good housewives, caring mothers and good preachers; they are encouraged to take up a profession. One of the main questions in subsequent research will be to what extent this encouragement is limited to a separate female sphere in society. This separate female sphere can be asserted, because in their roles as teachers, doctors and social workers, which seem to be the most prominent professions among young educated Muslim women, they mainly work among other women.

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