

10 Umm Salama's contributions

Qur'an, *hadith*, and early Muslim history as sources for gender justice

Yasmin Amin

Introduction

Feminism, as a phenomenon that engages issues of women's rights, liberation, and gender equality,¹ started taking shape as an academic field in the 1960s and continued to grow during the 1970s and 1980s. The term "Islamic feminism" came into use during the 1990s and advocated for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice, specifically using an Islamic discourse.² Islamic feminism highlights the teachings of equality and equity in Islam and encourages the questioning of patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings through the Qur'an, *hadith* and jurisprudence in order to create a more equal and equitable society.³ In the past twenty years, one can see a significant dent being made in the patriarchal narrative of Islam as an egalitarian version of Islam steadily takes wider hold.⁴

The question of gender justice is not a new construct by feminists or Muslim feminists and has a long tradition that was very much part of the discourse during and after the time of the Prophet. This chapter addresses this discourse, which raised questions about certain gender aspects in Islamic jurisprudence and even the language of the Qur'an as witnessed by various dialogues between Umm Salama and the Prophet. Umm Salama's questions, but also those of other Muslim women, were addressed to the Prophet and were sometimes even answered by Qur'anic revelation. This discourse is preserved in the Islamic canon, such as in the *asbab nuzul al-Qur'an* genre (occasions for revelation), *tafsir*, *hadith* (Prophetic traditions) and jurisprudence.

Feminism and the mothers of the believers

The Mothers of the Believers received ample attention in Islamic literature in general and in feminist literature in particular due to their rank and the special status awarded to them in the Qur'an. These women, who were married to the Prophet at various times during his life, were a diverse group; young, old, virgins, divorcees, widows, alluring, beautiful, homely, intellectual, witty, wise, powerful, and humble. Being addressed by the scripture raised their status, though they were also human. In *The "Mothers of the Believers": Stereotypes of the Prophet Muhammad's Wives*, Ghassan Ascha discusses the effect of the Mother of the

Believers' biographies in creating role models and how their perception changed in three areas: the *tafsir* literature, the *hadith* compendia, and the reformist movement during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵ Since the 1970s, feminist writers have been mining Islamic literature to find evidence for their feminist views, describing the early Islamic period in Medina as the Golden Age of Feminism.⁶ Each period had its own interpretations about the lives of the Mothers of the Believers and was further affected by popular, cultural and moral values. The emphasis on the Prophet's wives did not originate from their historical personalities, but rather from the continuous modifications, alterations, interpretations, and modernisations of the portrayed personalities.⁷ They were used to justify a great variety of attitudes. Ascha writes:

They were portrayed as ideal, obedient, gentle, affectionate, content, pious, inside their houses, veiled, but also jealous, angry, quarrelling, having great *kayd* (cunning) sowing *fitna* and sometimes with an imperfect mind, yet also as erudite teachers, daring, strong personalities, intelligent, political activists, even leaders in wars and of course feminists.⁸

However, looking closely at the literature, particularly feminist literature, one can easily discern a focus. Unlike Khadija and 'A'isha, who have been thoroughly studied, other wives have not yet been given their due in scholarly research. Shi'ite literature (with 'A'isha, Umm Salama and Umm Habiba being exceptions) diminished the roles played by the Prophet's wives and enhanced those of the members of 'Ali b. Abu Talib's household and his bloodline.⁹ Some scholarship regarded the Prophet's wives as a collective and treated their individual biographies as parts of a whole.¹⁰ In Shi'ite literature, Khadija is mostly portrayed as the most important wife in the life of Muhammad. She is always credited with being the first to believe in Islam and in Muhammad as the Messenger of God. In Sunni literature, she similarly holds a special position. In popular literature, she is also a favourite heroine.¹¹ However, it is 'A'isha that receives the most attention in feminist literature.¹²

Even in works that are not exclusively devoted to the study of 'A'isha, she is still mentioned frequently and portrayed as an authority on subjects ranging from law to variant readings of the Qur'an, a source of legal traditions and *hadith*. For example, she is Fatima Mernissi's central female figure in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, epitomizing the early Islamic encouragement of female self-assertion. Mernissi argues that Islam actually allowed the flourishing of women's self-determination and autonomy, using 'A'isha as an example.¹³ In a case study about orphans and polygamy, Ayesha Chaudhry points out a *hadith* that she finds particularly interesting with regard to the discussion on *wilayah*, orphans, and consent. The *hadith* discusses the responsibilities of guardians *vis-à-vis* the rights of orphan girls in a dialogue between 'A'isha and her nephew. Here, 'A'isha offers a commentary on two Qur'anic verses.¹⁴ Ibtissam Bouachrine describes 'A'isha's role in the "Battle of the Camel" in *Women and Islam: Myths, Apologies, and the Limits of Feminist*, claiming that she briefly assumed political leadership after Muhammad's death.¹⁵

Bouachrine emphasizes 'A'isha's accusations against Abu Hurayra of reporting *hadith* he never heard.¹⁶ She also contrasts Khadija and 'A'isha, pointing out that Khadija enjoyed more liberties than 'A'isha, who spent most of her life as a Muslim.¹⁷ In *Lifting the Veil: The World of Muslim Women*, the authors debate if 'A'isha was the original Muslim Feminist, as she pondered the reasons why a woman was categorized alongside animals such as dogs and donkeys.¹⁸ In *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, Robin Goodman points out that other scholars have focused on 'A'isha's linguistic power as she becomes the first of the "*rawiyat*" (female transmitters of the Prophet's words).¹⁹ Even within the field of Masculinity studies, writers claim that Muslim feminists use the role of motherhood to highlight the uniqueness of femininity. In his book *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, Amanullah De Soudy quotes Asma Barlas, who recalls that while 'A'isha did not have children, that did not diminish her importance in the Prophet's life or her appeal as a role model for women.²⁰ Even in a book about the pilgrimage, *The Hajj: Pilgrimage in Islam*, Asma Sayeed points out that legal discourse mandated the presence of a guardian during Hajj and therefore subsumed the fulfilment of a central pillar of practice to chance. Sayeed highlights that it was 'A'isha who recognized early on that this outcome was flawed and opined that not every woman has a *mahram* (guardian).²¹ Even in popular literature and novels, 'A'isha is a favourite heroine.²² Sayeed devotes a chapter to 'A'isha²³ in her book *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, though she also devotes a chapter to Umm Salama.²⁴

Unlike Khadija and 'A'isha, Umm Salama does not receive much attention in scholarly literature, especially in English. A few detailed studies about her exist in Arabic and Urdu.²⁵ Nonetheless, the original Islamic sources, especially the Sunni ones show that Umm Salama's testimony was actively sought and considered decisive on several issues. She addressed several gender aspects in Islamic jurisprudence, and even the language of the Qur'an. But who was Umm Salama?

Umm Salama

Umm Salama was Hind Bint Abu Umayya, who was also known as Zad al-Rakib, Ibn al-Mughira b. 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar Ibn Makhzum.²⁶ She was first married to Abu Salama, 'Abd Allah Ibn al-Asad Ibn Hilal Ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn 'Umar Ibn Makhzum,²⁷ who was the Prophet's brother *bil rida'ah* (by means of suckling) from the same nursemaid, namely Wahmaza Thuwaiba.²⁸

Ibn Ishaq wrote that Abu 'Ubayda Ibn al-Harith, Abu Salama Ibn 'Abd al-Asad and 'Abd Allah Ibn al-Arqam al-Makhzumi, as well as 'Uthman Ibn Maz'un rushed to the Prophet to give their allegiance and convert to Islam. The Prophet recited some verses of the Qur'an to them and they took their *shahada* (oath), declaring that he was bringing them *al-huda wal nur* (enlightenment and illumination).²⁹ There has been no explicit mention in the sources about when Umm Salama converted to Islam, but al-Dhahabi mentions that Umm Salama was one of the earliest Muslims.³⁰ Most of the *sira* (Prophet's biography) books mention that Abu Salama was among the first to take the *shahada*; Ibn Ishaq mentions

that he was the eleventh man to become Muslim.³¹ When he became Muslim, Abu Salama was already married to Umm Salama, so it is likely that she also converted at the same time or very soon after, as sources also mention that she emigrated with Abu Salama to Abyssinia in the fifth year after the commencement of revelation.

Umm Salama is one of the favourite authorities quoted about events in Abyssinia, especially describing the conversation between the Muslims and the Abyssinian emperor al-Najashi, when he refused to send back the Muslim refugees.³² Umm Salama also described the battle that erupted between the forces of al-Najashi and an opponent across the Nile, describing how al-Najashi and his forces were victorious and how al-Najashi continued to offer his protection to the Muslims until their return to Mecca.³³

When Umm Salama returned from Abyssinia to Mecca with her husband, she discovered that the news about the Quraysh ceasing their harassment of Muslims was nothing but a rumour. Her husband, Abu Salama, decided to leave again, this time to Medina. However, Umm Salama was prevented from joining him.³⁴ Though this episode is interesting and shows her resilience and courage until she finally joins her husband in Medina, the scope of this chapter permits the inclusion of neither all the details nor the details of their early life in Medina until he died from wounds received in the Battle of Uhud. After his death, two eminent companions of the Prophet, Abu Bakr and 'Umar, wished to marry her, but she declined both marriage proposals.³⁵ She accepted the Prophet's proposal after initially turning him down twice.

When the Prophet married Umm Salama, 'A'isha was very jealous. She felt that her position was being threatened. In her own words, she is to have said:

I was exceedingly sad, having heard much of her beauty. I was gracious to her, desiring to see her for myself. And, by Allah, I saw that she was twice as beautiful and graceful as she was reputed to be. I mentioned this to Hafsa but she said: "No, by Allah, this is nothing but jealousy [clouding your vision]; she is not as they say." Hafsa, too, was gracious to her, and having called to see her, she said to me, "I see her not as beautiful as you say, not even anywhere near it; though she is [unquestionably] beautiful." I saw her afterwards and, by my life, she was as Hafsa had said. But still I was jealous.³⁶

The Prophet respected Umm Salama and her wisdom and often sought her advice and counsel. Many narratives, scattered in different history books and biographical dictionaries, indicate that the Prophet had a special fondness for Umm Salama and respected her for her devotion and good judgment. Al-Baladhuri, for example, mentions that the Prophet used to say: "'A'isha holds a special position nobody else has reached, she is a part of me." After his marriage to Umm Salama he was asked about 'A'isha's previously mentioned position. He remained silent, which was taken as an implicit admission that now Umm Salama held this position and occupied a special place in his heart.³⁷ While most Sunni history books mention that 'A'isha was the Prophet's favourite wife, Umm Salama also occupied

a special place in his heart, as sources report that he used to start with her house every evening and end in the house where he would be spending the night.³⁸

Although 'A'isha claims in her list of privileges that she alone, among the Prophet's wives, saw Angel Jibril, it is recorded in the *hadith* collection of Muslim that Umm Salama also saw him. Like 'A'isha, Umm Salama's account emphasizes that the angelic presence took the human form of Dihya al-Kalbi.³⁹ Though all the wives of the Prophet possessed great knowledge, 'A'isha and Umm Salama had no rivals when it concerned *hadith*. Mahmud Ibn Labid⁴⁰ said, "The wives of the Prophet were treasuries of *Hadith* but 'A'isha and Umm Salama had no equal."⁴¹

Sunni and Shi'ite sources both show that Umm Salama had an especially close bond with al-Husayn, and therefore, she was among the favourite authorities quoted on the *ahl al-bayt*. She narrated hundreds of *hadith*,⁴² among them *hadith al-Kisa'* (The Mantle of the Prophet) and the Verse of Purification,⁴³ *hadith al-Thaqalayn* (The Two Weighty Things), *hadith al-Qarura* (The Flask), *hadith al-Manzala* (Status) and many more about the Prophet's relationship with 'Ali.

Sources reveal that Umm Salama accompanied the Prophet on seven of his battles and military missions, such as Ghazwat al Muraisi' – Banu al-Mustaliq (5 AH),⁴⁴ Ghazwat Banu Qurayza (5 AH) Ghazwat Khaybar (7 AH),⁴⁵ Fath Mecca and Ghazwat al- Ta'if (8 AH). Umm Salama also joined the Prophet on his journey to perform the pilgrimage in the sixth year of Hijra, which resulted in the Treaty of Hudaibiya.⁴⁶ The next section focuses on Umm Salama's contributions as found in Islamic heritage.

The *tafsir* (exegesis) and *asbab nuzul al-Qur'an* genre (occasions for revelation)

The *tafsir* (exegetical) genre preserved the information that not only Qur'anic verses had been revealed in Umm Salama's house but also many verses had also been revealed prompted by her questions.

Umm Salama once asked the Prophet why the Qur'an seems only to address men, while women also accepted Islam, fought side by side with the men, migrated with them, and sacrificed as much as the men – if not more. A few days after she asked that question and while she was combing her hair with the help of a servant, she heard the Prophet reciting verse Q 33:35 from the *minbar* (pulpit).⁴⁷ It is one of the longer verses of the Qur'an and reads as follows:

Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women and the humble men and the humble women, and the almsgiving men and the almsgiving women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember – Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward.⁴⁸

Mohammad Ali Syed⁴⁹ argues that verse Q 33:35 was just the start of a new trend in the Qur'anic revelations.⁵⁰ Many succeeding verses of the Qur'an deal with both men and women using separate expressions for both genders. He further argues that verse Q 33:35 puts women on the same spiritual level as men. This is achieved by repeating the good qualities of both men and women separately, ten times, and by declaring the same rights of reward for both genders.⁵¹

While not granting women the same rights as men, this verse articulates the spiritual equality of women before God. This was also recognized by Ibn 'Arabi who states that there is no spiritual qualification conferred on men that is denied to women. He argues that the Qur'an affirms that each virtue leading to spiritual refinement is equally accessible to men and women. "In addition, he points out that this gender-inclusive verse reflects a central Qur'anic teaching on the complete ontological equality of men and women."⁵²

Most exegetes attribute the revelation of this verse to Umm Salama, yet other attributions have also been used, such as for example Asma' bt. 'Umayy and Umm 'Umara al-Ansariyya.⁵³ Al-Tabarsi,⁵⁴ for example, attributes the revelation of verse Q 33:35 to a question asked by Asma' Bint 'Umayy, one of the female companions of the Prophet (d. after 40/660). She is considered as one of the first Muslims, as she converted to Islam early on with her husband, Ja'far b. Abi Talib. In other exegetical works, the identity of the woman who poses the question is withheld and the question is asked by a collective of "some women."⁵⁵

The *asbab nuzul al-Qur'an* genre also reports that another verse, namely Q 4:32 – "And do not covet that by which Allah has made some of you excel others; men shall have the benefit of what they earn and women shall have the benefit of what they earn" – was revealed after Umm Salama asked the Prophet about why women only inherit half of the amount men do and whether this was because men were obligated to fight in battles while women were not.

According to Ayesha Chaudhry, verse Q 4:32 is usually read in connection with verse Q 4:34⁵⁶ which has two documented reasons for revelation, one of them being that Umm Salama asked on behalf of the women why men had a preference over them in inheritance.⁵⁷ Karen Bauer agrees with that assessment and adds that verse Q 4:32 was revealed prior to Q 4:34, yet both are read together, indicating that men receive more money in inheritance shares, but in turn must spend their money on maintaining their wives and female relatives (mothers, aunts).⁵⁸

However, according to al-Baydawi, that verse was revealed in response to Umm Salama wishing that she were a man, because men go to battle and receive a full share of inheritance.⁵⁹ Regardless of which story about the occasion of the revelation is correct, it was the difference in inheritance shares and in booty of jihad that prompted the question.

And yet another verse, Q 3:195, is reported to have been revealed after Umm Salama asked the Prophet why the emigration and hardship of the women were not mentioned in the Qur'an: "So their Lord accepted their prayer: That I will not waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female, the one of you being from the other."

Shi'i exegetes also attribute the revelation of verse Q 3:195 as being a response to a question by Umm Salama, such as in the works of al-Tusi⁶⁰ and Tabataba'i⁶¹

al-Tabarsi,⁶² though, does not attribute it to Umm Salama's questions, though he mentions that it was reported by other (unnamed) sources that Umm Salama posed this question.

On another occasion, verse Q 9:102 was revealed in her house: "And others have confessed their faults, they have mingled a good deed and an evil one; maybe Allah will turn to them (mercifully); surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful." The verse in question is in reference to the repentance of the Ansari Abu Lababa (Marwan Ibn al-Munzir).⁶³ Marwan had chained himself to a pillar in the mosque as a form of repentance and out of guilt for divulging the Prophet's plans to raid the Banu Qurayza. He announced that he would not leave this pillar until Allah accepted his repentance. The *tafsir* genre remains rather vague on whether Umm Salama asked about his fate or not, but the sources record that it was during the night that Umm Salama heard the Prophet laugh out in delight as he told her that Abu Lababa has been pardoned by a verse. Umm Salama asked him straight away if she could rush out to the mosque and be the one to bring him the good news. The Prophet allowed her to do so and she hurried to the mosque shouting joyfully: "Rejoice Abu Lababa, Allah has pardoned you."⁶⁴

In addition to these narratives, which are found in most Sunni sources and in some Shi'i sources, there are additional Shi'i sources that claim that verses were also revealed to vindicate Umm Salama.

A portion of verse Q 49:11 is said to have been revealed on account of 'A'isha and Hafsa mocking Umm Salama: "O you who believe! let not (one) people laugh at (another) people perchance they may be better than they, nor let women (laugh) at (other) women, perchance they may be better than they." Tabataba'i reported that Umm Salama had tied a long white cloth around her waist in form of a belt and that the two ends were trailing behind her. 'A'isha and Hafsa laughed about her and 'A'isha told Hafsa: "Look at what is trailing behind her. It looks like a dog's tongue."⁶⁵

Mohammad Ali Syed argues that verse Q 49:11 is especially important for egalitarian purposes, as women have usually been targeted as the gender more likely to indulge in gossiping and backbiting.⁶⁶ Yet the verse criticizes persons of both genders for mocking fellow human beings and does not restrict it to women.

Apart from these verses where Umm Salama has been directly involved, either by asking questions or where the verse was revealed in her house or in response to a situation involving her, there are many Qur'anic passages addressing human righteousness or the lack thereof and God's rewards or punishments to humankind that use gender specific language. Men and women – whether believers, hypocrites, or unbelievers – are addressed specifically and separately. The Qur'anic text leaves no doubt that the believers, male and female, are equally charged with the fulfilment of obligations and that they will reap equal rewards.⁶⁷ These verses that address men and women separately are generally dated to the Medinan period with the exception of Q 16:97⁶⁸ and Q 40:40,⁶⁹ which are considered late Meccan revelations, as Barbara Stowasser observes.⁷⁰

The fact that God spoke specifically to the women of the believers did not go unnoticed and roused Muslim attention. This feature of the revelations is generally explained in *hadith* and *tafsir* as a result of questions or complaints by Umm

Salama in particular, or Muslim women in general, who felt that they had been left out. Ibn Sa'd notes this in his biographical dictionary *Kitab al-Ṭabaqat al-Kubra*.⁷¹ However, the corpus notes that the first such verse that was revealed, using this language, was Q 33:35 which was prompted by Umm Salama's question. Thus, Umm Salama opened this particular door.

This statement is intended neither to highlight Umm Salama's role as being the medium to deliver a critique on the language of the Qur'an nor to say that Umm Salama received any form of revelation to prompt these questions. After all, the Qur'an says that it has been guarded in a tablet,⁷² meaning that the text was complete before Umm Salama questioned its language. However, asking these questions as a woman allowed her – and all women – to play an assertive role in the new religion and allowed women after them not to remain as passive bystanders, but to engage with the text critically. The Qur'an also says that God is the facilitator of events,⁷³ and hence Umm Salama's questions were not surprising coming from a woman concerned with all issues affecting her gender.

The *hadith* and *fiqh* corpora

In the *hadith* corpus, numerous questions about differences between men and women or egalitarian concerns were also preserved as having been raised by Umm Salama. For example, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, and *Sunan Ibn Majah*, report that Umm Salama asked the Prophet about “nocturnal emissions” (popularly termed as “wet dreams”). It was narrated that at one of the gatherings 'A'isha asked the Prophet, on behalf of a Muslim man, about washing in the morning after awakening and finding some evidence of having ejaculated in the night without engaging in sexual intercourse or remembering any dream or vision. The Prophet told 'A'isha that the man had to perform his ritual purity washing. Umm Salama then asked whether women experienced that as well and if so, what they were required to do? The Prophet replied that women had the same experiences as men and should also perform the ritual purity washing.⁷⁴

Aḥmad Ibn Hanbal reports another example in his *Musnad*, when the *Muhajirun* (emigrants) came to Medina and started to settle down there. They started intermarrying with the *Ansari* (helpers) women. However, the *Muhajirun* were accustomed to different sexual practices than the *Ansar*. One practice was a particular position in intercourse, (popularly termed “doggy style”) where the woman would kneel in front of her partner. *Ansari* women were not accustomed to this and did not engage in that practice. One of the Muslim *Muhajirun* wanted to force his *Ansari* wife to accept this and to engage actively with him. The woman was too shy to ask the Prophet and went to Umm Salama and requested Umm Salama to ask the question on behalf of her. Umm Salama asked the Prophet who recited verse Q [2:223]: “Your wives are a tilth for you, so go into your tilth when you like.” However, he restricted this practice to one particular bodily opening (the vagina) and prohibited anal sex.⁷⁵

In his *Sahih al-Sunan*, Ibn Majah reports that Umm Salama once asked the Prophet about jihad for women. He replied saying that the Jihad of women does

not involve going to war or participating in battles as warriors, but that their *jihad* was performing *hajj* and *'umra* (the big and the small pilgrimage).⁷⁶ According to another version in the same book, Umm Salama narrated that the Prophet told her that performing the pilgrimage is the *jihad* of those who are physically weaker.⁷⁷ In a third version, Umm Salama was told that *jihad* for women was pregnancy and childbirth.⁷⁸ Yet women did participate in battles and were responsible for caring for the wounded; nursing them and giving water to warriors or digging graves. Some women actively participated in battles, as was recorded also in the biographical dictionaries and *hadith* compendia.

Sources reveal that Umm Salama accompanied the Prophet on seven of his battles and military missions like *Ghazwat al Muraishi* 'against *Banu al-Mustaliq* (5 AH),⁷⁹ and *Ghazwat al Khandaq* (Battle of the Trench).⁸⁰ Umm Salama narrated many *hadith* traditions about the events of the battle and its details. She also accompanied the Prophet on *Ghazwat Banu Qurayza* in the fifth year of *hijra* and *Ghazwat Khaybar* in the seventh year of *hijra*. Twenty women accompanied the troops into the Battle of *Khaybar*. Sixteen of them were named in the sources, among them Umm Salama.⁸¹

The Prophet consulted with Umm Salama when he negotiated the treaty of *Hudaibiyah*. Many companions were angry at the weak terms of the treaty. It was Umm Salama whose counsel helped to ease the tension among them.⁸² The Prophet asked the Companions and all others who were with them to go shave, cut their hair and slaughter their sacrifices, but nobody listened to him because they thought that the treaty was unfair to the Muslims. They were additionally disappointed at being prevented from performing the pilgrimage.

The Prophet asked them again to start sacrificing their animals, but again nobody listened. He entered Umm Salama's tent troubled and related the events to her and how hurt he was that they would not obey him. He said to Umm Salama: "Thrice have I commanded the people to slaughter their animals and shave their heads. But look how listless and indolent they are!" Sources report that she intuitively comforted him saying: "O Prophet of Allah, you can't make these fifteen hundred men do what they don't want to do. Just do your own duty, which Allah has imposed on you. Go ahead and perform your own rites in an open place so that every one of them can see you."⁸³ The Prophet realized the sense of this advice. He stepped out of the tent and saw that the sun had risen. He went up to the herd. Everybody was now watching him. Even the pagans of Mecca who had stayed there overnight saw him picking Abu Jahl's camel, which had a white, shining, silver nose-ring. He brought it out into the open, hobbled it and slaughtered it. The Prophet took Umm Salama's advice and the result was exactly as she had predicted.

Umm Salama did not like half-measures and preferred to err on the side of caution. When the Prophet allowed Suhayla Bint Sahl (in a different version Sahla Bint Suhayl) to breastfeed her teenage adopted son, so that she could keep him as a member of her household without having to cover herself as she did in front of strangers, 'A'isha used this permission to ask her sisters and nieces to breastfeed the men with whom she wanted to mix. Umm Salama disapproved of this practice

and said that breastfeeding was only for infants and adults should not be breastfed, be it directly or through drinking the expressed milk from a container.⁸⁴ Most of the Prophet's wives followed Umm Salama's reasoning in opposing the practice. 'A'isha however argued that if this was a license given to them by the Prophet, they should make use of it.⁸⁵

It has been reported that Umm Salama's wisdom was appreciated and acknowledged. A saying "we have not known any other woman who offered advice and it turned to be correct except for Umm Salama" is attributed to al-Juwayni, the Imam of the *haramayn*.⁸⁶ Four other women were present at *hudaibiyah*, Umm Salama, Umm 'Umara,⁸⁷ Umm Hani⁸⁸ and Umm Amir al Ashhaliyah.⁸⁹

Not only did women offer political advice, but they participated in battles, such as Nusayba b. Ka'b al-Ansariyya who took part in the Battle of *Uhud* (625 AD). She carried a sword and shield and defended the Prophet from enemies, sustaining several lance wounds and arrows as she placed herself in front of him. The Prophet is reported to have said that she was a better fighter than any man. She continued to fight in battles throughout her life and even after the Prophet's death, until she lost her hand at the Battle of '*Uqraba* (in 634 AD).⁹⁰

Khawla b. al-Azwar (d. 639 AD) is best known for her participation in the "Battle of *Yarmuk*" (636 AD). She is described as having the skill and fighting ability of the famed Muslim general Khalid b. al-Walid and impressed 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭab with her skills.⁹¹

Fighting was not the only way to participate in battle, and some women devised schemes to help in winning a seemingly lost battle. Azdah bint al-Harith b. Kaldah saved the day when she realized that with the men gone, they had been left defenceless. She turned to the women at the camp and instead of waiting for the coming attack, she – together with the other women – created a banner using their headscarves. With Azdah in the lead, the women charged toward the approaching enemy, who mistook them for reinforcement troops and therefore retreated in the middle of the battle.⁹²

The women also swore oaths of allegiance to the Prophet, and verse Q 60:12⁹³ enjoins the Prophet to accept their pledge. *Hadith* collections and biographical dictionaries identify the Muslim women who pledged allegiance to the Prophet by name. 129 were migrants from Mecca (seventy from the Quraysh and fifty-nine other women)⁹⁴ and 349 women from the Medinian *Ansar*.⁹⁵ They did not take the oath on one single occasion but on several occasions. The formula of the oath taken defines the conditions of female citizenship after the establishment of the *umma* (community) and hence acknowledges women as political actors.⁹⁶

Equality and equity as understood then was in support of the Qur'anic ideals of justice in general and social justice in particular,⁹⁷ emphasizing that all people within society have the same status. This shows not only the recognition of gender equality between women and men and an acknowledgement of women's rights but also the equality between Arab and non-Arab, or different ethnicities and races within Islamic society. It also includes slaves as equal human beings. Umm Salama is reported to have narrated a *hadith* in which the Prophet told Abu Dharr to listen and follow the advice of even a slave from Abyssinia with amputated limbs, because he could have an innate wisdom like anyone else.⁹⁸

While it is generally portrayed that men occupied the public sphere and women were more or less confined to the private sphere,⁹⁹ evidence from the sources suggests otherwise. The Prophet listened to women and their complaints, advice, and opinions, and spoke to the men of his communities about how important the women in Islam and in general truly are. The women's participation in socio-political events, decision-making processes, and their intervention in certain cases have been recorded in the sources.¹⁰⁰

Umm Salama was keen on talking about what had transpired between her and the Prophet in their home so as to let the Muslims know what was permissible or prohibited and to enable them to derive rules of conduct from that, which was reflected in *fiqh*. One example was the permissibility of kissing between husband and wife during the fast of Ramadan. Umm Salama narrated that the Prophet used to kiss her during the day of Ramadan and before breaking the fast at sunset.¹⁰¹

A different version mentions that a woman came to Umm Salama and told her about her husband who used to kiss her while fasting. She wanted confirmation that this was permissible during the fast. Umm Salama reassured her that it was, by citing the example of the Prophet.¹⁰²

According to a third version of the same, 'Umar Ibn Abi Salama asked the Prophet if it was permissible for a man to kiss while observing the fast. The Prophet told him to go and ask his mother, Umm Salama, who then told him that the Prophet used to kiss her while he was fasting.¹⁰³

Another example would be the ruling about lying with a wife while she was menstruating. According to one narrative, while the Prophet was sleeping in Umm Salama's house she awoke during the night and felt that her menses had started. She got up from under the covers and went to check. Her suspicions were confirmed, and she cleaned herself, used the appropriate bindings and returned to the room, yet was afraid to go back to bed in case she would sully the Prophet. The Prophet asked her if she had started menstruating and she confirmed. He lifted the covers and invited her back to the marital bed.¹⁰⁴ In a slightly different version the Prophet is said to have invited her back to bed saying that this was the normal way with all the daughters of Adam.¹⁰⁵

Umm Salama was not shy about revealing intimate details of her life with the Prophet for the benefit of the Muslim community. She related how the Prophet and herself used to use the same vessel of water to purify themselves together from *janaba* (impurity) after having engaged in marital relations.¹⁰⁶

Umm Salama also used to derive *fiqh* rulings from the *hadith* she heard and narrated and used to render advice based upon them. Once a woman asked her advice about visiting her father to take care of him during his illness while she was in her waiting period and not supposed to leave her house. Umm Salama told her to go and tend to her father during the day, but to make sure that she would spend part of the night in her own house and thereby fulfil both obligations – to stay in her house and to tend to her father.¹⁰⁷

A final *hadith* that Umm Salama narrated and that also reflected on *fiqh*, resulted in the ruling that it is not necessary for a woman to open her braids for the ablution ritual after intercourse, menstruation or postnatal bleeding.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The Qur'an establishes that all humans were created equal. Q 39:6, "He has created you from a single being, then made its mate of the same kind," and Q 4:1 "O people! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women; and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, by Whom you demand one of another (your rights), and (to) the ties of relationship; surely Allah ever watches over you" and Q 49:13 "O you men! surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other."

The Qur'an also asserts that the noblest in the sight of God is the one most possessed of *taqwa* (piety), that this is the only valid ranking of humans in the eyes of God based on godliness and virtue regardless of lineage, wealth, and power. This ranking is equally independent of gender because believing men and believing women are equals in obligations to be guardians of each other Q 9:71.¹⁰⁹

As demonstrated, the question of gender justice is not a new construct by feminists or Muslim feminists and has a long tradition as part of the discourse during and after the Prophet's time. Umm Salama's questions engaged Qur'anic revelation and her *hadith* narrations reflected on *fiqh*, as preserved in Islamic canon such as in the *asbab nuzul al-Qur'an* genre, *hadith*, and jurisprudence.

Notes

- 1 Badran 2008, 25.
- 2 Badran 2009, 243.
- 3 Ibid., 247.
- 4 Badran 2008, 32.
- 5 Ascha 1995, 89–107.
- 6 Kloppenborg and Hanegraaff 1995, x.
- 7 Amin 2013.
- 8 Ascha 1995, 107.
- 9 Amin 2013.
- 10 See for example, Ahad 2004; Bint al-Shāṭi' 2006; Debas 2009; Ilāhī 2007; Qureshi 1986; and Thomson 2012.
- 11 See for example, Buyuksahin 2016; Haylamaz and Coşar 2011; and Mujahid 2012.
- 12 See for example, Abbott 1962; Geissinger 2004, 2005, 2011; Jordan 2010; Sadda 2001; and Spellberg 2012.
- 13 Rhouni 2009, 202.
- 14 Chaudhry 2015, 88–105.
- 15 Bouachrine 2014, 53.
- 16 Ibid., 54.
- 17 Ibid., 57.
- 18 Parshall and Parshall 2002, 31.
- 19 Goodman 2015, 236.
- 20 De Soudy 2013, 78; quoting Barlas 2011, 179.
- 21 Sayeed 2016, 67.
- 22 See for example, Haylamaz 2012; Jones 2008, 2009; and Pasha 2009.
- 23 Sayeed 2013, 26–34.

- 24 Ibid., 34–38.
- 25 See for example, al-Hasanī 1998; and Tayyab and Imaa'illah 2008.
- 26 See al-Dhahabi 1982, vol. 2, 201; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 1959, vol. 1, 802; and Ibn Qutaybah 1934, 60.
- 27 See Ibn Sa'd 1920, vol. 8, 87; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 1959, 802; and al-Nuwayri 1940, vol. 18, 179.
- 28 al-Dhahabi 1987, 255.
- 29 Ibn Ishaq 1976, 144.
- 30 al-Dhahabi 1987, vol. 8, 98.
- 31 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 1959, vol. 3, 940.
- 32 Ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi 1966, vol. 3, 80.
- 33 Ibn Hisham 1928, 263–267; and Ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi 1966, vol. 3, 79–82.
- 34 Ibn al-Athir 1965, vol. 2, 101.
- 35 Ibn Ḥanbal 1974, vol. 6, 317; and Ibn Ḥajjar 1959, vol. 4, 997.
- 36 Ibn Sa'd 1920, vol. 2, 66; Ibn Ḥajjar 1959, vol. 4, 888; and al-Bukhari 1981, vol. 3, 126, 132.
- 37 al-Baladhuri 1987, vol. 1, 432 and vol. 2, 65.
- 38 Al-Ṭabari 1982, 76; and Ibn al-Muthanna 1999, 155.
- 39 Muslim 1980, vol. 7, 144.
- 40 He was also known as Abū Nu'aym al-Anṣari and was born during the lifetime of the Prophet; however, his status as a *Sahabi* (Companion) is disputed. Ibn Ḥibban classifies him as a *Ṭabi'i* (follower), while al-Bukhari considers him a *Sahabi* as per his biographical entry (1762) in al-Bukhari 1962, vol. 7, 402.
- 41 Geissinger 2015, 214; and Ibn Sa'd 1920, vol. 2, 522.
- 42 Baqiy b. Mukhallad (d. 276 AH) sets them at 378, while al-Dhahabi (d. 748 AH) counts 380 and al-Mizzi (d. 742 AH) only 158 narrations.
- 43 Q 33:33.
- 44 al-Ḥalabi 1902, vol. 2, 279; Ibn Sa'd 1920, vol. 2, 64; and Wellhausen 1882, 184.
- 45 Wellhausen 1882, 283.
- 46 Ibn Sa'd 1920, vol. 2, 95; and al-Ḥalabi 1902, vol. 3, 9.
- 47 Ibn Ḥanbal 1974, vol. 6, 301.
- 48 All English translations of the Qur'an were translated by M. H. Shakir.
- 49 Mohammad Ali Syed (1933–2010) was a practicing Barrister in the English Bar since 1975. He was also a scholar, an activist and a recognized expert on Islamic law. In 2003, the Queen of England made him a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE).
- 50 Syed 2004, 14.
- 51 Syed 2004, 15.
- 52 Shaikh 2012, 82.
- 53 Pink 2010, 191–192.
- 54 al-Ṭabarsi 1961, vol. 3, 358.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Q 4:34: “Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great.”
- 57 Chaudhry 2013, 31.
- 58 Bauer 2015, 169.
- 59 al-Baydawi 1990, vol. 1, 212.
- 60 al-Ṭusi 1963, vol. 3, 89.
- 61 al-Ṭabaṭaba'i 1970, vol. 4, 40.

- 62 al-Ṭabarsī 1961, vol. 3, 40.
- 63 Ibn Kathīr al-Dimashqī 1971, vol. 2, 385.
- 64 al-Dhahabī 1987, 313.
- 65 al-Ṭabaṭabaʿī 1970, vol. 18, 331.
- 66 Syed 2004, 15.
- 67 Stowasser 1996, 28.
- 68 Q 16:97: "Whoever does good whether male or female and he is a believer, We will most certainly make him live a happy life, and We will most certainly give them their reward for the best of what they did."
- 69 Q 40:40: "Whoever does an evil, he shall not be recompensed (with aught) but the like of it, and whoever does good, whether male or female, and he is a believer, these shall enter the garden, in which they shall be given sustenance without measure."
- 70 Stowasser 1996, 28.
- 71 Ibn Saʿd 1920.
- 72 Q 85:21–22: "Nay! it is a glorious Quran, In a guarded tablet."
- 73 Q 36:82: "His command, when He intends anything, is only to say to it: Be, so it is."
- 74 See *al-Tirmidhī* 1988, #98 and also *al-Bukhārī* 1981, vol. 4, 102 and *Muslim* 1980, #313; and finally, *Ibn Majah* 1988, #600.
- 75 Ibn Ḥanbal 1974, vol. 6, 318.
- 76 Ibn Majah al-Qazwīnī 1988, #2901.
- 77 See *Ibid.*, #2902.
- 78 See *Ibid.*, #2902.
- 79 al-Maqdisī 1994.
- 80 al-Ḥalabī 1902, vol. 2, 314.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 283.
- 82 Ibn Saʿd 1920, vol. 2, 95; and also al-Ḥalabī 1902, vol. 3, 9.
- 83 al-Bukhārī 1981, vol. 3, 182.
- 84 al-Banna n.d., vol. 16, 185.
- 85 *Muslim* 1980, #1454; *Abu Dawūd* 1989, #1815; and al-Nasaʿī 1988, #3118.
- 86 Ibn Hajar 1959, vol. 5, 347.
- 87 Nusayba bint Kaʿb al-Anṣariyah, was an early convert to Islam and the first woman to fight in defense of the religion.
- 88 Fakhitah Bint Abi Ṭalib, the Prophet's first cousin.
- 89 Wellhausen 1882, 242.
- 90 Souaiaia 2010, 5.
- 91 Kurzman 2002, 72.
- 92 Kaḥḥāla 1959, vol. 1, 41–42.
- 93 "O Prophet! when believing women come to you giving you a pledge that they will not associate aught with Allah, and will not steal, and will not commit fornication, and will not kill their children, and will not bring a calumny which they have forged of themselves, and will not disobey you in what is good, accept their pledge, and ask forgiveness for them from Allah; surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful."
- 94 Ibn Saʿd 1920, vol. 8, 161–230.
- 95 *Ibid.*, 230–239.
- 96 Moghissi 2004, vol. 1, 186.
- 97 Izutsu 1966, 209–211.
- 98 al-Mizzi 2008, #11956.
- 99 Sonbol 1996, xi.
- 100 For more details, see Decker 2012, 292–296.
- 101 See al-Bukhārī 1981, vol. 2, 233 and Ibn Ḥanbal 1974, vol. 1, 300, as well as al-Ṭabarī 1982, 142.
- 102 Ibn Ḥanbal 1974, vol. 6, 291.
- 103 *Muslim* 1980, #1108; and al-Ṭabarī 1982, 142.

- 104 al-Bukhari 1981, vol. 1, 83; and Muslim 1980, vol. 1, 296.
- 105 Ibn Majah 1988, #637; and Ibn Hanbal 1974, vol. 6, 294.
- 106 See al-Bukhari 1981, vol. 1, 83; and Muslim 1980, 296 as well as Ibn Majah 1988, #380.
- 107 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah 1959, vol. 5, 591, 686.
- 108 Ibn Hanbal 1974, #25938.
- 109 Stowasser 1996, 33.

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