

**THE IDEA OF FEMALE MUEZZINS AND IMAMS IN ISLAM: A CHALLENGE TO THE PAKISTANI PATRIARCHAL FORCES**Shakir Muhammad Usman<sup>1</sup>

Original Article

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Received: November, 2020

Accepted: April, 2021

Published: July, 2021

**ABSTRACT**

This research article explores the dynamics of discrimination faced by Pakistani Muslim women in contemporary history regarding the issue of legitimacy of female imams and muezzins. Although there are no authoritative statements affirming that women cannot become imams within the religious scripture of Islam, women from Muslim communities around the world in general and from Pakistan in particular suffer under patriarchal structures and dynamics. This makes it difficult for women to assume imam and/or muezzin positions, as they are often ignored and denied basic opportunities to practice their religious rights such as offering prayers in the mosque. A transformative theoretical underpinning structures and constructs an understanding of the situation, with the help of scholarly interpretations within the framework of modern-day social interactions.

**Keywords:** Female Imam, Patriarchal norms, Pakistani, Challenge.

**INTRODUCTION**

What we learn, observe and that we are confronted with in our childhood stays with us for the rest of our lives. It is not impossible to unlearn these things, but it is a difficult, uphill task. In the 1980s, when Benazir Bhutto, the Muslim world's first female prime minister, was campaigning during the elections, she was targeted by conservative religious groups, and as soon as she became prime minister, a smear campaign was launched against her by the religio-political parties, who asked how, when a woman cannot lead a prayer, she could lead the entire nation. Various religious leaders issued

*fatwas*<sup>1</sup> against her, and within no time at all, the news had become the talk of the town. Patriarchy and the male chauvinism of religious groups were in full swing (Sekine, 1992).

Malala Yousafzai, a teenage Muslim girl from Swat, Pakistan, a student with a wish to promote education and become a leader like Benazir Bhutto, had met with a similar fate at the hands of those who wanted to suppress female voices leading from the front.

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<sup>1</sup>A *fatwa* is a non-binding legal opinion on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified jurist.

Another example from the Pakistani political scenario reflects the patriarchal practice of using religion for political gains and portraying the religion as if it did not allow women to lead: In 1964, Fatima Jinnah, the younger sister of the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and one of the very few prominent female figures in Pakistan's independence movement

In Pakistani society, women are not allowed to hold sacred religious positions. Since 2002, there has been a 17% quota in an attempt to have female representation in the parliament (Dutoya, 2013), but it is a symbolic representation, and most of the women who enter the circles of power are both related to the patriarchal and feudal structures and dependent on them, and consequently, their seats are used by these patriarchal forces to remain in power.

This article is a tool to understand the reasons behind the controversy of female *imams* and to bring forth the arguments to counter this controversial narrative. Scholarly views presented in the article indicate that Islam does not restrict any gender, but Pakistani Muslim patriarchal forces have prevented women from having their humanistic rights by sheer dominance. At the core of Islam's divinity, nothing prohibits women leading prayer or leading a nation. Using hermeneutics and transformative research theory, this article discusses how female segregation in the mosques is a patriarchal construction and how the idea of female religious leaders, *muezzins* and *imams*, could be transformative for Pakistani society and could challenge the patriarchal social system in the name of religion.

### 1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

While ignoring traditions, historical accounts and sacred texts, the forces of patriarchy confined the role of women to subservient and domiciliary workers without much say in decision-making or leadership. With the help of hermeneutics, I analyze and interpret Islamic literature to support my arguments. Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation (Paterson and Higgs, 2005) that is especially

against the British colonizers, decided to confront the incumbent president of Pakistan and Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) Mohammad Ayub Khan. This move was called un-Islamic; her opponents used the words of many Muslim scholars and much literature to speak against her (The New York Times 04 Oct. 1964).

helpful in interpreting complex texts of a religio-historical nature. With the help of hermeneutics, I analyze the data collected through the literature review and interviews. I aim to obtain in-depth understanding of Islamic practices, sacred texts and their interpretations through systematic understanding and interpretation.

As this article focuses on women's religious rights and gender equity, I combine hermeneutics with transformative research methodology, which is a tool to "advocate for an improvement in human interests and society through addressing issues of power and social relationships" (Sweetman *et al.*, 2010, p. 441). I use hermeneutics to arrive at a deeper understanding of the text and transform the collected data to explain why restricting women from leading the mosques is a patriarchal notion of suppression and why women's inclusion in the mosques is inevitable.

### 2. STUDY STATEMENT

This research paper is an attempt to offer some evidence from the Quran and some opinions of scholars to make the case that there is no legal or religious restriction on women that stops them from playing an active role in the society, including the role of *imams* and *muezzins*. Gender segregation is not a goal of Islam, but the interpretation of Islam leads a majority of Muslims to believe that Islam does not permit women to lead prayers. After getting the inspiration from a Pakistani movement "*Aurat March*,"<sup>2</sup> and from initiatives taken by Muslim scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas to challenge patriarchal interpretation of

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<sup>2</sup>A women's movement whose meetings are held annually in various parts of Pakistan.

the Quran, I decided to open a conversation, with the help of this study.

In order to have an in-depth discussion, I opted to elaborate patriarchal notions in the interpretations of the Quran with the help of the scholarly works of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Elmira Akhmetova, Azizah Al-Hibri and Nevin Reda. To grasp a better understanding of Pakistani society, I interviewed two religious scholars, Dr. Farhat Naz Rahman and Dr. Khalid Zaheer, as well as three university professors: Dr. Nazakat Awan, Dr. Shehr Bano Zaidi and Dr. Muhammad Imran. This is a polemic topic, especially in Pakistan, and when I approached members of *Aurat* March and other women's rights organizations, they refused to give their opinion in order to avoid being targeted. In an attempt to be politically correct, the interviewees from Pakistan have presented contradictions that shows how deeply rooted in patriarchy is society.

#### 4. FEMALE MUEZZINS AND IMAMS: A SHIFTING PARADIGM THAT THE PAKISTANI PATRIARCHY IS STILL UNABLE TO RECOGNIZE

The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give *zakah*<sup>3</sup> and obey Allah and his Messenger (Quran 9:71).

It is amazing how resistant humans are to change. Historically, whenever there is a potential change that threatens the conservative mindset, those in power resist it by quoting their holy books, traditions and customs. Today's Muslim traditionalists in general and Pakistani traditionalists in particular are unable to accept that religion, culture and the justice system are not static entities; they are ever-evolving. At the time of Prophet

Muhammad, the religion, culture and justice system differed from the present system, and they will be different again a few decades from now. These systems change their rules, while keeping the core intact, according to the needs and demands of the society in any given timeframe. Around the sixth and seventh centuries, justice for female consisted largely of giving respect to women and protecting them from being killed by their own parents; in the twenty-first century, its domain has expanded.

As Amina Wadud, a female Muslim scholar and reformist, argues, when people call "gender justice" a western idea, or un-Islamic or an impossible phenomenon in Islam that must have been brought in from outside because it could not have stemmed from within, this rests on a complete misunderstanding of the religion (Wadud, 2006, p. 2). This misunderstanding that Wadud describes – that gender justice is a western ideology – can be seen in the views of one of the scholars I interviewed who is otherwise rather unorthodox and less conservative. He mentioned that the idea of a woman leading a prayer is a western idea: "There has always been male *imams* and we normally find no reason that why we should alter this arrangement. Why a lady should be interested in leading prayer; this has something to do with the western concept of liberty and equality" (Dr. Khalid Zaheer "Personal Interview" 2020).<sup>4</sup>

Because of the traditional patriarchal system that was in operation in the sixth century, the role of women, in the society and in sociopolitical and socio-economic spheres, was not as active as it is today, but women were very active on religious fronts. In theory, they had no limits whatsoever in taking part in social, economic or religious activities, but in practice patriarchy was a dominant force. Through various *hadiths*<sup>5</sup> of Prophet Muhammad we can see that women had the liberty to visit mosques, take care of mosques and run

<sup>4</sup>All personal interview quotes are exact, unedited for grammar.

<sup>5</sup>Collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad

<sup>3</sup>Zakah or Zakat (a form of alms-giving) is a religious obligation or tax and is considered one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

businesses. On several occasions it is mentioned in *hadiths* that nothing prevented women from going to the mosque, even at night (*Kitab Al-Salat*).<sup>6</sup>

Women were never forbidden from trading in Islam. During the Prophet Muhammad's time there were many well-known women traders like Umm al-Munzir binti Qays, Asmah binti Makhzemah bin Jandal and during the rule of Saidina Omar, a woman trader Al-Shifa binti Muawiz was elected "commandant" of Medinah market. We find that in Malaysia Muslim women work freely and voluntarily (Abbas, 2012, p. 2).

According to Muslim scholar Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad and Nevin Reda, an Islamic Studies scholar, a mosque is not a mere place of worship, but an instrumental social place for a community. A mosque is the headquarters of political leaders and also serves as a center of information and culture in its society. It is also a learning center, a shelter for poor people and travelers, a hospital, a judicial court, a place for relaxation and a place for celebration or socializing with people (The Role of Mosque, Reda, 2004).

Yet most Muslim scholars, who take pride in calling a mosque not only a house of God, but also a center of political, social and economic negotiations, are resistant to the idea of female *muezzins* and *imams*, despite the fact that women have proven that when they are given opportunities, they can excel in any field. Numerous men follow and work under women in many walks of life, but when it comes to the mosque handler or the mosque leader, most Muslim men say that women cannot lead the prayer.

The Quranic verse at the start of this chapter can be interpreted as a statement about how God has instilled empathy, respect, understanding, compassion and gender balance between men and women. The

Quranic interpretations adopted by Muslim scholars in general and Pakistani scholars in particular were influenced by the patriarchy pushing forward its agenda to silence women's agency. If Islam had not been forced to become a rigid, intolerant and patriarchal agent, we would be living in a different Pakistani society (Abugideiri, 2010).

In Islam, prayer is a private matter. In theory, women are allowed to pray anywhere and everywhere, even if they want to pray in a mosque or lead a prayer. "During the time of the Prophet and the earlier generation of Muslims, women attended mosques, as did men for all kinds of prayers and activities, but with the development of orthodox notions, women's participation in the mosque were being questioned by the teachers of morality" (Utaberta et al., 2018, p. 2). As mentioned above, the gender balance, equality and mutual respect that the *hadiths* and the Quran promote should not be present, in my view, only on a social or household level in Pakistan. Shouldn't these qualities also be visible within the religious structure and in one of the most important Islamic religious entities: the mosque?

Nowhere in the Quran or the *hadiths* is it mentioned that *imamate*<sup>7</sup> or mosques are forbidden to women. Khalid Zaheer, a Muslim scholar, said that if he were to come to a point of offering a prayer led by a female *imam*, he would not mind doing so (Dr. Khalid Zaheer "Personal Interview" 2020). A mosque is a place where everyone is welcomed and *imamate* is a position that can be possessed by anyone who is eligible to do so (Dr. Muhammad Imran "Personal Interview" 2020). "*Imam* is a symbolic representation of someone who has got leadership qualities and the one who has the capability to lead from the front and I do believe that women are capable of doing any kind of work" (Dr. Muhammad Imran "Personal Interview" 2020).

The divisions of gender roles that we see today are not natural or divine, but are

<sup>6</sup>The book of prayers.

<sup>7</sup>Leadership, especially in Islamic context.

created by a society that is dominated by men in power to protect their patriarchal privileges, strength and dominance over women. Imran stressed the importance of educating women and making them aware “that their role has not been divinely ordained, but it has been culturally and socially established” (Dr. Muhammad Imran “Personal Interview” 2020). In the first millennium, Islam gave respect to women when they needed it the most. “Islam liberated women from ignorance and discrimination, both of which were widespread in pre-Islamic society. For the first time in human history, Islam empowered women with progressive social, legal, political and economic rights” (Akhmetova, 2016, p. 478). According to Wadud, the time has come to break the shackles of stereotypes and clichés of the patriarchal mindset that are instilled through Quranic misinterpretations.

Such interpretations assume that men represent the norm and are therefore fully human. Women, by implication, are less human than men. They are limited and therefore of less value. Such interpretations encourage the stereotypes about women and men which severely hamper the potential of each. In addition, these interpretations justify the restrictions placed on the woman's right to pursue personal happiness within the context of Islam. Most troubling is the tendency to attribute these interpretations to the Quran itself rather than to the authors who hold them (Wadud, 1999, p. 35).

Segregating half of the population of the society and shutting the doors of *imamate* to women does not support or reflect the idea of equality that Islam promotes. On various occasions the Quran refers to the believers – Muslim men and women – without any discrimination. “There are more verses in the Quran regarding the full human dignity of women than any other issues” (Wadud, 2006,

p. 205). Restricting women from a religious designation is nothing more than protecting the vested interests of a patriarchy that believes that giving rights to women means weakening the command over the society that they have enjoyed for ages. Asma Barlas argues that men have translated the Quran, interpreted the Quran and read the Quran with patriarchal mindsets. She continues on to say that they have also ignored the basic principles of hermeneutics (2005).

The legal and historical record shows that some women have led prayers ever since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Silvers and Elewa, 2011, p. 143). A female Pakistani scholar of Islamic Studies, Dr. Farhat Naz Rahman, mentioned that in Islamic history, women have led the prayers, even where men and women were mixed, and hundreds of thousands of Muslim men have prayed in their *imamate*. She named three prominent female *imams*: In the seventh century, Umme Waraqa Ansaria Bint Abdullah Ibn Al-Haris led the prayer in her locality. In 699 CE, Ghazala al-Haruriyya led a prayer when male warriors were present in Kufa. In the beginning of the eighth century, a female slave of the caliph or *Khalifa*<sup>8</sup> Walid-II of Banu Umayyads also led the prayer. Umme Waraqa was the first female *imam* nominated by the Prophet Muhammad himself to lead the prayers of his tribe or village (Dr. Farhat Naz Rahman “Personal Interview” 2020). In 636 CE, during the Battle of Yarmouk, Prophet Muhammad's cousin, Abu Sufyan's daughter Juwayriyya Bint Sakhr, also led a prayer.

In 2005, following the footsteps of Umme Waraqa, when the contemporary Muslim scholar and philosopher Amina Wadud decided to lead a Friday congregation in the U.S., it sparked controversy around the world, especially in Muslim communities. The majority of the population did not approve of the act, considering it disobedience to God (Wadud, 2006). But, ignoring all the opposition, she was courageous enough to raise her voice against the opinion that a female Muslim scholar is

<sup>8</sup> A religious and civil leader in a Muslim country where *Shari'ah* laws are implemented.

lesser than even an illiterate male. We can find numerous Muslim scholars who insist that Islam and the Quran provide social justice and gender equality, but when it comes to practice, they make sure that women do not benefit from this equality.

The Quran is the main source of Islamic jurisprudence and legal issues, and the Quran does not say that men should have command or superiority over women. On numerous occasions, the Quran mentions both men and women together while addressing various issues. There is no indication that the Quran intends for us to understand that there is a primordial distinction between males and females with regard to spiritual potential (Wadud, 1999).

The fourth chapter of the Quran is dedicated to women. It opens with the proclamation that humankind was created from the same source (Quran 4:01). It suggests that there is no difference between men and women. "I do not allow the labor of any worker from among you, male or female, to go to waste. You are equal to one another." (Quran 3:193). The Quran mentions that God states that the difference between people is in deeds, not gender (Quran 4:124).

Renowned Muslim scholars such as Dawud Al-Zahiri, Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (868-909 CE) and Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE) also believe that in the eyes of God there is no question about permitting women to be *imams* because for God men and women are equal. In the Quran, alongside men, several female prophets are also mentioned. Among the Muslim scholars, there is an ongoing debate over whether or not God sent female prophets and whether or not women mentioned in the Quran were prophets. Most Muslim scholars do not think that the women who received revelations from God and mentioned in Quran were prophets. They think that no woman has ever been a prophet, and Dr. Zaheer believes the same (Dr. Khalid Zaheer "Personal Interview" 2020). But according to Ibn Arabi, female figures mentioned in the Quran such as Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Jochebed (mother of Moses) and Asiya Bint Muzahim (wife of

Pharaoh) were all prophets of God (Silvers and Elewa, 2011, p. 143).

The Quran is the clear witness of women receiving *wahi*<sup>9</sup> from God and on this basis some scholars ask why, if women can be awarded prophethood and divine revelation, which is a higher responsibility than the imamate, are they prevented from being *imam*? Many such occasions of women receiving *wahi* from God are mentioned in the Quran; for example "and We inspired to the mother of Moses" (Quran 28:07); and "Mary the mother of Jesus replies" (Quran 19:20-26). In addition, I have already mentioned Bilqis (Quran 27:23-42).

Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE) argues that prophethood is the highest position given to a human being, and asks why, if women can become prophets, they should not be *imams*. From this perspective, there is no other reason for denying women their right to become *imams* except for patriarchal insecurity and fear of losing privilege. A contemporary Muslim scholar from the U.S., Azizah Al-Hibri, who specializes in Islam and law, also expresses her concerns about these vested interests by saying that "oppression of women is the result of satanic logic infiltrating Muslim laws and distorting Muslim beliefs" (Hibri, 2000, p. 55); this oppression has nothing to do with the Islamic faith. It is well established that there are religious records of female prophets, thus they are eligible to be *imams*. I now move to the next topic to discuss the challenges that female *muezzins* and *imams* bring to Pakistani society and why feminist approaches are important to a peaceful society.

## 5. WHAT CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS DO FEMALE IMAMS BRING?

Since the dawn of civilization, masculinity has dominated the world and patriarchy has taken deep roots in our societies. Consciously or unconsciously, men have enjoyed this privilege, and it is difficult for some of them to imagine a life without this utmost dominance. Shehr Bano

<sup>9</sup>A revelation from God.

Zaidi believes that the patriarchy, with its lack of understanding and lack of education, has brought us where we are at the moment, and that religion has nothing to do with it (Dr. Shehr Bano Zaidi "Personal Interview" 2020).

Two such occasions of patriarchy using circumstances to oppress and silence women's agency are worth mentioning here. First, during the sixteenth century, numerous incidents of sexual harassment against female pilgrims on their way to Mecca were reported. Instead of demanding justice, providing security and punishing the culprits, the men turned towards a *Shafi'i*<sup>10</sup> scholar named Ibn Hajar Al-Haytami who ruled that the pilgrimage, which is an obligation for a Muslim, would no longer be an obligation for women. Nazakat Awan calls this ruling baseless and says that it is the duty of governments to provide security to everyone so as not to bar anyone performing religious duties (Dr. Nazakat Awan "Personal Interview" 2020). A second example, which is practiced even today, is the injunction against female pilgrims traveling alone. The Saudi Arabian government does not permit any woman to enter the country for the pilgrimage without a male *mahram*.<sup>11</sup> Khalid Zaheer explains that there is no clause in Islam that forbids women from traveling alone, and he terms this act as an "unnecessary inclusion in *Shari'ah*" (Dr. Khalid Zaheer "Personal Interview" 2020). There is no such condition stipulated by Islam; still, women are deprived of their basic religious rights to pilgrimage in the name of "protection" while ignoring the Islamic obligation that the law makes impossible.

All of this results from interpretations by men and for men in order to serve patriarchy. One example of these biased interpretations is: "Men are caretakers of women [...] so, the righteous women are obedient" (Quran 4:34).

<sup>10</sup> The *Shafi'i* or *Shafi'i* is one of the four schools of Islamic law in Sunni Islam. It was founded by the Arab scholar Muhammad ibn Idris Al-Shafi'i in the early 9th century.

<sup>11</sup> In Islam, a *mahram* is a person with whom one cannot legally marry, such as a brother, father, grandfather or uncle.

The interpretation is usually that women should be obedient and subservient to men, but this verse has been completely misunderstood (Dr. Khalid Zaheer "Personal Interview" 2020). According to Amina Wadud, the key words of this verse are interpreted out of context. She argues that if we see the meaning and use of these terms in the context of other passages, we will realize that it does not mean what we have been told by the interpreters or scholars (Wadud, 1999).

This is classically viewed as the single most important verse with regard to the relationship between men and women [...]. The verse says the position between men and women is based on what Allah has preferred [...] many men interpret the above passage as an unconditional indication of the preference of men over women [...]. All men do not excel over all women [...], likewise, some women excel over some men [...]. Since the Quran uses *nushuz*<sup>12</sup> for both the male and the female, it cannot mean disobedience to the husband (Wadud, 1999, p. 70-75).

This is just one example of how translations and interpretations have served or been used by one group to single out the other group as the subservient one. But as Sherry Simon, one of the experts of translation and interpretation work, explains, the sacred scriptures do not address any specific gender. She recommends not bringing gender into a discussion where it is not relevant. "Gender is not always a relevant factor in translation. There are no a priori characteristics which would make women either more or less competent at their task" (Simon, 1996, p. 7).

Some people give another reason to exclude women from leading a mixed prayer, saying that the woman might lose her modesty, and men might become sexually attracted to

<sup>12</sup> Disobedient.

the *imam*, and become unable to pay full attention to the prayer. Dr. Khalid Zaheer believes that the nature of men is to be attracted to women (Dr. Khalid Zaheer "Personal Interview" 2020). Once again we see that men, instead of correcting their misogynistic mindset, restrict women.

Although the patriarchal and quasi-feudalistic society of Pakistan has been painful for women, they have played an important role in keeping the society intact and, if given the opportunities, the society could become more peaceful, tolerant and harmonious. Some women are well aware of how religion and culture can be used as a tool to promote patriarchy. Women have been subjected to brutalities such as honor killings, spousal abuse, forced illiteracy and female genital mutilation in the name of religion (Dr. Farhat Naz Rahman "Personal Interview" 2020). Involving people from every segment of the life can help a rigid and imbalanced society like Pakistan to regain balance, harmony and peace.

There are not many female Islamic Scholars in Pakistan who are fighting for the cause of women or trying to bring them to the forefront. Dr. Rahman argues that "this role is the product of patriarchal approaches and it has nothing to do with Islam. The main cause of the oppression experienced by the Muslim women in the Muslim world is the absence in positions of religious authority" (Dr. Farhat Naz Rahman "Personal Interview" 2020). Women's roles, in every sphere of life, are crucial and critical for any healthy, balanced and peaceful society. Our society needs a complete reform and a drastic change, which is "long overdue specifically when it comes to making the mosques and Muslim communities reachable and welcoming to women" (Dr. Farhat Naz Rahman "Personal Interview" 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Although Islamic history includes some examples of women leading mixed prayer, patriarchal social norms have managed to manipulate the record in such a way that these

examples are forgotten. After a very long pause, gender discussions among Muslims started again a couple of decades ago. On Friday, 18 March 2005, when Amina Wadud led the first Friday prayer and became the first contemporary female *imam* to lead a mixed congregational prayer of around sixty men and women, she sparked another heated discussion around whether or not women are permitted by God to become religious leaders and lead mixed prayers.

The experiences of Benazir Bhutto, Fatima Jinnah and Malala Yousafzai, along with the available literature of renowned Muslim scholars and information collected from Pakistani scholars, suggest that patriarchy uses various ways to oppress women. According to the above mentioned scholars and literature reviewed, it is the right of women to coexist fully in any place that was meant for everyone. They have been deprived of this right of co-existence for thousands of years. Women have been downplayed and discredited, in the name of religion in order to maintain an atmosphere that is suitable for the patriarchy.

To change this course of events, it is important to continue the conversation about women's rights not only in playing an important role in religious opinion-making, but also in becoming *imams* and *muezzins*. This conversation can replace anti-women and exclusive discourse with all-inclusive discourse. Pakistani society is already late in achieving women's equality and this is hindering our progress toward becoming a peaceful society as a whole.

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