

Module 4: Muslim Women as Social Transformers

| Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century



introduction

This unit presents visual images, information, and vignettes representing the historical and contemporary role of Muslim women as political leaders and contributors to social and religious developments and gender equality. These women worked to improve their societies, and many of them struggled against dangerous oppressive forces with courage and conviction. Yet they remain largely unsung heroes.

These examples can inspire us all. They present Muslim women as active social transformers, as opposed to their common depiction as stereotypical oppressed victims.

medieval period: Khadījah bint Khuwaylid 555–619

- Khadija was the first follower of the religion of Islam after the revelations received by Mohammed. She was also the first wife of the Prophet Mohammed. As the daughter of a businessman in the Quraysh tribe, Khadija followed the family business and was a successful entrepreneur in her own right. Her caravans travelled the trade routes from Syria to Yemen, but she did not travel with them and instead hired merchants for the journey. She brought Mohammed into her service when he was 25. She was very impressed with his character, and eventually she made an offer of marriage to him, which he accepted.
- Khadija was the first to believe the revelations that Mohammed received from the archangel Jibreel and was the first to support his role as the prophet of Islam. Because of this she is often referred to as the “Mother of the Believers.” Khadija was also known for her strength during the persecution of the early Muslims and for her kindness and charity.

medieval period: Aisha bint Abu Bakr

7th century

- Aisha is one of four persons (the others being Abu Hurayrah, Abdullah ibn Umar, and Anas ibn Malik) who authenticated and transmitted more than two thousand hadith (sayings of the Prophet). These have formed the basis for one of the most important Islamic religious texts. Aisha was married to the Prophet Mohammed, the messenger of God in Islam.
- Men and women came from far and wide to benefit from her knowledge. She took boys and girls, some of them orphans, into her custody and trained them. Her house thus became a school and an academy.

Source: J. Zine & S. Muir. (2003). MENTORS Anti-Islamophobia Resource Kits (Elementary Unit). MENTORS: Toronto, Canada.



http://uk.ask.com/wiki/Masjidul_Haram

medieval period: Rabia al-Basri 717–801

- Rabia al-Basri (born in Basra in what is present-day Iraq) was a Muslim sufi saint and poet. She devoted her life to prayer and devotion and has become renowned for her remarkable spiritual poetry.
- Sufism is the mystical tradition in Islam. Many of the great Muslim artists, scientists, poets and philosophers were seekers on the sufi path of knowledge and enlightenment.
- Rabia was born into poverty. One of the myths surrounding her life is that she was freed from slavery because her master saw her praying while surrounded by light, realized that she was a saint, and feared for his life if he continued to keep her as a slave.



Rabia al-Basra
http://uk.ask.com/wiki/Masjidul_Haram



<http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/yezidism.htm>

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medieval period: Rabia al-Basri 717–801

- Rabia chose a solitary life of prayer, living much of her life in desert seclusion.
- Her poetry remains a lasting legacy and is popular worldwide.

Poem by Rabia al-Basri

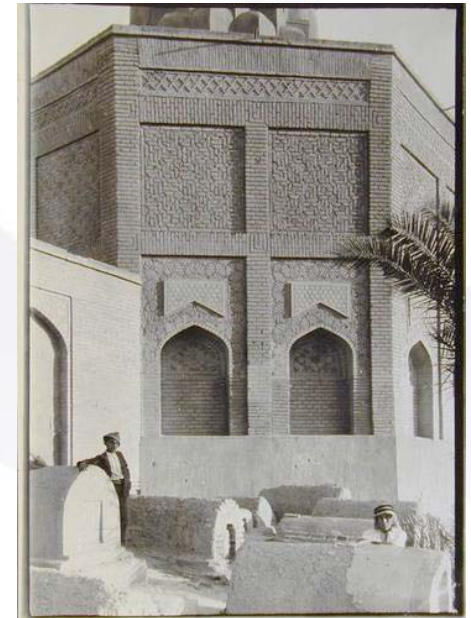
If I Adore You

*If I adore You out of fear of Hell,
Burn me in Hell!
If I adore you out of desire for Paradise,
Lock me out of Paradise.
But if I adore you for Yourself alone,
Do not deny to me Your eternal beauty.*

medieval period: Queen Zubaida 764–809

- Queen Zubaida was known for her wealth and generosity. She commissioned the building of mosques in the empire and built a famous road named “Zubaida’s Way” that led pilgrims heading for the Hajj all the way from Baghdad to Mecca (Saudi Arabia). On this road she had a series of water canals and inns (known as “caravansaries”) constructed. Pilgrims and travellers heading to the holy city of Mecca could stop at these inns for food and rest. Thousands of pilgrims travelled Queen Zubaida’s road each year. Queen Zubaida was the wife of the famous Muslim Caliph (ruler) named Harun Al Rashid, who ruled the Abbasid Empire.

Source: J. Zine & S. Muir. (2003). MENTORS Anti-Islamophobia Resource Kits (Secondary Unit). MENTORS: Toronto, Canada.



Tombstone of Queen Zubaida
<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/2810815>

medieval period: Razia Sultana 1205–1240: first female ruler of South Asia

- Razia Sultana was a descendant of the Muslim Turks who invaded India in the 11th century. She was the only woman ever crowned in the Delhi sultanate, which ruled parts of India from 1210 to 1526. Notably, Razia managed to keep the nobility from over-asserting their power, while also gaining popular support from the army and the populace. She was known as a great administrator, political leader, and military leader, and was skilled on the battlefield. A keen political and military strategist, her greatest accomplishment on the political front was to manipulate rebel factions into opposing each other.



<http://www.storyofpakistan.com/person.asp?perid=P047>

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medieval period: Razia Sultana 1205–1240: first female ruler of South Asia

- She reportedly discarded traditional female clothing in favour of men's garments. Razia was known for her openness and held meetings and court appointments in public, allowing anyone to be a witness. She also worked to develop greater religious tolerance for the Hindus living under Muslim rule. Eventually her gender and policies made her unpopular among the Turkish nobility and she was forced to flee. She was given refuge by a peasant who later killed her. However, her tragic end does not take away from her notable place in history.

medieval period: Shajarat Al-Durr: fighter against the crusaders in 1250

- In 1249, the Frankish army of King Louis the IX landed on the shores of the Nile River in Egypt. At the time, the ruler of Egypt, Sultan Salih Ayyub, was away in Damascus. He left his wife Shajarat Al-Durr to organize the defence of the country.
- Salih Ayyub returned in 1250, but died shortly after. To avoid chaos and to avoid alerting the invading army that Egypt was without a ruler, making it vulnerable to attack, Shajarat told everyone that the Sultan was sick. To avoid suspicion, she made sure that a servant was seen taking food to his tent every day. Meanwhile she continued to rule the army in his name and led a crushing defeat against the Crusaders, even capturing Louis the IX.
- Shajarat Al-Durr officially became the Sultan of Egypt for 80 days. Coins were minted bearing her image and her name was mentioned in the mosque during Friday prayers.

Source: J. Zine & S. Muir. (2003). MENTORS Anti-Islamophobia Resource Kits (Secondary Unit). MENTORS: Toronto, Canada.

early modern era: Huda Shaarawi: early Egyptian reformer

- Shaarawi was a feminist activist throughout her life. In 1914, she founded the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women. In 1923, she founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), in which she was to remain active throughout her life. The EFU consisted of upper and middle class Egyptian women, and at its height had about 250 members. The EFU focused on various issues, particularly women's suffrage, increased education for women, and changes in the Personal Status laws. While the EFU accomplished few of its goals, it is widely credited with setting the stage for later feminist victories.



<http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Shaarawi.html>

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early modern era: Huda Shaarawi: working for reform

- The EFU began to form transnational links with women's organizations in Europe. After attending a conference of the International Women's Alliance in Italy, Shaarawi and her colleagues became famous for removing their face veils on their way home to Egypt as a symbolic show of emancipation.

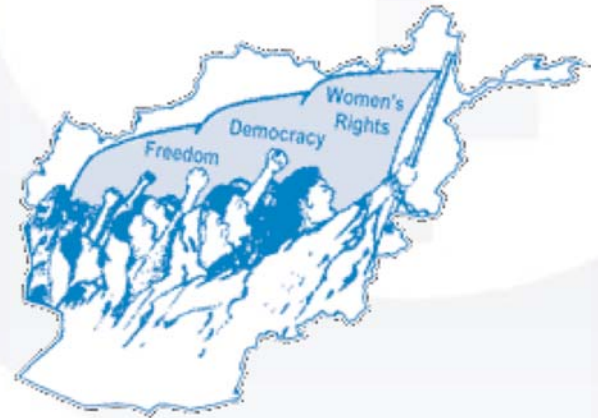
The mandate of Shaarawi's EFU included political, social and legal equality for Egyptian women; for example:

- enabling access to education for women at all levels
- reforming marriage and divorce laws, and restricting polygamy
- increasing the minimum marriage age for girls to 16. (Shaarawi herself was married off at 12, and in an incredibly bold move for the time and place she lived in, left the marriage at 13.) Raising the legal age of marriage eventually passed into law after a petition was circulated.

<http://www.answers.com/topic/huda-shaarawi>

modern era: Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)

- RAWA began during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1977. Meena Keshwar Kamal, the founder of RAWA, struggled in the Afghan resistance movement against Russian occupation and fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan. She was assassinated in 1987 but remains a powerful symbol of martyrdom for RAWA.
- Trying to meet the needs of refugee women and children battered by the brutal occupation, RAWA established schools and a hospital for refugee Afghan women and children in Pakistan. Despite the Taliban's ban on education for women, members of RAWA secretly started schools to educate women and girls.



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modern era: Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)

- RAWA members have risked their lives in secretly documenting human rights abuses. They used hidden cameras to document the brutalities of the Taliban as a testimony to the dangers of extremist rule. The brave women of RAWA operate underground school networks, schools, and orphanages, as well as hospitals and health care centres that provide free medical treatment for women and children.

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modern era: RAWA: additional resources

- RAWA's Official Website
<http://www.rawa.org/index.php>
- Biography Of Meena, Founder of RAWA
<http://www.rawa.org/meena.html>
- Video: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan – Part 1
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLvdB4oK_TI

modern era: Malalai Joya: Afghan politician & activist

- Afghan politician and activist Malalai Joya was elected to the Afghan parliament in September 2005. She was later suspended from her office for making critical remarks about the Afghan legislature.
- For her criticism and her commitment to the enforcement of women's rights, she received a number of death threats. So far, she has survived four assassination attempts.
- During her early years, her father gave up his career to fight in the Afghan civil war. He was injured and lost part of his leg. As the situation in Afghanistan became more and more dangerous, he left the country with his family and went to Iran, then Pakistan.



<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2007/11/08/warlords-no-better-than-taliban-says-afghan-mp.html>



<http://www.countercurrents.org/joya110310.htm>

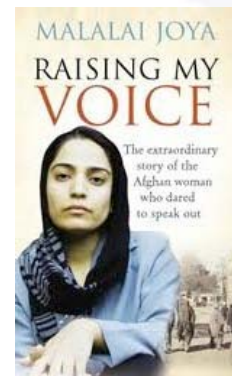
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modern era: Malalai Joya: Afghan politician & activist

- In 1996, representatives from an underground campaign group called The Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC) visited the refugee camp where 18-year-old Malalai lived with her family.
- Malalai joined the group and began to teach literacy to women in Herat, a city in western Afghanistan. This was a bold venture, because under the Taliban it was strictly forbidden to educate girls beyond the age of eight. Those who broke the rules were punished severely.



<http://links.org.au/node/585>



<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/15/afghan-activist-malalai-joya>

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modern era: Malalai Joya: Afghan politician & activist

- Since then, Malalai has become a prominent voice speaking out against the injustice of Afghanistan's history of foreign occupations and war and the destructive effect of fundamentalist groups like the Taliban.
- In 2009 *Time Magazine* ranked her among the 100 most influential people of the world.

Source: <http://thethunderbird.ca/2007/10/25/biography-of-malalai-joya/>

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modern era: Malalai Joya: additional resources

- Books:

Raising my Voice by Malalai Joya

A Woman Among Warlords by Malalai Joya & Derrick O'Keefe

- Interview:

Malalai Joya: A Woman Among Warlords – CNN Interview

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K34S474CfKs>

- Articles:

Afghan Leader Malalai Joya is Resistance Personified

<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2010/07/24/afghan-leader-malalai-joya-is-resistance-personified.html>

An Angry Woman, by Malalai Joya

<http://www.countercurrents.org/joya110310.htm>

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modern era: Malalai Joya: additional resources

- Video:

Malalai Joya: Hard Talk BBC
<http://vimeo.com/16861310>



modern era: Merve Kavakci: banning of the hijab in Turkey in 1999

- Merve Kavakci is a Muslim woman elected to Turkish parliament as a member of the Fazilat (Virtue) Party. At the time of her election, she was already a woman of many accomplishments. She had memorized the Holy Qur'an, was a qualified computer scientist, and head of the Women's Commission of the now-banned Refah Party.
- On May 2, 1999, a few weeks after her election, she entered parliament for the oath-taking ceremony wearing a headscarf and was taunted by hundreds of politicians demanding her expulsion. As they screamed at her to “get out,” she sat with quiet dignity.



http://www.hurriyetusa.com/haber_detay.asp?id=11711

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modern era: Merve Kavakci: banning of the hijab in Turkey in 1999

- The controversy was caused by her insistence on wearing a hijab, a headscarf worn by many Muslim women as a sign of their religious identity. Turkish secularists resisted any overt symbols of religious adherence, and the country's chief prosecutor began legal action to close down the Fazilat party. Meanwhile, police used tear gas and armoured vehicles against people who were protesting against the ban on the hijab. Many protestors were injured and large numbers were arrested.
- Merve made public statements that the decision to cover her head in parliament was a test of democracy. She said her right to wear the headscarf was guaranteed by the constitution and international laws: *“My head is covered because of my faith. I will defend my rights until the end.”*

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modern era: Merve Kavakci: additional resources

- Video:

Interview with Merve Kavakci

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7637200092606006724#>

- Article:

George Washington University Professor Merve Kavacki: A Modern-Day Pilgrim

<http://media.www.gwhatchet.com/media/storage/paper332/news/2008/11/24/Life/Slice.Of.Life.Gw.Professor.Merve.Kavakci.A.ModernDay.Pilgrim-3559559.shtml>

modern era: Monia Mazigh

- Born and raised in Tunisia, Monia Mazigh immigrated to Canada in 1991. She holds a Ph.D. in finance from McGill University and speaks Arabic, French, and English fluently. She has worked at the University of Ottawa and taught at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia.
- Dr. Mazigh was catapulted onto the public stage in 2002 when her husband, Maher Arar, was deported to Syria where he was tortured and held without charge for over a year. She campaigned tirelessly for his release. Her struggle for justice is chronicled in the book *Hope and Despair: My Struggle to Free My Husband, Maher Arar*.



http://weblog.johnwmacdonald.com/2008_11_01_archive.html

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modern era: Monia Mazigh

- In 2004, she ran in the federal election for the NDP, coming third but gaining the most votes for the riding the NDP had ever received. Dr. Mazigh lives in Ottawa with her husband and two children.

Interview with Monia Mazigh:

<http://muslimyouthvoice.ca/node/288>

Source: <http://muslimyouthvoice.ca/node/288>

modern era: Sisters in Islam

- Sisters in Islam (SIS) was formed in 1988 as a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Malaysia. SIS believes in an Islam that upholds the principles of equality, justice, freedom and dignity. SIS developed the following mission and objectives:
- Our mission is to promote an awareness of the true principles of Islam, principles that enshrine the concept of equality between women and men, and to strive towards creating a society that upholds the Islamic principles of equality, justice, freedom and dignity within a democratic state.



<http://www.udel.edu/udaily/2011/nov/muslim-women-malaysia-113010.html>



<http://www.wookies.org/portal>

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modern era: Sisters in Islam

- Objectives:
 - To promote and develop a framework of women's rights in Islam, which takes into consideration women's experiences and realities;
 - To eliminate injustice and discrimination against women by changing practices and values that regard women as inferior to men;
 - To create public awareness, and reform laws and policies, on issues of equality, justice, freedom, dignity and democracy in Islam.

SIS actively addresses human rights concerns and Muslim family law issues that negatively impact women, such as polygamy.

<http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/BM/mission.htm>

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modern era: Sisters in Islam: additional resources

- Websites:

Sisters in Islam

<http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/BM/index.htm>

Institutional Profile of SIS

<http://www.awid.org/eng/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/Sisters-in-Islam-Malaysia-Institutional-Profile>

- Article:

Sisters in Islam, Muslim Women Against Religious Extremism – AsiaNews article

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Sisters-in-Islam,-Muslim-women-against-religious-extremism-1842.html>

modern era: Shirin Ebadi: winner of the nobel peace prize 2003

“I am the first woman in the history of Iranian justice to have served as a judge. Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, since the belief was that Islam forbids women to serve as judges, I and other female judges were dismissed from our posts and given clerical duties. They made me a clerk in the very court I once presided over. We all protested. As a result, they promoted all former female judges, including myself, to the position of "experts" in the Justice Department. I could not tolerate the situation any longer, and so put in a request for early retirement.”



http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-autobio.html

“Human rights is a universal standard. It is a component of every religion and every civilization.”

“I maintain that nothing useful and lasting can emerge from violence.”

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modern era: Shirin Ebadi

After leaving the judiciary, Dr. Ebadi spearheaded several social and political initiatives. For example, she has:

- Led several research projects for the UNICEF office in Tehran.
- Cofounded the Association for Support of Children's Rights in Iran (1995). This group works to promote human rights in Iran.
- Cofounded the Human Rights Defence Centre, with four defence lawyers (2001).
- Represented several journalists or their families, accused or sentenced in relation to freedom of expression.
- Proposed to the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis) that it ratify a law prohibiting all forms of violence against children. The law was promptly debated and ratified in the summer of 2002.

Source: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-autobio.html

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modern era: Shirin Ebadi: additional resources

- Book:

Shirin Ebadi – Autobiography

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-autobio.html

- Videos:

Shirin Ebadi Interview – Our Lives Project

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUugZfJhZWo>

Highlights: Shirin Ebadi's Interview with CNN

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwNwnD7nw6A&feature=related>

Shirin Ebadi – France 24 News

<http://www.france24.com/en/20100225-ebadi-shirin-lawyer-freedom-press-president>

Conversations with History

<http://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=11794&subject=pet>

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modern era: Shirin Ebadi: additional resources

- Article:

10 Questions for Shirin Ebadi

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1191820,00.html>

modern era: Amina Wadud & Asma Barlas: women's perspectives on the Qur'an

- Dr. Amina Wadud (pictures 1 and 2) is a Visiting Professor at the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Dr. Asma Barlas (pictures 3 and 4) is Professor of Politics and Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity at Ithaca College, New York.

1: <http://denisebomfim.blogspot.com/2010/08/amina-wadud-woman-that-is-imam-uma.html>

2: <http://denisebomfim.blogspot.com/2010/08/amina-wadud-woman-that-is-imam-uma.html>

3: <http://fuse.ithaca.edu/126/>

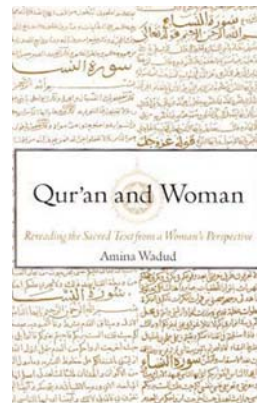
4: <http://anjameulenbelt.sp.nl/weblog/2008/06/14/barlas-en-ramadan/>



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modern era: Amina Wadud & Asma Barlas: women's perspectives on the Qur'an

- Both scholars have done groundbreaking work by developing feminist readings of the Qur'an. They argue that since the interpretation (or *exegesis*) of religious texts has been done historically by men, women's reading of these religious documents have not been taken into account. Both scholars are committed to understanding and promoting gender justice within the Qur'an and in Islam. They have also suffered from criticism and in some cases threats to their lives, because their views challenge the status quo of male religious authority.



Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud:
http://www.ozebap.org/text/feminism_islam.htm

Believing Women book:
<http://www.amazon.ca/Believing-Women-Islam-Patriarchal-Interpretations/dp/0292709048>

Quran and Woman book:
<http://www.socioweb.com/sociology-textbooks/book/0195128362/>

suggested questions & activities

Ask students to write down their impressions of Muslim women before & after presenting the module.

- How are the stories and lives of the Muslim women in this presentation the same or different than what you may have already seen or heard?
- What surprised or inspired you?
- Can you think of other examples of Muslim women who are social transformers?
- Why do you think that stories of Muslim women like these are not more popular or well known?
- What connections can you make between the women in your lives & the women who have been profiled?

Follow-up Activity:

- Choose one of the women featured in this presentation and do further research on her biography and accomplishments.

prominent Muslim women for possible further research

- Benazir Bhutto: Prime Minister of Pakistan twice over and the first Muslim woman elected to lead a Muslim state.
- Mahnaz Afkhami: Head of the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) and the first Minister of Women's Affairs under Pahlavi regime. She is one of the founding members of the Sisterhood Global Institute.
- Asma Jahangir: Pakistani lawyer and human rights activist who has served as a United Nations Special Rapporteur of the Commission of Human Rights since 1998. In 2005 she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize as part of the 1000 Women for Peace project.
- Ayesha Imam: Activist for women's rights, human rights, democracy, and sustainable development. She is the founding director of BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights in Nigeria and is on the board of the international solidarity network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUM).