

Confronting Sexual Apartheid in Mosques. The Rise of the Gender Jihad in South Africa

195

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Abstract – This article aims to retrace the history of the emergence of the ‘gender jihad’ in South Africa in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, within the broader context of the anti-apartheid struggle. Special attention will be devoted to the figure of Shamima Shaikh (1960-1998) and her crucial role, as National Coordinator of the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa (MYM)’s Gender Desk, in campaigning for women’s equal access to mosque spaces. The impact of the historic sermon delivered by amina wadud at Cape Town’s Claremont Main Road Mosque on August 12th 1994 will also be discussed. By casting light on the intellectual references, socio-political concerns and strategies of actions of the South African gender jihad, this article aims to provide the reader with an example of the complex interaction between the local and the global, the ‘margins’ and the ‘center’, in the construction of modern Islamic discourses.

1. Mourning the brave

When the news that Fatima Mernissi had passed away in Rabat, on November 30th 2015, reached South Africa, two small groups of Muslim activists met to commemorate her life and relentless struggle for women’s equality in Islam, respectively in Cape Town and Durban. The Cape Town’s commemoration was hosted by Al-Fitrah Foundation, formerly known as

The archives in South Africa have been inaccessible to the author because of restrictions to international travel due to the COVID pandemic. This article is mainly based on secondary literature and semi-structured interviews with activists and scholars. I would like to thank them all for their precious information and suggestions. I also owe gratitude to the staff of the University of Cape Town’s Centre of Contemporary Islam, and especially professor Sa’diyya Shaikh, for having helped me to shape my research with their resourceful guidance and feedback. I am also grateful to Fatima Seedat, Na’eem Jeenah, Fatima Noordien, Tahir Sitoto, and Margot Badran for reading the first draft of this article and providing me with their constructive criticism. Specific acknowledgments to other individual contributions to my research can be found throughout this article, and I apologize to those who are left nameless here for mere reasons of space. I have worked on this chapter during a research fellowship at the «Giorgio La Pira» Research Center on the History and Doctrines of Islam (FSCIRE) in Palermo (2020–2021), to whom I am deeply grateful for the financial support.

The Inner Circle, «a faith-based organization that uses spiritual tools to provide acceptance and healing to the queer Muslim community»¹.

The about eight women (and one man) who gathered in Durban organized the commemoration at the community hall of the Women's Cultural Group, a historic women's organization established by Zuleikha Mayat in 1954². Despite some differences, both gatherings were fundamentally religious in nature, as they concluded with the performance of the *salat al-janazah*, the congregational funeral prayer performed for the sake of the deceased's soul. Both ritual prayers were led by women: Fatima Noordien performed the role of the imam in the Cape Town's commemoration, and Aneesa Vawda did in the one held in Durban³.

Both Noordien and Vawda are two long-standing gender jihadis in South Africa. Fatima Noordien developed an early political consciousness in her childhood, mainly through her parents, who were both deeply involved in the Islamic movement and the anti-apartheid struggle. She was twelve years old at the time of 1976 Soweto Uprisings, when massive demonstration broke out in the township of Soweto (Johannesburg) and then spread countrywide, giving new impetus to the struggle against apartheid. Noordien recalls how she joined the demonstration by following her brothers, and stood at the side of a road throwing stones at the police cars that were passing by – full of enthusiasm but without fully realizing what she was doing. Her subsequent involvement in politics came «as a natural flow»: she joined the Muslim Student Association (MSA) while she was in high school, reaching leadership positions once she enrolled at the University of Cape Town⁴.

The journey of Aneesa Vawda as a feminist and Islamic activist began later, as it most commonly occurred, when she enrolled in the University of Durban, in the early 80s. At that time, mass protests against the apartheid regime were reaching their height. She later recalled:

¹ Al-Fitrah Foundation, *About us*, website <https://www.al-fitrah.org.za/page1.html>. The organization was established in 2004 by imam Muhsin Hendricks, who came out as gay in 1998 and was hence forced to resign from his position as a madrasa teacher at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town. For further information on Al-Fitrah Foundation, see F. Piraino - L. Zambelli, *Queer Muslims in South Africa. Engaging Islamic Tradition*, in «Journal for Islamic Studies» 37, 2018, pp. 120-144. On the Claremont Main Road Mosque, see note 42, below in this article.

² The Women's Cultural Group was established mainly as a fund-raising organization for education and other charitable activities. For a thorough examination of its history, see G. Vaheed - T. Waetjen, *Gender, Modernity and Indian Delights. The Women's Cultural Groups in Durban (1954-2010)*, Pretoria, HRSC Press, 2010.

³ Video interviews with Fatima Noordien (May 3rd 2021) and Aneesa Vawda Moosa (April 15th 2021).

⁴ Video interview with Fatima Noordien (May 3rd 2021).

«The intersection of my Muslim activist ‘Islamist’ (before it became a negative term) identity with the anti-apartheid activist ideology whilst immersed in a largely Indian and Muslim South African community was a glorious awakening [...] that shaped my worldview as a student»⁵.

Noordien and Vawda’s journeys of conscientization⁶ were part of a much larger glorious awakening: in South Africa, as well as in many other Muslim majority and minority contexts, the last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a variety of knowledge-building and activism projects for women’s rights that based their call for gender equality on a rigorous interpretation of Islamic primary sources, especially the Qur’an. This kind of discourse came to be known as «Islamic feminism»⁷; it should be noted, however, that this term is highly controversial, and it has sometimes been refused by the very scholars and activists who ostensibly seem to best fit the definition, mainly because of the association of feminism with European intellectual hegemony⁷. Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon; this consideration, however, must not make us forget how the priorities of research, the methodologies of analysis and the strategies of action adopted by the various scholars and activists around the world can vary significantly from place to place. In South Africa, two major issues earned the attention of the Islamic feminist struggle, namely the recognition of gender equality and women’s rights within Muslim marriage law, and the struggle against women marginalization in mosque spaces and Islamic rituals; this article engages primarily with the latter.

⁵ A. Vawda, *In Search of Equality. Strategies of a Durban Gender Jihadi*. Extended draft version, provided by the author, of the chapter included in V. Rivera - N. Jeenah (eds.), *If This Be Madness. An Anthology to Honour the Life and Courage of Shamima Shaikh*. Independently published, 2019, pp. 125-156. I would like express my gratitude to Aneesa for her invaluable support and the warm encouragement she has provided me from the very beginning of my journey of (re)search in South Africa.

⁶ The term «conscientization» was coined by Paulo Freire to refer to the process through which oppressed individual and communities develop a critical consciousness of their social reality through reflection and action. See P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York - London, Continuum, 2005 (original edition, *Pedagogia do oprimido*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1970).

⁷ The heated debate over the definition of «Islamic feminism» is perhaps best captured in a well-known discussion between Margot Badran and Asma Barlas, published in A. Kynsilehto (ed.), *Islamic Feminism. Current Perspectives*, (Tampere Peace Research Institute Occasional Paper, 96), Tampere, Peace Research Institute, 2008. For a critical discussion of «Islamic feminism» from the perspective of two South African Muslim scholars, see F. Seedat, *Islam, Feminism and Islamic Feminism. Between Inadequacy and Inevitability*, in «Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion», 29, 2013, 2, pp. 25-45; S. Shaikh, *Feminism, Epistemology and Experience. Critically (En)gendering the Study of Islam*, in «Journal for Islamic Studies», 33, 2013, pp. 14-47.

To this day, most South African mosques, especially in the Northern provinces and the Kwa-Zulu Natal, do not have a dedicated women's space at all. This is mostly true for mosques of Indian tradition; in contrast, mosques in the Cape Town area usually have separated «women's sections»⁸. Typically, these facilities consist of basements, mezzanines, or small peripheral rooms that, according to Sudanese/South African architect Amira Osman, «reinforce my position as a 'second class' Muslims, deprived from equal experience of the main spaces of mosques»⁹. In the words of black African journalist Nelisiwe Shahida Msomi, the so-called «lady facilities» are «the outcast section of the masjid' that 'makes me feel like the naughty child who is punished by being made to stand in the corner of the class»¹⁰. In township mosques¹¹, where members of congregations are mostly black African converts of the first and second generation, as well as migrants from neighboring countries who came to South Africa in the post-apartheid period, it is more common to find women and men praying in the main space with only a curtain dividing them – and sometimes without it. Even where the main space is equally divided, women's voices are marginalized, and the area remains highly gendered. The kitchen is reserved for women, and since children are supposed to stay with their mothers, there is no room for cultivating co-parenting¹².

⁸ During the apartheid era, Muslims were racialized as «Colored» and distinctions were made between the Capetonian «Malays» from the «Indians» who were predominant in the Eastern and Northern provinces. Although all racial categories of identity are generally refused among engaged Muslims, most of the population still move between racial and religious identities. For a broader discussion of the issue, see M. Haron, *Conflict of Identities. The Case of South Africa's Cape Malays*; unpublished paper presented at *Malay World Conference* in Kuala Lumpur, 2001. For a thorough comparative examination of the mosque tradition in Cape Town and the Northern Provinces (an area formerly known as the Transvaal), see A. Tayob, *Islam in South Africa. Mosques, Imams and Sermons*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1999.

⁹ A. Osman, *Reflection on the Newly Launched Women in Architecture Award*, in «Journal of the South African Institute of Architects», 87, Sept-Oct 2017, pp. 25-29 here p. 26

¹⁰ N. S. Msomi, *The Death of the Muslim Woman's Spirit in the Holy Places*, in V Rivera - N. Jeenah, *If This Be Madness*, pp. 61-68, here p. 62.

¹¹ In the context of South Africa, the term «township» emerged in the segregation era to refer to areas reserved by legislation to the indigenous African population, and hence became a core concept of spatial apartheid. The term remained in use in the post-apartheid era, since the majority of black Africans still inhabit these areas. For an exploration of the existing literature on South African townships, see U. Jürgens - R. Donaldson - S. Rule - J. Bähr, *Townships in South African Cities. Literature Review and Research Perspective*, in «Habitat International» 39, 2013, pp. 256-260.

¹² Video interview with Nelisiwe Msomi (April 21st 2021). For a larger discussion of Black Muslim women's experiences in township mosques, see S. Sesanti, *Manifestations of African Islam. A Case Study of African Muslims in Kwa-Nobuhle Township in the Eastern Cape*, in «Journal for Islamic Studies», 29, 2009, pp. 33-58.

Women ritual leadership, like delivering Friday sermons (*khutab*) and, especially, fulfilling the role of *imam* in the ritual prayer (*salat*), remains a taboo even in most progressive circles: Vawda recalls that when she led the *salat al-janazah* in honor of Mernissi, «my male friend did not pray behind me»¹³.

Women's participation in *janazah* rituals remains «an extraordinary occurrence» among Muslims in South Africa, where the overwhelming majority of *'ulama* (religious scholars) consider *makruh* (reprehensible) for women to be present during the *salat al-janazah* or the funeral procession¹⁴. Traditionally, women participate to the ritual by carrying out the *ghusl* (washing the body of the deceased), and wrapping the body with the *kafan* (white cotton shroud), but as soon as the body leaves the house, men take control of the ritual. Hence, women-led *janazah* are an even more extraordinary event; the first of this kind to be publicly known in South Africa was performed twenty years before the one dedicated to Fatima Mernissi. On January 8th, 1998, community activist Farhana Ismail led a *salat al-janazah* for Shamima Shaikh, one of the groundbreaking figures for Islamic feminism in South Africa, who died on the same day at only 37 years.

2. Shamima Shaikh and her comrades

«A pioneer in promoting inclusive mosques»¹⁵, Shaikh was born on September 14th, 1960, in the rural town of Pietersburg (renamed Polokwane in 2003) from a traditional Indian family. She became politically active shortly after her enrollment in the university of Durban-Westville, through the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and, more specifically, the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO), which she joined in 1984. The BCM,

¹³ WhatsApp chat with Aneesa Vawda, April 1st 2021. Women ritual leadership is a heavily debated issues among Muslims worldwide; for a summary of various positions that emerged in the discussion that followed the Friday prayer performed on March 18th 2005 in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, when amina wadud fulfilled the role of imam in front of a gender-mixed congregation, see A. Elewa - L. Silvers. 'I am One of the People'. A Survey and Legal Analysis on Woman - Led Prayer in Islam, in «Journal of Law and Religion», 26, 2010-2011, 1, pp. 141-171.

¹⁴ R. Omar, *Women and Janazah*. Khutba delivered at Claremont Main Road Mosque on May 18th 2015. In the same sermon, Omar explores the Islamic sources (Qur'an and Sunna) and the opinion of later jurists (*fuqaha'*) to conclude that there is «unequivocal and strong evidence that it is clearly permissible for women to perform *salat al-janazah*». However, he remains silent on the issue of women leading the ritual prayer.

¹⁵ V. Rivera, *Introduction*, in V. Rivera - N. Jeenah, *If This Be Madness*, pp. 1-8, here p. 2.

which emerged in the late 1960s, asserted itself in the 1970s as the leading liberation movement, especially among university students. Its project was as much cultural as it was political because it emphasized the need for black psychological liberation that could free the Africans from the fear and sense of inferiority that made them content with a world designed by and for Whites¹⁶. The BCM also redefined the category of 'Black', calling for the inclusion of all those «who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations»¹⁷. This redefinition was aimed at overcoming the 'divide and rule' politics of the apartheid state, which distinguished the «Colored» and the «Indians» from the «Africans» and gave the former groups a few extra privileges over the latter to sabotage any unitarian action between them¹⁸. For Shaikh, joining the BCM's struggle became «a rite of passage from the local, Indian existence that apartheid expected, to the new black South African identity that she chose»¹⁹.

Although a significant number of women joined the movement, some achieving prominent positions²⁰, the BCM did not actively construct a gender ideology, nor did it have a specific focus on gender issues; some former activists have denounced the deep misogyny and profound masculinism that permeated the movement despite its male militants' professed progressivism²¹. Nevertheless, the BCM provided women activists with a space

¹⁶ G. M. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa. The Evolution of an Ideology*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1976; B. Ndaba et al., *The Black Consciousness Reader*, New York, OR Books, 2019.

¹⁷ S. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, Oxford, Heinemann, 1987 (first edition 1978), p. 48.

¹⁸ For an overview of racial categorization under the apartheid regime, see D. Posel, *Race as Common Sense. Racial Classification in Twentieth Century South Africa*, in «African Studies Review», 44, 2001, 2, pp. 87-113.

¹⁹ A. Tayob - N. Jeenah - S. Shaikh, *Partners in Struggle*, in N. Jeenah - S. Shaikh (edd.), *Journey of Discovery. A South African Hajj*, Cape Town, Full Moon Press, 2000, pp. 13-24, here p. 16.

²⁰ To mention but three examples, Winnie Motlalepula Kgware (1917-1998) was elected president of the Black People's Convention (BPC), an umbrella body for BC groups, as early in 1972; Nombulelo Mkefa became AZAPO's first woman president in 1979; Deborah Nikiwe Matshoba (1950-) was appointed as literacy director of the South African Student Association (SASO) in 1973 and is credited for having proposed the name «AZAPO» at the organization's founding congress. See M. Bofelo, *The Absences and Presences of Women in «His-story»: Biko and Shaikh in Conversation*, in V. Rivera - N. Jeenah, *If This Be Madness*, pp. 177-210, here p. 186.

²¹ For two early examples of such criticism, see A. Moodley, *Black Woman You Are on Your Own*. «Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity», 16, 1993, pp. 44-48; M. Ramphela, *The Dynamics of Gender within Black Consciousness Organisations. A Personal View*, in M. Ramphela - M. Mpumliwana, - L. Wilson (eds.), *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, pp. 214-227. Cape Town, D. Philips, 1991. For a broader discussion of male-centrism and sexism in the BCM, see M. Bofelo,

for conscientization and a platform for activism, with the consequence that their projects «inadvertently changed those [black political] cultures by altering perceptions of the abilities and roles of women»²².

On September 4th, 1985, Shaikh was arrested, together with other activists, for distributing pamphlets that called for a consumer boycott of white-owned businesses. Na'eem Jeenah, the national president of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and a rising star in its parent organization, the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), was also among those arrested²³. This experience marked the beginning of a love relation between Shaikh and Jeenah, who married in 1987. Their union epitomizes the close interconnection between the worlds of the Islamist groups, the BCM and the Marxist left during the years of the anti-apartheid struggle²⁴.

In terms of awareness of gender inequalities, the MYM was not distant from the BCM. Although its program included «some elements of what could be part of a women's agenda»²⁵, the organization was male-dominated and expressed patronizing tendencies, arguing for a 'parallel development' of the sexes that implied separate spheres of social interaction for men and women. Things began to change after the 1987 MYM General Assembly when the new president Rashied Omar announced a «revolution of leadership» that would be prepared for the eradication of apartheid²⁶. With the assistance of the new National Director Ebrahim Moosa, Omar led what Abdulkader Tayob defines as the

The Absences and Presences of Women in «His-story»; P. D. Gqola, *Contradictory Locations. Black Women and the Discourse of Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa*; in «Meridians», 2, 2001, 1, pp. 130-152; L. Hadfield, *Challenging the Status Quo. Young Women and Men in Black Consciousness Community Work, 1970s South Africa*, in «The Journal of South African History», 54, 2013, 2, pp. 247-267.

²² L. Hadfield, *Challenging the Status Quo*, p. 248.

²³ Founded in Durban in 1970, the MYM is an Islamist group inspired by the Egyptian *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (Muslim Brotherhood) and the Pakistani *Jama'at al-Islami*. For a detailed examination of the MYM history in the apartheid era, see A. Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa. The Muslim Youth Movement*, Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press, 1995.

²⁴ A book-length history of these interconnections has yet to be written; Na'eem Jeenah provides a short but effective description of the various backgrounds and positionalities in his article *The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminism in South Africa*, in «Women's Studies International Forum», 29, 2006, pp. 27-41. For a broader picture of Muslims involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, see G. Vahed, *Muslim Portraits. The Anti-Apartheid Struggle*. Durban, Madiba Publisher 2012. For a discussion of the interconnection between the BCM and other progressive movements, see I. McQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements under Apartheid*, Pietermaritzburg, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2018.

²⁵ N. Jeenah, *The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms in South Africa*, unpublished Master Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2001 p. 13.

²⁶ A. Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa*, p. 167.

«contextualist» turn in the MYM ideology: the educational programs were re-written to include critical and hermeneutical approaches to the Islamic sources, and Fazlur Rahman replaced Sayyid Qutb as the most read scholar in the organization's study groups²⁷. The attainment of gender equality became one of the group's pillars. Women started entering its executive cadres: Fatima Noordien paved the way, becoming the first woman to be elected in the MYM National Committee in 1990²⁸. In the same year, the MYM adopted a «Women's Rights Campaign» as one of its three main campaigns, alongside a «Living Wage Campaign» and a «Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse»²⁹.

The Islamic literature available on women was still «limited and often unsatisfactory»³⁰; and remained as such at least until the early 90s when the pioneering work of international scholars such as amina wadud, Leila Ahmad and Fatima Mernissi appeared on the shelves of South African bookshops. Throughout the 1990s. two books in particular – Mernissi's *Women and Islam. An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1991)³¹ and wadud's *Qur'an and woman* (1992)³²– were widely read among South African Islamist activists. The then MYM National Director Ebrahim Moosa organized reading groups in Cape Town for selected activists to discuss Quranic verses on women; the

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 167-183.

²⁸ N. Jeenah, *The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms*; video-interview with Fatima Noordien, May 3rd 2021.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 90 ss.

³⁰ A. Vawda, *In Search of Equality*, p. 1.

³¹ Originally published in French in 1987 with the title *Le Harem politique: le Prophète et les femmes*, Mernissi's book was published in an American edition, translated with the title *The Veil and the Male Elite. A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Basic Books, New York, 1991 and the British edition translated with the title *Women and Islam. An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1991. Both translations were published in 1991; the UK edition was distributed in South Africa, although scholarship in English mostly refer to the American. This book marks the 'Islamic' turn of Fatima Mernissi, who had previously relied on a secularist approach in her campaigning for women's rights. Throughout the book, Mernissi critically engages with the *hadith* literature to explore the role of women in early Islamic society, at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. For a thorough analysis of Fatima Mernissi's work, see R. Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critique in the Work of Fatima Mernissi*. Leiden - Boston, Brill, 2010.

³² Originally written as wadud's PhD dissertation, *Qur'an and Woman* was published in Kuala Lumpur in 1992: A. wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, Kuala Lumpur, Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1992. Throughout the book, wadud argues against the negative attitudes of Muslims toward women, which she claims have influenced the interpretation of the Qur'an regarding gender relations, and explores topics such as human creation, the Hereafter, the representation of women in this world and their rights and duties in the public and private sphere. The book was soon acknowledged as a groundbreaking work; in the following years, it was translated into several languages and re-published with a new preface and added glossary by Oxford University Press in 1999. I discuss more thoroughly wadud's work and her method for Qur'anic hermeneutics in M. Picchi, *amina wadud*, in G. Tamer (ed.), *Handbook of Qur'anic Hermeneutics*, Berlin, De Gruyter, forthcoming 2023.

method he recommended, aimed at critically re-engaging with the Islamic tradition, heavily relied on wadud and Mernissi's «hermeneutical skepticism»³³. In 1993, when the MYM established a Gender Desk and Shamima Shaikh was chosen as its first National Coordinator, excerpts of wadud and Mernissi's books were included in the educational reader packet distributed nationwide, alongside writings by local women activists³⁴.

The decision to establish the Gender Desk came after Shaikh was thrust into the public eye in the aftermath of a women's protest that she led at the 23rd Street Mosque in Johannesburg. The mosque, controlled by former members of the MYM, arranged to accommodate women in the mezzanine floor for the *tarawih* prayer of Ramadan 1993; after facing intimidation on the first night, women continued to attend the mosque throughout the month until the 27th night (March 21st)³⁵. Expecting a considerable crowd for the celebration of the *Laylat al-Qadr*, the mezzanine was again reserved for men and a tent was set up for women outside the building. A group of 25 women, led by Shaikh, refused to be denied access to the mosque and occupied the main room: «despite the anger of the elders, the women stood their ground and prayed»³⁶. In the immediate aftermath, the demonstration appeared to be a failure, as the mosque closed its doors to women once for all following the media backlash. Nevertheless, the action was the main impetus for the MYM's General Assembly to publicly recognize «that gender oppression is pervasive in our communities» and to establish the Gender Desk with Shaikh as its national coordinator³⁷.

³³ Video-interview with Ebrahim Moosa, April 8th 2021.

³⁴ N. Jeenah, *The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms*, p. 21. The earliest version of the Gender Desk educational packs that Jeenah mentions in his thesis, issued in 1994, was impossible to locate for the sake of the present study; I am grateful to Mohammad Groenewald (MYM) for having provided me with a later version of the reader, issued in the early 2000s: F. Waggie, *Introduction*, in Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa, Gender Desk, *Reader on Woman, Gender and Islam*, Muslim Youth Movement-Western Cape Media Desk, undated, ca 2002, p. 1. The texts included in this version are: R. Hassan, *Members, One of Another Gender Equality and Justice in Islam*; A. al-Hibri *Islam and Women's Rights in the Age of the Global Village*; A. al-Hibri, *An introduction to Muslim Women's Rights*; A. Wudud [sic] - Muhsin, *How Perceptions of Woman Influence Interpretation of the Qur'an. Introduction Chapter of Qur'an and Woman*; M. Rafiqul-Haqq - P. Newton, *The Place of Women in Pure Islam*; Muslim Women's League of North America, *Gender Equality in Islam and Women's Dress*; S. Shaikh, *Women and Islam – The Gender Struggle, the Ideological Struggle*.

³⁵ S. Shaikh, *23 Street Women Jamaah Statement*, pamphlet distributed at the 23rd Street Mosque on Ramadan 28th 1993. Available on the Shamima Shaikh memorial website, <http://shams.za.org> (last accessed April 20th 2021)

³⁶ F. Haffejee, *Women Claim the Mosques*, in «Africa South & East», 1994. Available on the Shamima Shaikh memorial website, <http://shams.za.org> (last accessed April 20th 2021).

³⁷ F. Waggie, *Introduction*.

The Gender Equality Campaign launched by MYM in 1994 focused on two main issues: women's rights in Muslim family law, a pressing question after the new democratic constitution recognized the legal validity of customary marriages³⁸, and «equal access» to mosques for women. The latter was a significant semantic shift from the previous MYM campaign promoting «space in mosques» for women, one that reflected an ideological turn: it «implied that women and men should share the same main space in the mosque rather than [...] women being relegated to a secondary space»³⁹.

3. The 1994 democratic turn and the 'amina wadud moment'

Women's equal access to the mosque's main space became a reality in South Africa in 1993, when Tahir Sitoto, imam of the Muslim community in Kwa-Nobuhle, a township in the Eastern Cape, pulled down the curtain that secluded women from the center of the mosque⁴⁰. Sitoto had been leading the MYM since 1990, when he was elected to the presidency formerly held by Rashied Omar, and was the first African to hold that office

³⁸ The new South African constitution recognized customary law, defined in the 1998 Recognition of Customary Marriages Act 120 as «the customs and usages traditionally observed among the indigenous African peoples of South Africa and which forms the culture of those people». Such definition excludes non-indigenous religious marriages, as it is the case of traditional Muslim marriages; as a consequence, Muslim women whose marriage is not registered at a magistrate's office are left with no legal protection, and their children with them. The negotiations between the State, bodies of *'ulama* (religious scholars) and women's rights groups have continued to this day, for no final agreement has yet been reached. On December 19th, 2020, after twenty-six years of discussions, the South African Supreme Court of Appeal has ruled that «the non-recognition of Muslim marriages is a travesty and a violation of the constitutional rights of women and children in particular, including their right to dignity, to be free from unfair discrimination, their right to equality and access to court. Appropriate recognition and regulation of Muslim marriages will afford protection and bring an end to the systematic and pervasive unfair discrimination, stigmatization and marginalization experienced by parties to Muslim marriages including the most vulnerable, women and children» Quoted in P. Nombembe, *Non- Recognition of Muslim Marriages a Violation of Women's and Children's Rights: Supreme Court of Appeal*. In «Times Live», December 19th 2020. Available at <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-12-20-non-recognition-of-muslim-marriages-a-violation-of-women-and-childrens-rights-supreme-court-of-appeal/> (last accessed April 21st 2021). For a thorough discussion of the debate around Muslim marriage in post-apartheid South Africa, see A. Tayob (ed.), *Muslim Marriages in South Africa*. Centre of Contemporary Islam, Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 2001.

³⁹ N. Jeenah, *The National Liberation Struggle*, p. 34.

⁴⁰ S. Sesanti, *Manifestations of African Islam*, p. 45. The mosque was established a short time before and the curtain was raised because of pressures by members of the historical Muslim communities, who insisted that gender segregation was a necessary feature of mosques. Tahir Sitoto recalls that his action was not planned; he «instinctively» pulled down the curtain, arguing that «we cannot emulate cultural traditions that masquerade themselves as Islamic normative practices». Video interview with Tahir Sitoto, May 7th 2021.

in the history of the organization. However, the event occurred at the 'margins' of the South African Muslim community and did not receive a significant media coverage⁴¹.

Broader mediatic impact – and backlash – would come in another instance. About a year later, Sitoto's example was followed by the mainstream Claremont Main Road Mosque (CMRM) in Cape Town, where Rashied Omar had been serving as imam since 1986⁴². On August 12th, 1994 – four months after the first democratic elections held in South Africa brought the African National Congress (ANC) to power and Nelson Mandela became the first black president of the country, amina wadud delivered a historic Friday sermon at CMRM on the subject of «Islam as engaged surrender»⁴³.

«When I arrived at the mosque – wadud recalls – the air was thick with excitement. People crowded around the mosque entrance. Women came down from their previously assigned section upstairs and were accommodated in a section next to the men on the main mosque level [...] I made my way through this large number of people and eventually reached the place where I would deliver the *khutba* in front of the congregation»⁴⁴.

Men and women were separated by a simple piece of rope, and this arrangement would remain.

⁴¹ For a broader discussion of the «Otherization» of the black Muslim experience in the mainstream narrative of South African Islam, see T. Sitoto, *Scripting Black African Muslim Presence in South African Islam. A Quest for Self-Understanding beyond the Moment of Conversion*, in «Islamic Africa», 9, 2018, pp. 163-178.

⁴² Founded in 1854, CMRM has since the early 1980s established itself as a key platform in South Africa for the elaboration of a progressivist and liberationist Muslim discourse. Under the leadership of Imam Hassan Solomon (1980-1986) and then Imam Abdul Rashied Omar (1986), the pulpit (*minbar*) became the medium of a systematic political communication performed through Friday and Eid *khutab*, by the imams and guest preachers alike. According to Fatima Noordien, who was part of the mosque's administrative board when the decision to host amina wadud was taken, the opening of the main space to women was not the result of a concession granted from the imam, but rather the culmination of a struggle that the women of the congregation had been carrying out since the early 80s (video interview with Fatima Noordien, May 3rd 2021). For an overview of the mosque's history, see F. Gameldien. *The History of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, Its People and Their Contribution to Islam in South Africa*. Cape Town, Claremont Main Road Mosque, 2005.

⁴³ In her account of the event, wadud wrote that she was not well informed about the nature of her talk and realized only forty-five minutes before the prayer that she was to deliver a sermon in front of the entire Friday congregation. See A. wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad. Women Reform in Islam*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2006, pp. 163-186.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168. It should be noted that wadud's speech was formally defined as a «pre-*khutba* lecture», not an actual sermon. The official label notwithstanding, this article follows wadud's own definition of the lecture as a *khutba*. Other narratives of the event can be found in Sa'diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat's chapters included in K. Ali - J. Hammers - L. Silvers (eds.), *A Jihad for Justice. Honoring the Work and Life of amina wadud*, Akron OH, 48Hrs Books, 2012; see also F. Esack, *On Being a Muslim. Finding a Religious Path in the World Today*, Oxford, Oneworld, 1999, pp. 118-122.

The event was welcomed by progressive Muslims worldwide, but also provoked what Rashied Omar described as «a massive overreaction on the part of a community not used to having their horizons changed»⁴⁵. In commenting on the uproar following the sermon, Omar employed the term «gender jihad», which was circulating among Islamic activists to highlight how the struggle for gender justice was part of the larger *jihad* against the apartheid's racial capitalism⁴⁶. wadud has since adopted the term, making it the title of her second book *Inside the Gender Jihad*, and significantly contributed to its popularization; as a consequence, «gender jihad» is now used worldwide as a non-Eurocentric alternative to the highly contested «Islamic feminism»⁴⁷.

Despite the severe backlash experienced by both wadud and CMRM, 'the amina wadud moment' reinvigorated the spirit of South African gender jihadis. However, 1994 also represented the beginning of the end for Shamima, who was diagnosed with breast cancer toward the end of the year; her private struggle against the disease, however, did not stop her relentless campaigning for Muslim women's rights. In 1995 Shaikh became the first chairperson of the newly founded Muslim Community Broadcasting Trust, formed by MYM members with the aim of establishing a radio station and a TV community station. The former became a reality on 29th, August 1997, when *The Voice* began broadcasting, reaching

⁴⁵ Quoted in F. Gamielien, *The History of the Claremont Main Road Mosque*, p. 89. For a broader discussion on the debate on women's ritual leadership emerged in South Africa after wadud's 1994 «pre-khutba», see U.C. Lehmann, *Women's Rights to Mosque Space: Access and Participation in Cape Town's mosques*, in M. Bano - H. Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, Leiden, Brill, 2012, pp. 481-506; N. Hoel, *Sexualizing the Sacred, Sacralizing Sexuality. An Analysis of Public Responses to Muslim Women's Religious Leadership in the Context of a Cape Town Mosque*, in «Journal for the Study of Religion», 26, 2013, 2, pp. 25-41.

⁴⁶ It is unclear who is to be credited for having coined the term «gender jihad». According to Na'eem Jeenah, Rashied Omar coined the term as early as 1985, as part of a larger articulation of the Arabic term «jihad» as the struggle against oppression and injustice. The concept of «gender jihad» however did not gain ground among Islamic activists until it was later popularized by Shamima Shaikh (video interview with Na'eem Jeenah, April 29th 2021). Rashied Omar himself is uncertain about the exact date in which he first used the term (email exchange with Rashied Omar, May 1st 2021). According to the liberation theologian Farid Esack, the term «comes out from conversations and interactions between me and Shamima» (answer to a question asked by this author to prof. Esack at the end of a video interview conducted by amina wadud on January 31st 2021, available on her youtube channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSWQrIghDIM&t=3414s> - last accessed May 1st 2021). Rashied Omar's understanding of *jihad* can be retrieved from his article *Islam and violence revisited*, in «Journal of Ecumenical Studies» 52, 2017, 1, pp. 67-78; for Farid Esack's, see his *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism. An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*, Oxford, Oneworld, 1997.

⁴⁷ See for instance H. Abudigeri, *The Renewed Woman of American Islam. Shifting Lenses Toward 'Gender Jihad'?*, in «The Muslim World», 91, 2001, pp. 1-18; M. Iannucci, *Gender Jihad. Storia, testi ed interpretazioni dei femminismi musulmani*, Cesena, Il Ponte Vecchio 2013; K. Herrmann, *Gender-Jihad. Der Kampf islamischer Feministinnen für Frauenrechte und eine Neuauslegung des Korans*, München, GRIN, 2009.

the Greater Johannesburg area and beyond. Since its early beginnings, The «Voice»'s programming devoted a great deal of attention to gender issues, with the controversial program «Saut al-Nisa'» (Women's Voice) running for a two-hours spot, five times a week⁴⁸. In 1996 Shaikh also became the editor of *al-Qalam*, a Durban-based monthly newspaper that had framed itself since the 80s as the representative of the Muslim politically engaged 'alternative' press⁴⁹.

Shamima lost her battle with cancer on the 9th day of Ramadan 1998 but furthered the gender jihad beyond her death by making a political statement of her own funeral⁵⁰. As per her request, the *salat al-janazah* at home was led by her friend Farhana Ismail, and the imamship⁵¹ of another one at the Masjid ul-Islam in Brixton (Johannesburg) was performed by her husband Na'eem Jeenah. On that occasion, women prayed in the main section of the mosque for the first time⁵².

⁴⁸ According to N. Jeenah, women at «The Voice» were not ghettoized into women's shows or shows about women. One of the most popular programs was the weekly «In the Shade of the Qur'an», hosted by Farhana Ismail, which discussed the Qur'anic perspective on different political social, and economic issues - including the gender jihad. See N. Jeenah, *The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms*, pp. 42-51. For an overview of the Muslim radio stations that emerged in the post-apartheid era, see M. Haron, *The South African Muslims Making (Air) Waves during the Period of Transformation*, in «Journal for the Study of Religion», 15, 2002, 2, pp. 111-144.

⁴⁹ M. Haron - I. Buccus, *Al-Qalam. An Alternative Muslim Voice in the South African Press*, in «South African Historical Journal», 61, 2009, 1, pp. 121-137.

⁵⁰ The politicization of funerals has a long history in the black South African community; throughout the apartheid era, funerals of «martyrs» of the regime (as imam Abdullah Haron, Steve Biko or Robert Sobukwe), were transformed by activists into massive political demonstrations, until the government banned them altogether in July 1985 (M. Parks, *South African Bans Public Protest at Funerals*, in «Los Angeles Times», 1/8/1985. Available at <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-08-01-mn-4324-story.html>, last accessed May 1st 2021). According to the Muslim historian Achmad Davids, this history has deeper roots, as the first Black urban uprising in South Africa was actually a Muslim protest funeral, organized after the British colonial government closed (on January 15th, 1886) the historical Muslim graveyard of Tana Baru during a smallpox epidemic out of public health concerns. Two days later, after a child died from the disease, more than 3000 people joined the funeral procession that buried him in Tana Baru in defiance of the law. When the police tried to identify the demonstrators, stones were thrown and the uprising began. See the fourth chapter in A. Davids, *The Mosques of the Bo-Kaap. A Social History of Islam at the Cape*, Cape Town, South African Institute of Arabic and Islamic Research, 1980.

⁵¹ I owe to Mohammed Hashas, through his paper (not yet published) *Views from the Edge. Female Imamship in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, the suggestion to distinguish between the «imamship», which is for the functions of imams in and around the mosque, and the «imamate», which is a classical title that refers mostly to religious and political «sovereignty» or to the «caliphate». Not by chance, both functions have been historically precluded to women. The word «imamship» has first been used by Mansur Ali in M. Ali, *Muslim Chaplaincy as a Model for Imamship. From Liminality to Immanent Spirituality*, in M. Hashas - J. J. de Ruiter - N. V. Vinding (eds.) *Imams in Western Europe. Authority, Training, and Institutional Challenges*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 295-314.

⁵² N. Jeenah, *The National Liberation Struggle*.

The death of Shamima Shaikh was a significant loss for Islamic feminism in South Africa; however, her legacy continues to this day, carried forward by her peers and new generations of activists who came to age after the end of apartheid. To mention but a few of the ongoing projects and initiatives, the Muslim Personal Law (MPL) network, founded in Durban in 2016, operates as a resource base for Muslim women activists, counselors, lawyers, and academics «whose work bring together research, law, psychology and activism with real lived experiences of Islamic law in South Africa», to coordinate the struggle for egalitarian sexual ethics within the Muslim family⁵³. Established after a visit from the prominent Malaysian feminist activist and intellectual Zainah Anwar, founder of the historic NGO Sisters in Islam (SIS)⁵⁴, the MPL network strives for greater effectiveness through collaboration with global Islamic feminist networks such as the Musawah («equality» in Arabic) initiative (www.musawah.org)⁵⁵.

Founded in Durban in 2003 by a group of women and men «tired of being excluded for Eid congregational prayers twice a year»⁵⁶, the *Family Eidgah* (celebration for the Eids) has since become the core work of the initiative Take Islam to the People (TIP). In the Family Eidgah men, women, and children can participate together to the celebrations, and sermons are regularly delivered by women preachers. Although the organizers faced resistance and harassment in the earlier years of activity, the TIP Family Eidgah has now become a regular feature of Durban's religious landscape and celebrated its 37th Family Eidgah in August 2020⁵⁷. Women regularly address the Friday congregation as preachers in Cape Town's Claremont Main Road Mosque and Brixton's Masjid

⁵³ F. Ismail, *The MPL Network. Centering Women's Experiences of Islamic Law*, in «The Daily Vox», April 17th 2018. See the MPL network's Facebook page for information on current initiatives: <https://www.facebook.com/mplnetworkSA> (last accessed April 21st 2021).

⁵⁴ For a short history of SIS, see Z. Anwar, *What Islam, Whose Islam. Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Women's Rights*, in R. Hefner (ed.) *The Politics of Multiculturalism. Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2001, pp. 227-252.

⁵⁵ Launched in 2009 by Sisters in Islam, Musawah has since then developed several capacity-building projects, carried out international meetings, and published various reports and papers, as well as a widely praised anthology: Z. Mir Hosseini - M. al-Sharmani - J. Rumminger (eds.), *Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2015.

⁵⁶ A. Vawda, *In Search for Equality*, p. 13. For a description of the 2016 celebration, see F. Asmal, *South African Women Push for More Inclusive Eid Prayers*. Al-Jazeera online 6/7/2016. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/7/6/south-african-women-push-for-more-inclusive-eid-prayers> (last accessed April 21st 2021).

⁵⁷ The recording of the 2020 eid al-fitr and eid al-adha' celebrations, performed online due to COVID restrictions, are available on the TIP's Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/TipFamilyEidgah/> (last accessed April 21st 2021).

ul-Islam. Although their sermons are still labeled «pre-khutba lectures» instead of actual khutbas, the practice is normalizing the presence of women's authoritative voices in mosques.

In recent years, especially after the emergence of the global #MeToo Movement (2016), gender activism in mosques moved beyond the paradigm of inclusion and directly confronted the nature of authority itself, denouncing the misogyny, toxic masculinity, and sexual abuse perpetrated by too many male Muslim leaders⁵⁸. The marginalization, hatred, and discrimination directed against LGBTQI+ Muslims in mosque spaces and communities has also received an increasing deal of attention⁵⁹.

Finally, the University of Cape Town, especially the Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI) where Prof. Sa'diyya Shaikh has recently become the co-director together with Dr. Fatima Seedat, who is also affiliated as a senior lecturer at the African Gender Institute (AGI), promises to become a global center for gender and sexuality studies in Muslim contexts.

Conclusions

As feminist theorist Donna Hathaway reminds us, knowledge is always «situated»⁶⁰. In other words, knowledge is forever subject to the context of its production, embodied and embedded within the shifting politics of gender, class, and racial identities. The intense focus on gendered «spatial apartheid» in sacred spaces that characterizes the South African *gender jihad* was informed by a broader reflection in the national liberation movement on the central role that spatial segregation had in

⁵⁸ For two recent examples, see S. Shaikh, *Spiritual abuse- the Violation of Amanah. Rethinking Muslim Gender Ethics*, in «Muslim News» June 2019. N. Davids, *Confronting Misogyny in Muslim Leadership*. Intervention at Radio 786, August 17th 2020. Available at <https://soundcloud.com/radio-786-100-4fm/confronting-misogyny-in-muslim-leadership-with-professor-nuraan-davids-radio-786> (last accessed May 3rd 2021).

⁵⁹ R. Omar, *Toward Intersectional Justice. Confronting Homophobia in Our Communities*; 'eid al-fitr khutba delivered in CMRM on July 6th 2016. In the khutba Omar recalls how one of the mosque's madrasa teachers [Muhsin Hendricks] «graciously opted to leave» after coming out as gay more than a decade earlier, «to spare CMRM from being targeted by irate parents and community members. We recognize that an injustice was done unto him when he left under those circumstances. A key lesson that we learnt from that experience, brings me to where I think we have to start in our endeavor to combat homophobia in our communities».

⁶⁰ D. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges. The Science Question and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. In D. Haraway (ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, London, Free Association Books, 1986, pp. 183-201.

maintaining racial inequalities⁶¹. Although racial and gender discrimination are not identical, the use of space for establishing and maintaining power relations follows similar lines. Reflection about racial segregation imposed by the regime inevitably led to a conscientization about the gender segregation applied in Muslim sacred spaces. On the other hand, the recognition of the validity of customary marriages in the 1996 Constitution gave rise to a heated debate among Muslims, and negotiation between the State, the bodies of *‘ulama* (religious scholars) and Women’s Rights NGOs that continue to this day.

In the context of Bosnia, the focus of Zilka Spahić Šiljak article that precedes this one, neither issue received a great deal of attention by Islamic feminists, who have instead focused their effort on gender equality in institutional politics, a sphere where women’s participation dramatically dropped with the fall of the socialist rule (1990). Family law in Bosnia is entirely secular and gender-egalitarian, the legacy of half a century of socialism; customary marriages are not a common practice, and there is no significant effort from religious scholars or salafi groups to reintroduce polygamy, unilateral divorce, or other «shari’a-based» provisions that are at odds with (post)modern understandings of gender equality⁶². After the public practice of Islam almost disappeared during the early decades of socialist rules, mosques, madrasas and Islamic groups started flourishing again with the Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1980s and even more after the war of 1992-1995. These neo-traditional institutions generally accommodate women in their space and ranks. Women participate in religious authority and leadership, with *bulas* regularly leading devotional prayers and *muallimas* teaching in the Islamic schools (*madrasa*). Although women’s participation in ritual leadership is not egalitarian – the *bulas* cannot lead the *salat*, to begin with – women feel comfortable enough in their sacred spaces not to perceive equal access to the mosque as an urgent issue⁶³.

⁶¹ N. Hoel, *Feminism and Religion and the Politics of Location. Situating Islamic Feminism in South Africa*, in «Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa», 19, 2013, 2, pp. 73-89.

⁶² Interview with Zilka Spahić Šiljak, April 9th 2021. I am grateful to professor Spahić Šiljak for her precious insights on the history of Islam in Bosnia, a context I knew very little about before reading her article.

⁶³ For a broader discussion of women’s participation in religious authority in Bosnia, see A. Mesarič, *Disrupting Boundaries Between Traditional and Transnational Islam. Pious Women Engagement with Islamic Authority in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, in «Slavic Review», 79, 2020, 1, pp. 7-27; C. Raudvere, *Textual and Ritual Command. Muslim Women as Keepers and Transmitters of Interpretive Domains in Contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in M. Bano - H. Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques*, pp. 259-278.

As stated in the introduction, the global nature of Islamic feminism must not make us forget how the lived experience of Muslim women, and hence their priorities, strategies and methods, can vary significantly according to context. The comparison between the expressions of the gender jihad in Bosnia and South Africa, countries that both occupy 'marginal' positions in the mainstream 'Middle East centered' perception of Islam, provides an excellent example for the reader to have a glimpse of the complex interaction between the local and the global, the 'margins' and the 'center', in the construction of modern Islamic discourses.

