

CALL FOR PAPERS

Women and Religious Knowledge: Towards an Ethical Approach to Women's Issues

Dr. Fatma Hafez

Please note that this is a translated version. For the original Call-for-Papers in Arabic, please visit this [link](#)

I. Historical Background:

The 20th century witnessed a series of changes in the status of Muslim women and in some of the prevalent concepts and perceptions of women in the past. Thrusting their way through the public sphere, women forced the perceptions that held sway and defined their existence and vital roles to shake. The modern era also witnessed the rise of a conflict between two perceptions of women: the "female woman" whose restrained function lies in producing and breeding the human race, and the "woman citizen," who is man's partner in development and is his equal in terms of rights and duties. Each of these perceptions poses a number of problematics and raises questions about the reading of the historical practice in approaching women as a subject matter, its repositioning in the light of the two abovementioned perceptions, and the tracking of the transformations that have marked the course of women's lives and pathways within a rich and diverse Islamic history.

The 20th century ushered in a new era in which questions were raised about the Hijab, its significance and impact on women's movement in the public sphere, their education and work rights, and the consequential change in concepts and perceptions. At the end of the century, however, other types of questions came to the fore. They relate to the production of religious knowledge, as well as its producers, in an attempt to dismantle the hegemony of men over the process of interpretation and the production of religious knowledge, and to disengage from the prevailing religious understanding on the assumption that it was the product of prejudiced and male-dominated historical discourses imposed by virtue of men's exclusive exegetical readings of religious texts. This shift in the nature of the questions raised about religious discourse bifurcated into two main variables: First, women's organizations and activists emerged from within the Islamic space after the majority of women's organizations, up to the middle of the twentieth century, had espoused either liberal or leftist referential paradigms. Second, female academics led the feminist movement after decades of advocacy for legal rights. By the beginning of the third millennium, however, several female academic activists started proclaiming affiliation to the Islamic referentiality in their endeavor to reconcile feminist ideas and beliefs on the one hand, and Islamic values on the other hand, which include such concepts as justice, equality and equity. In this regard, two main directions

can be differentiated: The first, has been used in a number of studies, while the other has only been used in a collective attempt.

1. **Direct Reading of Text** This type of textual reading takes the form of feminist studies that offer new readings of religious texts inspired by modern methods¹. Radical critiques were levelled at Islamic scholarship, especially jurisprudence, as being responsible for discrimination against women and the perpetuation of the state of inequality. This trend was founded on two principles: First, the classical interpretation of the text was informed by the historical and cultural conditions experienced by early exegetes, which curtailed the universality of the divine message. Rather than elevating themselves to the status of the text, these exegetes undermined it by subjugating it to their narrow cultural contexts and preconceived thoughts and perceptions (Amina Wadud, 1999)¹. Second, conviction has it that nothing should preclude women from providing more equitable interpretations of text, at least in theory.

This new feminist interpretation of text and history has generated a number of controversies, but the most important thing in this respect is that it has opened the door for the question of the legitimacy of re-reading the text in detachment from the interpretative legacy (what Wadud calls the "direct reading of the text"), on the one hand, and the extent of accuracy of the feminist reading of history based on the thesis of male-dominated knowledge, on the other hand. The question of interpretation in general and the feminist one in particular has been addressed in a number of studies, as is the case with the question of the contribution of women to the production and transfer of knowledge in some engaging studies in contradistinction to the feminist view of history and women's status in it.²

¹ One of the most prominent figures in this context is Amina Wadud who wrote *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, a book which was followed by similar ones authored by Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed and Nimat Barazangi, among others.

² See the following traditional sources:

- Ali bin Mohammed Al-Maafri Al-Malqi (605 AH), *Alhadā'iqū Alghanau fī Akhbāri Anisāi: Tarājimu Shahīrāti Anisāi fī Sadri Al Islami*. Edited and prefaced by Aida Attayib (Libya: Dar Al-Arabiya Lilkitab, 1978); the seven published parts were selected from eleven modern ones based on the original manuscript.
- Badr Al-Din Al-Zarkashi, *Al-Ijābatu fīma Istadrakathu Aisha 'alá Aṣḥābati*. Ed. Saeed al-Afghani, Damascus.

See also the following recent studies:

- Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*. Trans. Abdullah bin Ibrahim Al-Askar, (Beirut: Dar Jadawil, 2013).
- Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*. Trans. Ahmad Al-Adawi (Cairo: Madarat, 2017).

2. Innocent Reading of Text:

In contrast to what has been dubbed the "direct reading of the text" that intersects with classical methodologies, other endeavors to produce modern interpretations of religious texts emerged in the Arab world, exemplified by such work as the *Journal of Women and Civilization* (2000-2002), supervised by Dr. Mona Abul-Fadl, which is one of the most serious attempts to approach the issue of women in the Qur'an. The "innocent reading of the text," a reading based on women's experience and the continuity of the interpretative legacy, though allowing for a margin of criticism of what this legacy has produced in relation to women, differentiates the sources of Islamic theorization by distinguishing authentic sources (Qur'an and Ḥadīth) from derivative sources (classical scholarship and Islamic thought). This trend also advocates differentiation between the text and its interpretation, arguing that no matter how accurate interpretations might get in understanding the meaning of the text, this should not discard the original differentiation between them, which is due to the divergent sources of both texts.

The experience of "Women and Civilization" is not unique in this field. Over a number of years now, the Center for Women's Studies in Islam, a research establishment affiliated to the official Moroccan religious institution Rabita Mohammadia of Ulema, has been engaged in producing religious knowledge that takes into account the feminist dimension, sifting through Islamic heritage, especially at the level of interpretation and jurisprudence, to make it more consistent with recent developments. In this context, a symposium was organized in 2013 aimed at reviewing the Quranic concepts of "al-Wilāya" (guardianship) and "al-Qawāma" (provision of protectorship and maintenance) from a perspective that combines the feminist and the classical dimensions. These endeavors raise questions about the possibilities of producing a feminist type of knowledge that combines methodologies informed by the classical legacy and the modernist one, as well as the possibility of developing an Islamic ethical approach that provides an introduction to dealing critically with traditional discourse about women.

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- Salah al-din al-Monajad, What was Written about Women, Damascus: The Journal of al-Majma' al-'ilmī al-'arabī, 16, no 5-6 (1941): 212-219.
 - Mohammed Khair Ramadan Youssef, The Authors of Women and their Works in Islamic history, Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm ,2000
 - Mohammed bin Azzouz, *Juhūd Almara' Aldimashqiyah fī Riwayati al Hadīthi Asharīfi* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2004).
 - Marion Katz, *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice* (Columbia University Press, 2014).
 - Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Interface Publications, 2013).

II. Description and Objectives of the Seminar

The above background statement reveals the existence of a problematic that characterizes the relationship between contemporary Muslim women and the religious sphere. This problematic has two aspects:

The first aspect portrays women as subjects of research that investigate their status in textual and interpretative sources of knowledge and the forms of their presence, as well as the governing values of the discourses on women, with a view to developing an ethical approach to the religious text concerned with the subject of women, on the one hand, and providing a methodological and critical view of the interpretative and jurisprudential heritage in this regard, by detaching oneself from the constraints of both historical and contemporary contexts.

The second aspect looks at the treatment of women as active knowledge producers both in Islamic history and in contemporary reality, providing studies that evaluate the Islamic feminist product, monitoring its trends and methods in the production of Islamic feminist knowledge, and conducting research about the presence/absence of women in the field of knowledge and its causes, the differences between knowledge produced by women and male-centered knowledge, and the outcome of the methodological and interpretative tools when differentiated along gender lines.

This seminar seeks to address these two axes from multidisciplinary perspectives, tackling these questions objectively and in a way that is not conditioned by the dicta of ideology and advocacy, and contributing to the elaboration of a methodology for the discussion of this subject.

In general, the seminar seeks to:

- Provide ethical approaches to the subject of women beyond apologetic and ideological discourses, in an attempt to achieve a deeper understanding of text, history and present-time transformations.
- Provide critical studies of the phenomenon of re-reading the religious text from a feminist perspective through analytical models that review the principles, methods and tools, and determine the nature and development of their foundations.
- Test key statements in feminist discourse, such as: male knowledge, male prejudice, absence of women from the sphere of knowledge production, etc.
- Provide multidisciplinary studies on women, which transcend monotheistic and ideological visions, and which are open to both Islamic studies and humanities.

III. Suggested Research Questions and Topics:

The proposed research papers should be based on the issues raised above, and the central questions to be addressed can be summarized as follows:

Axis 1: Women as research topics: The image of women in foundational texts and heritage sources

- How can an interpretative framework be presented in understanding the image and status of women in the past and the present?
- What are the ethical concepts governing the status of women in foundational and in exegetical texts (interpretation, jurisprudence, etc.)?
- How can the absolute and the relative be differentiated within the discourse on women's issues?
- Why do Hadiths known as "Women's Hadiths" pose a dilemma within the feminist discourse?
- What determines the contextual? If feminist discourse speaks of a historical context that has imposed itself on historical interpretation, do modern interpretations go beyond their context?
- Can the ethical rules governing women's issues be extrapolated? What is the proposed methodology to do so?

Axis 2: What role do women play in the production of religious knowledge?

- What factors contribute to women's presence/absence?
- Can knowledge be gendered? In what way does feminist knowledge differ from the one that is described as male-dominated?
- How can the feminist interpretation of the religious text, its orientations, methodologies, etc. be evaluated (Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Rifaat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi, *Musawah Movement, Women and Civilization*)?
- How can the critical reviews of women-related jurisprudence undertaken by some religious scholars like Al-Ghazali, Al-Qaradawi, Fadlallah and others be evaluated?

IV. Description and Methodology of Research Papers:

The abstracts and research papers should observe the following criteria:

- The research should focus on a specific theoretical issue or a practical topic, and any proposal that deals with general issues or which is not framed theoretically will not be taken into consideration.
- Apologetic studies or those which revolve around the fair treatment of women and their glorified status in Islam using an oratorical style will not be accepted.
- Descriptive research papers and those which are not grounded analytically or critically will not be accepted.
- Research papers that establish their critique of women's studies on the basis of conspiracy theory that aims to alienate women and secularize the social sphere will not be considered.

The Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics invites researchers and academics interested in the above or related topics to send the following:

- Abstract (300-500 words) which identifies the research problematic, the main question and the sub-questions to be addressed by the research paper, as well as the proposed methodology.
- A brief CV (one page maximum) stating the researcher's academic background, major research interests and publications.
- The authors of accepted abstracts will be notified and invited to submit full-length papers (7,000-10,000 words) according to the timeline shown below.

V. Panel Discussion

Abstracts and full-length papers will be evaluated by a scientific committee, which will select papers on the basis of scientific criteria and their relevance to the aims and objectives of the seminar as outlined in this Background Paper. A limited number of the submitted papers will be selected for participation at a panel discussion in Doha. Accommodation and travel expenses of the participants will be covered by the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics.

Accepted papers, as well as those presented at the seminar, will be eventually sent to two academic referees for blind evaluation in accordance with accepted publication norms and standards. They will then be published in a special issue of *Journal of Islamic Ethics* or in a special volume in the book series *Studies in Islamic Ethics*, both of which are published by Brill. The open-access published works will be made available to the largest possible number of readers around the world.

VI. Language of Research Papers and Panel Discussion:

Abstracts and research papers can be submitted in English or Arabic, and the panel discussion will be conducted in both languages.

Important Dates:

- 15/08/2019: Deadline for abstract and CV submission
- 22/08/2019: Notification of the committee's decision on abstracts
- 02/12/2019: Deadline for submission of full papers
- 10/12/2019: Notification of the committee's decision on papers
- 10-12/02/2020: Seminar to take place at the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) in Doha, State of Qatar
- 30/01/2020: Deadline for the submission of the final version of full papers after making the necessary editorial corrections in the light of the comments and suggestions of the scientific committee. The final papers will then be submitted to Brill for evaluation and publication.

Contact:

- Submissions should be sent to women@cilecenter.org
- For inquiries about this Call for Papers, please contact Dr. Dr. Fatma Hafez at fatima.hafez3@gmail.com
- For all inquiries about *Journal of Islamic Ethics*, please write to: jie@brill.com