Valparaiso University
ValpoScholar

Celebration of Undergraduate Scholarship | Office of Sponsored and Undergraduate Research

Spring 4-23-2016

Approaching Women's Education: Utilizing Islamic Sources for Empowerment

Emily P. Lueder
Valparaiso University, emily.lueder@valpo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/cus

Recommended Citation
Lueder, Emily P., "Approaching Women's Education: Utilizing Islamic Sources for Empowerment" (2016). *Celebration of Undergraduate Scholarship.* Paper 534.
http://scholar.valpo.edu/cus/534

This Poster Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Sponsored and Undergraduate Research at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Celebration of Undergraduate Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

APPROACHING WOMEN'S EDUCATION:
UTILIZING ISLAMIC SOURCES FOR EMPOWERMENT

Emily Lueder
Theology 493: Theology Seminar
December 9, 2015

"I remember that once our teacher taught us that in Islam both men and women have equal rights to get education and they share common rights. I wonder who has taught the Taliban and from where they have grasped these harsh regulations and laws."[1] Qasima Shamsi, an Afghani woman, gives voice to the fear and concern that many Afghans felt when the Taliban rose to power in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the 1990s. Her words continue to resonate today. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, education for women has continued to suffer as a result of security risks, including criminal acts, gender-specific violence, and threats from the Taliban. In addition, Taliban supporters have violently opposed the western-influenced curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education post-2001, as well as NGOs seeking to implement this curriculum.[2] Despite this, the Afghan government has committed to devising and implementing "a unified educational curricula based on the tenets of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture as well as academic principles, and develop religious subjects curricula for schools on the basis of existing Islamic sects in Afghanistan."[3] Although the Taliban advocates a fundamentalist viewpoint of Islam to bar women from receiving an education, there are two other viewpoints espoused by Muslims that seek to counter the Taliban's perception, secular feminism and Muslim feminism. These latter perspectives utilize Islamic sources and traditions in different ways to demonstrate that women do have the right to an education based on Islamic teachings. Based on the current realities in Afghanistan, the Muslim feminist perspective is an ideal approach for structuring the educational system because it empowers Afghan women to live devoutly as Muslims, while also empowering them to fully participate in society.

---

[1] Rosemarie Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2002), 106.
[2] Adele Jones, "Curriculum and Civil Society in Afghanistan," *Harvard Educational Review* 79.1 (Spring 2009): 116–117.
[3] Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ch. 2, Article 45 http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/page/constitution (accessed 03 Dec. 2015).

The Rise of the Taliban

Prior to the rise of the Taliban, the political and social contexts of Afghanistan were changing rapidly. As civil war broke out, many Afghan citizens fled to surrounding camps. There, some of the refugees were influenced by both Deobandism and Wahhabism, two conservative interpretations of Islam from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia respectively.[4] Influenced by these two interpretations, several of the refugees formed the Taliban, a social movement that rose to power with the hopes that they would reinstate a pure form of Islam in Afghanistan. However, taking these interpretations to a new extreme, the Taliban utilized Islam to disempower the Afghan people and in particular, the women.

Women's rights have been an issue in Afghanistan for decades. When the Soviet Union invaded in 1979 and began planning for the expansion of women's rights, Islamic militants resisted, stating that this expansion threatened their religion and way of life. Consequently, although laws protecting women were put in place, women's rights began to deteriorate as war erupted in the country. After the overthrow of the Soviet army in 1989, Afghanistan was left in economic and social turmoil and women's rights disappeared as the *mujahedeen* came to power.[5] Afghanistan was being controlled by a fragmented group, who were also fighting one another for control, and the *mujahedeen* began imposing strict regulations, especially on Afghan women, in order to "gain through intimidation what they could not impose by force."[6] The *mujahedeen* began to use intimidation tactics to control the Afghans.

---

[4] For more information on Deobandism, see Muhammad Moj, *The Deoband Madrassah Movement: Counter-Cultural Trends and Policies* (London, UK: Anthem Press, 2015). For more information on Wahhabism, see Natana DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[5] The *Mujahedeen*, which literally means "ones who engage in *jihad*," were the resistance fighters who fought against the Soviet armies and, after driving out the Soviets, controlled much of Afghanistan. John L. Esposito, ed., "Afghanistan," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 18 Nov. 2014).

[6] Caroline B. Fleming, "Even in Dreams, They Are Coming: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Education of Women in Afghanistan," *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 11, no. 3: 599 (accessed 30 Sept. 2015).

As various Afghani groups fought for control, the Taliban rose to power. Intending to return Afghanistan to a "pure Islamic state," the Taliban gained political authority throughout the southern and western regions of Afghanistan and entered Kabul in 1996. Prior to the rise of the Taliban, Islam had little government involvement and most decisions were made by the various tribes and their communities. Nearly 80 percent of Afghanistan's population belong to the Sunni Hanafi sect, which focuses primarily on customary practices of Islam.[7] Islam was the bedrock of Afghan society because Sharia law was part of the legal process and was reintegrated into the new civil codes in 1946.[8] However, the differences between tribal customs and religious practices could become conflated, which angered Taliban members seeking a version of a pure Islamic state free from societal or tribal customs. Members of the Taliban were further alarmed at the influence of Sufism, a mystical form of Islam. Sufism originated in Central Asia and Persia as a response against "authority, intellectualism, the law and the mullah."[9] As a result, Sufism became immensely popular among the poor, and Sufis frequently gathered to perform *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and visit the shrines of Sufi saints. Although the masses embraced Sufi practices, conservative groups like the Taliban criticize Sufism because of its focus on contemplation and pious living over strict implementation of the law.

Islamic extremism had never been successful in Afghanistan.[10] Wahhabism, for example, is a movement that aimed to stop the spread of Sufism among the Arab Bedouin. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the leader of this movement, originally argued that the popular Islamic beliefs

---

[7] For additional information about the Hanafi sect, see Faraz Fareed Rabbani, *Faith, Prayer & the Path of Salvation According to the Hanafi School* (UK: White Thread Press, 2008).
[8] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 83-84.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Extremism literally means "being situated at the farthest possible point from the center. Figuratively, it indicates a similar remoteness in religion and thought, as well as behavior. One of the main consequences of extremism is exposure to danger and insecurity." "Extremism," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 8 Dec. 2015).

and practices were idolatrous and a return to paganism. As a result, adherents of Wahhabi Islam supported an interpretation of Islam "that returned to the 'fundamentals' of Islam, the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad."[11] Beginning in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism gained prominence after the oil boom in the 1970s and eventually sent Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, an Afghan, to set up a small Wahhabi cell in Peshawar. The Wahhabi Afghans, also known as the Salafis, opposed both Sufism and the local tribal system.[12] Consequently, the Salafis were disliked by the Afghani people, who perceived Wahhabism to be a foreign creed. This perception of Islamic extremism as foreign ultimately contributed to its failure. However, while the majority did not agree with Wahhabi doctrines, Arab *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan, which included Osama Bin Laden, attracted a small Afghan following primarily because of their access to wealth and weapons.[13] Therefore, while Islamic extremism was not popular, it began to take root in Afghan society.

In addition, the *mujahedeen* who had fled to Pakistan were preparing to lead a jihad when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979.[14] The *mujahedeen* desired political change that would "create a true Islamic society as constituted by the Prophet Mohammed in Mecca and Medina as well as deal with the challenges of the modern world."[15] They supported women's education as well as the advancement of women in daily life. They also attempted to create an Islamic

[11] John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 53-54.
[12] The term "Salafi" has much wider resonance and meaning within the *ummah*. Literally, "Salafi" means a "return to the pious ones" or the ancestors. There are a variety of Salafi voices within Islam, and some favor a more violent approach to political systems while others advocate for a quietist approach. When used in this paper, the term refers to the Wahhabi Arabs in Afghanistan. For more information on Salafism more broadly, see Johnathan A.C. Brown, "Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not?: Salafis, the Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 26.2 (2015): 117–144.
[13] Rashid, *Taliban,* 85.
[14] There are two forms of *jihad*, which literally means "struggle." The greater jihad refers to the personal struggle to submit to God. The lesser jihad refers to warfare. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 133.
[15] Rashid, *Taliban*, 86.

economy and banking system. However, the *mujahedeen* rejected tribal segmentation, ethnicity, and nationalism and instead supported a reunification of the Muslim community. As a result, they disregarded the various ethnic and tribal identities in Afghanistan, which led to their ultimate failure.

The Taliban were also influenced by another form of Islam known as Deobandism, which was spread by Pakistani Islamic parties in the Afghan refugee camps. Deobandism, one of the many branches of Sunni Hanafi Islam, perceived education to be the basis for a modern Islamic society and set up *madrassas* (schools) throughout India. Eventually *madrassas* were set up along the North West Frontier Province and in Baluchistan. These *madrassas* allowed Pakistanis and Afghan refugees to receive a free education, food, shelter and military training. However, many of the *madrassas* in Afghan refugee camps were "run by semi-educated mullahs who were far removed from the original reformist agenda of the Deobandi school."[16] As a result, their interpretations were heavily influenced by the tribal code of the Pashtuns. In addition, these *madrassas* were receiving funds from Saudi Arabia, so Wahhabism also influenced the students. However, the Taliban took these interpretations to an extreme. Their interpretation "represented nobody but themselves and they recognized no Islam except their own."[17] Although the Taliban had been influenced by both Wahabbism and Deobandism, their interpretation was much more rigid and had never been seen before in Afghanistan.

Thus, the Taliban rose to power in the wake of both social and political strife. In order to bring stability to the nation, the Taliban believed a pure Islamic state was needed. The Taliban would soon begin to impose harsh restrictions on the Afghanis, particularly the Afghani women,

---

[16] Ibid., 89.
[17] Ibid., 88.

in pursuit of this state. These restrictions included barring women and girls from receiving an education.

Education in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

When the Taliban fell from power in 2001, an interim government was established, a new curriculum framework was drafted, and a new constitution was created. However, the Taliban continues to resist these changes, arguing that this framework had been influenced too heavily by Western ideals foreign to Afghanistan and to Islam. As a result, although the Taliban is no longer in control, their threats and violence continue to keep women and girls from attending school.

Following the invasion by the United States, the Taliban fell from power and an interim government was established. In 2004, Afghanis, with the assistance of western powers, crafted a new constitution to promote democratic ideals. In regard to the educational system in the new state, constitution writers were influenced by several NGOs, a curriculum consultation agency, and several senior members from the interim government's Ministry of Education (MOE) who drafted a new curriculum framework to promote these same ideals in 2002. This educational framework was later approved by the interim government in 2003 and incorporated into the constitution.[18] The preface of the curriculum reads: "when young people enter the world of work, as a result of the implementation of the new curriculum, they will be good Muslims, civilized human beings and true, self-reliant Afghans." It also acknowledges the hope that "students will reinforce and broaden the Islamic vision and religious principles in a non-extremist way."[19] The drafted framework, which later influenced the educational aspects of the constitution, recognized the role of Islam in Afghan society and its importance within the educational framework.

---

[18] Jones, "Curriculum and Civil Society in Afghanistan," 116.
[19] Ministry of Education (MOE), Department of Compilation and Translation, *Curriculum Framework Afghanistan* (Kabul: Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, 2003): 11; cited in Jones, "Curriculum and Civil Society in Afghanistan," 116 – 117.

However, despite these changes, there is still resistance to government-influenced curriculum. The Taliban, for example, continues to threaten schools. In 2006, the Taliban Leadership Council stated:

> Present academic curriculum is influenced by the puppet administration and foreign invaders. The government has given teachers in primary and middle schools the task to openly deliver political lectures against the resistance put up by those who seek independence . . . . [U]se of the curriculum as a mouthpiece of the state will provoke the people against it. If schools are turned into centers of violence, the government is to blame for it.[20]

The Taliban is ultimately concerned that this new curriculum is promoting western ideals that will undermine Islamic teachings and practices. Therefore, while the Ministry of Education continues to move forward with the new curriculum, the Taliban and other Islamic fundamentalist groups continue to create barriers for students, particularly women and girls who seek education, in order to resist the curriculum change.

Education for women has continued to suffer because of security risks, including terrorism, suicide attacks, landmines and unexploded ordnances, and sexual violence. The Taliban continues to create these security risks: "As of 2006, there are still reports of Taliban members placing bombs and landmines in girls' schools."[21] The Taliban has composed threatening letters to girls' schools, warning them to close. In addition, according to a 2006 announcement by President Karzai, nearly 200,000 Afghan children "had been forced out of school this year by threats and physical attacks."[22] Thus, although the Taliban is no longer in power, their threats and continued violence keep women and girls from attending school.

---

[20] Human Rights Watch, "Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan," *Human Rights Watch* 18, no. 6 (2006): 34; cited in Jones, "Curriculum and Civil Society in Afghanistan," 116.
[21] Hayat Alvi-Aziz, "A Progress Report on Women's Education in Post-Taliban Afghanistan," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 27, no. 2: 175.
[22] Pamela Constable, "Afghan Girls, Back in the Shadows," *The Washington Post*, 23 Sept. 2006 (accessed 03 Dec. 2015).

Political and economic factors also contribute to the continued lack of access to education for women and girls. Following the Soviet invasion and the rise and fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan is utilizing the survival strategies of "an impoverished, war-torn country."[23] As a result, children are sold in order to pay off debts or children are pulled from school to help with the household income. In addition, the Pakistani Taliban has reemerged along the Afghan-Pakistan border: "The re-emergence of the Taliban after their fall was not anticipated by the US, but the Pakistani government of President Musharraf has played a major role in this comeback."[24] Thus, facilitated by the Pakistani government, the Taliban has once again gained prominence and is rising in power in Afghanistan. Its rise creates renewed concern among the population, and has a negative impact on women seeking an education because families do not want to send their young girls to schools that might be the targets of Taliban violence.

Even after falling from power, the Taliban continued to disempower Afghan women and girls with threats of violence and the destruction and vandalism of girls' schools. Furthermore, since falling from power, the Taliban has once again gained a foothold along the Afghan-Pakistan border. Thus, in order to empower Afghan women and girls, a new educational approach must be considered.

The Taliban on Education

Utilizing Islamic sources, the Taliban banned girls and women from receiving an education, even though the Taliban's interpretation of Islam is inconsistent with the desires of the Afghani people. Other Islamic scholars disagree with the Taliban's prohibition, and counter these interpretations by pointing to several passages from the Qur'an and Hadith reports that

---

[23] Alvi-Aziz, "Progress Report on Women's Education in Post-Taliban Afghanistan," 176.
[24] Ibid.

support equality and women's education. In doing so, they hope to create a space for women's education by relying on the sacred texts of Islam.

From 1996–2001, the Taliban issued policies that negatively impacted education for women.[25] First, Afghan girls and women were prohibited from attending school. In the summer of 1998, the Taliban ordered more than 100 schools to be closed. Consequently, girls were taught to weave and sew in their homes. Second, the Taliban also imposed strict regulations on NGOs that provided education. One of these regulations stated that girls could only receive education to the age of eight and that this education must be restricted to the Qur'an. However, these restrictions affected boys as well. For example, books were removed from some of the biggest cities in Afghanistan. Third, because teaching was a female-dominated profession in Afghanistan, there was a shortage of teachers. As a result of the Taliban's ban on education, illiteracy is a large problem throughout Afghanistan. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, as of 2000, Burkina Faso and Niger were the only two countries with lower adult literacy rates than Afghanistan.[26]

---

[25] Under the Taliban, Afghan women suffered in a variety of ways other than restrictions to their education, as the Taliban's policies included locking women in their homes, painting over their windows and forcing women to wear *burqas* in public. In addition, women were required to be accompanied by a male relative outside the home. Women were also prohibited from receiving medical care unless female physicians were available. As a result of these constraints and in order to avoid punishment, many women committed suicide. These constraints also affected the children of Afghanistan. The lack of access to health care for women, especially access to reproductive health care needs, had a direct impact on the health of their children. The infant mortality rate also climbed as women were unable to seek medical attention during pregnancy. Fleming, "Even in Dreams, They Are Coming," 600, and Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban*, 63–74.

[26] This situation differed between the cities and the rural areas of Afghanistan. On the one hand, near Kabul, only one school endured the Taliban's rule through the aid of a development agency and community support. This school was considered unofficial and received no support from the state. A focus was still placed on religious law, but the *mujahedeen*, with the help of an American university, introduced a textbook for learning the standard alphabet. Moreover, after nearly a year of lobbying, several Afghan women were given permission to open the Naswan Shashdarak school in order to educate first through sixth grade girls. On the other hand, in villages, both boys and girls were being educated in a variety of subjects, including reading, writing, math, and Islam. Therefore, some Afghan girls were able to receive an education despite the Taliban's restrictions, but a large education gap remains. Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban*, 66.

The Taliban grounds their education policies on their interpretation of the Qur'an. The Taliban's insistence on gender segregation in schools is, in part, derived from their interpretation of two qur'anic verses: Qur'an 33:53 and Qur'an 24:30–31. In the former, God instructs believers that when they enter the home of the Prophet, they are not to overstay their welcome: "That is vexing to the Prophet who might be wary of you, but Allah is not wary of the truth. If you ask them [the wives] for an object, ask them from behind a curtain." (Qur'an 33:53).[27] In this case, the Taliban interprets the curtain as a literal, physical barrier that divides women from men. They apply this understanding of separation between the believers and the Prophet's wives to all women, particularly in the context of education. The second verse, Qur'an 24:30–31, affirms the need for separation between sexes in terms of clothing: "And tell the believing women to cast down their eyes and guard their private parts and not show their finery, except the outward part of it. And let them drape their bossoms with their veils and not show their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, the sons of their husbands, their brothers, the sons of their brothers, the sons of their sisters, their women, their maid servants, the men-followers who have no sexual desire, or infants who have no knowledge of women's sexual parts yet."[28] The Taliban interprets this passage to mean that women need to cover themselves with a physical garment in order to maintain their modesty.[29] Because the Taliban embraces a

---

[27] Majid Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004).

[28] Ibid.

[29] The need for women to maintain their modesty by wearing a particular garment is reaffirmed through the Taliban's interpretation of Qur'an 33:59: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful." Discussions about veiling (and gender segregation) are highly contested. For an example of these discussions, see Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

strict form of shariah law, the garment that they think women should wear is the *burqa*, which covers a woman from head to toe, and includes a face-veiling portion of netting over the eyes.[30]

The Taliban's interpretation of these verses are not accepted by the majority of Muslims around the world. Abdul Raheem Yaseer, the Assistant Director at the Center for Afghanistan Studies, discusses the Taliban's style of Islam:

> They misinterpret instructions … When Islam says all women should be modest and moderate and modestly dressed, then they go as far as to say they should cover their face and hands, and feet too, which is not culturally acceptable and religiously correct. And then they say women should not go to school. They should study at home. They should not learn the worldly things but they should concentrate on the religious subjects. These are all against the mainstream Islam which says that men and women are all obliged to acquire knowledge from the cradle to the grave and they should seek knowledge even at the furthest spot from their place of residence.[31]

Yaseer argues not only that the Taliban's interpretation of Islam is inconsistent with mainstream Islam, but also that their position against women's education disregards the Islamic belief that all Muslims, men and women, should be committed to lifelong learning. Yaseer is only one of many who argue that the Taliban's interpretation of Islam is not a true interpretation. Many scholars and Muslim leaders state that the practices of the Taliban have little or nothing to do with Islam and find the Taliban's claims to be offensive. In fact, equality is a core principle in Islam: "Most believe that Islam teaches that in the eyes of God men and women are equal, and that men and women do not have to be identical to be equal."[32] Thus, there are verses in the Qur'an that support equality, but the Taliban disregards them in order to support their own ideology.

Yaseer and other scholars argue against the Taliban's strict interpretation of the Qur'an by highlighting the different verses in the Qur'an that support gender equality. For example, Surah 4 discusses the creation of men and women, stating that both genders were created from

---

[30] Hadia Mubarak, "Burqa," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 28 Nov 2015).
[31] Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban*, 39-40.
[32] Ibid., 42.

one source and are “of like natures.” (Qur’an 4:1). This same surah later states that men and women ought to “demand” “mutual rights.” (Qur’an 4:1).[33] These phrases are used by progressive scholars to argue that men and women should be given the same social, economic, and political rights.[34] However, because the term translated as “person” can also be translated as “father,” it could be argued that men were created first, suggesting male superiority. This Surah nevertheless implies that men and women were created from the same source and are deserving of the same rights.[35] Therefore, the principle of equality is consistent with qur’anic teachings.

Additionally, there are passages in the *Hadith* and examples from the *Sunnah* that illustrate the rights of women, specifically the right to receive an education.[36] In a Hadith reported by Sahih Bukhari, for example, a woman came to Muhammad and asked that he teach the Muslim women of the community:

> A woman came to Allah's Apostle and said, "O Allah's Apostle! Men (only) benefit by your teachings, so please devote to us from (some of) your time, a day on which we may come to you so that you may teach us of what Allah has taught you." Allah's Apostle said, "Gather on such-and-such a day at such-and-such a place." They gathered and Allah's Apostle came to them and taught them of what Allah had taught him.[37]

His willingness to teach the Muslim women in this hadith illustrated that women’s education was valued by the Prophet.[38] Thus, Bukhari affirms that women were being educated during the life of Muhammad. Furthermore, these passages from the Qur’an and Hadith are not exhaustive, but

---

[33] For an example of an interpretation that emphasizes the equality between men and women, see Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16–23.
[34] Fleming, “Even in Dreams, They Are Coming,” 602.
[35] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2008), 49-50.
[36] The *hadith* are traditions of the Prophet, which are considered to be scriptures. The *Sunnah* are “Muhammad’s example as recorded in the *hadith*.” Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*.
[37] Muhammad ibn Ismail Bukhari, *The English Translation of Sahih al Bukhari with the Arabic text,* Translated by M.M. Khan (Alexandria, VA: Al-Saadawi Publications, 1996).
[38] Fleming, “Even in Dreams, They Are Coming,” 607.

rather provide a brief insight into the current debates among Islamic scholars over what the Islamic texts say about gender equality.

While scholars debate what Islamic sacred texts say about women's rights to an education, it is evident that the Taliban's interpretation of Islam is at odds with the desires of the Afghani people. An understanding of the demographics of the Afghani community, specifically their identification with Islam, can provide insight into what the Afghani people might want in terms of education and which model of female education might work best within this context. In a study conducted by Lina Abirafeh, more than 100 Afghanis were interviewed regarding their various identities. Of the participants, 71 were female and 50 were male. Furthermore, of the female participants, most were married (55 percent) and received no education (59 percent), compared to their male counterparts who were also mostly married (56 percent). However, unlike the female participants, a majority of the men had received at least seven years of education. During the interview, the participants were asked "to rank five different aspects of their identity in order of importance to them."[39] These five aspects included: national identity, religious identity, ethnic or tribal identity, sex, and family identity. A majority of both female and male participants listed their religious identity as the "primary social category within which they were more closely affiliated."[40]

As this study illustrates, Islam is of great importance to Afghani men and women. Islam provides a framework for how the Afghanis ought to live and for that reason, Afghani men and women define themselves within this framework. In their interviews with Abirafeh, many of the participants "expressed that they are content within its boundaries, electing freely to abide by its

---

[39] Lina Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: the politics and effects of intervention* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 90.
[40] Ibid.

tenets."[41] Many of these participants expressed the belief that Islam provides guidance and the possibility for progress. Furthermore, many of the female participants expressed a belief that Islam not only supports, but guarantees equal rights, including the right to an education. However, while discussing equal rights with female participants, Abirafeh noted an observation: "Women explained that they prefer to find ways to defend their rights within an Islamic context. They want to search for answers in the Koran [*sic*], or through another practicing Muslim. And they want to know more about Islam and the rights that it affords them."[42] This observation provides an additional example of the importance of Islam to Afghani women. These women want to utilize Islam to argue for the rights being denied.

This study indicates that as Afghanistan recovers from the Taliban's rule, an approach to education based on an Islamic framework must be utilized regarding women's rights. Based on these interviews, it is clear that while Afghanis want progress and modernity, they do not want the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam that limits the rights of women and restricts access to education. Instead, they seek an approach to education that makes use of the Afghan Islamic context and utilizes Islamic sources.

Alternative Models of Education

There are two other groups currently debating the role of women's education in Islam that might offer an alternative model for Afghanis to embrace in rejection of Taliban policies: the secular feminist model and the Muslim (or Muslima) feminist model.

The first of these two groups uses the modernist or progressivist approach, which could also be referred to as secular feminism. This approach represents the feminism "developed by Muslims as citizens within the context of nation-states rather than as Muslims solely within the

[41] Ibid., 91.
[42] Ibid.

framework of their religious community."[43] Secular feminism is often utilized by feminists who understand religion as a "key factor in the subordination and oppression of women."[44] This belief comes from the notion that feminism and gender equality are incompatible with Islam. For example, in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Haideh Moghissi argues that Islam is a religion based on a gendered hierarchy and "therefore cannot be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women's equality with men."[45] Moghissi and other prominent secular feminists often describe Islam as "patriarchal" and "misogynistic." However, other scholars tend to focus on the socioeconomic and political barriers that hinder modern changes to women's rights in Muslim societies. Instead of using Islamic sources to strengthen their arguments for equality, these scholars downplay religion.

Since the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Muslim women, especially middle and upper class women, began to see that their movements and opportunities were restricted compared to the movements and opportunities of the men of the middle and upper classes. Many secular feminists identify imposed practices, such as domestic segregation, gender segregation, and veiling, as "not religious requirements as they had been made to believe but simply social customs."[46] Their focus turned to the public sphere as they made a claim for gender equality. There had been two different waves of secular feminism. The first of these two waves understood the private sphere as the religious sphere and accepted a patriarchal family structure within this sphere, in which men and women had separate and unequal roles. Therefore, this wave of feminism focused on creating change in the public sphere instead. The second wave

---

[43] Margot Badran, "Feminism," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World* (accessed 13 Oct. 2015).
[44] Riham Bahi, "Islamic and Secular Feminisms: Two Discourses Mobilized for Gender Justice," *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 3, no. 3 (2011): 142.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Badran, "Feminism."

questioned the patriarchal family structure as being religiously ordained and the role of religion in both the public and private spheres.[47]

One of the most influential secular feminist movements took place in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century. These secular feminists, led by Malak Hifni Nasif, presented their demands to the 1911 Muslim Nationalist Congress in Cairo. These demands included the right to attend congregational prayer in a mosque, the right to choose work, and the right to education. Similarly, in 1923, Muslim and Christian women formed the Egyptian Feminist Union, in which they demanded educational and political rights. This union also worked to end legalized prostitution and provide health services to low-income women. Additionally, the Daughter of the Nile Union reached out to Egyptian women through literacy programs in 1948. Many of these secular feminist unions operated under the belief that health and economic well-being is a "prerequisite to women's advance."[48]

Toward the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the secular feminist movement that Nasif inspired had turned its focus from health and economic rights to sexuality, violence against women, and women's bodies. Honor killings and female genital mutilation, for example, were both understood to be Islamic practices and secular feminists quickly argued against both of these practices using religious and human rights.[49] The secular feminists also began arguing for gender equality as opposed to complementarity, a specific form of gender inequality in which men and women have different, but complementary roles. A new coalition was created called Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), which

---

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] For more discussion on female genital mutilation (FGM) and Islam, please see Anwar Etin, "Female Genital Cutting," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 01 Dec 2015).

embarked on extensive research into statutory, customary, and Islamic laws.[50] However, as these feminist unions and coalitions made great strides for women's rights, conservative political Islam, including the Taliban, threatened to reestablish patriarchal dominance.

As a middle ground between the rigid Islamic fundamentalist approach and the secular modernist approach, a third approach emerged: Muslim feminism. This approach was "a new interpretive effort by women scholars and intellectuals, and some men, who had embarked on a woman-sensitive rereading of the Qur'an and other religious sources."[51] Unlike the secular feminists, these Muslim feminists utilize religious sources to argue for women's rights. Muslim feminists prioritize readings of the Qur'an that focus on gender equality and social justice, rather than rights and liberation. Muslim feminists argue for gender equality in all spheres of life. Whereas secular feminists accept a patriarchal family structure, Muslim feminists accept an egalitarian family structure. Furthermore, Muslim feminists demand gender equality in the religious sphere, arguing that women have the right to perform religious rituals. However, while the secular feminists conceptualize their argument in a public/private dichotomy, the Muslim feminists conceptualize "a public sphere inclusive of the religious and the secular rather than equating the public sphere solely with the secular."[52] Muslim feminists understand that the public sphere includes both religious and secular aspects.

In *Inside the Gender Jihad*, for example, Amina Wadud asserts that her jihad is against gender prejudices. Like other Muslim feminists, Wadud criticizes traditional Islam and secular feminism, stating "that the Islamic texts must be the foundation for continued debate, interpretation, re-interpretation and contestation."[53] Whereas the Islamic fundamentalist

---

[50] Badran, "Feminism."
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Bahi, "Islamic and Secular Feminisms," 146.

approach asserts that original Muslim practices must be followed and the secular feminist approach argues against the use of an Islamic framework, the Muslim feminist approach encourages the reinterpretation of Islamic sources for the current social context.

Sisters in Islam (SIS), which was founded by Malaysian women in the 1980s, illustrates the intellectual and activist work characteristic of Muslim feminism. Supporting the concept of an egalitarian family structure in Islam, SIS raises awareness through the dissemination of booklets on gender equality. Similarly, other organizations in Indonesia, including the Center for Pesantren and Democracy Studies, support an egalitarian family structure through the curriculum used in Islamic boarding schools.[54] In the case of Afghanistan, organizations that work to promote gender equality may be successful, especially organizations based on Islamic ideals. The Afghan Institute for Learning (AIL), for example, has created several centers throughout Afghanistan to promote culture-sensitive health education among Afghan women and children. AIL operates under the belief that "women who are empowered with basic education are more prepared to make choices that protect the health of their families and their own."[55] In order to empower women through education, more organizations need to be established in Afghanistan that promote culture-sensitive education.

Muslim feminists also focus on mosques and other sacred spaces in their argument for an egalitarian form of Islam. As Muslims immigrate to the West, Muslim women are utilizing the Muslim feminist approach in their new communities. Mainly in the West, but also in South Africa, Muslim women are interested in sharing the main space in the mosque with the men, giving *khutbahs* or sermons, and serving as imams in mixed congregations. In New York, for

---

[54] Badran, "Feminism."
[55] Sakena Yacoobi, "Teaching Women to Care for Themselves in Afghanistan," *The UN Chronicle* 42, no. 4 (2005): 46.

example, Amina Wadud served as an imam, leading the congregation in prayer and delivering the *khutbah*. However, this resulted in a debate over "the lawfulness of a woman acting as imam before a mixed congregation of women and men."[56] As a result of this debate, several hadith and other jurisprudence texts were widely analyzed. This example illustrates the importance of Islamic texts in Muslim societies today. Thus, when examining options for gender equality in a Muslim society, it is essential that Islamic sources be utilized.

Each of these three approaches addresses the role of women's rights in Muslim societies in different ways. The Islamic fundamentalist approach supports one interpretation of the Islamic sources and the belief that for Muslims to live authentically, they must follow the original practices of Islam. The secular feminist approach argues for universal human rights and the reinterpretation of Islamic sources for the current social context. Secular feminists do not typically engage Islamic sources, but rather favor secularist approaches in their arguments for women's rights.[57] In contrast, the Muslim feminist approach utilizes sources from the Islamic tradition to engage and encourage those rights. This approach argues that international human rights and the principles of Islam do not conflict, but that women should have the freedom to live devoutly, while also actively participating in society. Therefore, the question becomes: Which of these three approaches is best suited to the social and political context of Afghanistan? Which approach best empowers Afghan women as women and as Muslims in regards to education?

All three of these models for education understand Islam differently. Whereas the Taliban's fundamentalist approach calls for a return to earlier contexts, the secular feminist approach and Muslim feminist approach recognize that contexts are ever-changing. Further,

---

[56] Badran, "Feminism."
[57] Rebecca McLain Hodges, Dina Sijamhodžić-Nadarević and Soudeh Oladi, "Education and Women," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women*.

while the secular feminists rarely engage Islamic sources, Muslim feminists support the reinterpretation of Islamic sources as a major piece of their argument for women's rights.

A New Model of Education for Afghanistan

Each of these three models offers benefits and drawbacks; however, the Muslim feminist model of education is the best option for the current contexts of Afghanistan. Taking the importance of Islam to the Afghanis and their desire for progress and equality into consideration, the Muslim feminist model empowers women to receive an education and live devoutly as Muslims.

Both the Islamic fundamentalist approach and the Muslim feminist approach utilize Islamic sources and use an Islamic framework, but the former approach is not the best option for Afghanistan. Either of these two approaches could be well-suited to the context of Afghanistan because both approaches root their positions in the sacred texts of Islam. However, as mentioned above, Islamic fundamentalists tend to argue that Islam must return to its earlier practices and that Islam is incompatible with international human rights, which includes the right of women to receive an education. This position is problematic within Afghanistan because the social context of today is much different than previous social contexts. A return to earlier practices espoused by Islamic fundamentalists would not allow for progress because it reflects back on previous contexts, rather than the current realities of Afghanistan. In addition, it is difficult to determine early religious practices from local tribal customs. This creates problems because religious practices and local customs can become conflated. As a result, although the Islamic fundamentalist approach acknowledges the importance of utilizing Islamic sources, it would not be the best approach for the context of Afghanistan. This is further confirmed in that polling data indicates that the majority of Afghanis do not support Taliban rule.

Instead, the Muslim feminist approach would be the best option for the social and political contexts of Afghanistan. As Islam is a key aspect of Afghan identity, it is imperative that women's education be placed in an Islamic framework. Afghan women want to be Muslim and live devoutly as wives and mothers. They want to choose whether or not they wear a veil. Moreover, Afghan women want careers and education. Prior to the Taliban, women had these opportunities. In an interview conducted by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, Afghan women were asked five open ended questions about life before, during, and after the Taliban's rule. One of the questions asked whether life would be better or worse if the Taliban lost control of Afghanistan. Many of the participants stated that their life would be better without the Taliban in power. One interviewee identified as Palwasha stated, "If a good government based on democratic value and respectful of women's rights comes to the power, and prepares the way for our children's education and well-being and opens the door of work for women, our life will change for the better."[58] Many of the other interviewees expressed similar desires. The Muslim feminist approach takes these desires into account by empowering them to be devoted Muslims and receive their rights, including the right to an education.

The Muslim feminist approach would also take the current concerns about NGOs and Western-style education into consideration. As mentioned above, the Taliban continues to resist the current educational framework because they believe it had been influenced by western ideals that are foreign to Afghanistan and to Islam. However, the Muslim feminist approach utilizes Islamic sources in their arguments for women's education. Thus, by using the Muslim feminist approach, Islam would be the foundation for the educational framework

[58] Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban*, 89.

Women's access to education continues to be a problem in Afghanistan. The Taliban's strict interpretation of Islamic sources fueled this problem by denying women the right to an education and forcing them to remain locked inside their homes. Even after falling from power, the Taliban has continued to bar women from receiving education through the use of threats and violence. As a result, Afghan girls and women have lost years of education, the literacy rate in Afghanistan plummeted, and a shortage of teachers continues to impact Afghan boys and men as well. Thus, in order to empower the Afghani women, Afghanistan must consider other educational approaches that also utilize Islam. The Taliban utilizes an Islamic fundamentalist approach, which argues for a return to "original" Islamic practices; however, they take this approach to an extreme. Stating that Islam is at odds with international human rights, the Taliban does not support a reinterpretation of Islamic sources for the current social and political contexts of Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's approach is only one option for an Islamic context and a wide array of Islamic scholars and practitioners condemn the acts of the Taliban and their interpretation of Islamic sources.

Conversely, there are two other approaches which may better suit the current contexts of Afghanistan. The secular feminist approach, on one hand, supports gender equality. However, secular feminists also disregard Islamic sources, even stating that religion is a mechanism used for disempowerment. This approach becomes problematic because, as the studies and interviews mentioned above illustrate, Islam is important to a majority of Afghans. A successful approach must utilize Islam rather than ignore it. For that reason, the last approach, the Muslim feminist approach is ideal. This approach utilizes Islamic texts to empower women and incorporate them into the educational system in Afghanistan. Using this approach, Afghan women are able to live devout lives as Muslims, while also participating fully in society. The Muslim feminist approach

examines Islam as an essential facet of Afghan society, while also listening to the desires of Muslim women today.

Bibliography

Abirafeh, Lina. *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2009.

"Afghanistan." *Islamic World: Past and Present*. Ed. John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 18 Nov. 2014).

Ahmed, Leila. *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence from the Middle East to America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Alvi-Aziz, Hayat. "Progress Report on Women's Education in Post-Taliban Afghanistan." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 27, no. 2 (2008): 169 – 178.

Badran, Margot. "Feminism." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 13 Oct. 2015).

Bahi, Riham. "Islamic and Secular Feminisms: Two Discourses Mobilized for Gender Justice." *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 3, no. 2 (2011): 138 – 158.

Brown, Johnathan A.C. "Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not?: Salafis, the Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, no. 2 (2015): 117 – 144.

Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Ismail. *The English Translation of Sahih al Bukhari with the Arabic text.* Translated by M.M. Khan. Alexandria, VA: Al-Saadawi Publications, 1996.

Constable, Pamela. "Afghan Girls, Back in the Shadows." *Washington Post*, September 23, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/22/AR2006092201404.html.

Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Ch. 2. Article 45. http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/page/constitution (accessed December 3, 2015).

DeLong-Bas, Natana. *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Engineer, Asghar Ali. *The Rights of Women in Islam.* New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2008.

Esposito, John L. *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Etin, Anwar. "Female Genital Cutting." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 01 Dec. 2015).

"Extremism." *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 08 Dec. 2015).

Fakhry, Majid. *An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings.* New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004.

Fareed Rabbani, Faraz. *Faith, Prayer & the Path of Salvation According to the Hanafi School*. UK: White Thread Press, 2008.

Fleming, Caroline B. "Even in Dreams, They Are Coming: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Education of Women in Afghanistan." *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 11, no. 3 (2005): 597–617.

Hodges, Rebecca McLain, Dina Sijamhodžić-Nadarević and Soudeh Oladi. "Education and Women." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 13 Sept. 2015).

Human Rights Watch. "Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan." *Human Rights Watch* 18, no. 6 (2006).

Jones, Adele. "Curriculum and Civil Society in Afghanistan." *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 115 – 122.

Ministry of Education (MOE), Department of Compilation and Translation. *Curriculum Framework Afghanistan*. Kabul: Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, 2003.

Moj, Muhammad. *The Deoband Madrassah Movement: Counter-Cultural Trends and Policies*. London, UK: Anthem Press, 2015.

Mubarak, Hadia. "Burqa." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (accessed 02 Dec 2015).

Rashid, Ahmed. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

Skaine, Rosemarie. *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2002.

Wadud, Amina. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Yacoobi, Sakena. "Teaching Women to Care for Themselves in Afghanistan." *The UN Chronicle* 42, no. 4 (2005): 46-47.

I have neither given, nor received, nor have I tolerated others' use of, unauthorized aid.
Emily Lueder