

A'ishah's legacy: Amina Wadud looks at the struggle for women's rights within Islam - Islam: Women

Amina Wadud

I converted to Islam during the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s. I saw everything through a prism of religious euphoria and idealism. Within the Islamic system of thought I have struggled to transform idealism into pragmatic reforms as a scholar and activist. And my main source of inspiration has been Islam's own primary source -- the Qur'an.

It is clear to me that the Qur'an aimed to erase all notions of women as subhuman. There are more passages that address issues relating to women -- as individuals, in the family, as members of the community -- than all other social issues combined.

Let's start with the Qur'anic story of human origins. 'Man' is not made in the image of God. Neither is a flawed female helpmate extracted from him as an afterthought or utility. Dualism is the primordial design for all creation: 'From all (created) things are pairs' (Q51:49).

Therefore, when the proto-human soul, self or person (nafs) is brought into existence, its mate (zawj) is already a part of the plan. The two dwell in a state of bliss: the Garden of Eden. They are warned against Satan's temptation but they forget and eat from the tree. When the Qur'an recounts the event in the Garden, it uses the unique dual form in Arabic grammar showing that both were guilty. The female is never singled out and chastised for being a temptress.

Ultimately, the two seek forgiveness and it is granted. They begin life on earth untainted by a 'fall' from grace and with no trace of original sin. On the contrary, in Islam the creation story for humans on earth begins with forgiveness and mercy as well as a most important promise or covenant from God. He/She/It will provide guidance through revelation. Adam is the first prophet.

Furthermore, the Qur'an is emphatic that since Allah is not created then He/She/It cannot be subject to or limited by created characteristics, like gender. That Arabic grammar carries gender markers has led even the best Arab grammarians erroneously to attribute gender to the thing referred to. Modern feminist studies have analyzed this gender bias in language.

Islam brought radical changes regarding women and society, despite the deeply entrenched patriarchy of seventh-century Arabia. The Qur'an provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. It prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanors. Finally, women are offered the ultimate boon: paradise and proximity to Allah: 'Whoever does an atom's weight of good, whether male or female, and is a believer, all such shall enter into Paradise' (Q 40:40).

In the period immediately following the death of the Prophet, women were active participants at all levels of community affairs -- religious, political, social, educational, intellectual. They played key roles in preserving traditions, disseminating knowledge and challenging authority when it went against their understanding of the Qur'an or the prophetic legacy.

The Prophet's favorite wife A'ishah, from whom the prophet said we should learn 'half our religion', was sought after as an advisor to the early jurists. In the famous 'Battle of the Camel' she was an army general. The prophet even received revelation while resting his head on her lap. Unfortunately, this period passed before it could establish a pattern sustainable as historical precedent. And the name of A'ishahs cannot erase what was to happen to the status of women in the following thousand years.

During the Abbasid period, when Islam's foundations were developed, leading scholars and thinkers were exclusively male. They had no experience with revelation first hand, had not known the Prophet directly and were sometimes influenced by intellectual and moral cultures antithetical to Islam.

In particular, they moved away from the Qur'an's ethical codes for female autonomy to advocate instead women's subservience, silence and seclusion. If women's agency was taken into consideration it was with regard to service to men, family and community. Women came to be discussed in law in the same terms as material objects and possessions. (This is today reflected in Pakistan's rape laws which treat the offense as one of theft of male private property with no consideration for the woman's rights).

Not until the post-colonial 20th century would Muslim women reemerge as active participants in all areas of Islamic public, political, economic, intellectual, social, cultural and spiritual

affairs.

Today Muslim women are striving for greater inclusiveness in many diverse ways, not all of them in agreement with each other. At the Beijing Global Women's Conference in 1995, nightly attempts to form a Muslim women's caucus at the NGO forum became screaming sessions. The many different strategies and perspectives just could not be brought to a consensus. On the Left were many secular feminists and activists who, while Muslim themselves, defined Islam on a cultural basis only. Their politics was informed by post-colonialist and Marxist agendas of nationalism. Concrete issues of women's full equality: standards of education, career opportunities, political participation and representation were understood in Western terms. The cultural imposition of veiling was to them a symbol of women's backwardness; for them full entry in the public domain and other indicators of liberation were reflected in Western styles of dress.

On the far Right, Muslim male authorities and their female representatives, known as Islamists, spearheaded a reactionary, neo-conservative approach. They identified an ideal Islam as the one lived by the Prophet's companions and followers at Madinah. All that was required today was to lift that ideal out of the pages of history and graft it on to modernity adopting a complete shari'ah state, unexamined and unquestioned and opposed to modern complexity. Then life would be perfect. There were no inequities towards women because the law was divine and the matter of patriarchal interpretation was irrelevant. Female Islamists representing this viewpoint handed out booklets (written by men) with titles such as 'The Wisdom behind Islam's Position on Women'. Although the arguments were not intellectually rigorous or critically substantial they held a substantial sway. Ironically, these arguments would also form part of the rhetoric used by secular feminists to discredit human-rights and social-justice advocates who were in the middle ground, who insisted on fighting from within an Islamic perspective, or who happen to wear hijab.

As the term 'Islamic feminism' gained currency in the 1990s through scholars and activists, it would clarify the perspective of a large number of women somewhere between Islamists and secular feminists. While they would not give up their allegiance to Islam as an essential part of self-determination and identity they did critique patriarchal control over the basic Islamic world-view. Islamic feminism did not define these women, and many still reject the term. However, the term helped others to understand the distinction between them and the two

'dominant approaches for Muslim women's rights.

Today more women are active in the discussion and reformation of identity than at any other time in human history. By going back to primary sources and interpreting them afresh, women scholars are endeavoring to remove the fetters imposed by centuries of patriarchal interpretation and practice. By questioning underlying presumptions and conclusions they are creating a space in which to think about gender. Drawing upon enduring principles of human rights, enshrined in the text, they extract meanings that can interact with the changing moral and intellectual circumstances of the reader. And women scholars and activists are also busy constructing a system of legal reforms that can be implemented today for the full status of women as moral agents at all levels of human society.

This moral agency is a mandate of the Qur'an and cannot be restricted by any amount of historical precedent, social custom or patriarchal aspiration. The long-term success of this project lies in the fact that it is all happening within Islam. And the rationale for change comes from the most trustworthy and reliable source of Islam itself -- the Qur'an.

Amina Wadud is an Islamic Studies Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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