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## Gender Justice and Peace

This issue of Amana explores gender justice and peace in the context of Islam. Islam is a religion founded on principles of justice, and our contributors examine gender relations and the status of Muslim women in different parts of the Muslim world. AMAN staff Zarah Kathleen T. Alih opens this issue with the fundamental right of a person to control his/her own body. We then hear different views of ‘Islamic/Muslim Feminism’ from Islamic scholar Maulana Waris Mazhari and rights activist Zainah Anwar.

Muslim women’s exercise of their rights varies in different countries and regions and is influenced by social, political and cultural factors. Analyses of India and North Africa provide an interesting comparison.

Finally, Muslim women peacebuilders from Aceh and Kashmir share their stories about women’s experience of conflict and role in building peace. We end with a young person’s view of peacebuilding which is rich and multifaceted and leaves us with some inspiring examples.

I hope that this issue of Amana Magazine sparks discussion and dialogue. Please keep in touch with any suggestions, feedback or contributions for this or future editions.

Amy Braun
Editor, The Amana Media Initiative
Women’s Bodily Rights

The paternalistic patriarchic system is still very constraining for women. This system allows men to have power over, to control the lives of women in all aspects: social, legal, political, moral and religious. This system ultimately results in a very discriminatory distribution of roles and positions for men and women. Strangely enough, there are still a great number of people who consider this state of inequality as the will of God.

A human being’s sexual feelings reveal the gender identity. This means that sexuality is always based on the strength of society’s social history. Sexuality does not merely revolve around biology or the anatomy. It is a combination of anatomical structure and psychology. Female sexuality is everything that is intrinsic regarding the anatomy and female sexual pleasure. Therefore, female sexuality does not merely refer to the whole body, but includes thoughts and feelings.

The idea that sexuality merely refers to the body leads to the conviction that women should be passive and men active. Women do not have the right to enjoy sex. On the contrary, it is the woman who should be enjoyed. Sexuality is always viewed from the masculine context. And men should always be the subject. Women, on the other hand, are only objects, sexual objects. The natural consequence is that abuse, rape and sexual violence are legitimized.

Every human being has the right over his/her own body. A woman has a right over her own body and to health and pleasure from her body. A woman’s body is not taboo but something positive. Women have the right to appreciate and express themselves through their own bodies.

A woman’s body is not the root of sin or trouble as is the common perception prevalent in society. It is the impure thoughts and views regarding the body that is the actual tragedy here. Moralistic values prevalent within society are very biased because they are determined based on the assumptions of men. These unfair moralistic judgments have resulted in the stereotyping of the woman’s body. A woman’s body is always linked to temptation, defiling men’s morality, the cause of calamity and other negative stereotyping. This gives birth to moralistic judgments further legitimized by religion. As a consequence, the policies and laws issued tend to benefit men and are disadvantageous to women.

A number of critical questions come to the surface: If women cover their bodies, are they automatically respected and ensured that their most basic rights are fulfilled? Do staying in the house at night and always being accompanied by male relatives outside the house mean that women are respected and protected from all forms of violence, abuse, and rape and that all forms of violence against women will decrease? The reality does not endorse this assumption. What happens is that the more hypocritical a community is, the more the rate of violence and violation of women’s basic rights increases.

What should be done, especially in this era where the mainstream religious tends toward the more conservative interpretations? It is necessary to re-read texts and provide an alternative vision and challenge the hegemony and monopoly of those who claim to be the guardians of theology, and to struggle for the right of interpretation. However, this endeavor is a very ambitious and risky task in the contemporary Muslim world, especially when women are the ones who dare to do it.

The implicit theory, driven further into the Muslim unconscious, is epitomized in Imam al-Ghazali’s (1050-1111) classical work, The Revivification of Religious Sciences (Ihya ‘Ulum al-Din). According to Mernissi, the Implicit theory of female sexuality is ‘seen in Imam al-Ghazali’s interpretation of the Qur’an which casts women as the hunter and the woman’s qaid power (the power to deceive and defeat men, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue).

But while Aqqad tries to link the female’s qayd power to her weak constitution, the symbol of her divinely decreed inferiority, Imam al-Ghazali sees female’s power as the most destructive element in the Muslim social order, in which the feminine is regarded as synonymous with the satanic. The Muslim organization of social interaction, spatial configuration and segregation, gender relations and social order then appears as an attempt to subjugate female power and neutralize its disruptive effects.

Zarah Katheen T. Alih is from the Philippines and is the Regional Coordinator for the Muslim Women’s Commision and HIV prevention program at AMAN.
In recent years, scores of books, mainly in English, have been published on what is termed by its proponents as ‘Islamic Feminism’. A number of NGOs, almost wholly funded by Western organizations, have also cropped up in various countries that see themselves as engaged in promoting ‘Islamic Feminism’. I would be the last to deny the reality that vast numbers of Muslim women continue to be denied their rights, and I readily admit to the fact that patriarchy, which I deem as un-Islamic, is deeply entrenched in most Muslim societies. Yet, as a Muslim, and as someone who is concerned about Muslim women’s access to justice, I have serious reservations about some basic aspects of the ‘Islamic Feminism’ project.

Based on my limited reading on the subject of ‘Islamic Feminism’, I think that many—though I cannot say all—advocates of this project have no independent world-view of their own, and that they simply follow the dominant Western feminist discourse, which they seek to propagate in an ‘Islamic’ guise. They appear to want Muslim women to go the way of Western women, and, for this, seek to interpret Islam in a particular way to promote this agenda. The Western feminist model, rather than Islam per se, is their criterion to decide what is ‘just’ and ‘proper’. This is the model that they want Muslim women to emulate, seeing, as the dominant West does, Muslim women as ‘backward’ and, consequently, as in desperate need of ‘liberation’.

At the same time, I would also stress that Muslim scholars, including the male ulema, must recognize the reality of deep-rooted gender biases in Muslim societies. We have to accept that Muslims have handicapped half our population—Muslim women—by all sorts of unwarranted restrictions. We have to admit the urgent need to allow and enable Muslim women to develop their suppressed potentials. The solution to this must be evolved from within the broad paradigm provided by the Qur’an and authentic Hadith, rather than on the basis of Feminism, even in a so-called ‘Islamic’ guise.

In a sense, several issues that ‘Islamic Feminists’, particularly those who are heavily funded by Western organizations, take up are geared, intentionally or otherwise, to set Muslim women and men against each other. So, for instance, you have huge funds being poured in for such purposes as setting up women’s mosques or enormous Western media hype about a woman Imam leading a mixed congregation. Personally, I am against such sensationalism, but I also recognize that it is our own weakness that has caused or led some Muslim women to take to this path. If Muslim women had been allowed by Muslim men their Islamic right to worship in mosques there would have been no grounds for such unnecessary controversies. In this regard, I think a major share of the blame lies on the shoulders of the traditionalist ulema.

In this regard, the traditionalist Hanafi ulema argue that although in the Prophet’s time women did pray in mosques, this practice was later abrogated by the Caliph Umar. Hence, they argue, we must stick to the Caliph’s decision. It is strange that even as they cite this as an argument to justify banning women from praying in mosques they do not advocate that thieves’ hands should not be cut off, which is what the Caliph Umar once ordered, against the Qur’anic commandment to the contrary, during a severe drought. The point, then, is that several prescriptions of Islamic jurisprudence, including some dealing with women, are related to their spatio-temporal contexts, and that, as the contexts change, these rules must,
too. In other words, in seeking to apply the rules of the shariah one also has to take into account what the demands of the situation or context are. This applies to women’s issues as much as to other such matters.

Unfortunately, our traditionalist ulema, who continue to rigidly adhere to medieval fiqh formulations, do not generally see things in this way. They do not appreciate the inherent flexibility provided by the principles of Islamic jurisprudence to generate contextually relevant responses to new issues. One reason for this is that madrasas, where our ulema are trained, make no provision for their students to learn about new social contexts and developments. The men who run the madrasas give little or no attention at all to the question of how the madrasa curriculum should respond to new challenges and realities.

Today, we are faced with a situation where we are confronted with two extremes. On the one hand is the dominant Western culture that has commodified women and that seeks to destroy all differences between men and women on the specious grounds that difference automatically means inequality. It insists that just because a man does something or behaves in a certain way, a woman must do so, too. In other words, despite its protestations of radical equality between the sexes, this approach is based on the notion of the male as the criterion for deciding what is good for women and what is not. Lamentably, in India, too, we are fast falling prey to this mentality, blindly imitating the West.

On the other hand are our traditionalist ulema. In a sense, some of their very conservative, even reactionary, positions on women are a response to what they see as the potent challenge of dominant Western views about women. They want to keep Muslim women locked up in their homes and fully veiled, quite in contrast, I must add, to the position that they enjoyed at the time of the Prophet. They go so far as to insist that a woman’s very voice is awrah or that it should be ‘veiled’, or, in other words, that even her voice must not be heard by any ‘strange’ male, although there was nothing like this in the time of the Prophet.

Given the traditionalist ulema’s attitude to women-related issues, it is hardly surprising that many educated Muslim women blame the ulema for their ills, some of them even locating the root of their problems in Islam itself. This is undoubtedly a very troubling and lamentable state of affairs. I think it is imperative that Muslim males, including the ulema, realize this enormous problem and encourage Muslim women to come forward and participate in all spheres of public life, especially through access to education, religious as well as secular, in which they continue to lag far behind.

In this regard, I think that it is crucial for Muslim women to start studying Islam for themselves, for, undoubtedly, they can better understand the Islamic notion of gender justice than many men. It was essentially due to Muslim women’s educational backwardness, particularly in the realm of religious scholarship, that it became easy for them to be exploited by Muslim men, including the religious class, the reason being that if you do not know your rights others will naturally exploit you. By becoming Islamic scholars, including muftis and faqihas, in their own right, Muslim women will be able to challenge the deeply-rooted notion that a husband is his wife’s lord and he can treat his wife the way he wants, that a wife must be forever subservient to her husband, regard him as her lord or hakim, consider her the dust of her husband’s feet as the path to heaven for her and even treat him almost like a demi-god, or majazi Khuda as it is said in Urdu—these being widely-held conceptions in Muslim society which, however, have no Islamic basis at all. Sad to say, this is the view also of some traditionalist ulema, who ought to know better.

Obviously, if Muslim women were themselves to study Islam and contemporary social demands and challenges it would be much more difficult for men to exploit them in the name of Islam. In this way, it is likely that the Qur’anic mandate of gender justice would be more prominently highlighted, just as in the early Muslim period, when numerous Muslim women excelled in the field of Islamic scholarship, some even challenging well-known male scholars and exemplifying, through their own lives, the rights of women in Islam.

In other words, while I do not agree with many basic aspects of the approach, methodology and agenda of ‘Islamic Feminists’, I readily admit that one basic demand and concern of theirs—gender justice—can no longer be ignored by the ulema and Muslim males. In my humble opinion, gender justice is something that is intrinsic to Islam itself. Denying it obviously leads to a denial of a basic Islamic mandate.

Islamic Feminism

A graduate of the Dar ul-Uloom Deoband, Maulana Waris Mazhari is the editor of the Tarjuman Dar ul-Ulum, the official organ of the Delhi-based Deoband Madrasa’s Graduates’ Association.
Gender Justice
An Interview with Zainah Anwar
by Yoginder Sikand

Based in Kuala Lumpur, Zainah Anwar, is one of the founding members of ‘Sisters in Islam’, an activist group struggling for the rights of Muslim women. She is also one of the pioneers of Musawah, a recently launched initiative to build a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. In this interview with Yoginder Sikand, she talks about her vision for an understanding of gender justice in Islam and the place of Islam within a democratic nation-state.

Q: You may not like being labeled, but how would you describe yourself? As a Muslim feminist? A feminist who is also a Muslim? An Islamic feminist?

A: I am a feminist. That is my foremost identity. But I am also a Muslim, and so I have no problems calling myself a ‘Muslim feminist’. I am very proud of my Muslim identity. I don’t see any contradiction in being Muslim and feminist at the same time, because I have been brought up with an understanding of Islam that is just and God that is absolutely just, including in matters related to women and gender relations. At the same time, I would hesitate to call myself an ‘Islamic feminist’. I find that term ‘Islamic’ too ideological. I prefer to call myself a ‘Muslim feminist’, because the term ‘Muslim’ signifies human agency and how I, as a human being, understand God and religion. Because of political Islam, there is a tendency to believe that anything labeled ‘Islamic’ is the divine word of God, unmediated by human agency and interpretation, which is not the case, of course.

Q: Many Muslim feminists seek to articulate a gender-just understanding of Islam based almost wholly on their reading of the Qur’an, with out taking recourse to the corpus of Hadith and fiqih, possibly because the latter two sources contain prescriptions and rules that seem to greatly militate against gender justice. How do you relate to these latter two sources of Muslim tradition?

A: For me, as a Muslim, the Qur’an is the ultimate authority. Anything that contradicts it, including in the corpus of Hadith and fiqih, cannot be considered to be Islamic. Furthermore, I also believe that the Qur’an is open to multiple interpretations, as a result of human agency in seeking to understand the text. There is no final, authoritative human interpretation of the text. Thus, the history of Qur’anic exegesis is a story of a constant, and continuing, endeavour of Muslims seeking to understand the word of God, a wondrous exercise that can result in new meanings and perspectives evolving over time. Interpretations of the same text can vary due to temporal and spatial differences, differences in the class and educational background or the gender of the reader or the sort of experiences the reader has been through and which inform her when she reads the Qur’an.

In other words, Muslim feminists argue against any monopolistic claims on the part of anyone, including the ulema, of knowing fully the mind of God, as revealed in the Qur’an. Every understanding of the Qur’an is necessarily a partial, limited, and humble one, which cannot be considered to be perfect or free from error.

Q: Muslim feminists are routinely accused of seeking
to undermine, if not defy, the authority of the ulema as authoritative spokesmen of Islam. How do you respond to this charge?

A: We are not questioning the authority of the ulema because we want to. We are saying that if someone’s interpretation of Islam violates the norms of justice, which are so integral to the Qur’an, and if this interpretation is then imposed on us as a source of laws and public policies that are oppressive and discriminatory towards women, then we, as citizens of a democratic country, must speak out against this.

If you want to take Islam into the public sphere, you can only expect people to challenge you if they disagree with your views, especially when your views are made into laws that govern the lives of citizens. You cannot prevent others challenging you by using the argument that only you know what Islam is, and that no one else has the right to speak of, or for, it. This would, in effect, be tantamount to equating your own views with that of God, a grave sin in Islam. Sadly, however, that is precisely the tendency of conservative ulema and Islamist radicals alike.

We are arguing for the need to respect everyone’s right—the Muslim feminists’, the ulema’s, the Islamists’ and everyone else’s—to seek to understand and interpret God’s word. We are all on a journey of discovery of the intent of God’s word, and this journey will never be complete. We are arguing for recognition of this fact.

That said, I do not deny that the ulema and other religious scholars do have their own roles to play. I do believe that there are principles within the rich heritage of Islamic jurisprudence that render open the possibilities for re-interpretation to bring about justice and equality in the modern world.

Q: Numerous Muslim feminist groups across the world, including Sisters-in-Islam, are dependent on foreign, especially Western, institutional funding. Why is this so? I ask this question particularly since their source of funding opens them to the charge of serving as ‘agents’ of non-Muslim forces that are portrayed as engaged in a ‘conspiracy’ to undermine Islam.

A: It is strange that although Islamist groups, too, get funding from overseas, no one levels the same sort of criticism against them. If we Muslim feminist groups are ‘tools’ of the West, the same could also be said of Muslim governments across the world that are so dependent on Western countries and Western-dominated institutions for aid. If our Muslim critics are so concerned that we should not have to take recourse to Western organizations for funding, why don’t rich Muslims, like the Gulf Arabs drowning in petrodollars, ever assist groups like us? We would be happy to accept their aid as long as they do not interfere with our work. But, of course, they will not aid groups like ours. The reason is simple: they do not believe in equality for women.

I would like to make it clear here that our donors do not interfere at all with our functioning. We draw up proposals, set the agenda, and set it before potential funders, who, if they provide us with money, do not at all meddle with the way we go about doing the things we do. We just have to be accountable for the money we spent.

That said, I must also add that we are now beginning to approach more local donors so that Malaysians have a greater stake in our work, with which they have become increasingly familiar in recent years. In fact, every attack against us is an opportunity for us to open up the space for us to be heard. Because of this, the support for our work has grown, as there is greater awareness of the significance of our work to Malaysia’s survival as a democratic multi-ethnic country.

Yoginder Sikand is a New Delhi-based writer and professor, writing predominantly on Indian Muslims and inter-community relations.
This essay is aimed at examining the causes of the conspicuous absence of any protest/reform movement among Indian Muslim women until the last decade, though the atmosphere was pregnant with hope and aspiration since the dawn of the 19th century. In spite of being the most wretched among the Indian womanhood, Indian Muslim women remained silent about their pathetic lot and never came out with any reformist agenda. The causes of such a historical and discomforting silence are rooted in the self image through gendered historiography of Indian Muslim males resulting in the absence of a collective consciousness as a suffering and colonized group.

However, the spread of education exposes to the outside world, particularly to the march of Muslim women in other countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Egypt, Morocco, Bangladesh, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan and immigrants Muslim communities of the West. The achievements of the fellow Muslimah in these ‘lesser liberal and democratic’ societies (compared to India, that is celebrated as the ‘largest democracy’ of the world), have been the area of focus and relentless struggle of this writer as an academician and journalist/columnist for almost a decade. An important and unique particularity of the Indian Muslim woman is that she is torn between the two parallel identities of political-nation and Ummah’s nation. The male membership of the largest Indian minority, which is at par with the largest Muslim populations of Muslim countries, has been asking women to alter their interests in the larger interest of the community that is under siege of the xenophobic Hindu majority. They themselves did not bother to extend the bounties of Islam, Qur’an and Sunnah to their women so that instead of becoming a pitiable creature she could have been an enviable ‘status-woman’.

Indian Muslim women are disadvantaged due to three unavoidable particularities besides being women as such. Firstly, they are part of a minority community that is no longer welcome in the land due to the partition of India into India and Pakistan at the very inception of ‘Nationhood’. Hence the general prejudice in public sphere ensures that an Indian Muslim has to be ten times more talented and hard working to get what members of majority group and lesser ‘dangerous’ and indigenous minorities like Sikhs and Jains comfortably achieve in every civil arena.

Secondly, Muslim women in India are disadvantaged as the weaker-half of the community that is already marginalized in the national society, ensuring the meekest levels of confidence in striving for their national share in growth and state policy making on their own.

Thirdly, the Indian Muslim patriarchy is ultra vigilant to safeguard its cultural identity and adherence to orthodox religious tenets due to its fear of state-led liberal reforms through sheer advantage of numbers in the legislative. These fears have been unfounded and on the contrary the electoral politics and ‘the rule of majority by single vote’ to claim government formation has promoted a culture of unqualified support to the male leadership of clan or family. The equally patriarchal political parties woo male heads of the family, neighborhood, village, clan or sect of Indian Muslims, obliterating the victim hood of Indian Muslim women.

Having stated a three tier system of disadvantaging women of the Indian Muslim community, another eye-opening parallel process of deliberate ideological colonization of Muslim women by their own male family members, particularly husbands and in-laws, is through the creation of tracts, pamphlet literature and series of publications in book form that are solely aimed at women and hold no Islamic (Qur’an and Sunnah based) genuineness and tenability. This highly popular and populist literature is cheaply priced in comparison with its production cost. However the sheer volume of sale ensures its creators/ producers nexus is in commercially good health. The writer of this essay is investigating hundreds of such books and booklets, where some weak Hadith are quoted or a tricky interpretation of some key words of the verses of Qur’an regarding male-female relationship is cited to create a sub-culture of women’s oppression within an Islamic framework. The exercise is aimed at weeding out such contradicting interpretations of Islamic teachings that are created to bestow Islam with patriarchal and macho character.

Sheeba Aslam Fehmi is a PhD student in political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
Fez, Morocco - Women in North Africa have made tremendous progress in promoting and upholding their rights. Women in this region—commonly known as the Maghreb—are at the forefront of the Arab world in terms of individual rights and gender equality, and constitute models for other Arab women to follow. A number of lessons may be drawn from the inspiring experience of women in North Africa, especially in Morocco and Tunisia.

Access to justice has been greatly facilitated by the new Family Courts in Morocco as necessitated by the Moroccan Family Code of 2004. When women marry, they are now able to retain ownership of their property thanks to Article 49 of the code, which allows for a separate contract on property alongside the marriage contract. This is in accordance with Islamic law, in which women may remain the sole owners of their property and have no legal obligation to share it with their husbands. In addition, mothers married to foreign nationals in Morocco and Tunisia can now pass on their citizenship to their children—a privilege previously allowed only to men.

The countries of the Maghreb have made significant headway in combating violence against women. Almost all Arab countries have signed the most important international convention that bans such violence, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), with exceptions to articles that clashed with a literal interpretation of the Islamic law. But Morocco has recently agreed to the convention in full.

Women are also more visible in economic and academic spheres than before in the Maghreb. Nationwide youth literacy is gradually becoming a reality with women demanding accessible and standardised educational opportunities. And women often spearhead business ventures, are increasingly choosing their professions freely and feeling safer at the workplace as a result of laws that combat sexual harassment, and have better access to clinics and more independence in making decisions about their reproductive health.

Fertility rates have dropped considerably in the region, from well above six children per woman in the 1970s to approximately two per woman in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, according to the Journal of African and Asian Studies. This reduction is impressive: the Maghreb accomplished in 25 years what took almost 200 years in France.

Women in the Maghreb have also progressed when it comes to exercising their political rights and civic voice, with more and more women becoming members of their nations’ parliaments (43 in Tunisia, 34 in Morocco and 30 in Algeria) and local governing councils (no less than 3,406 in Morocco).

Non-governmental organisations have played an essential role in pushing women’s rights forward in the Maghreb region. Networking between associations at national and grassroots levels ensures that activists can disseminate information and rally multiple groups to help promote new legislation or initiatives that help women.

Another lesson that the Moroccan and Tunisian experiences offer is the importance of the place given to gender and women studies in some universities. These academic programmes have proved instrumental in changing social perceptions, attitudes and structures that obstruct gender equality.

One of the main reasons for the slow progress in women’s rights in the rest of the Arab world is an unfounded fear among conservatives that granting full equality to women constitutes an imposition of Western values and a deviation from Islamic norms. Proponents of women’s rights in the Maghreb, however, have made every effort in their thinking and action to show that it is patriarchy and social norms, and not Islam itself, that constitute the roots of their problems.

Women’s rights are indeed congruent with the spirit of Islam and with universal ideals. Islamic jurisprudence has a tradition of ijtihad—an independent and contextual interpretation of the Qur’an and hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad—which allows consideration of culture as a changing concept.

The countries of the Maghreb strive to reinterpret Islam in modern social contexts through their revised family codes, which secure women’s rights without compromising Islamic values. Tradition and modernity are not lived as mutually exclusive. The future of women’s rights in the Maghreb greatly depends both on the work of civil society activists and continued Islamic legal reform based on universal human rights.

Fatima Sadiqi is a professor of linguistics and gender studies from Morocco and a UN expert on gender.
Women and the Peace Movement: Experiences in Aceh

By Suraiya Kamaruzzaman

Suraiya Kamaruzzaman has been working for women’s rights and peace in Aceh for twenty years. She presented these reflections at the International Consultation Workshop on Muslim Women and Peace in Asia organized by AMAN in Bogor, Indonesia, on 24-27 May 2009.

Amana: How did the conflict in Aceh start?

Suraiya Kamaruzzaman: Initially, the conflict took place between a group of Acehnese people who declared the independence of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka – GAM) from the Indonesian government in 1975. The central government sent several military operations to destroy GAM.

Amana: What were some of the challenges you faced as a peacemaker during the time of the armed conflict?

SK: Speaking about peace was often interpreted as wanting peace with the Indonesian government at the expense of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). At that time, it was dangerous to openly support either the central government or GAM for fear of retaliation from the other side. Being caught in the middle is very common in conflicts, including for women’s groups that prioritize peaceful struggle for democracy and justice. Speaking about peace is speaking about safety. Peace does not necessarily mean “freedom” or “freedom from the state.” It means safety from fear, safety from poverty, safety to speak and safety to realize one’s human rights, both in conflict and post-armed conflict or in facing natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami.

In the late 1990s I interviewed women in the Pidie district, the location of a GAM base and thus the target of military attacks. They wanted freedom, which meant:

“Nobody knocks on my door at midnight and takes my husband and my children who then disappeared.”

“I am able to work in the garden and do not have to evacuate from my home, village and agricultural field that is ready to harvest.”

“My children are able to go to school without fear of shootings, booming voices, or strangers who always follow them.”

They had a deep understanding of freedom. Authentic freedom is feeling safety in any condition, both inside and outside the home, for themselves and their families.

Amana: How have women responded to the armed conflict?

SK: Most victims of the violence were women and children. According to statistical data in early 2004, 148,000 women became heads of their household due to violence from the conflict; thousands of people have died or been traumatized. But being affected by violence does not make Acehnese women powerless. Women took on many roles at the grassroots level for peace building and community development. For example, female survivors of violence testified on human rights abuses in Aceh requested support to end the conflict. Women aided people from both parties, serving as negotiators when their husbands and sons were being taken by the party (GAM). They planned strategies to save their sons. They also took charge of social and communal duties when men had to leave for their safety, such as earning income, caring for children, and looking for and burying the dead. Women
also provided social support to each other, sharing survival strategies. They spread posters calling for peace in the most affected areas and even kept company with women ordered into “isolation” for being part of a GAM family or for those accused of being ‘inong Pa’i (female soldiers for the Indonesian military).

It is undeniable that some women were also involved in GAM. But I have never found any information that women were initiators of the GAM declaration or serving as supreme commanders in Aceh.

Amana: how did you start working for women’s rights?
SK: My involvement in struggling for women’s right begins in 1989 when I established a women’s institution named Flower Aceh and became involved in women’s grassroots organizing for economic enhancement, socialization and fulfillment of women’s reproductive rights.

In the mid-90s, I became more involved with organizing and working with marginalized women in Pidie region, including women victims of sexual violence perpetrated by the Indonesian military. In addition to grassroots work, I tried to build national and international support by means of lobbies and campaigns in many national and international forums.

It has been important to me to involve women in peacebuilding and work for women’s participation in drafting peace agreements. This takes place at both the grassroots and higher levels.

Since 1994 I have been campaigning through radio and television, writing for newspapers, speaking at public functions and lobbying political leaders.

Even after the end of armed conflict, women must continue to be involved in maintaining the peace through lobbying, networking and advocacy for women’s issues to be included in the Aceh government constitution.

Amana: What do women bring to the peace movement?
SK: All my involvements along with women activists made nonviolence a prominent principle in working for peace. We have many successful stories of using nonviolence. For example, when a factfinding team from the Indonesian government visited Aceh in 1998, I organized women activists to do peace actions at the airport. This was the first women’s rally held during the conflict and had about 40 participants. We decided use peaceful means and symbols, such as flowers, handkerchiefs, and white clothes. We mingled with other passengers and only revealed our intentions once inside, after it was too late for the police to prevent the demonstration. We gave the flowers to the chairman of the delegation to remind him of the hundreds of women raped and thousands widowed during the conflict. We were able to speak directly to the members of the delegation and present our message. Student demonstrators were not even allowed inside the airport. A nonviolent, peaceful approach enabled us to reach our goal without being harassed or intimidated.

Peaceful, nonviolent means are not for women only; this is a sexist view. I thought that we should prioritize peaceful, nonviolent ways to achieve just development for all people.

Unfortunately, no women were involved in negotiating and drafting the formal peace agreement in Aceh and the concerns of women have been ignored. Women continue to struggle for participation in executive and legislative decision making.

To comment on this or any other story, email us at amana@arf-asia.org
Khatoon, 75 years old, a resident of Budgam has almost lost eyesight longing to see her disappeared son. Her abject poverty and old age did not dampen her spirits to continue her search for her son. Her tale is not very different from hundreds of mothers whose sons have vanished without a trace in custody of security agencies.

Khatoon’s predicament started in 1995 when troops allegedly picked up her youngest son Bashir. She kept looking for him for many years, going from pillar to post but “had to return empty handed.” Her younger son Muzamil, unable to see his mother’s suffering, took up arms “to avenge the disappearance of his brother.” As if this shock was not enough for the wrinkled old woman, Muzamil died in an encounter with troops.

Khatoon had no tears. She said, “I have wept enough for years waiting for Bashir. Now the tears have dried up . . . but my heart always weeps. I don’t want money or compensation. I only want to know the whereabouts of my beloved son.”

Naseema, 25 years old, was cooking her father’s favorite dish, nadroo, when suddenly she heard her mother burst into loud wails and screams. An IED blast had taken place in Pattan where a prominent religious cleric had to address a mass gathering. The cleric escaped miraculously but Naseema’s father along with many other victims fell prey to the IED blast. The bodies of the victims could not be identified amongst the various pieces of flesh that lay hanging on trees and bushes around the areas. A small bag containing some unidentified parts of human flesh is all that was brought back home for last rites and burial. Naseema could never deal with this loss and trauma. The shock rendered Naseema in a state of disturbed bereavement and post traumatic stress disorder ever since.

Shafiqa, 18 years old, was at home along with her mother and grandmother when their village was cordoned for a search operation by security forces. The men in the village were taken away from their homes to assemble in an open field for an identification parade and interrogation. Shafiqa was among the 30 women who were raped on the night of February 23, in a small village in Kashmir. The ages of other women raped ranged from 13 to 80 years. Shafiqa has lost the will to live. She has attempted suicide several times.

Haseena, 37 years old, is a “half widow” from Kupwara. More than a decade back the security forces picked up her husband. She has searched for him but to no avail. She only wants the authorities to give his whereabouts. She says, “If he has been killed please hand over his body to me. I can’t take this uncertainty anymore. How am I supposed to take care of the family? I have no source of income. The government also does not provide relief in such cases. I want to ask the government why the widow of a slain militant is treated differently from other widows. Why are our problems and status so different?”
The above cases are just the tip of the iceberg of the effects of the armed conflict on women in Kashmir. Countless widows, “half widows”, rape victims and orphans have been added to our society during these last 20 years. Most of these cases remain unreported as they continue to suffer in silence either due to ignorance, social taboo, conservative attitudes of society, or because they lack the will to go through the tedious process of getting the guilty punished.

There are many untold and unreported cases. Most of the cases reflect that the people in Kashmir, especially women, are undergoing psychological problems as a consequence of increasing tension, both at an individual level as well as the community level. These cases give an insight that Kashmir not only presents many traumatized individuals but that there is a collective trauma that the society has suffered. Thus, the implications for healing are obvious.

The Valley’s lone psychiatric hospital is overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of patients presenting themselves for the psychiatric problems termed as post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) that the Kashmiri community is undergoing due to the prolonged violent armed conflict prevailing in the area for the last two decades. This has resulted in deep wounds to the community such that they go well beyond the socio-economic problems of neglect and poverty.

At the moment the support system for the recovery of the society stands damaged and instead elements like fear, distrust, anger, impatience, cynicism, sense of loss, hopelessness and powerlessness have found their way into the society which has led to many social changes making the people insensitive to situations. To add to all this, there has been a complete breakdown of traditional and community support and instead there is pervasive insecurity and fear all around.

It is a known fact that the people on both sides of the Line of Control have suffered enough pain and the coming generations are going to echo it. This pain resonates in the sufferings of women and children. The situation demands to opt to silence the guns and say no to violence, regardless of the identity of the perpetrators. Efforts are required to desist that this kind of history should not be handed over to the younger generation to remember.

It is high time that the dialogue between India and Pakistan, with representation from Kashmir, is resumed to help to reach a consensus to resolve the outstanding issues. It is also very important that the role of women as peace builders is recognized and women are made part of the resolutions, negotiations and reconstruction phases. Women know what it takes to rebuild a society as they have “seen and braved it all”.

The issue of Jammu and Kashmir affects the lives of many people; as such representation of all sections/communities/societies is important, to have lasting peace in the region. So let’s not put dialogue on hold any more - let’s give peace and dialogue a chance, with a prayer and hope that no more Khatoon’s, Naseema’s, Shafiq’a’s and Haseena’s are added to the already painful history of Kashmir.

Ezabir Ali is a core member of Athwaas (Kashmiri for “warm greetings/handshake”) and a member of the Jammu and Kashmir Voluntary Health and Development Association.

To comment on this or any other story, email us at amana@arf-asia.org
When I first heard the mention of women and peacebuilding the image that popped to my mind was a nurse standing by an injured soldier. Maybe this particular image came to me because of all the news of war and destruction, or stories of heroic female nurses that I was fed with as a child. I guess I always think of war with the mention of peace. If you mention to me women and peace then I will imagine Florence Nightingale. So to talk of women and peacebuilding, for me, I will think of women aid workers in times of conflict.

Women doctors and nurses who lend their expertise in times of conflict can be regarded as peacebuilders, but peacebuilding encompasses more than just the provision of aid in times of war. To stand up and protest against wars and killings of innocent lives is to help generate peace. To sign peace treaties, that is peace-building. To write poems; novels; and dramas highlighting the plight of the oppressed is a way towards peace. I would like to think that when one speaks of women and peacebuilding it should cover a variety of definitions.

To work towards peace is to first work towards justice. And I believe that women have been actively engaging in this quest for a more just and peaceful world for a very long time regardless of their race or religious creed.

From an Islamic historical point of view let us look at one of the first peacebuilding treaties in Islam. The Muslims of Medina who were once of warring tribes needed an overall leader who they believed would unite them and they saw this leader in the Prophet Muhammad. Twelve men set out from Medina to Mecca and met with the Prophet at Aqabah and here they agreed to adhere to the absolute unity of God and the teachings of the Prophet. This became known as the First Covenant of Aqabah. They returned to Medina with an emissary from the Prophet and Islam thrived in Medina, and the once warring tribes slowly progressed into solidarity. As the year passed another group of pilgrims from Medina came to Mecca and once again met with the Prophet at Aqabah. Amongst the 73 men were two women. And here in the Second Covenant of Aqabah they pledged to protect the Prophet from any harm that he may encounter. In a time when it was unheard of to have women in important meetings as such, these two women sought what is right and just by pledging their oath in this covenant. After this covenant the Prophet saw Medina as a safe place to emigrate and he brought peace there as he united the Medina Muslims. The presence of the two women is pivotal. It shows that these two women believed that the message the Prophet preached brought about peace to their society; owing their allegiance to him and pledging to protect him meant to help sustain peace and stability.

This story is one of many examples that illustrate how the concept of peace in Islam is not something foreign. The word Islam in Arabic is often translated to English to mean peace. Muslims throughout the world greet each other with “may peace be unto you”, regardless men or women. So to have such a treaty that came into being through the concept of unity and peace is no surprise. That is a religious and historical example of how women have taken part in the peacebuilding process, but what of contemporary examples?

Through writing one can also express one’s voice. Women writers have used their writing to highlight the plight of the oppressed through fiction and non-fiction. One such writer that I have been blessed to have heard speak is Ahdaf Soueif. She writes about Palestine through her novels and essays. She calls for justice and peace through literature. Indeed her initiative of the 2008 Palestinian Literature Festival saw the coming together of numerous authors who call for peace in the land.

Aung San Suu Kyi is another woman who I think deserves to be regarded as a bastion of peace through her calls for justice. Having won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, she still remains under house arrest in Myanmar because her call for democracy and justice is regarded as a threat by the ruling government. Yet her plight and her spirit remains strong. She indeed is a woman that should be regarded as one who is part of the peacebuilding process as she directly faces injustice.

These examples are only a few, but there are many other women who are involved in the peacebuilding process through seeking justice. Unfortunately they are not the ones who make front page news. Hence we don’t really think of them when we speak of peacebuilding. We should be more aware that the term peacebuilding is open to different definitions, so why not let the seeking of justice be one of the explanatory concepts when speaking of peacebuilding?

By Nadiah Adnan
AMANA NEWS ONLINE

With news, features and analysis from across Asia, Amana news online offers fresh perspectives on peace, interfaith and other positive initiatives taking place in Muslim and other communities.

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EVENTS IN AMAN

InSIGHT out! Photo Story Workshop
October 10 - 14, 2009
Pattani, Thailand

Interfaith Consultation on Climate Change
October 1 – 2, 2009
Bangkok, Thailand

Imam and Muslim Leaders Meeting on Assistance to Asylum Seekers
October 31, 2009
Harul Mosque, Bangkok
The Amana Media Initiative (Amana) is a broad-based media project committed to promoting greater understanding and peace within Muslim communities, between faiths and among various cultural communities in Asia. Amana means trust, stemming from ‘aman’, the Arabic word for peace.

Amana was founded in April 2005 by the Asian Resource Foundation (ARF) and the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN). The ARF supports holistic development by building awareness to mobilise and share resources in order to help marginalised groups in Asia. AMAN aims to build understanding and solidarity among Muslims and other faith communities in Asia towards people’s empowerment, human rights, justice and peace.

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Focus: Islam and peace, interfaith partnerships, development initiatives, human rights, gender and peace

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**Interfaith Consultation on Climate Change**

AMAN hosted a youth workshop and interfaith consultation on climate change on September 28 – October 2, 2009. The event coincided with the UNFCCC negotiations in Bangkok and brought together more than 50 people from many countries and religious groups to discuss environmental ethics, spiritual values and climate change activism. The Asia Pacific Youth Network on Climate Change (AYCC) was launched, with chapters throughout the region.

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