

**THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN
IN ISLAMIC SOCIETIES:
(PAST AND PRESENT)**

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Abstrak: Gerakan untuk memperjuangkan kesetaraan gender telah mendapatkan respon positif dari beberapa kalangan, bahkan sudah mendapatkan legitimasi legal sebagaimana tertuang dalam CEDAW (*The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*) yang diratifikasi oleh 183 negara pada tahun 2006. Bagi kalangan reformis religious, kondisi ini justru menjadi tantangan tersendiri terkait dengan bagaimana membangun argumentasi kesetaraan dan keadilan gender tidak hanya secara politis tapi juga secara religious. Dalam hal ini, ada dua pendekatan yang dilakukan, yakni: reinterpretasi al-Qur'an dan rekonstruksi sejarah. Meskipun kedua pendekatan tersebut saling terkait, namun tulisan ini lebih terfokus pada pendekatan kedua, yakni tentang bagaimana posisi dan peran perempuan dalam kepemimpinan politik dan militer. Secara historis, peran politis dan militer perempuan terepresentasikan dalam beberapa tokoh dan pejuang perempuan, seperti Aisyah, Nusaiba bint Ka'b al-Ansariya, Azdah bint al-Harith, dan lain-lain. Beberapa perempuan lain juga terkenal aktif dalam perjuangan pembebasan bangsa seperti Cut Nyak Dien, Chawa Barajewa dari Chechya dan beberapa perempuan Chechnya lain yang terlibat dalam perlawanan fisik terhadap pemerintahan Uni Soviet. Dalam wilayah kepemimpinan politis, beberapa negara Muslim telah memberikan kesempatan lebih luas bagi perempuan untuk berpartisipasi aktif dalam berbagai ruang publik. Bahkan kepemimpinan religious pun tidak lagi menjadi monopoli laki-laki dengan adanya mufti-mufti perempuan.

*The movement to fight for gender equality has got a positive response from some parties, even it has also got legal legitimacy as enshrined in CEDAW (*The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*), which was ratified by 183*

countries in 2006. For religious reformist, this condition is actually a challenge in relation with the way to build arguments gender equality is not only on political side but also in religious one. In this case, there are two approaches performed, namely: a reinterpretation of the Koran and historical reconstruction. Although the two approaches are interrelated, but this article focuses more on the second approach, which is about how the position and role of women in the political and military leadership. Historically, the role of women in politics and military are represented in several prominent and female fighters, like Aisha, Nusaiba bint Ka'b al-Ansariya, Azdah bint al-Harith, and others. Some other well-known women active in the struggle for national liberation as Cut Nyak Dien, Chawa Barajewa of Chechya and several other Chechen women who engage in physical resistance against Soviet rule. In the area of political leadership, some Muslim countries have provided greater opportunity for women to actively participate in various public spaces. Even the religious leadership was no longer the monopoly of men with the women who can make decisions.

Kata Kunci: Perempuan, Kepemimpinan Politik, Militer.

A. INTRODUCTION

The elimination of all forms of discrimination against women has since the end of the 20th century become a matter of increasing concern to international organisations. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and by 2006 had been ratified by 183 countries. While the text of this convention refrains from being too specific, aiming primarily at pushing states to make the greater participation of women in politics and society possible (at least in principle), the declaration signed sixteen years later at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing goes one step further, demanding concrete measures to achieve this end. Amongst these are that women be given access to leadership positions in politics and society and that the level of their participation be increased. Article 13 of the Beijing Declaration states, “Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace“.

For Islamic societies this statement presents a great challenge, since it is understood by many conservatives as contradicting the fundamental principles of Islam.¹ If they do not wish to be accused of westernisation, reformers must justify gender equality and gender justice not only politically but also theologically. In so doing two approaches present themselves: reinterpretation of the *Qur'an*² and/or the reconstruction of history. To a certain extent both strategies are closely linked, since whenever controversy regarding the interpretation of a particular text passage arises reference is always made to the *Sunna*, the life of the Prophet and his pronouncements regarding the questions and problems which people put to him. In recent years new readings of the *Qur'an* have been presented by a number of scholars,³ whereby several methods have been used: re-translation of key terms, re-evaluation of the relative weight of various verses, and a re-contextualisation of the Revelation. With this article I shall focus mainly on historical and current political dimensions of re-shaping Islam and figure out whether and how women performed and still perform in political and military leadership positions.

B. RE-CONSTRUCTIONS OF HISTORY

Both, orthodox as well as liberal and feminist Muslims and Muslimas accord the history of Islam a central role in determining the legitimacy of social and political structures. This

¹ In fact in Islamic countries the rules governing the presence of women in the public sphere are quite heterogenous, although they are all justified by references to the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*. Thus, for example, in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait it is forbidden for women to drive cars, while women in the Islamic Republic of Iran may do so. In Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia women have been elected to the highest public offices, while in many Arabic countries they may not even stand for election. In Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East women are subject to the *purdah* and thereby kept out of the public sphere, while in Southeast Asia they are quite active.

² According to Islamic tradition, the *Qur'an* was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel between 610 and 632 C.E. It contains 6,666 verses, which comprise 114 *suras* that are ordered according to length. During the twenty-two years of transmission, the Revelations often make references to problems which confronted the Muslim community at the time. Thus, God can be said to have been responding to questions and problems which pre-occupied the Prophet and/or his followers. These responses, like the entire *Qur'an*, are regarded to be perfect, eternal and unchanging. This is the reason why conservative or fundamentalist Muslims often strive to restore the circumstances of 7th-century Arabia. But like other holy books, the *Qur'an* requires interpretation. Not every word, nor the meaning of every verse is immediately self-evident to the reader, and often several different interpretations exist. Furthermore, many of the problems confronting modern Muslims are not mentioned in the *Qur'an*; times have changed, new inventions and discoveries have been made, and political and economic structures have further developed.

³ For example Khaled Abou El Fadl, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Siti Musdah Mulia, Lily Zakiyah Munir, Amina Wadud, Norani/Cecilia Ng, Nasruddin Umar, etc. According to the Indian intellectual Asghar Ali Engineer, since the language of the writings is highly symbolic and quite vague, interpretation is quite difficult. The personal background of the exegete tends to push the resulting interpretation in a certain direction. Thus although the verses of the *Qur'an* are divine, understanding and interpretation are human acts. Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1999), p. 5.

has to do with the significance of the *Sunna*⁴ for Islamic studies, the exemplary status accorded the Prophet's actions and decisions regarding certain issues, which even today are treated as precedents to be emulated;⁵ but it also has to do with the importance of the re-constructions of pre-Islamic society, against which Islam seeks to dissociate and thereby define itself. A third component in such re-constructions of history are the biographies of

⁴ The *Sunna* refers to the norms and rules of conduct that are traced back to the words and actions of the Prophet. These norms and rules are rooted in the *sira*, the Prophet's biography, and the *ahadith*, short accounts of the Prophet's words and actions initially passed down orally and later collected and put in writing.

⁵ The primary sources for the *ahadith* are the *sahaba*, the companions of the Prophet, who orally passed on accounts of what they heard and what they experienced until these accounts were finally set down in writing. If the chain of transmitters proves to be sound (evinces no gaps or inconsistencies), then a *hadith* is regarded to be *sahih*, or "sound". It is thus considered to correctly relate the words of the Prophet and to be an accurate portrayal of his actions. This is what makes the *ahadith* guidelines for actions for orthodox Muslims and is why they are referred to in legal disputes or when actions need to be morally assessed. While Fatima Mernissi notes that the *ahadith* were very likely to have been subject to deliberate manipulation in the course of the political and religious disputes following the Prophet's death Engineer goes one step further and casts serious doubt on the *ahadith* as binding guidelines. Anyone who had ever met the Prophet in person is regarded as a companion whose words must be accorded the status of truth. However, many of these figures were full of prejudices, did not have the best memories and also often had only limited understanding of what was going on. Moreover, many of *ahadith* were only recorded in writing after the death of the Prophet, and it is quite obvious that memories change over such extended periods of time. Since the Prophet himself had a favourable attitude towards women, whereas his men often did not, it is not surprising that the accounts reflect the prejudices and attitudes of those who passed them down to subsequent generations Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women*, p. 5-6. Cause for further concern is the fact that the number of *ahadith* multiplied drastically in the centuries following the Prophet's death. While during the time of Malik ibn Anas, who lived about 150 years after the death of the Prophet (715 C.E.-796 C.E.), only a few hundred *ahadith* were known; one hundred years later they counted more than several hundred thousand. Muhammad al-Bukhari, the most famous collector of *ahadith*, studied more than 600,000 of these traditions, finally finding 2,630 of them to be sound. Although the prophetic traditions are regarded by all Muslims as authoritative, Sunnis and Shia each have their own canonical collections and thus differ with respect to which *ahadith* they regard to be authentic or inauthentic. Further, the various Islamic legal schools also differ with regard to which traditions are authentic or not. With the enormous number of *ahadith* in circulation it is only natural that contradictions arise, contradictions which demand to be resolved by interpreters of the faith. Also problematic is that quite a number of the *ahadith* contradict the *Qur'an*, such as the *hadith* that stipulates that a majority of those in hell are women, or the *hadith*, judged by Bukhari to be sound, that woman was create as far ahead of his times and was not able to achieve many of his aims. He was forced to make compromises to accommodate the political and social circumstances of his day. For this reason even those *ahadith* regarded to be authentic cannot be used to derive divine law. Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women*, p. 24. Even several verses in the *Qur'an* itself were formulated out of the necessity to make compromises. Thus, for example, the passages which accord men higher status with respect to women. Engineer is convinced that "without men being given a slightly upper hand, they would not have accepted the Islamic ideal in that society." Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women*, p. 25. Engineer is thus willing to go so far as to confront the sanctity and the immutability of the *Qur'an* with the patriarchal context of 7th-century Arab society. For many this may amount to heresy; after all he basically asserts that God created the sacred text in such a way that men who were simply the products of their times could understand it. This view can be proofed with verse 19:97 of the *Qur'an* which states "We have made this [Qur'an] easy for you, in your own language, in order that you may give the glad tidings to the pious and the God-fearing." The consequence of such a line of thinking are far-reaching as the text is opened to a greater degree of interpretation and contextualisation. Engineer himself distinguishes between the essential message of the *Qur'an*, according to which all men are equals and a subordinate claim, which was made to appease the ignorant men of the 7th century. His argument is a play on the statement "*Allah* is mighty, wise", which he interprets to mean that *Allah* is just enough to accord men and women equal status, but at the same time wise enough to take contemporary social realities into consideration in formulating his message. Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women*, p. 32.

renowned historical figures, the writings of Muslim/Islamic scholars and historical events, which resonate with present-day circumstances – either in the sense that these events represent developments from which society must dissociate itself, or which should be emulated. Islamic intellectuals differ with respect to the degree with which they feel specific cultural and historical contexts must be taken into account, i.e. the relevance which history has for the present. In simplified terms one could say that the intellectual dividing line runs between relativists and ontologists, whereby the latter strive to re-establish a social order as they believe to have existed during the life of the Prophet and during the reign of the four rightly guided caliphs.⁶

The construction of Islamic gender history is therefore not just important, but inevitably controversial. In the following I would like to discuss approaches which scholars have taken to de-essentialise prevailing feminine stereotypes in their efforts to legitimise the participation of women in leadership positions. More concretely I would like to show that women in the Muslim world were able to attain influence and autonomy that they were warriors, rulers and businesswomen and thus crossed the borders of conservative gender models. Muslim scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed have been dealing with this issue since the 1980s in their efforts to legitimise the ideals propounded by the modern women's liberation movement. Mernissi in particular has in her books time and again portrayed how common patriarchal notions, as well as statements made by Islamic politicians and clerics, provoked her to seek out a truth that differed greatly from the one usually presented to justify the exclusion of women from leadership positions.⁷ Whether women can rule an Islamic state or serve as imams, whether they can independently run businesses, whether they should become leaders of political parties, professors or ministers or, whether they should generally be allowed to work outside the home, even without the permission of

⁶ The concept of the four rightly-guided caliphs (*ar-Rashidun*) refers to the first four of Muhammad's successors who lead the Muslim community (*umma*) after his death. These were Abu Bakr (632 C.E. - 634 C.E.), 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (634 C.E. - 644 C.E.), 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (644 C.E. – 656 C.E.) and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (656 C.E. –661 C.E.). Each of these caliphs faced considerable difficulties legitimising their rule, were confronted with uprisings, and all except for Abu Bakr were murdered. After 'Ali's death the *umma* split into two groups the people of the tradition and the community (*Ahl as-Sunna wa al-Jamaa'*) and the party of 'Ali (*Shi'at 'Ali*).

⁷ In the introduction to her book *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* she recounts how the indignation over the 1988 election of Benazir Bhutto to the office of Prime Minister of Pakistan pushed her to examine the truth of the claim that never in the history of Islam had there ever been a female political ruler. But her initial research proved to be a positive surprise. She writes: "Just as in a fairly-tale, queens, malikas, and khatums emerged little by little from the soft crackle of yellow pages in old books. One by one they paraded through the silent rooms of the libraries in an interminable procession of intrigues and mysteries." Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Cambridge: Polite Press, 1993), p. 3. In the introduction to *The Political Harem* she relates how a grocer, whom she held very dearly, nearly dropped the eggs she was about to buy from him, when she asked him if a women could lead the Muslim community. Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (t.t: Perseus Books, 1991), p. 7.

their husbands or fathers – all these are questions which are not primarily answered politically, but theologically. Here it is helpful to turn to the historical evidence which proves that a hierarchical gender order or the seclusion of women in the home while men occupy the public sphere are by no means dictates of an essentially Islamic historical tradition. Instead they have shown themselves to be modern innovations, which too are subject to change.

Regarding the structure of pre-Islamic Arab society there is no scholarly consensus, particularly with respect to nature of relations between the sexes. While not only conservatives, but also many Muslim liberals and feminists believe that characteristic of the so-called “age of ignorance” (*jahiliyya*) was that women were denied human status, scholars of Islam, such as Gudrun Krämer and Leila Ahmed,⁸ believe that the role of women in pre-Islamic society as depicted in the *Qur'an* was cast more negatively than was actually the case, and that the advent of Islam even constituted a deterioration in the status of women. This view is in accordance with the consensus of classical western Oriental Studies. The British Orientalist Robertson-Smith found evidence suggesting matrilinearity, polyandry and uxori-locality and in his 1907 study of kinship, concluding that pre-Islamic Arabia had been a matriarchal society.⁹ Later, William Montgomery Watt refined this view, emphasising the existence of matrilinear geneologies. Both scholars believed 7th-century Arab society was undergoing radical changes in which matrifocal structures were being superseded by patrilinearity, polygamy and virilocality.¹⁰ The driving force behind this social transformation was the formation of private property obtained through trade, which men wished to pass on to their sons. Leila Ahmed also finds evidence suggesting the existence of polyandry in Mecca and Medina, pointing to the documented kinship relations of the Prophet on the one hand and on the other hand to A'isha's classificatory model of Arab marriages as reported by al-Bukhari. In order to clarify these various reconstructions of Arab history,¹¹ it is helpful to recall Arabia's geopolitical and ethnographic situation during the time of the Prophet. Compared to the mighty political centres Byzantium and Persia the enormous Arab Peninsula was in the 6th century C.E. a climatically disadvantaged, peripheral region (with the

⁸ Leila Ahmed was born in 1940 in Cairo. The daughter of an upper-class family, she studied at the University of Cambridge and is today professor at the Harvard Divinity School. Her manner of doing research differs from the previously-mentioned non-Western authors with respect to the greater openness to the sources and their interpretation as well as her willingness to bracket ideology out of her research.

⁹ William Robertson-Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (t.t: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), p. 1907.

¹⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Mohammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 272f.

¹¹ Badram in the 1980s noted that this was a new development, which she attempted to reconstruct on the basis of the writings of several women authors without, however, herself critiquing these. Margot Badran, “Islam, Patriarchy, and Feminism in the Middle East”, In: *Trends in history* 4, 1986, p. 49-71.

exception of South Arabia, where water was plentiful). The population was comprised of nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists as well as sedentary traders and agriculturalists in the oases who cooperated in numerous ways. The most important social and political unit was the kin group; but trans-regional associations based on alliances between clans or tribes were also crucial, and violent clashes were frequent. Since there is no evidence documenting the existence of political authority independent of kinship structures, social homogenisation of the various societies of the Arab peninsula is unlikely. Forms of marriage were probably heterogenous: both polygyny as well as polyandry were common enough, existing as temporary marriages¹² in which a man would occasionally seek out several women living within the group, or a woman would likewise visit men who did not live continuously with them.¹³ Marriage proposals could be initiated¹⁴ by either women or men, and both sexes had the right of divorce.

The existence of Jews and members of Christian sects¹⁴ is historically documented, but the Arab tribes continued to worship their own goddesses. Cults existed in Yathrib, the city which would later become known as Medina,¹⁵ in Ta'if¹⁶ and in Mecca. Meccans worshipped al-Uzza, the All-Mighty, who was associated with a sacred black meteorite, the Ka'aba. The tribe of the Quraish controlled and maintained this shrine. The throngs of pilgrims that flocked to Mecca had made the Quraish and the city rich, which is why the local population was not terribly eager to join Muhammad's new religion. Of course, one cannot simply draw conclusions regarding relations between the sexes based on the existence of female deities, but if one considers religion, social structure and economy together, it does seem that the advent of Islam did initiate the patriarchalisation of Arab societies. Such a development corresponds to the course of history as sketched out by the historian Gerda Lerner for the Middle East generally.¹⁷

Yet it would be incorrect to conclude that Islamisation only brought disadvantages to women. The prohibition of female infanticide most certainly may be counted amongst the positive reforms just as several of the rights which Muhammad is reported to have

¹² Muhammad's mother Amina is said to have remained with her own group following her marriage to his father Abd'allah. Following the death of his parents, however, Muhammad was not raised by his matrilineal kin, but rather by his patrilineal uncle.

¹³ Ahmed considers polygyny, which Muhammad practiced after Khadija's death, to have been very rare.

¹⁴ These were primarily Malkites, Manicheans, monophysite Jacobites and Nestorians.

¹⁵ Here people worshipped al-Lat, a goddess already mentioned in the writings of Herodotus.

¹⁶ The place of worship dedicated to the goddess Manat was located in Qudaid, near Yathrib. She is said to have been worshipped in the form of a black stone.

¹⁷ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Lerner particularly shows how women's reproductive and sexual capacities came to be commoditized and controlled by men.

introduced, such as a woman's entitlement to a share of the inheritance, were real novelties in some patriarchal groups. Many *hadith* recount how controversial Muhammad's innovations were amongst his male followers and how often such resistance led to his failing to put his ideas into practice.¹⁸ But, that self-confident women who knew how to fight for their rights lived in both Mecca and Medina is also documented. Just how unproblematic female dominance was can be gleaned from the Prophet's own biography.¹⁹ Muhammad ibn Abd'ullah of the Banu Quraish, who after the death of his parents was raised first by his paternal grandfather and then by his paternal uncle Abu Talib, at the age of about twenty entered the service of the wealthy merchant Khadija al-Kubra daughter of Khuwaylid ibn Asad a widow and mother of several children. After Muhammad had worked for her for several years and gained her trust, she proposed to him in the year 595 C. E., a proposal he accepted. The age difference is reported to have been fifteen years. The marriage lasted twenty-five years, until Khadija's death, and remained monogamous. Fatima was born of this union, and it is through her that the Prophet's patriline continued. Two aspects of this unequal relationship are repeatedly emphasised: Khadija's wealth, which enabled Muhammad to live a life of material security and comfort and her role as his closest confidante. It is she who is said to have comforted him when he returned from the Cave of Hira on the Jabal al-Nur in the Hijaz completely distraught after having received his first revelation.²⁰ It was also she who supported him in his capacity as Prophet and who became his first follower. A third aspect of their relationship is implicitly manifest in the historical reconstructions: her role as protector. Muhammad's position in Mecca was precarious: the Meccans found his rejection of traditional polytheism and his assertion that he was the voice of God presumptuous and regarded him with increasing hostility. Yet it is quite apparent that he was protected by two powerful supporters -- Abu Talib and Khadija -- and it was they who made his continued presence in Mecca possible. When they died Muhammad and his followers were no longer safe, and they were forced to flee to Yathrib/Medina.

¹⁸ Mernissi in *The Veil and the Male Elite* discusses the controversy over the participation of women in battle, which Muhammad's supporters rejected, and the question as to whether women were to be considered spoils of war. Muhammad proved incapable of asserting his views regarding the respect to be accorded women against his followers and even feared a rebellion.

¹⁹ Sources regarding the life of the Prophet include not only the *ahadith* and the *Qur'an*, which are directly linked to the life of the Prophet through the circumstances of revelation (*asbab an-nuzul*), but also the biographies (*sirat ar-rasul*), such as that compiled by Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham.

²⁰ Even before he began receiving the Revelations Muhammad occasionally withdrew to meditate. At Hira in the year 610 C.E. he received his first "prophetic Auditions" which are said to have scared him to death. Hans Küng, *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft* (München: Piper, 2004), p. 137.

After Khadija, Muhammad married thirteen other women, many of them widows. This subsequent polygyny is significant, because as with everything the Prophet did, it set a precedent.²¹ Nevertheless his wives are reputed to have been anything but submissive, and the Prophet is reported to have been very affectionate towards them. Women were amongst the Prophet's active followers. They participated in worship, received religious instruction and debated religious matters with him. They were not known to have held back with their criticism and were on occasion even known to have regarded his instructions with some bemusement. Thus Hind bint Utbah, when Muhammad informed her that upon her conversion she would not be permitted to commit adultery, retorted she seriously doubted that a free woman could ever commit adultery. Another account mentions Umm Salma, who ostensibly asked Muhammad why the *Qur'an* only addresses men. According to Fatima Mernissi it was not only Umm Salma who complained about being omitted from the sacred text. She believes there to have been a female "protest movement".²² The objections raised by women seem to have not gone unheeded, since in the subsequently revealed sura 33: 36 both men and women are explicitly addressed: "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women, who give in charity for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise – for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward."

C. WOMEN AT ARMS

The first Muslima to actively intervene in political events and raise a claim to leadership which she tried to assert against opponents is considered to be A'isha, the Prophet's youngest wife. During the dispute over who would succeed her husband as Commander of the Faithful²³ she turned against Ali ibn Abi Talib and in 656 C. E. even led an armed uprising against him. She mobilised her followers in the mosques, called them to arms and ultimately found herself leading a troop of several thousand men into battle, which because she did so riding camel-back came to be known as the "Battle of the Camel". In the end seven thousand

²¹ In current debates over the legal legitimacy of polygyny, proponents of the practice refer to the fact that it was practiced by the Prophet and also to verse 4: 32, which states that men may have up to four wives, while opponents refer to the fact that Muhammad married almost exclusively widows.

²² Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elit*, p. 119.

²³ The reason accepted by Orientalists is that she fought the battle against Ali because he failed to avenge the murder of Uthman ibn Affan, thereby forfeiting any legitimate claim to leadership.

men died, and A'isha lost the battle. Mernissi writes: "A'isha was the first woman to transgress the *hudud* (limits), to violate the boundaries between the territory of women and that of men, to incite to kill, even though the act of war is a privilege of men and belongs to the territory outside the *harem*...A'isha as the first woman who took a political decision by leading men, remains forever linked in Muslim memory with *fitna* (disorder and distraction)." ²⁴

No doubt Mernissi's argument engages the dominant patriarchal discourse, but fails to consider that it was hardly uncommon for women in 7th-century Arabia to participate in military activities. Ali Ashgar Engineer notes that there is a *hadith* in the *Sahih al-Bukhari*, which relates how women participated in the Battle of Uhud, ²⁵ how they tended wounds, how they carried the dead and injured from the battlefield and how they distributed water. ²⁶ The Indo-Pakistani historian, biographer and scholar of Islam author Sayyed Sulaiman Nadvi points to a pre-Islamic custom in which wives accompanied their husbands into battle and believes this only changed gradually after the advent of Islam. ²⁷ However, women did not just care for the injured or bring provisions, but also served in battle. Nusaiba bint Ka'b al-Ansariya ²⁸ fought at Mt Uhud at the Prophet's side, and, according to several sources, Muhammad even referred to her as his shield. Accounts say that she protected him with her sword and cross-bow until her own wounds made it impossible for her to continue fighting. ²⁹ On the Meccan side, too, women participated in battle. The traditions mention several women, amongst them Hind bint Utbah, Abu Sufyan's wife, who spurred on the troops with her singing and her playing of the tambourine. She was out for revenge since her father and one of her brothers had been killed in previous clashes with Muhammad's supporters. When the Meccans won, she cut the noses, ears and livers out of all the fallen Medinan fighters, made them into bracelets and necklaces, climbed atop a cliff and, in full view of the

²⁴ Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queen*, p. 66.

²⁵ The Battle of Uhud is one of the major violent conflicts between Muhammad's supporters from Medina and the Quraish from Mecca. It is regarded as the Quraishi response to the lost Battle of Badr, which took place in 624 C. E. The following year troops from Mecca and Medina faced off again at Mt Uhud, and this time it was the Quraish who won. The losses must have been quite heavy; subsequent commentators of the *Qur'an* linked the authorisation of polygyny stipulated in verse 4:4 to the shortage of men that resulted from this war.

²⁶ Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women*, p. 203.

²⁷ Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, *Heroic Deeds of Muslim Women* (Islamabad, 1990); quoted in Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women*, p. 205.

²⁸ Nusaiba Bint Ka'b also appears in the historical texts under the names Umm Umara, Umm Amara, al-Najariya or al-Maziniya.

²⁹ Mirian Cooke, "Women's jihad before and after September 11", In *Women and Gender in the Middle East and the Islamic World Today*, UCIAS Edited volume 4, 2003, p. 1.

Medinans, danced wildly, mocking and ridiculing the defeated as she did.³⁰ She is even said to have eaten the liver of Hamza, one of the Prophet's uncles.³¹ Later, after she had converted to Islam, she along with her daughter Huwairah participated in the Muslim conquests.

Even after the death of the Prophet women continued to be involved in military activities. One of them, Umm Hakim, is said to have killed seven Byzantines with a tent pole.³² Another account mentions a group of women, lead by Azdah bint al-Harith, which, during a battle at a Persian harbor, turned their veils into flags and marched onto the battlefield. Their deployment is said to have been decisive in helping the Muslims to victory. However, female militancy was not only accepted in Arabia. Engineer mentions Indian fighters such as Gul Bahisht who lead an army against the Raja of Jahore and Nurjahan, who is said to have killed elephants and lions.³³ Several Islamic sects, such as the Kharijites, who emerged from the conflict over the Prophet's successor, even expressly encouraged women to take up arms, since they regarded armed defence of the a duty to be performed by all Muslims.³⁴ Several Kharijite women attained renown as fighters, amongst them Ghazala, who according to accounts won a duel. To the Kharijites' adversaries, however, such manifest female militancy was a serious provocation, and they responded with sexual humiliation, stripping the dead women fighters and publically displaying their naked bodies.

Yet these and other cases cannot simply be explained away by pointing to cultural patterns that overlay pure Islam. Miriam Cooke quotes Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, the founder of the Shafi'i *mazhab* (legal school),³⁵ who in the 9th century defined *jihad*, and in particular armed struggle, as a religious duty, tantamount to prayer, the *hajj* and *zakat*. According to Cooke the patriarchal turn in the Islamic world only took place in the 12th and 13th centuries, a time during which the idea became current that those who had been martyred in battle against unbelievers would go to paradise where they would be pampered by heavenly virgins.

³⁰ When Mecca was finally taken by Muhammad's troops in 630 C.E., Hind was on the list of those who were to have been executed. However, her husband appealed for mercy, and she converted to Islam in order to save herself.

³¹ Mernissi cites Dar Ihya at-Turat al-Arabi's *As-Sira an-Nabawiya*, "the biography of the Prophet".

³² Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women*, p. 207.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³⁴ It seems that this group was less patriarchal since they did not permit child marriage or concubinage, even though Muhammad practiced both.

³⁵ In the 8th and 9th centuries C.E. several centres of Islamic scholarship emerged – Baghdad, Medina, Fustat (Cairo) and Kufa – in which scholars tried to standardise the legal system that until then was only rudimentarily codified and largely the product of local law. Four legal schools survive to the present day, schools that can be traced back to four great legal scholars: Malik ibn Anas (710 C.E. – 795 C.E.) of Medina, who wrote the first handbook of Islamic law; Abu Hanifa (699 C. E. –767 C. E.) of Kufa, whose interpretations became official legal doctrine under the Abbasids; Muhammad ibn Idris as-Shafi'i (767 C.E. – 820 C. E.), a student of Malik ibn Anas; and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780 C.E. –855 C.E.) of Baghdad.

Despite this shift towards patriarchy women were never entirely excluded from military campaigns, but rather were to some extent able to attain respectable positions as resistance fighters. If they were the widows or daughters of fallen military leaders they could even take up leadership positions. When the former Sultanate of Aceh became embroiled in a bloody, thirty-year long battle to try to prevent the occupation of their territory by the Dutch, a woman named Cut Nyak Dien attained lasting renown as a guerilla fighter. She descended from the local nobility, was the daughter of Teuku Nanta Setias and the wife of Teuku Ibrahim Lamngas, two men who were military leaders. After their deaths Cut Nyak Dien took over leadership of their units, reorganised them and continued the fight. Her second husband was also a military leader, and she subsequently fought alongside him. After his death she was arrested, weakened by advancing age and the harshness of life in the forest.

In certain historical situations women were able to become fighters even without kinship ties to male military leaders. Many women participated in the Algeria liberation war³⁶, while in Iran they demonstrated against the Shah, despite the great risk involved, and they even smuggled weapons under their chadors.³⁷ In Palestine they held prominent positions in the various organisations of the liberation movements.

Even today women in militant Islamic groups in various countries are active as suicide bombers. For example, in Chechnya, where they are referred to as *shahida* or, because of their long black robes and the black veil over their heads and faces, as “black widows”. The first known *shahida* was Chawa Barajewa, who in July 2000 drove a truck loaded with explosives into a Russian road block. Two-and-a-half years later another woman drove a car loaded with explosives into a government building in the capital Grosny. Yet another woman tried to assassinate Jurt Ahmed Kadyrow, Moscow’s man in Grosny, while he was at a fair in Ilischan and in so doing also killed eighteen bystanders. On 13 October 2002 a Chechnyan commando occupied a theater in Moscow taking all 850 members of the audience hostage who had come to see the musical “North-East”. Amongst the hostage-takers were also thirteen women dressed in black garments over which they wore explosive belts in highly visible fashion.³⁸ Two other spectacular attacks were the suicide bombings by women in the midst of an open air concert in Tushino, formerly a village and now a suburb of Moscow, in

³⁶ Since these times (1954-1962), however, women’s position in society has been declining dramatically. Meredith Turshen, *Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active participants to Passive Victims?* In *Social Research* 69, 2002, p. 259-279

³⁷ Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women’s Struggle in a Male-defined Devolutionary Movement* (MacMillan, 1994).

³⁸ The Russian military stormed the theatre using poison gas and killed all hostage-takers. Dozens of civilians, too, died, mostly from the exposure to the chemicals.

July 2003 (thirteen dead) and the bombing of two fully occupied passenger planes in 2004 which were on their way to Sochi and Volgograd. In the same year, and only a few days later, a woman detonated a devastating explosion at the entrance to the metro station Ryzhskaya. The worst attack to date was the occupation of a school in Beslan on 1 September 2004, in which more than 1,200 women and children were held hostage without food and water. The building was mined, and time and again hostages were murdered. By the end of the ordeal officials counted 23 dead. In this terrorist operation, too, women participated. However, the conclusions this allows us to draw with respect to gender relations is a matter of debate. The Moscow journalist Julia Jusik did research amongst Chechnyan women terrorists and found out that self-determination only played a secondary role.³⁹ The assassins had generally come into contact with recruiters following family difficulties, often the death of a father, brother or husband and were sought out, trained and deployed for particular operations. A young woman who refused to execute the orders given her, left the organisation and who has since then been in hiding, portrayed a depressing scenario of rape, coercion and hopelessness at the hands of the men who planned the operation. The accounts in Jusik's monograph were particularly shocking since they revealed that many women once armed and sent off to execute a particular operation could no longer decide whether they would actually carry out their orders or whether they would abort the operation. The actual detonation of the explosive charge, according to Jusik, was controlled by unknown men behind the scenes.

The second region in which female suicide bombers have become active is Palestine. The first *shahida* was named Wafa Idris and detonated her bomb inside a shopping center in Jerusalem. She and one other person died, thirty-one were injured. The journalist and Middle East expert Barbara Victor who investigated Wafa Idris' story encountered numerous inconsistencies that suggest the act may have been an accident and that the young woman, at that time twenty-eight, only intended to transport the bomb for her brother. It was apparently he who was selected to carry out the operation. Yet another of the many versions of the account relating to this almost legendary figure portrays an unhappy woman who was told by a doctor following the death of her new-born baby that she would never again be able to have children. Upon hearing this her husband left her, robbing her of any further reason to live. This personal catastrophe, says Victor, suggests that perhaps Wafa Idris did act intentionally. Yet underlying both Victor's and Jusik's interpretations is the implicit assumption that

³⁹ In 2002, when she was only twenty-one years old, Julia Jusik wrote a much-acclaimed report on Chechnyan suicide bombers. It was then following the attack on a Moscow theatre that she began researching her monograph, the German translation of which appeared in 2005.

women do not commit themselves to such acts out of their own political convictions and willingly transform themselves from bearers of life into killing machines.

In Victor's view, personal frustrations were also decisive in the making of another *shahida*, Darine Abu A'isha. The diligent student, the youngest child of a middle-class couple, capitulated in the face of tradition, which dictated that it was her destiny to marry and bear children instead of embarking on an academic career. At an Israeli check-point she pressured a soldier into behaving improperly, namely to kiss her cousin publicly in order to save a baby that urgently required medical care. The young man asked her parents for her hand in marriage that same day, since such an insult to her honour was considered a grave matter. Darine is said to have refused, preferring to die as a martyr. A third assassin is said to have acted, because her husband, whom she loved very much, betrayed her.

But according to Victor even more than the oppression experienced at the hands of Israeli soldiers it is the patriarchal gender relations that are decisive in women's decisions to become a *shahida*, in her words, "...if these people are forced to live in a society filled with punishment and prohibition, and if they are offered equality and respect only by becoming martyrs, it is not surprising that there is an increasing number of Palestinian women who are opting for the latter alternative." The author is no doubt correct in concluding that the majority of Palestinian women are prevented from actualising themselves by rigid moral codices, the tyranny of parents, brothers, uncles and other high-ranking family members, as well as by a rigid, pre-determined life plan. Moreover, Palestinian women are particularly likely to become victims of family violence and "honour killings".⁴⁰ The participation of women in armed struggle can therefore hardly be regarded as an indicator of a social order particularly favourable to women. However, whether one can decisively say that this is indicative of precisely the opposite situation is just as dubious. Those women can attain honour and glory by joining the struggle for liberation has something of a historical tradition in Palestine. During the nation's more recent history secular women fighters made headlines on numerous occasions during the first Intifada. The most well-known of these was Leila Khaled, a former member of the Marxist People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine

⁴⁰ Honour killings are frequently reported from Palestine and neighbouring countries in which large number of Palestinian refugees lives. For example James Emery, Reputation is everything: Honour killings among the Palestinians, 2003. Online resource: www.worldandi.com/newhome/public/2003/may/clpub.asp; Gendercide (2007): "Honour" killings and blood feuds. Online resource: www.gendercide.org/case_honour.html. An autobiographical account was written by the Jordanian-Palestinian women Souad and published in 2003. Souad's story shows how hopeless the situation of women is who have been accused of besmearing the family honour and describes the rigour with which male members of the family are willing to get rid of a female family member.

(PFLP), who on 6 September 1970 hijacked an passenger air plane belonging to the Israeli airline El-Al. Assisting her in the operation was a comrade-in-arms by the name of Patrick Arguello. On the way from Tel Aviv to London both were overpowered by security officials; Argello was shot and Khaled herself injured and arrested. The picture of her lying on a stretcher, her fingers raised in the sign of victory, went around the world. Only a short time later the PFLP carried out another hijacking and used this to pressure officials into releasing her. Leila Khaled was a public heroine. For photographers, who in the 1970s saw in her an icon of the new femininity and aesthetised resistance, Khaled posed with her Kalashnikov, a *keffiyeh* loosely draped around her head and a ring that incorporated the safety pin of her first hand grenade.

Arafat took up the story of militant feminine resistance in a speech held on 27 January 2002 and called upon Palestinian women to set out for Jerusalem to become *shahidas*.⁴¹ Organisations such as Hamas interpret Islamic doctrine rather conservatively and therefore tend to be rather ambivalent with respect to female militancy. A highly regarded widow who was given the honourable title “*Umm Jihad*”, spoke out decidedly against women’s participation in war, pointing out that they are not permitted to walk alone in the streets and are obligated to maintain proper dress. Thus, either women would be hindered in battle by long, impractical garments, or, if they opted for battle dress, would bring shame upon themselves and their family. That such views do not go unchallenged is evident from the respect accorded to women fighters. Hamas even engages women as military trainers, such as in the case of Samira Sabih who was hired to work in Gaza as an explosives expert. She was by no means the tool of her male superiors, but rather trained men, until she was captured by the Israeli military. Such developments are not simply social deviations or lapses, but rather represent a new view of femininity or rather as a partial departure from binary gender constructions. However tentative this development might be, it does force the spokesmen of such influential organisations such as Fatah and even the Hamas to at least publicly pay lip-service to the idea that women, too, can fight. Even Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the founder of Hamas, told Victor that he supports the participation of women in armed resistance.

Feminists support a rather heterogenous spectrum of views with respect to the issue of female militancy, adopting positions ranging from absolute rejection to euphoric support. In Germany the feminist activist Alice Schwarzer advocated that women should be allowed to

⁴¹ Victor quotes this speech, in which Arafat takes up the idea of the equality of men and women that permits the latter to participate in men’s battles. He referred to these future women-at-arms as the “Army of Roses”.

defend or even fight for their own peace (Schwarzer 1978); others argued in favour of an absolute proscription of armies and military service⁴² or equated femininity with the negation of militant aggression.⁴³ As the work of Christine Eifler and Ruth Seifert on the military shows, the integration of women in armies does not change the gender hierarchy, but rather can even reinforce it.⁴⁴ It is not rare for women who dare to push their way into “the boys’ club” to become victims of sexual violence.⁴⁵

D. WOMEN IN POSITIONS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Just as controversial an issue as women fighters and soliders are women political leaders, or more generally, the issue of women in leadership positions in the Islamic world. Conservative Muslims, who regard leadership positions to be the domaine of men, cite verse 32: 34 which says: “Men are protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more strength than the other...”. Or, they quote a *hadith* which says, “A people which has a woman as a leader will not succeed.” Such arguments are deployed especially when a woman strives to achieve the highest position in government, such as was the case in Indonesia when Megawati Sukarnoputri sought to become Suharto’s successor.⁴⁶ Megawati’s Democratic Party for Struggle (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan*) appeared as the driving force behind the democratisation process, and her prospects for winning the election were quite good. This lead to an unprecedented national discussion between politicians, religious leaders, members of civil society and members of the major Islamic organisations, which centred on the question as to whether it was admissible for a woman to be elected the

⁴² The magazines *Emma* and *Courage* were for many years the fora, in which these debates were conducted. On the debate between the editors of both magazines, see Sybille/Alice Schwarzer Plockstedt, “Frauen ins Militär? Pro und Contra”, In: *Emma* (12), 1980.

⁴³ In the 1980s the equations women = peace and men = war were first debated and female complicity discovered. Christina Thürmer-Rohr, *Vagabundinnen. Feministische Essays* (Berlin: Orlanda, 1987). Nevertheless the scandal over the US-American service-woman Lynndie Rana England, who participated in the torture of Iraqi soldiers in the military prison of Abu Ghraib, provoked such a strong public reaction, because it went against stereotypical conceptions of femininity. Pictures which showed Lynndie holding naked prisoners on a leash and forcing them to crawl around on the floor like dogs were leaked to the press in 2004.

⁴⁴ Christine Eifler, *Soziale Konstruktionen: Militär und Geschlechterverhältnis* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1999). Ruth Seifert/ Hg. Christine Eifler, *Gender und Militär. Internationale Erfahrungen mit Frauen und Männern in Streitkräften* (Königstein: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2003).

⁴⁵ In 1996 a national debate on sexual violence arose in the United States when several female recruits in the Army filed complaints of sexual harassment and rape against their instructors at the Ordinance Centre of the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. After a hotline was set up and several studies conducted, it became undeniably clear that the problem was virulent and nation-wide.

⁴⁶ In a paper Nelly van Doorn-Harder analysed the arguments against a female president and discovered that conservatives justify their position with a verse from the previously mentioned Surat an-Nisa and with several *ahadith* that state a leader must always be male. N. Doorn-Harder, “The Indonesian Islamic Debate on a Woman President”, In: *Sojourn* 17(2), 2002, p. 164-190.

president of a country with a Muslim majority. The influential Indonesian Council of Ulema (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) threatened to issue a *fatwa*, and this threat, according to Sonja van Wichtelen, who examined the role of the media in the 1999 and 2004 elections, was treated as if it actually were an issued religious injunction.⁴⁷ Many influential Muslims rejected the idea of a woman becoming the highest representative of state,⁴⁸ and radical organisations like the Islamic Defender Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) further fanned the flames of controversy. Liberals were likewise forced to defend their position publicly. On 22 June 1999 a group by the name of Civil Society for the Political Rights of Women went public with the statement that religion should not be misused to exclude a woman from the presidency and that a woman's rights must be asserted regardless of age, class, education, religion, ethnicity or political membership. Sanusi, who has reflected on this frequently quoted *hadith*, concludes that there is no logical basis for the establishment of a link between gender and political action. Moreover, it is not true that female leaders are the product of westernisation.

Despite these interventions and the PDI-P's victory Megawati did not become president. The parliament instead selected a man, Abdurrahman Wahid. Megawati was consoled with a position as his deputy. Only after the former was impeached for his involvement in a financial scandal, after having served only two years of his term, did she advance to the nation's highest political office.

The public debate over Megawati notwithstanding, it is not at all uncommon for women in the Islamic world to move up into the highest political offices. Pakistan, Turkey and Bangladesh all had women prime ministers; Pakistan and Bangladesh even on two occasions. When Indira Gandhi stood for office in India she was elected by the overwhelming majority of Muslims. Statistics claims the internet site of Majid Ali, a Pakistani investment-banker and self-proclaimed feminist, indicate that in the last fifty years more than 750 million Muslims have elected a woman to be their head of state.⁴⁹ However, in most cases these women heads

⁴⁷ Sonja van Wichtelen, "Contesting Megawati: The Mediation of Islam and Nation in Times of Political Transition", In: *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3(2), 2006, p. 43. Van Wichtelen's argument is that the media played a crucial role in fomenting chaos and polarising the various factions.

⁴⁸ Critics argue that in light of the massive of religious reservations, representatives of the old order appealed to religious sentiments out of strategic interest, i.e. in order to check Megawati's rise to power, Bahar Yus, "Women in Islam. Female presidency in controversy", In: *Islamic Path*, 2003. Online resource: www.islamic-paths.org/Home/English/Issues/Women/Presidency_Controversy.htm

⁴⁹ Majid Ali, "Female leadership in Islam", In: *Pakistan Link*, 2005. Online resource: www.pakistanlink.com/Opinion/2005/Jun05/24/03.HTM

of state were successors to powerful men and so can be said to have benefitted from dynastic power relations.⁵⁰

Female power, however is not a recent phenomenon, even if women are rarely mentioned in Islamic history. Fatima Mernissi is the first to have expressly turned her attention to female Islamic rulers. In her monograph *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* she identifies fifteen women in positions of political leadership who were so important that their images were minted on coins and that Friday prayers were spoken in their names. The rulers studied by Mernissi were not only the wives of rulers or mothers of future rulers, but also women who deposed their husbands, such as A'isha al-Hurra of Andalusia did in the year 887 C.E. The terms Sultan and Malik, which in the Islamic world are used to refer to rulers, exist in both masculine and feminine forms: Sultana or Malika. Other titles for female rulers were: *al-Hurra* (the free woman), *Sayyida* (mistress) oder *Sitt* (lady) (Mernissi 1991:19). However, the rulers whose biographies Mernissi examines were all representatives of men, or achieved a certain degree of power and influence as concubines, wives or mothers. The Christian Subh, also known as the "Queen of Cordoba" (*Sahiba Malikat Qurtuba*), was a slave and won the heart of Caliph al-Hakam, who, as the years went on and his youth waned, entrusted her with more and more of his duties since he wished to devote himself more to the sciences. After his death she ruled in the name of his under-age son, but was soon ousted by a young secretary who was her confidante, perhaps even her lover. Al-Khaizuran, the wife of the Abbasid caliph Muhammad ibn Mansur al-Mahdi, followed a similar biographical trajectory, first having been the Caliph's favourite slave, then becoming his wife and finally managing to have her sons named the legitimate successors to their father. Her son al-Hadi is said to have tried to check her influence, whereupon she murdered him when he was only 24 years old. Harun ar-Rashid's youngest son, on the other hand, loved his mother dearly and gave her free reign at court. Shajar ad-Durr took power in the 13th century, after her husband, al-Malik as-Salih Najm ad-Din Ayyub, died and her son al-Muazzam Turanshah proved to be unfit to rule and was assassinated in 1250 C.E. But the Sultana was only able to maintain her hold on power for a few months. Thereafter she was forced to yield to a man. According to Mernissi, female rule never went unchallenged. Instead she was often discredited as a "violation of the spiritual principles that underpin and legitimize political authority."⁵¹ According to the hegemonic discourse, the feminine was subordinate to the male, implying that the former was to be ruled by the latter. From this followed that a woman could never become sovereign. The

⁵¹ Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens*, p. 30

cases Mernissi examines show that women could and did attain power and influence over their husbands or sons, that during periods of transition they could take over the reigns of government, but that ultimately they were exceptions from the rule that political and spiritual power was considered to be male power. Furthermore, it is often asserted that their rule was a sign of decline, or that female rule contributed significantly to the weakening of the polity. This is the argument implicit in works such as that of Anthony Reid, who studied the rule of four sultanas who ruled the Sultanate of Aceh in northern Sumatra in the 17th century.⁵² The rule of these four women sovereigns came at a time when the Sultanate, which formerly had undergone a period of rapid expansion, experienced serious political decline when it was no longer able to fend off the encroachments of the European maritime powers, particularly those of the Dutch. Reid regards the poor leadership of these four sultanas to have been decisive in Aceh's change of political fortunes.⁵³ The Acehnese scholar Sher Banu A. L. Khan, on the other hand, does not believe that the Sultanas were the reason for the Dutch victories, but rather emphasises that in this difficult situation these women rulers had demonstrated considerable negotiating skills. "A more accommodative and consensual approach," she writes, "based on law and the ability to keep foreign diplomats and merchants happy could well be the answer to Aceh's continued peace, prosperity and survival as an independent kingdom."⁵⁴

Weak leadership is something present-day women heads of state in Islamic polities are also accused of. Megawati is a prime case in point. According to her critics, although she embodied considerable symbolic power, she was constrained by female stereotypes of femininity and was incompetent when it came to dealing with everyday political affairs.⁵⁵

Yet at another level women have without a doubt been marching ahead for years. In Iran or in Jordan half of university students are women. In Turkey, Tunisia and Algeria quotas existed for many professions stipulating that women had to comprise a certain percentage of

⁵² These were Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah (1641-1675), Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiatuddin Syah (1675-1678), Sultanah Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah (1678-1688) and Sultanah Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah (1688-1699).

⁵³ Anthony Reid, "Trade and Problem of Royal Power in Aceh-Three Stages: 1500-1700," *Monographs of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, v.6 (Kuala Lumpur: Perchetakan Mas Sdn Bhd, 1975), p. 52.

⁵⁴ Sher Banu A. L. Khan, "The Sultanahs of Aceh 1641-1699", In Graf, Arndt, Susanne Schröter und Edwin Wieringa, eds, *Aceh: Culture, History, Politics* (Singapur: ISEAS, 2007), p. x.

⁵⁵ Megawati quite clearly availed herself of popular conceptions female stereotypes (*kodrat wanita*), which were integral to Indonesian politics under Suharto. The ideology behind this conception clearly distinguishes between men and women, ascribes to the latter emotional and nurturing qualities, but at the same time claims that they are incapable of making decisions and asserting these against resistance. Women are cast as good mothers, supportive wives, but not as individuals who think independently and act autonomously. Julia Suryakusuma referred to this ideology as a "mother cult" (*ibuism*) and has criticised the resulting politics as "state ibuism". Julia Suryakusuma, *Sex, Power and Nation: An Anthology of Writings, 1979-2003* (Jakarta: Metafor Publishing, 2004).

the workforce. And in many Muslim countries women have little difficulty pursuing careers as lawyers, university professors, doctors, theologians or higher level government officials. Women's organisations active in countries with Muslim majorities are the amongst the most active organs of civil society, while at universities institutes for gender studies have been established in order to scientifically monitor the process of gender mainstreaming.⁵⁶ Even in countries such as Yemen there are now in the ministries ombudsmen for women's issues, and the government established a national Women's Committee, which demands that thirty percent the seats in parliament be reserved for women. Of course the reality is that until this goal is achieved there is still a long way to go: so far the cabinet is comprised of only one woman, the minister for human rights, Amar al-Alim al-Suswa. With respect to Indonesia, Abshar-Abdalla of the Liberal Islam Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*) emphasises that both conservative and liberal Muslims advocate the involvement of women in the public sphere. The two largest Islamic organisations, the *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, have made the promotion of women part of their agendas and have each established their own women's associations. These work to promote women's education, provide adequate medical care, and prevent domestic violence and the trafficking of women and children. The young women, who are active in associations working towards these ends, go even further and demand reforms in family law, the outlawing of polygyny and the increased participation of women in leadership positions. Conservative groups, too, have their own women's organisations, such as those established by *Persatuan Islam* (Persis) and *Al Irsyad*. Even those groups generally regarded to be fundamentalist, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS), which Abshar-Abdalla considers to be analogous to the Muslim Brotherhood. In PKS publicity campaigns fifty percent of the activists are women. The only party which excludes women from the public sphere is the MMI (*Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia*), which was established in the year 2000 by Abu Bakar Ba'ashir.⁵⁷

Yet, making leadership positions more easily accessible to women elites is not uncontroversial, and quite a few Muslim radicals are exerting considerable pressure on women. In 1999 in Yemen, for example, they petitioned against a centre established by

⁵⁶ Amongst these are the Institute of Women's Studies in Lahore, Pakistan; and the Ahfad University for Women in Sudan, which is dedicated to educating women, strengthening their roles in national and rural development and achieving equity for women in Sudanese society.

⁵⁷ Abu Bakar Ba'ashir is considered to be a founding member of the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, which is held to be responsible for the bombing of a discotheque on the Island of Bali in the year 2000. The version of Islam propagated by Ba'ashir and his followers is decidedly anti-pluralistic, anti-democratic and patriarchal.

Rauffa Hassan, a professor of mass communication, and accused her of promoting homosexuality. As a result the centre was shut down and a death warrant issued against her.

Even more vehement than the rejection of women exercising worldly power is the rejection of women exercising religious power. According to Mernissi's research no woman in the history of Islam ever occupied the position of *caliph* or *imam*. But now even this bastion of patriarchal religious interpretation is being challenged. Women study Islamic theology, and at the Al-Azhar University in Egypt a number of women have been appointed deans to the department of Islamic Studies. Women may become muftis (*muftiyya*) and thus may issue *fatwas*, some even do so on television or in the print media. Thus the internet site Islamonline has its own *muftiyyas*, one of whom is Suad Saleh, also a dean at Al-Azhar University.

In 2005 a woman entered into the last bastion of male dominance, claiming spiritual leadership over both women and men. On 18 March 2005 Amina Wadud, professor of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University became the first woman to lead both men and women in the Friday prayer and to hold the Friday sermon.

For her, leading Friday prayers and holding the sermon, were just two of many important steps in a "gender *jihad*", a struggle for equality between the sexes, which according to her is integral to Islam. "Gender justice is essential to the divine order", she writes (Wadud 2006: 10), but "patriarchal control over what it means to be human robs females of their God-given agency and full humanity."⁵⁸ The backlash was immediate, and some of it even anticipatory. Because of threats stemming from the fundamentalist milieu even simply finding a place to hold the Friday service proved to be challenge. Finally, an Anglican church provided the space.⁵⁹

The Egyptian-American journalist Yasmin Mogahed, who also works for the on-line program "Ask About Islam", on 28 March 2003 spoke out against Amina Wadud's holding of the Friday sermon. "God dignifies both men and women in their distinctiveness, not their sameness", she argued, referring to a quotation of the Prophet which says that paradise lies at the feet of mothers. Although no man could become a mother, no one ever complained that this was unjust. Women should not try and be like men, but rather should concentrate on their own sphere and draw their self-worth and respect from that. The portal is part of the internet portal "Muslim Wake Up", where Amina Wadud's sermon was announced on 18 March 2003 to those wishing to attend. This announcement was undeniably positive, reading "On March

⁵⁸ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld: 2006), p. 255.

⁵⁹ The press repeatedly emphasised that this prayer service could only take place in the West, and that to this day no such event has taken place in an Islamic country.

18, 2005 Muslim women will reclaim their right to be spiritual equals and leaders. Women will move from the space tradition has relegated them in the back of the mosque and pray in the front rows.” (MWU 18 March 2005). The headline read: “Muslim Wake Up! And the Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour”. Even amongst spiritual leaders the response was mixed. Egypt’s Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Guma declared in an interview on Egyptian television “that there is no consensus among religious scholars on the issue of female imamat of mixed gender congregations, pointing out that respected scholars like Imam Tabari and Imam ibn Arabi found the practice permissible.” Sheikh Sayyed Tantawi of Cairo’s Al-Azhar mosque permits women-led prayers only in a congregation without men. Critics, on the other hand, castigate Wadud as a heretic. Thus, the Egyptian religious scholar and preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi accused Wadud of having simply ignored fourteen centuries of Islamic tradition. Similarly the Grand Mufti Abdul Azziz al-Sheikh decried her as “an enemy of Islam”, who has transgressed “divine law”.⁶⁰ Muslim protesters outside the church where the service took place could be seen holding signs with the slogan “Mix-gender prayer today. Hell fire tomorrow.” Supporters insist that it is legitimate for women to hold the *khutba*, arguing that the Prophet himself authorised one of his followers, Umm Waraqah, to lead Friday prayers and that the qualifications to perform such a task are completely gender neutral. The only requirements are that a person has sufficient knowledge of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunna* and that he or she be a morally upstanding member of the community. The Women Muslim League regards such conservative readings of the sacred text as symptomatic of the oppression of women in the contemporary Islamic world. Women, according to the League, have always been regarded as a source of authority in Islam, and a large number of *hadiths* can be traced back to A’isha.⁶¹ The professor and scholar of Islamic law Khaled Abou El Fadl is of the opinion that the *Qur’an* by no means prohibits women from becoming *imams*. And, in Indonesia, Sheikh Hussein Muhammad of Cirebon believes that women may indeed lead both men and women in prayer.⁶² Other voices, such as the The Secretary General of Islamic Commission of Spain, enthusiastically announced the provocation to be an “historical event, as

⁶⁰Luthfi Assyaukanie, “Amina Wadud’s breakout”. Online resource <http://islamlib.com/en/page.php?page=article&id=812>Wajah liberal Islam di Indonesia (Jakarta: Jaringan Islam Liberal, 2005). A summary of various comments may be found at various internet sites, such as at <http://pakistantimes.net/2005/03/20/top10.htm>.

⁶¹ Women under Muslim Law 2005.

⁶² Assyaukanie, “Amina Wadud’s Breakout”.

a recovery of genuine Islam, and a break from the macho Islam which has nothing to do with the Prophet's teachings.”⁶³

Amina Wadud herself commented the New York prayer service only sparingly, wishing to avoid the attention of the yellow press. She regards her spiritual activities to be part of a greater struggle, a gender *jihad*, which seeks to achieve an order based on divine justice. “Gender justice“, she writes, “is essential to the divine order of the universe.”⁶⁴ Although justice has been granted by Allah it has been ignored by the people. According to her interpretation of the *Qur'an* and *Sunna* women and men are equal before Allah, who is sometimes addressed as “She” in her writings. Wadud is optimistic that the world will change and that gender jihadists “will become representatives for achieving a new world order removed from the entrenched patterns and diverse forms of patriarchy.”⁶⁵

Despite many positive developments, it would be too early to speak of a shift having taken place in the Islamic world towards the equality of women and an acceptance of their holding leadership positions. Hibba Abugideiri, who portrays several female Muslims thinkers that have “created an epistemological shift whereby religious knowledge, rather than being understood as authoritative and incontestable, is revealed to be constructed, value laden, and context specific”⁶⁶ points out that many of these women are US-American citizens and that they advocate their ideas in an open society. Even if I do not agree with her thesis that feminist Islam is a phenomenon embedded in American society, or that American Islam might serve as a model for global Islam, it is true that liberal and feminist reformers often are not able to endure the repression in their home countries. Rauffa Hassan the professor of mass communication, for example, taught at a centre for women’s studies in Yemen, until it was forced to close as a result of pressure from radical Islamists. A death warrant was issued for her, and in 1999 she was forced to flee the country. Even more famous is Asma Barlas, the professor of Pakistani origin, who today teaches politics at Ithaca College in New York and is considered to be one of the most important representatives of Islamic feminism. In 1983 she was forced into exile for having criticised the Pakistani regime and was granted asylum in the USA. The Islamic theologian and human rights activist Riffat Hassan, who

⁶³ Abdennur Prado, “About the Friday Prayer led by Amina Wadud”, 2005. Online resource: www.altmuslim.com/update_more.php?id=1428_0_28_0_C

⁶⁴ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁶⁶ Hibba Abugideiri, “Hagar: A Historical Model for “Gender Jihad”, In: Yazbeck Haddad, Yvonne, eds.: *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thoughts in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), p. 100.

became famous for her reinterpretations of the sacred texts, resides in the USA, too, and the Iranian feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini is currently living in exile in London. This shows that a long way lies ahead of the Islamic world before gender justice is no longer regarded as a heresy or blasphemy. But there are also encouraging developments. In Southeast Asia, where supporters of a more radical Islam have so far been kept in check by moderates, feminists can work towards an understanding of Islam in which women are included as actors in all spheres, whether this be as imams, as businesswomen or as politicians. This does not mean that women in leadership positions are already accepted as a matter of course. But things are moving. At gender conferences which recently became very popular men use to announce that they fully support women's equality, and supporting one's wife in her professional career wins one much respect, while being married to a woman who has succeeded in a leadership position is a source of pride.

E. CONCLUSION

The established legal justification of gender equality contained of in CEDAW yields a challenge for religious reformers to construct either political or religious basis of gender equality and justice through two mutually interconnected approaches, that is, reinterpretation of the Qur'an and reconstruction of history. In terms of the second approach, the construction of Islamic history is inevitably important to show that women in the Muslim world were able to attain influence and autonomy that they were warriors, rulers and businesswomen and thus crossed the borders of conservative gender models. Through historical studies, there were some women positing considerable positions both in political sphere and military one that strengthens the public role women has played even in term of the Prophet Muhammad, such as Aisyah, Nusaiba bint Ka'b al-Ansariya, Azdah bint al-Harith, and so on. This inclination is further continued in the following periods where women participation in public space gains greater supports and affirmations not only from religious institutions/organizations but also from the state. In countries with Muslims in majority has also stipulated policies to strengthen gender empowerment. This progress exhibits the willingness and struggle of the Muslim reformers to negotiate the notion of gender equality exemplified in historical accounts against the conservative stance which rejects public participation of women.

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