Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts

Farida Shaheed
Great Ancestors:

Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts

A Training Manual

Farida Shaheed

Women living under muslim laws
نساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

Regional Coordination Office Asia
Shirkat Gah-Women's Resource Centre
Lahore-Pakistan
Dedication

To all great ancestors:
women who assert rights for themselves and others,
fight for social justice, and dare to reach for their dreams;
and men who walk with them.

This is for the networkers of the international solidarity
network: Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUMIL)

and is dedicated to

Mariemé Helie Lucas
who formed the network and pushed us to run the Feminism
in the Muslim World Leadership Training Institutes,

Anissa Helie
who made these institutes happen and

Salma Sobhan
who nicknamed them NVIs,
who gave us so much of our language,
and who lives with us and through the network ---

a truly great ancestor.
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INTRODUCTION

There is a myth that women’s struggles for rights is alien to those societies that embraced Islam, flowing from a misconception that the contemporary women’s movement is exclusively rooted in European and North American concepts and women’s struggles in these locations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This myth enjoys credibility both outside and within Muslim contexts. In the latter, it is deliberately promoted to discredit women’s rights advocates and their cause. When taken as fact, the myth can sometimes provoke a disengagement with the contemporary rights discourse and impede women’s assertions for their rights and for justice. The truth is that women have taken steps to assert their rights and have intervened to bring about a more just society in every era and in every location. This is as true of Muslim contexts as elsewhere.

Tracing women’s assertions from the earliest days of Islam through to the mid-twentieth century, *Great Ancestors: An Information and Training Kit* does more than just refute this myth; it provides a very different picture of the past. Far from the commonly held impression of silenced, cloistered and acquiescent women, the ‘great ancestors’ in this Kit are strong, determined and engaged women. I should clarify that *Great Ancestors* is not about women classified as famous or powerful in history; it is about women who intervened for women’s rights and social justice, whether they were subsequently famous or not. The two categories overlap but do not coincide.

Three broad strands of women’s assertiveness are visible from the start; at times the strands are interwoven, at others, they run parallel to one another. The first strand consists of women asserting control over their personal lives, especially in terms of bodily integrity, including sexuality, and rights within
the family. The second, much less documented strand is women’s solidarity actions, that is, initiatives by women to support other women. The third strand is women’s efforts to improve their societies. In the earliest periods, women’s engagement in this last strand was through mysticism and/or scholarship on the one hand and by influencing those who ran the affairs of state on the other. This evolved over the centuries: mysticism became less important; scholarship continued, supplemented by women’s writing and efforts for education; women not only intervened with state rulers and administrators, they, themselves, were appointed to positions of authority and became heads of state. Later still, nationalist struggles and the modern political process provided an important framework for this strand. Regardless of strands, many of the ‘great ancestors’ led by example: by the life-choices they made for themselves, these women defied, and so challenged, existing structures and norms and in doing so, they provided an opening for other women (and men) to either follow in their footsteps or to emulate them by creating another path, another choice.

The Training Manual and Module

The Great Ancestors project started as a training module designed for the Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Training Institutes jointly run by the international solidarity network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUM) and the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (Rutgers University). Defining leadership as the ability to make things happen, the Center’s regular institutes had been running for many years and had helped create an international pool of feminists skilled in women’s human rights issues. The pool included a number of WLUM networkers. The joint institutes made this training available to more women from Muslim communities and countries. Aiming to mobilize new activists in the WLUM network, the joint institutes informally came to be called the NVI (New Volunteers Institute). The NVIs retained many of the Center’s core modules, but added new components addressing the felt needs of current and potential networkers. One concern was to explode the myth that the struggle for women’s rights is confined historically and geographically to European and North American locations.

In 1998, NVI participants were asked to collect narratives of women they considered to be ‘great ancestors’ from their own historical context to share with others. The results were uneven. Participants had disparate research abilities and not all the ‘great ancestors’ so identified displayed a feminist perspective: several were women who simply fit the definition of classical heroines, known for military conquests or supreme sacrifices; only a few had taken steps to promote women’s rights – whether for other women or for themselves as women. Consequently, for the second NVI, the decision was taken to prepare a training module; and I was asked to take on the task – and challenge.
My desire was to create a module that would bring to life the diversity of women's assertions through the ages - the different styles and issues they took up - and to ensure the inclusion of ancestors from roughly the same geographical location as the participants. With less than two months in which to conceptualise, research, and produce the training module, extensive research was impossible. Other than a few narratives collated in the first NVI and inputs from some networkers, the module relied on materials available in my personal library and in the documentation centre of Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre. Yet, finding information proved easy, rather than difficult. Indeed, there were more worthy ancestors than could be used in the module. Admittedly, as I rifled my memory and rummaged through my shelves and the books I had collected for Shirkat Gah, I often felt that the years of seemingly random collecting had, in fact, been for this module. Early on, we started calling these women the 'great ancestors' and so the title of the NVI module and the two companion volumes of *Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts – An Information and Training Kit*.

The training module is designed as an oral narrative to be read out by five different voices accompanied by illustrations on overhead transparencies. (Resource and time constraints precluded anything more elaborate.) The main part of the module is made up of short cameos of women's actions and thinking, with occasional linking commentary. Wherever possible, the script uses the actual voices of these women, that is, quoting their own writings or speeches. Where original voices are not available, as is the case for most of the pre-sixteenth century texts, the script keeps as close as possible to the original source(s) used, even when the material has been transformed into a first-person narrative. Some modifications were necessary to facilitate reading and comprehension. To keep attention focused no one piece is longer than a reading of 60 seconds; many are far shorter.

*Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts - A Training Manual* is divided into three sections coinciding with the three strands of women's assertions: personal rights, social reform initiatives and solidarity actions. The module runs through the centuries three times, tracing one strand at a time. (The companion volume of narratives is organised chronologically.)

Not counting discussion time, the module is designed as a 60 minute training session that allows for 45-50 minutes of presentation. Consequently, even where substantial information was available, the module is extremely selective, choosing only the strongest narratives on women's rights while ensuring regional representation. Amongst those excluded are a number of the better known and often cited examples of significant and strong women.

Conscious that women's assertions for rights, even within Muslims contexts, have never been limited to Muslim women, the training module (and *The Narratives*) deliberately includes the voices and lives of a handful of non-Muslim women. This is to signal that (a) within a given geographical area,
women faced similar or identical socio-cultural norms and restrictions, (b) women often had a similar analysis of, and response to, the issues at hand and (c) women united in their struggles as women more often than as communities. Time constraints and the specific focus of this training module did not allow us to include examples of actions uniting women across religious and geographical boundaries. A similar module about women’s assertions of rights within a geographical context, or focused on solidarity across identities, could be produced. Just as interesting, this would, however, be a different project altogether.

The earliest voices of women asserting their rights in this module date from the eighth century. The narratives could start earlier, but we deliberately omitted immediate family members of the Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم); not because these women did not assert themselves, but in order to avoid any potential controversy. Hence, because opinion is divided on whether Sukaina bint al-Hussain (great-granddaughter of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم)) survived or was martyred at Kerbala, her story was excluded. This, even though various historical chronicles - including accounts from the early thirteenth century - maintain that Sukaina married several times, and, in at least one case, filed for divorce herself. According to these records, Sukaina’s marriage contract with Zayd Ibn Amr, the grandson of the Caliph Usman, is notable for the long list of written conditions he was to comply with, including: he would never be the one to end the marriage, he would never touch another woman while they were married, Sukaina would be allowed to live near her friend Umm-Manzur, and he was not to refuse her any reasonable thing she asked of him.² These records relate that when Zayd violated the terms of the marriage contract by spending seven months at the residence of his female slaves, Sukaina called in the Governor of Medina to mediate, who then appointed a judge to hear the couple’s case.³

Although this is one of the earliest illustrations of women’s determination and ability to stipulate conditions in their marriage contracts to maximize their personal space, the narrative was dropped. A training module cannot afford to alienate its audience, and it seemed counter-productive to start with a narrative that had that potential. Fortunately, this determination to assert rights within marriage is corroborated by other narratives from approximately the same period, and these have been used instead.

An unfortunate propensity amongst historians to document a few powerful personalities over the masses - usually men in and close to the seats of power – means that available records from the earliest periods are limited to women mostly connected with powerful political men. Consequently, the earliest voices of our ‘great ancestors’ are unavoidably restricted to those of women who wielded either some measure of power through their social and economic status, or influence through their scholarship and mysticism. This makes the narratives not focused on an individual woman and those of ancestors whose names have been lost in the records, all the more vital, for they indicate
women’s activism amongst a much wider cross-section of society.

Run at the 1999 NVI, the module did exactly what it hoped to: it connected the contemporary struggle for women’s rights with the participants’ own historical past, engendering a sense of linkage with – and ownership of – both women’s assertions in the past and the contemporary movement. Multiple requests for the training module followed. I was reluctant, however, to distribute just the script (and illustrations) without an accompanying document on the sources we had used. I felt it was vital that potential users be adequately equipped to address any questions that may arise, quite apart from a concern that some of the narratives may leave the audience incredulous. Not infrequently, there are several recorded versions of history, with nothing to suggest one is more accurate than another. For the module, I obviously selected the version that resonated most with our own perspective.

A separate concern was that the snippets of women’s lives contained in the module do not do them justice. These women’s lives aroused interest, piqued curiosity, and left me – and those helping me – inspired, provoking a desire to share a more complete picture with others than is possible in less than 60 second sound-bites. There was also the question of those women who asserted rights but had to be excluded to stay within a manageable 45-minute reading session. For all these reasons, I decided the training module needed a companion volume that elaborated the sources, that gave quotations and citations in full, and that provided more information. But, for The Narratives volume, I needed a research assistant devoted to the project – something that was easier said than done. It was not until 2003 that I found an appropriate person, Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed, to join me on an internship in 2004 to work on the second companion volume on completion of her masters’ degree in history with a specialisation in women’s history.

The Volume of Narratives

Organised chronologically, the volume Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts - The Narratives includes women who could not be accommodated in the training module and others ‘discovered’ by us over the last year. It also provides the exact and full quotations used in shortened and/or edited versions in the training module. The volume has biographical notes on 53 women. Dozens more are mentioned in narratives which are not about a single woman but a phenomenon or trend such as women’s support for ribats (that were both shelters for women and institutions for scholarship and heterodox religion between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries), the formation of women’s organizations, the proliferation of women’s journals and periodicals, the struggle for institutionalising women’s education, and women’s participation in political processes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Sources Used and Challenges Faced

Starting in the eighth and ninth centuries, a number of historical records do include women. Fifteen percent of the 4,250 persons entered in the earliest Al-Tabaqat al-kubra (The First Generations) are women. In the eleventh century, works conflating biography and history proliferated, written by scholars (mostly historians of the ulama) convinced of the need to record not only the lives of the rulers, but to “recor[d] the history of the umma as the sum total of the lives of its notables.” Until the fifteenth century, these scholars included a significant number of women. Where records on the first generations largely centre on Mecca and Medina; those of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries cover women from Egypt to Syria. Importantly, in this second period, the lives of 1,300 women were recorded by their contemporaries (roughly ten percent of the total entries), for example by Al-Sakhawi in his twelve-volume tome, Daw al-lami (Brilliant Light). As expected, these documents record the lives of women from learned, religious, royal and elite families. More surprisingly perhaps, they also record the lives of women merchants, poets, concubines, midwives and entertainers.

After the fifteenth century, women unfortunately—and mysteriously—disappear. In his sixteenth century compilation of 1,647 illustrious personages, Al-Ghazzi (d. 1651) only includes twelve women; Al-Muhibbi (d.1699) includes no women at all; eighteenth century al-Muradi (d.1791) only mentions a single woman, al-Baytar’s (d.1918) nineteenth century work only two. There may be many reasons for this. One possible reason is the fragmentation of the Arab-centred umma into disparate structures and empires each with its own priorities, its own court and languages. For these - and other - centuries, court records are a valuable - but still largely untapped - source of information, providing a different (and sometimes counter-intuitive) view of women’s engagement in their societies.

Finding material about women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries proved to be a challenge, probably due to language. Obliged to rely on information available in English (and some in Urdu) in Pakistan (and on the internet), we were unable to access the narratives of women written in other languages. Language presents an additional problem in the case of Turkey caused by the change in script from Arabic to Roman in 1928; a time when numerous women’s organisations were actively demanding improved rights for women and some 40 women’s periodicals were appearing in the Arabic script. Not only are there few contemporary writers on Turkish women who can read the Arabic script, this transitional period may have experienced a gap in documentation as women activists, along with others, struggled with the challenge of the change in script. We have collated the scattered information we could gather on Turkish women’s organisations in the opening decades of the twentieth century but, despite our best efforts, we were unable to trace the names and lives of women in these organisations.
Our compilation relies on the work of others. Inevitably, therefore, the narratives of 'great ancestors' are richer where others before us have documented women's lives and achievements, be this as autobiographies or biographies, or by collating women's speeches and writings and making these available in English. We have been helped by personal contacts in different countries, especially in Iran, Nigeria and Uzbekistan, who provided us with information we would not have been able to obtain otherwise. This has been supplemented by research on the net, in pursuit of names mentioned in passing in some document or the other. We regret that, our attempts to mobilise information notwithstanding, there are still relatively few narratives from sub-Saharan Africa, and from the Far East, and none to speak of from Europe other than Spain.

**Insights from the Research**

Our research provided some interesting insights and revealed certain trends. Some are not covered in either the training module or the companion volume; others do appear but are worth emphasizing. One interesting fact is that the need to document the lives and accomplishments of women is not only felt by contemporary feminists: periodically others have felt a similar compulsion, such as the scholars who compiled the biographical-historical records mentioned above from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. Another example is a collection called *Javahir al-Ajayib* (Jewels of Wonder) written some time between 1501 and 1576 by a man, Fakhri of Herat (a.k.a. Sultan Muhammad b. Muhammad Amiri). This collection of biographical information on some twenty female poets and learned women includes extracts of their writings, and is dedicated to Maham (d.1562), the influential nurse of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. More recent efforts include work done by Hind Nafsat and May Ziyada at the turn of the twentieth century in Egypt. There are also several contemporary efforts in different parts of the world – many are still works in progress.

More significantly, two important aspects not highlighted in the narratives, need to be underlined. The first is that over the centuries, many men from within Muslim contexts have called for better gender relations and justice, and that innumerable men have been key supporters and facilitators of women's assertions of self. The notion that all men in Muslim societies are misogynistic is as much a myth as the notion that women are only silent victims. Amongst the earliest and best known was the Andalusian Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) (a.k.a. Averroës). The son and grandson of *qadis* (*qadi* in this context meaning the supreme judge of a city), himself a *qadi* in Seville and Cordoba, Ibn Rushd was a reformer whose unorthodox views were severely attacked by conservative clerics. Underlining the need to reconceptualise women’s role in society, Ibn Rushd noted that:
In these (our) states, however, the ability of women is not known, because they are merely used for procreation. They are therefore placed at the service of their husbands and relegated to the business of procreation, child-rearing and breastfeeding. But this denies them their (other) activities [b]ecause women in these states are considered unfit for any of the human virtues.”

Fast forward to the early nineteenth century and we have the Egyptian, Rifaat al-Tahtawi (1801-73) demanding that women be allowed social, economic and political equality with men, condemning the harem as a prison that needed to be destroyed, proposing that child marriage be banned and education made universally available to all girls and women. By the late eighteenth century, a scattering of male reformers in different societies were advocating social reform including the need to reorient and expand the limited role assigned to women in their society. Indeed, in a number of societies under colonial rule, women’s rights were supported by male reformers and nationalist leaders so that women and men forged a joint opposition to the colonial powers. Our more recent narratives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century show that men played pivotal support roles in the lives of many of our ‘great ancestors’, often as fathers, brothers and husbands. If we have chosen not to speak of such men it is not because we do not think of them, too, as ‘great ancestors,’ only that we feel a more pressing need to highlight women’s self-assertions.

The second important aspect omitted in the training module and largely hidden in the compilation of narratives is the solidarity women extended to each other in their struggle for their rights, especially recorded in the modern era. Whether in Egypt and other Arab countries, Nigeria or India or Turkey, women worked together for their rights, undivided by religious or ethnic identities. Nor was women’s solidarity confined within geographical demarcations: women linked up with each other across continents and, at least in some contexts, also across the colonizer-colonised divide. Several British women were an integral part of the women’s movement in the Indian subcontinent before independence in 1947; some were prominent in the nationalist struggle for self-rule (Annie Besant, for example, was jailed for agitating against British authorities). Women from the Arab countries, from Iran, and from Turkey attended women’s conferences in Europe, and in Asia and the Middle East, women organised their own regional conferences across cultural and religious boundaries.

Supporting this internationalism were women’s organisations and journals that proliferated in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. The journals regularly reported events concerning women in other parts of the world so that, for instance, reports of visits by Turkish women to Great Britain were translated and published in India. Then, as now, women learned from each other. Hence the news of women being inducted into the police force in
England immediately inspired Turkish women to make the same demand and the idea was spread through women’s journals.\textsuperscript{14}

Transnational solidarity also took other forms. We know, for example, that denied access to official medical schools in their own countries, women in North America and England established their own private medical universities. Simultaneously, they sponsored some women from elsewhere (e.g. India) to benefit from these women’s institutions.\textsuperscript{15} Limitations of space precluded incorporating information about this in the training module but, in an age where collective identities are increasingly being used to fragment the global women’s movement – or inadvertently end up doing so – this unity of earlier feminists needs to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Certain themes of women’s activism and assertions have remained constant. Women actively opposed polygamy – more accurately polygyny – from the start and did so in every period. They have repeatedly asserted the right not to veil, the right to choose their marriage partners as well as not to marry at all, and made multiple efforts to negotiate the contours of their personal lives in every way. Their success has depended on the political environment, their personal status and access to power as well as sources of support.

For its part, the socio-political environment has fluctuated. Periods of openness, that allowed women greater space in which to fulfill their potential and in which their public interventions are more visible, are followed by periods of rising conservatism where societal parameters narrow down, and women become obscured. Also, seemingly inevitably, this narrowing down is marked by strictures on women’s personal lives, on their dress as well as mobility. The very calls to restrict women point to the wider space available to women at that particular point of time. History also suggests that whenever women’s challenge to the existing social order is beyond the control of individual men, the state is called in to impose and enforce restrictions through law and policies. This is seen in the Andalusian and North African dynasties (711-1492), the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722), and the Ottoman empire (1300-1923), to mention only a few.

Finally, if the number of ‘great ancestors’ documented is relatively small, this is undoubtedly due to the fragmented nature of the chronicles available; the narratives are indicative of only the tip of the iceberg that constitutes women’s self-assertions. Early on in conducting the research for the training manual, I came across a passage in Fatima Mernissi’s book, *Hidden from History: The Forgotten Queens of Islam* which resonated deeply. Pointing out the dismissiveness of other (male) scholars when she started looking for women queens in the Arab history and their absolute conviction that no such entity ever existed, Mernissi makes the point that:

*Muslim women in general...cannot count on anyone, scholar or not, ‘involved’ or ‘neutral’, to read their history for them. Reading it for themselves is entirely their responsibility and*
their duty. Our demand for the full and complete enjoyment of our universal human rights, here and now, requires us to take over our history, to reread it, and to reconstruct a wide-open Muslim past. This duty, moreover, can turn out to be no drab, disagreeable task, but rather a journey filled with delight.\textsuperscript{16}

Certainly, my experience was precisely that: delightful. Indeed, I have had to enforce strict discipline on myself to stop reading in order to complete the volumes as they are today.

We know important gaps remain to be filled and hope that others will take up the relay baton from the \textit{Great Ancestors}. Knowing that additional time and resources (most importantly people and multiple language skills) would reveal more ‘great ancestors’, we think of this as a continuous project. We are certain that there will be future editions and hope those with information on all the ancestors we’ve missed will make contact so we can produce an even richer collection of \textit{Great Ancestors} in the future.

Farida Shaheed
October 2004, Lahore
References

1 The Institutes took place in September 14-26, 1998 in Istanbul, Turkey, and on October 25-November 5, 1999 in Lagos, Nigeria.

2 In Women and Gender in Islam, Leila Ahmed finds this reference in Umar Ridda Kahhalah’s biographical work on women in early Islam, Alam al-nisa: fi alami al-arab wa’l-islam (vol.2) as well as in Jean Claude Vade’s 1957 article, “Une Personnalité féminine du Higaz au Ier-VIIe siècle: Sukayna, petite-fille de Ali” in Arabica vol. 4.


4 I am most grateful to Rights and Democracy, Canada, for sponsoring the internship.


6 Robinson, 188.

7 The recorders include: al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d.1071), Ibn Asakir (d.1176), Ibn Khallikan (d.1282), Ibn Hajar (d.1499) and his student, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (d.1497).

8 Robinson, 188

9 This may pose a challenge in other places which also underwent a change in script, such as Malaysia.

10 By the time the book was published, Fakhri had relocated to Sindh (contemporary Pakistan) explaining why the dedication is to Maham, considered to be one of the most influential women in the Mughal court, rather to someone from amongst the Irano-Timurid women that the book focuses on.


12 Tariq Ali, 66-67

13 The illustrations are from South Asian history because this is the context I am most familiar with; others will undoubtedly have other examples.

14 Valaiiti Ma ‘lumaat, (News from Abroad) section of Tehzib-e-Niswan journal; different issues and volumes 1915-1940.


GUIDELINES FOR USING THE TRAINING MODULE

About the Module

The module is based on cameos of women’s lives and extracts from their writings illustrating their assertions for rights. These have been converted into a script of narrative pieces to be read aloud. This main part of the module is preceded by a short introduction and ends with a few important comments and explanations. Originally designed as a training session administered by six facilitators, the script can also be produced for a bigger audience (See guidelines below.). Interaction with the audience takes place after the module has been completed. In a training session, a short introduction precedes the narrative pieces. To emphasize the wide spectrum of women asserting rights through the ages the script is read out loud by several voices speaking from different parts of the room. During the reading, the room is darkened so that the audience can focus on the voices while viewing illustrations of different transparencies on an overhead projector.

Explanations on how to use the training module are given below.
Objective:
To explode the myth that struggles for women’s rights are limited to Europe and North America and alien to societies that have embraced Islam, by highlighting three strands of women’s assertions for their rights in Muslim contexts from the eighth century to the 1950s. The three strands are: (1) assertions for personal rights - especially within marriage - for themselves and for other women, (2) actions taken in support of other women and people’s rights, and (3) women’s contributions as sufis, scholars and educators.

Length:
60 minutes excluding any discussion time. Introduction: a couple of minutes; main module: 45 minutes; closing: 10-12 minutes.

Format:
As a training session, the module starts with a staged altercation between two facilitators about the origins of the women’s movement and women’s activism. The first facilitator who introduces the session as being about feminism and the women’s movement that started in Europe and the west a couple of centuries ago. The second facilitator interrupts to challenge this statement, and makes the point that women have been active in different parts of the world. Without allowing her to finish, the first resumes, saying “Well, yes, women were active but we all know that in our parts of the world, the ideas have come to us from Europe and North America…”

This last phrase is the signal to start the main part of the module (40-45 minutes length). The lights are shut, the first speaker starts with the opening lines “How can you have forgotten me?”, and the first transparency appears on the overhead projector.

Note: The first time we ran the module the first facilitator was interrupted not just by the second facilitator, but also by a participant making much the same point. Be prepared to handle this eventuality.

The module closes with a short session (roughly 10 minutes). In our sessions we end the narratives with a quotation from Fatima Mernissi regarding the need for women to read and re-write their own history. This is optional. However, users must explain the following points that are integral to the module:

(1) Not all the narratives and voices in the module are of Muslim women. Voices of non-Muslims remind us that Muslim contexts include non-
Muslims; that women from these communities are also amongst our ‘great ancestors’; that women have usually acted together for their rights within a given geographical area.

(2) History provides many examples of women supporting each other’s struggles across national identities and even the colonizer-colonized divide. We need to remember and celebrate women’s solidarity then, as now.

(3) The notion that all men in Muslim societies are misogynistic is as much a myth as the notion that women are only silent victims. While many men easily qualify as ‘great ancestors’, they have been omitted in order to highlight women’s activism.

More information on each of these points is given in the Introduction to the present volume; greater details are to be found in the conclusion and main text of the companion volume: Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts.

Basic Ingredients

Equipment:

1. A venue that can be darkened.
2. Overhead projector
3. Five copies of the module script and one set of overhead slides of the illustrations.
4. Five hand-held flash-lights or reading lamps that can easily be switched off and on.

Six Persons:

Five facilitators to read out the script

The five facilitators who read the script are designated as Speaker 1, Speaker 2, Speaker 3, Speaker 4, and Speaker 5. Each Speaker is assigned specific ‘lines’ or ‘narrative pieces’ in the script. If facilitators are able to speak in different accents this is ideal because the different accents reinforce the diverse backgrounds of the ‘great ancestors’.

Note 1: Those staging the introductory altercation should be neither Speaker 1 nor Speaker 2.

Note 2: A facilitator must be selected to conclude the session.

Note 3: The module can be adapted for use by four speakers, but does not work for less than four persons.

One additional person to manage the overhead transparencies

xxi
Preparing for the Session

Selecting readers: Each Speaker is like a role in a play. The order in which the lines are assigned to each Speaker in the module ensures that no facilitator speaks consecutively, that Speakers are heard 'randomly' rather than in the same order, and that the lines are reasonably distributed between the speakers.

Additionally, the distribution of the lines gives each Speaker a slightly different character. The narratives assigned to Speaker 1 are those of women who are not only strong-willed, but also bold, provocative and somewhat sassy. Speaker 3 also relates narratives of women who are strong but not necessarily sassy. Both require strong, emphatic readings that indicate - especially for Speaker 1 - a sense of self-satisfied success.

Illustrations: Each narrative has at least one illustration; some, especially longer narratives, have more than one illustration. The module is formatted with page-breaks each time a new illustration is to be projected. In addition to the narrative pieces that either relate women's actions or extract from their writings, there are some linking narratives. Some of the linking narratives have illustrations, some don't. If a linking narrative is on a separate page, this means that there is an accompanying illustration; if not the linking narration is either at the bottom or top of a 'narrative piece' on an individual woman.

Note: There are only two instances in which more than one Speaker is given on a single page: in the extract from Rokeya Hossein's Sultana's Dream (page 101 & 103) that is a dialogue between two women, or when there is an un-illustrated narrative piece.

As each narrative is read out, a facilitator needs to slide the illustration (on the right hand page facing that text) onto the overhead projector. This should be done relatively slowly to keep pace with the reading.

Making Copies of the Text and Illustrations

The training module is spirally bound to facilitate photocopying.

The Script: Each facilitator needs a separate copy of the text or script to be read out.

Illustrations: The illustrations need to be copied onto transparencies so they can be projected during the session. For our training, we photocopied each illustration onto a transparency. It is better to use coloured transparencies for the coloured illustrations. Coloured photocopies are more expensive than black and white ones, but using only black and white images is more monotonous.

Note: Those using the module may wish to replace some illustrations with others. Please ensure that after the final selection is made, the illustrations on transparencies are numbered in the order they
are to appear. Where more than one illustration is to be used for
one set of lines, we found it easier to assign these the same principal
number with a tag indicating there is more than one illustration e.g.
5a, 5b, 5c.

Of course, it is also possible to transpose the illustrations into a multi-media
format. We have not tried this ourselves, but still suggest trainers read the,
notes given below on how the illustrations are to appear.

Collective Rehearsing
Facilitators need to rehearse the script they will be reading out together. This
will help:

➢ Familiarize speakers with their lines and also the order in which they
shall be speaking (i.e. after which speaker their narrative piece is to be
read). This minimizes chances of readers missing cues during the session
itself.

➢ Allow readers to practice saying aloud names and words they may be
unfamiliar with. Pronunciations are given within the text and a
pronunciation key is given to help readers at the end of this section.

➢ Identify which facilitator is most suitable for each of the five Voices. In
much the same way as a play, familiarity with the text will allow speakers
to fall into character and speak with confidence. This livens up the
session and helps keep the attention of the audience/listeners focused.

Note 1: Each facilitator needs to be familiar with the pronunciation key.

Note 2: All words included on the page within the borders – except the one
in italics indicated as a footnote on page 17 - are to be read out loud.
This includes headings which indicate the person’s name or the place
and date but are not in sentence form: for example: ‘Turn of the
Century, Indonesia’ or ‘1892 - Egypt – Hind Nawfal’

Note 3: If, during rehearsal, a speaker has difficulties with the exact text or
with a particular word, the text or word needs to be adjusted to
ensure a smooth reading in the actual session.

Illustrations:

Rehearsals give an opportunity to the facilitator in charge of the
transparencies to become familiar with the order in which illustrations are to
appear and, especially when there is more than one illustration, to better judge
the time between each change of transparency.

Note 1: The transparencies are to slide in from top to bottom; in other words,
the top part of the transparency should appear first.

Note 2: 60 seconds is actually a long time; even 30 seconds is a considerable
amount of time for people to focus on just one slide. Therefore, unless several transparencies need to be shown for one illustration, the slides should appear slowly, while the audience listens to the text.

Running the Module

Setting:
The module is best suited to the circular (square or rectangular) setting common for training that can accommodate up to 25-30 persons, with facilitators dispersed amongst participants.

Note: The module has been run for a larger audience of 100-150 people in an auditorium setting. In this case, the initial dramatized interaction is replaced by a less dramatic introduction to the module and its original purpose. The module works fine in this type of larger setting, but loses its sense of drama as well as the sense of women’s voices emerging from different geographical locations evoked when facilitators are dispersed within the participants.

Lights for reading the script:
To read her assigned narrative piece or lines, each facilitator turns on her flashlight or table lamp and switches this off when she finishes. The next Speaker then switches on her light to read her lines, and switches it off on completing her reading, and so forth. Restricting the light to one source at a time around a particular speaker enhances the impression of diverse voices speaking from different locations. This is not essential, but it helps keep people’s focus on what is being said.

Optional Additional Exercise
At the 1999 NVI training institute jointly run by WLUMI and the Center for Women’s Global Leadership, an additional exercise was used to bring home the continuity of women’s assertions from the past to the present. This exercise also makes the module more participatory and increases participants’ sense of belonging to a larger movement.

Each NVI participant was invited beforehand to identify at least one woman who had inspired the participant, someone she would like to claim as a ‘great ancestor’ and to bring along a picture. This was optional, not obligatory. Participants were invited to share the story of their personal ‘great ancestor’ as part of their self-introductions after the ‘great ancestors’ module had been run. (This was done over several sessions.)

In preparation, several chart papers were pasted to create a large space in the training hall. In the centre of these blank sheets, facilitators pinned up photographs of women identified as ‘great ancestors’ by the training module.
After participants shared their personal ‘great ancestors’, they were invited to add the pictures of these new ‘ancestors’ to those already on the chart. The result was a visually widening circle of connectivity between past and present.

**Note 1:** Many of the 1999 NVI participants cited women from within their own families: mothers, aunts, grandmothers, some identified other women they knew personally; none cited any ‘big personality.’

**Note 2:** A few participants who had not identified women explained that, until they experienced the training module, they had felt uncomfortable with the term ‘great ancestors’, presuming this meant women in political power.

**Adapting the script**

The training module script in this volume is the original one used for the 1999 NVI training (with only minor corrections). Conducting the research for the companion volume of narratives revealed more ‘great ancestors’ and we were greatly tempted to expand the original script by including some of the strongest examples of additional great ancestors. Equally tempting was the idea of inserting striking new quotations from women already in the original module.

Sadly enough, we were obliged to drop both ideas. Any additional narratives would lengthen the script beyond the current advisable length of 45-50 minutes. Anything longer is likely to tax the audience, especially when the module is not being read by professional actors/readers. The alternative, i.e. replacing existing narrative pieces, required hard choices we were reluctant to make. Reluctantly, therefore, we gave up the idea of including any of the gems of more recent research.

Instead, we offer the information now available in the companion volume: *Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Context.* This enables trainers to extract new cameos and quotations as suits their specific needs. To facilitate the task of those who may wish to modify the script, we have included pictures of the additional women ancestors, wherever possible. There are also some general illustrations that we found attractive and thought could possibly be used by others in adapting the module.

**Note:** In making additions or replacements, just be sure remember to number the final list of illustrations to be used.
Guidelines and cautionary notes for adaptation:

1. As presently constructed, the script ensures that the narrative pieces move from one context to another, include different types of assertions, and guard against any particular geographical region dominating the whole. In making replacements, therefore, care should be taken to
   - Avoid geographical concentration – unless, of course, the explicit purpose of adaptation is to focus on one area;
   - Ensure the inclusion of women’s different forms of assertions, even on the same or similar issues.

2. Remember that the script runs through the centuries three times, each time following a specific theme of women’s assertions. In adapting the present text, trainers need to be mindful that additions fall into existing themes. Any additional theme will require a complete review and reorganization of the module’s script, and will have to be worked out with care.

3. A full reading of the present script takes about 45-50 minutes; and no one intervention is more than 60 seconds; most are much shorter. 60 seconds for each ‘narrative piece’ is the maximum length advisable for one voice according to radio experts consulted. Currently, the only piece exceeding 60 seconds is a dialogue read out by two facilitators. It is advisable to keep to this length.

4. Please read each narrative piece out loud as we did to ensure that:
   - The text is easy to read out and easily understood when heard (remember that the syntax of the written word is very different from that of oral speech);
   - Any unusual words are replaced with ones that are easy to pronounce/understand;
   - Each section is under 60 seconds and; if not, eliminate all unnecessary words.

5. Do take care that the overall length of the script does not exceed 45-50 minutes.

6. If you add a new narrative piece, ensure that listeners are able to locate the woman’s geographical location and the year or century being referred to either – and preferably – as part of the narrative itself, or as a comment interjected by Speaker 4 who has the role of narrator in the present script.

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# GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>amir</td>
<td>ruler, commander, chief or nobleman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>artel</td>
<td>traditional cooperative form of operation found in production, supply and distribution activities (USSR, Central Asia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bazaar</td>
<td>market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imam</td>
<td>religious leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jarya</td>
<td>female slave and/or concubine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>javab</td>
<td>response Persian (Iran and South Asia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>magajiya</td>
<td>heir apparent; archaic term for a queen (Nigeria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mullah</td>
<td>preacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nikahnama</td>
<td>marriage contract document (South Asia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>purdah</td>
<td>literally ‘curtain’ the practice of excluding and segregating women; sometimes used for the veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qadi</td>
<td>magistrate or judge in a Muslim juridical system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raden</td>
<td>title of nobility (Indonesia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ribat</td>
<td>literally a station or fortress, in this context a shelter or ‘convent’ for women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sayyida</td>
<td>woman claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad (ص)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sharif</td>
<td>noble, honourable; in this context ‘respectable’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sufi</td>
<td>Muslim mystic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ta’a</td>
<td>wife’s obedience to husband (in return for being provided for)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ulama</td>
<td>plural of alim or learned person, scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uwar gari</td>
<td>‘Mother of the Town’ (Nigeria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yan-taru</td>
<td>female disciples of Nana Asma’u (Hausa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zenana</td>
<td>harem; Persian term used for the female section of the household compound that could be a separate building or a portion of the main house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# PRONUNCIATION KEY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark used in the pronunciation keys</th>
<th>Sounds like...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vowels</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>an unstressed ‘a’; as in about and among</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aa</td>
<td>as in far;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ai</td>
<td>sounds like eye [e.g. chughtai]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aw</td>
<td>as in awful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ay</td>
<td>as in cable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>as in tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ee</td>
<td>as in need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eh</td>
<td>sounds like the ‘a’ in baby, only its not as long or diphthongized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>as in sit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ō</td>
<td>as in moan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oo</td>
<td>as in fool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ow</td>
<td>as in cow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>a short ‘u’; as in but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consonants</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>NB: all ‘d’ sounds are soft; slightly ‘dentalized’ as in draw rather than door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kh</td>
<td>there is no English equivalent; similar to the ‘ch’ in the Scottish loch; a throaty sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ŋ</td>
<td>a nasalized ‘n’; as the French maman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q</td>
<td>back of the throat ‘k’ sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>NB: all ‘t’ sounds are soft; slightly ‘dentalized’, as in ‘the’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: Stressed syllables are indicated in capital letters, e.g. CAP-i-tal

Note 2: We are not using an internationally recognized phonetic method; also the pronunciations of some words are based on our own assumptions.
THE MODULE
INTRODUCTORY SESSION IN A TRAINING (2-3 MINUTES)

We suggest the following lines for the introduction to the module but these are only suggestions and should be adapted according to the audience.

Facilitator 1

I would like to welcome you all to this session on feminism and the women’s movement. As we all know, the women’s movement started a couple of centuries ago with women’s struggles in Europe and the West.

Facilitator 2 interrupting

Excuse me, [takes name of facilitator 1], I don’t think that’s true. I think women have been active in many parts of the world. How can you say that it’s only in the West and Europe? We know women from different parts of the world were active...”

Facilitator 1 resumes,

Well, yes, women maybe were active in different places, but I think we all know that in our parts of the world, and in our countries the ideas of the women’s movement came to us from women in Europe and North America...”

THIS IS THE CUE TO

➤ Turn off the lights

➤ For Voice 1 to start reading the first narrative piece that begins with ‘How can you have forgotten me?’

➤ For the facilitator in charge of the transparencies to slide the first illustration onto the overhead projector.
SPEAKER 1

How can you have forgotten me, Umm-Salama? [OOM-ay sa-LA-ma]

Known to be bold and assertive, today, most people remember me for my marriage to Abbas [a-BAAS] who later became caliph.

This was not my first marriage, nor even my second. It was my third.

One day after my second marriage, I saw this handsome young man who took my fancy, and made inquiries.

Discovering Abbas was of good family but poor, I immediately sent him a proposal. And, since I knew he had no money, I also sent him the amount for my mahar or dower.

When Abbas accepted, I made him promise that he would neither take a second wife nor take any concubine. After our marriage Abbas decided nothing without first asking me and getting my approval.

This changed after Abbas became the first Abbasid [a-BAA-sid] caliph in 750, and the courtiers started to advise him.

I didn’t mind this on state matters but then one day I overheard a courtier, Khalid [KHAA-lid], trying to get him to go back on his promise to never look at another woman by singing praises of the delights of sampling all types of women.

That swine! I had him thrashed.

When he came limping back to Abbas, Khalid was singing praises of a single wife. For this I rewarded him richly.
SPEAKER 2

Then there was Aisha bint Talha [a-EE-sha bint tal-HA], known for her beauty, knowledge of Arabic literature and astrology, but equally for her capriciousness and assertiveness in her personal life.

Aisha, who married several times, refused to veil. When one of her husbands, Mus‘ab [moos-AAB], objected and urged her to observe the custom of veiling, she replied:

God Almighty has honoured me with beauty. I want people to see this and understand what rank I enjoy before them. I will not veil myself. Nobody can reproach me with a fault.
SPEAKER 3

Let me, Arwa Umm-Musa [AR-wa OOM-ay-MOO-sa], tell you about husbands.

Born into the aristocracy of southern Arabia, I married the Caliph of Baghdad. At the marriage I made Mansur [man-SOOR] agree in writing to neither take a second wife nor a concubine while I lived.

He did so, but later regretted this promise and tried to get qazi [QA-zee] after qazi to cancel the restriction.

I always managed to get a judgement in my favour. Finally, I decided to put an end to his constant attempts once and for all.

I called in the grand qazi of Cairo to judge the matter. The Qazi ruled in my favour. What else could he do since I produced the written document as proof.

SPEAKER 5 (NARRATOR)

It was not only the rich and powerful who fought for justice.

This is 15th century Cairo.
Wife and husband visit the qadi, Baghdad - 13th century miniature
SPEAKER 4

In my poor neighbourhood, a woman whose name I forget - had asked the state to arrange a suitable marriage for her niece. The chief qazi-Al-Dawadar [al-da-WA-dar]- ordered his junior to do so.

The marriage was arranged with a ghulam [ghul-AAM] or bondsman. As the girl was only 12, the husband had not been allowed to have intercourse.

He violated the restriction, raped the child, and - adding insult to injury - divorced her.

Her outraged aunt rounded up the entire neighbourhood. I remember us marching to the house of the Dawadar, the men carrying the poor girl on their shoulders.

The Dawadar was furious. He had the man, his patron, named Faris [FAA-ris], and the junior qazi produced. The bondsman admitted intercourse but said there was no restriction.

"The girl is obviously a minor" the Dawadar said and ordered that the bondsman be flogged and that his patron, Faris, carry the girl on his back through the city as a warning to those who would deflower girls and break the law. Faris and supporters of the bondsman begged for mercy. So, the matter was sent to a mediator who arranged a 4 dinar [din-AAR] compensation for the girl. Still, the entire city turned out to protest on her behalf.
SPEAKER 3

Women also dealt with courts in 16th century Istanbul. Many were engaged in trade and stood bond etc. but they also went to court to assert their rights. One woman, Dervish bint Mehmed [dur-VAY-sh bint MEH-MED] even went to court because a policeman had dared to block her passage on a public thoroughfare. She registered a case of assault against him.

Husni [HUS-neeh] bint Abdullah, Fatima [FA-teh-ma] bint Adbullah and Emine [a-MEEN-eh] bint Abdullah were brought to court for fighting with or assaulting men.
Turkish women in outdoor apparel—16th century miniature

Turkish lady and maid on their way to the public bath—17th century miniature
Speaker 3 (contd)

As for Nefise [ne-FEE-seh], she was accused of adultery, prostitution and of entertaining namahram [Na-Meh-rum] men in her husband’s caftan shop “for who knows how many days”. Her husband defended her, put this down to the “liars and busybodies in the community”, and posted bail.

But who knows, perhaps there was some truth in the matter for he later divorced her. Unfazed by this Nefise went to court to get the settlement promised in the divorce deed. And, taking advantage of being in court defended herself against the earlier allegations of adultery which she said were unjust and malicious.

SPEAKER 5 (NARRATOR)

In every era, some women always managed to assert control over their sexuality both within and outside marriage.
Bazaar scene, Turkey – 16th century miniature
SPEAKER 1

I, Sayyida Al-Hurra [SAY-yida al HUR-ra], born Arwa Bint Ahmad al-Sulayhiyya [sul-LAY-hee-ya], ruled Yemen for more than fifty years from 1074 to 1137. Al-Hurra means a sovereign woman who obeys no superior authority. And so it was, for after my husband died, I ruled alone.

My people were loyal, but for full sovereign status I still needed the approval of the caliph-imam al-Mustansir [al-mus-TUN-sir] in Cairo. When I formally applied to him, he refused and instead ordered me to marry Saba [SU-ba], the man my husband named successor in religious matters. When the caliph-imam sent the money for my dower I could no longer refuse. But, I didn’t want anything to do with him. What could I do? Here is what happened.

After the marriage was signed, Saba traveled from San’a to my new palace in Jhibla. There he was shown into the nuptial chamber where he found a jarya [JURR-yah] or slave woman in attendance. Being truly religious, he never raised his eyes to look at her face.

All night the jarya stayed with him and all night he waited for the queen. But no other woman appeared. In the morning without meeting the queen he went back to Sa’na never to return.

Now, some say I disguised myself as a jarya, others that I sent my maid servant.

What do you think actually happened?
SPEAKER 3

In 11th and 12th century Spain, many well known poets never married. Everyone knew about their lovers. No one cared.

Wallada [val-LA-da], the daughter of a caliph, died unmarried in 1087. Her poetry celebrates her relationship with her lover, the poet Ibn Zaydun.

Naz’hun [NAAZ-hoon] of Granada immortalised a night of love.

Both foreshadowed the most famous woman poet of Muslim Spain, Hafsa [HAAF-sa] Bint al’Hajj whose lover was the famous Jafar.
SPEAKER 2

Some women turned away from men. In the 12th Century, a male scholar noted:

"there are also women who are more intelligent than the others. They possess many of the ways of men so they resemble them even in their movements, the manner in which they talk, and their voice.

Such women would like to be the active partner...

Such a woman does not shame herself, either, if she seduces him whom she desires. If she has no inclination, he cannot force her to make love. This makes it difficult for her to submit to the wishes of men and brings her to lesbian love.**

Most of the women with these characteristics are to be found among the educated and elegant women, the scribes, Qur'an readers and female scholars."

At least, that was his interpretation of what he saw.

** In a translated rendition this was changed to 'love of women'.

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Woman reading a book, Turkey - 15th century
SPEAKER 4

Me, I simply refused to marry.


Ever since I could crawl I would go sit with my grandfather when he held court. Climbing onto his lap I would watch him conduct the affairs of state.

People were so used to seeing me that even when I grew older no one protested.

Instead of learning the usual housework and baby tendering taught to young girls, I ended up learning the arts of governance and warfare.

My mother succeeded my grandfather and I was named magajiya [mag-A-jee-yah], the heir apparent.

I was sixteen at the time, an age considered right for marriage in Zazzau, but I refused saying "I shall never become subject to the control of a man."

And why should I? I became queen in 1576.
Artist's impression of Queen Amina of Zazzau
SPEAKER 5

In 17th century India, Mughal [MŌ-ghal] princesses were often either not allowed to marry, or chose not to.

Look at Raushanara Begum [RŌ-shun-a-ra BAY-gum], sister of the pious Aurangzeb [AW-rung-zaib] about whom stories and scandals abound, for she was also a schemer and conspirator in the affairs of the palace.

We know she smuggled men into the palace for her pleasure since two of the unfortunate ones were caught and executed.
Miniature, 1420 - Herat
SPEAKER 5 (continues)

Raushanara’s niece, Zinat un Nissa [ZEE-nat oon-NIS-sa] was very different however.

She refused to marry and demanded her father, Emperor Aurangzeb give her the amount he would have spent on the dower. She then used her mahar money to build a mosque: the Zinat-ul-masjid [ZEE-nat al MUZ-jid] in Delhi.
[Mosque] Zinat-ul-masjid, photograph-1850
SPEAKER 3

I can tell you that in the 18th century, an Englishwoman visiting Istanbul believed Turkish women to be very free in certain matters. At this time many women were taking off the veil and adopting new dress fashions, leading to the imposition of restriction in dress codes for Muslim women in 1725.

In 1717, Lady Montagu wrote to a friend in England saying that women wore so many veils in public that:

"there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave and 'tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street."
Turkish women in the bazaar
SPEAKER 3 continues

This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery... The ladies seldom let their gallants know who they are... Upon the whole I look upon the Turkish women as the only free people in the empire."
Turkish lady at home - 19th Century
SPEAKER 1


Married around the 1870s to a much older man, she was still young when he died.

She refused to return to her parents home saying: I shall stay with my children in my own home.

Infuriated, her brother publicly disowned her.

Aïni stayed on in the village managing alone. Then, she fell in love with my father and got pregnant but he refused to marry her. Had the French not been in power, my mother would surely have disappeared.

When the family tried to take away her children and make her leave the village, my mother went to the magistrate who ordered that no one was to harm her or her children.
Berber woman with children - Painting
**SPEAKER 1 continues**

She gave birth to me alone, unaided and shunned by all.

I was only nine days old when she took me and her other children to the public prosecutor to register a case against my father.

The case dragged on for three years.

I look just like my father and everyone agreed I was his. Though he refused to admit paternity, he was ordered to pay my mother a 300 franc fine.

My mother refused to accept his money. And though she eventually had to give me into the care of the convent to save my life, Aini had the last word: she kept her home and her children.
Aïni Aïth Mansour's daughter,
Fadhma Amrouche, with son - 1900
SPEAKER 2

The practice of ta’a [TA-AA] or obedience to the husband in marriage allowed the Sudanese state to forcefully return a wife to her husband. For many years women fought against this law at considerable risk of abuse. They also defied it as can be seen from the story of a 16 year old.

This unhappy young woman who was sharing her husband and home with a second wife, ran away to her father’s. In February 1940 a decree of the Shari’a [SHAR-ee-a] Court of Shendi had her returned to him by force. She defiantly ran away again and in August, a second decree was ordered. Husband and wife left the court together, but as soon as she was outside she disappeared again.

The third time the court called her, she simply refused. She denounced her husband’s cruelty and, with the help of her father, registered a case and proved that her husband treated her badly.

Her husband was found guilty by a magistrate’s court, fined and imprisoned for beating his wife and harming her father.
**SPEAKER 5**

In the 1930s north India was shaken by Rasheed Jahan [ra-SHEED ja-HAŇ], a Marxist and social activist who joined the communist party in Lahore and was arrested for her politics in the 40s.

The daughter of two pioneers for women’s education Sheikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan [wa-HEED ja-HAŇ], Rashid Jahan became a doctor in the 30s.

But, this was not the cause of furor.

They were shocked by Rashid Jahan’s writings in which women characters spoke out on taboo subjects such as being used sexually, marital rape and wife beating. Attacked for being unislamic and accused of obscenity, she stood her ground.

In 1932 her stories in the collection, Angarey [un-GARR-eh], so incensed the community that the book was banned within months.

Rashid Jahan helped start the Progressive Writers Movement and inspired many others, including Ismat Chughtai [IS-mut CHUGH-tai] whose 1940s story of lesbian love, The Quilt, was also to be banned for decades.
Rashid Jahan

Rashid Jahan's parents
Sheikh Abdullah & Wahid Jahan

Rashid Jahan with husband
Mahmud-uz-Zafar
SPEAKER 5 continues

Around the same time Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali [BAY-gum sha-REE-fa HAH-mid al-lee] formulated a model nikahnama [NI-ka-NA-ma], or marriage contract, in which - amongst other conditions - she inserted the delegated right of divorce which she said all women should have. She had this printed in 1937 and widely circulated.

During World War II, one of her comments that gained fame was:

We have suffered many Hitlers in the household of every generation.
SPEAKER 1

Note: the first line is to be read out loud

1892 - Egypt - Hind Nawfal [hind NAA-fel]

"We learn from history how many a deadly lion has emerged from the harem and how many hennaed hands have held the reigns of kingdoms...

And how many daughters, educated by wealth and cultured by poverty, have become heads of the harem and directed its affairs.

And how many women were noted for intelligence and perfection, whose learning was not dependent on that of men."
SPEAKER 4

Rabia Basri [RA-bee-a BUS-ree], the best known woman sufi put the centrality of the love of God above all else. Consulted by men and women alike, her stories show she was both sharper of wit and more profound than her male contemporaries.

Hassan al-Basri [HUS-san al-BUS-ree] admitted:

I passed the whole night and day with Rabia speaking of the Way and Truth, and it never passed through my mind that I was a man. Nor did it occur to Rabia that she was a woman, and when dawn came, I looked at her and I saw myself as bankrupt and Rabi’ā as truly sincere”.

But my favorite story is the night Rabia carried a torch and an ewer through the streets of Basra intent, she explained:

on setting fire to paradise and pouring water on the flames of hell, so that those two veils should drop away from the eyes of the believers and they would love God for his beauty, not out of fear of hell or desire for paradise”. 
SPEAKER 3

Fatima of Nishapur [NISH-a-poor] - who held dialogues with the most famous mystics of the ninth century - was far more down to earth.

Having decided to marry Ahmad-e-Khazruya [KHAZ-rui-ya], she sent him a message telling him to ask for her hand from her father.

When Ahmad didn’t respond, she sent a second message saying: “Ahmad, I thought you were manlier than this. Be a guide not a highwayman!”

After their marriage they once visited another scholar, where to Ahmad’s dismay Fatima lifted her veil.

When he protested “Fatima what boldness is this that you displayed with Abu Yazid [AB-oo ya-ZEED]?”

She answered: “You are intimate with my natural self. Abu Yazid is intimate with my spiritual way. You rouse my passion, but he brings me to God.”
Lady in discussion with a Sheikh,
Persian miniature - 1658
SPEAKER 2

Hafsa Bint al-Hajj [HAAF-sa bint al-hujj], the most famous woman poet of Muslim Spain, was known for her long love affair with the poet Abu Jafar [AB-oo JAA-fer].

After his death, Hafsa abandoned poetry and moved to Marrakech, Morocco, where she spent the rest of her life teaching the princesses of the Almohad [al-MO-had] dynasty.

She has been described as the greatest woman teacher of her times.
Andalusion noble woman and attendants listen to music, Spain - 13th Century

Moorish women playing chess and listening to music, 1283
SPEAKER 5

Maybe in Spain and Morocco, but there were many contenders for that title.

In Baghdad, living to be more than ninety Shuhda Bint al-Ibari [SHÔ-da bint al-i-BA-ree] earned the title Fakhr-an-Nissa [FAAK-run-nis-sa], the Pride of Women.

But perhaps the most impressive of these times was Fatima Bint Ahmed, known for her expertise in religious law.

Whenever her imam husband, Yahya [yah-ya], didn’t understand how to explain a legal problem to his students, he used to consult Fatima.

He would then relay her answers to the students.

The students were no fools however. And, when they still couldn’t understand the imam’s explanation, they would say "We know that does not come from you, yourself but from behind the curtain."
Women and men listen to lecture, Baghdad - 1237


**SPEAKER 4**

In the 15th, 16th and 17th century, women in Iran and Central Asia were visibly engaged in cultural and intellectual activities as indicated by a 16th century book on women poets and intellectuals: *Javahir-e-Ajayib* [ja-VA-hir a-jai-ib], or Jewels of Wonder.

These women often considered themselves equal to, sometimes better than, men.

**Bija Munajjima** [BEE-ja moo-NAJJ-i-ma], a sufi of Herat, Afghanistan considered herself an equal in both literary and religious matters to the male sufi **Abdul-Rahman Jami** [ab-DUL RAH-man JA-mee].

She engaged him in a bitter life long intellectual battle.
Persian miniature, early 15th century
SPEAKER 4 continues

Nihani's [neh-HAA-nee] style was different.

A poetess in the service of Shah Sulayman's [su-LAY-maan] mother in 17th century Iran, she was the daughter of a grand amir.

Nihani once wrote a verse she was particularly proud of. This she posted in the main square of Isfahan's [is-fa-HAN's] bazaar with a proclamation that she would marry any man skilled enough to write a javab [ja-VAAB] - response - to her verses.

Not one of poets of the time was up to the challenge.
Woman smoking hubble-bubble,
Persian miniature - 1670s
SPEAKER 2

In the 19th century, education became a major focus of women’s activism and struggle.

In Nigeria, Nana Asma’u [US-ma-OO], grew up in a house of scholars. During the reign of her brother, Caliph Mohammed Bello, she was given the title Uwar Gari [oo-war gar-EE] - mother of the town - and became not only responsible for women, but also for the religious education of the community at large.

Nana Asma’u translated many works she thought would benefit the community and also wrote her own books and poems. She counseled and assisted women from all communities, including women captives. She later started a women’s market and was a champion of women’s education.

Stating that women needed no permission to study, in the 1840s, Asma’u started a movement for women’s education: the yan-taru [EN-tar-oo].

Women from all walks of life travelled from far and wide to spend time studying with Nana Asma’u. The yan taru movement passed on from one principal teacher to another and continues even today in a somewhat changed manner.
SPEAKER 1

I ended my life as a college teacher, but in 1899, a women’s journal carried the story of how I had to steal my education like a thief.

In those days, *sharif* [shar-EEF] or ‘decent’ girls were taught to recite the Qur’an and sometimes to read Urdu but never to write - to prevent us it was said - from writing love notes to men.

Having asked an aunt for some poems on a pretext, I collected discarded pieces of paper and when everyone was asleep, I crept into the kitchen, scraped off some soot from the pans and made some ink.

In the heat of the afternoon, I would steal off to the roof and copy out these passages. But I still couldn’t read the beautiful letters I copied!

I then made a deal with a male cousin: I would help him to recite the Qur’an only if, in return, he taught me to read some religious poems.

Reading with him, then sneaking off to practice alone I finally mastered the art of reading and writing.

No one could believe this was how Bibi Ashraf [bee-bee USH-ruf] the college professor of Lahore learnt to read!
Cover of Tehzib-e-Niswan,
Indian Women's Journal - 2nd July, 1932
SPEAKER 3

Tooba Azmoudeh [TOO-ba AZ-moo-deh] got her education at home and continued studying when she married. She first taught girls in her home and then opened Tehran’s second official girls’ school in 1908.

Initially, Tooba’s students and teachers were physically harassed and targeted by malicious gossip, but they persevered.

When Tooba arranged for her students to sit for the exams for the regular Government certificate, a mullah agreed to conduct the exam from behind a curtain, but refused to issue certificates saying:

“It’s pointless to give certificates to mere girls. No one believes girls can learn.”

Eventually certificate status was granted to girls and by 1936 Tooba’s home school had become a middle level school with 400 students and 20 teachers - including two men.

Around the same time, Sadigheh Khanum Daulatabadi [SA-di-gheh KHA-num DAW-la-ta-BAA-dee] started a school in Isfahan [IS-fa-han].

The twenty year old Sadigheh was the only woman able to teach in the city. Sadigheh had studied at home but had also attended her brothers’ school dressed as a boy.

In 1936, Sadigheh had become the inspector of girls’ education in the Ministry of Public Instruction.

But, Sadigheh’s activism was not limited to education: she started a woman’s newspaper; joined women campaigning for voting rights in Paris; and attended International Conferences.
SPEAKER 5

Etel Adnan [e-TEL ad-NAAN] remembers Lebanon in 1934:

It must have been the month of June, school was out. I was nine or ten when my mother made a costume for me on her sewing machine: pantaloons of shining black satin, a white satin blouse, a black tie.

She took me to the hairdresser’s and told him to cut my hair very short a la garçon [a la garh-SON] she said, -like a boy...

Being dressed as a boy made me feel very happy. I felt special: no other girls that I knew ever dressed like that. In fact no boys either.

I thought I looked beautiful in it or touched by some magic. It must have reinforced my identity of being neither just a girl, nor a boy, but a special being with the magical attributes of both.
**SPEAKER 4**

*Anbar-otin [UN-ber-öt-EEN],* a passionate advocate of women’s rights, used her poetry to promote her ideas in 19th century Central Asia.

Bitterly addressing men she once wrote:

"about women it is contumeliously said that their destiny is to give pleasure.

Men you are foolish, and,

just like wolves, dripping with malice.

They are the flower buds of gardens,...

A multitude of beauties, bright and luminous;

Mother and sister are dear to you,

But, obscured into crowds

Women have little value for you.

Know then, women are beauteous and not faceless“
Central Asian women watering crops
SPEAKER 1

Fifty years later the same sentiment was echoed by Huda Shaarawi [HOO-da SHAR-aa-wee], a pioneer of the Egyptian women’s movement. For many years, Huda headed the Women’s Committee of the Wafd [vufd] nationalist party.

However, when the Wafd men came to power in 1924, women were very disappointed.

Resigning from the party and the Women’s Committee, Huda sent an open letter to the head of the party, saying:

Exceptional women appear at certain moments in history. Men view these women as supernatural beings and their deeds as miracles. In moments of danger, when women emerge by their side, men utter no protest. Yet women’s great acts and endless sacrifices do not change men’s views of women.

Through their arrogance, men refuse to see the capabilities of women.

Faced with contradiction(s), they prefer to raise women above the ordinary human plane instead of placing them on a level equal to their own.

Men have singled out women of outstanding merit and put them on a pedestal to avoid recognizing the capabilities of all women.
SPEAKER 2

Fatima Aliye Hanım, [AL-ee-yeh HA-nim] the first woman novelist in modern Turkey was the daughter of an enlightened member of the ulema [OO-leh-ma] and main author of the Ottoman Civic Code.

Her 1892 novel Muhadarat [moo-HA-dar-ut] (Womanhood), tells the story of a gifted woman whose development was stunted by a traditional society. In Nisvan-e-Islam [nis-VAAN](Muslim Women):

Fatima denounced the misinterpretation of Islam and urged women to become educated and participate in society.

This work published in 1891 predates by almost a decade Qasim Amin’s [QA-sim a-MEEN’s] Tahrir-i al Mara [TEH-reer-eh al-MAA-ra](Liberation of Women) which caused a sensation in Egypt at the time.

Typically, the centenary of Qasim Amin’s book was celebrated by the Supreme Council of Culture in Cairo in 1999, but Fatima’s earlier book has been forgotten.
Turkish woman, 1910s
SPEAKER 1

Nabawiya Musa [nub-e-WEE-ya MOO-sa] started teaching in Egypt in 1906. She remembers:

My salary was six pounds, and for men it was ten. I was furious. I taught as the men. Why did the ministry pay them nearly double?

When I protested, I was told I didn’t have a secondary school diploma. I decided to pass the exam.

The men at the ministry went into an uproar. They thought it ridiculous that a woman who had not attended high school should sit for the exam.

I remember the day of the exam. The male students living nearby rode the same tram. We would sit at the back not to attract the attention of the male students but their talk poured over my head.

Some vowed to beat ‘the girl student’ if she failed and, of course, she would fail. Surely, she had applied to sit only to show off her beauty and charms!

They paid no attention to me because I was not the person of their imagination.

They assumed this girl would be frivolous and showy. The girl sitting at the back was modest and no one could even imagine she could read.

My brother smiled at me but I was careful not to answer his smile with one of my own. I got off the tram one stop before and walked to the back gate because I knew the male students had gathered to catch sight of me.

My success was big news. Had I conquered France at the time my name would not have reverberated more.

Not until 1928 would another woman sit for this exam.
A young Nabawiya Musa

Students of the Saniyah school, 1919 where Nabawiya studied and taught
SPEAKER 4

1909 - Egypt - Malak Hifni Nasif [MUH-lek HIF-nee NA-sif]

Men say to us categorically, 'You women have been created for the house and we have been created to be breadwinners.'

Is this a God-given dictate? How are we to know this since no holy book has spelled it out?

Political economy calls for a division of labour but if women enter learned professions it does not upset the system. The division of labour is merely a human creation.

We still witness people like the Nubians whose men sew clothes for themselves and the household while the women work in the fields.

If men say to us that we have been created weak we say to them: 'No it is you who made us weak through the path you made us follow.

After long centuries of enslavement by men, our minds rusted and our bodies weakened...

Nothing irritates me more than when men claim they do not wish us to work because they wish to spare us the burden. We do not want condescension. We want respect.

Men blame any shortcomings we may have on our education, but in fact our upbringing is to blame. Learning and upbringing are two separate things. Some people think that good upbringing means kissing the hands of women and standing with arms properly crossed.

Good upbringing means helping people respect themselves and others.
Malak Hifni Nasif
**Speaker 5 (NARRATOR)**

Obviously, in every era, some women had good upbringing. Though women’s actions to promote justice and help others are less well-documented, fragments of history tell us there have always been some women who have acted for and with other women.

Remember *Umm-Musa [OOM-ay MOO-sa]*, who in the 9th century called in the chief qazi to make her Caliph husband refrain from concubines?

Well, she obviously sympathised with the concubines, for on her death she left an endowment to be used for the welfare of those concubines who only had girl children.
Women help deliver a baby, Persian miniature - 1605
SPEAKER 2

Nafisa [na-FEE-sa] - the great granddaughter of Hassan - and still revered as a saint in Egypt, was born in Mecca, grew up in Medina and later migrated to Egypt.

Her fame as a religious scholar was so great that even Imam Shaf'ei [SHA-fe-ee] came to hear and learn from her.

Nafisa, however was also known for her sense of justice. When people complained to her about the injustice of the Egyptian governor, she stepped into the road one day and, blocking his passage, forced the governor’s procession to halt.

She then handed him a petition in which she accused him of tyranny and called on him to be more just.

She died in 823.
**SPEAKER 3**

Between 993 and 1020, women suffered at the hands of the mad ruler Al-Hakim [al-HA-kem] who terrorised Cairo.

First he eliminated dogs,
then banned singing in public,
walking along the Nile,
the sale of wine and
pleasure boats.
He then revoked the rights of non-Muslims.
Women became a real phobia.
He forbade women to lament and to laugh,
to go out at night,
to go to cemeteries,
to walk in the streets unveiled;
to wear adornments in public.
Finally, women were banned from leaving their homes at all.
Shoemakers were forbidden to make shoes for women and women’s bath-houses were closed.
For seven long years, women remained prisoners.
Painting of Cairo
Speaker 3 continues

Knowing he was mad, several delegations of women still went to him to protest. And, defying his various bans, women continued to go out.

Many were beaten; others killed; one group was drowned. Sanity only returned in the shape of a woman.

Sitt-ul-Mulk, the Lady of Cairo, Hakim’s elder and well-loved sister, became regent on his death. In her four short years of rule, she brought back sanity, removed the restrictions on non-Muslims and restored to women their rights and dignity.
Painting of women in Cairo
SPEAKER 4

Between the 11th and 15th centuries from Syria to Egypt, well-off women set up ribats [ri-BAATS], often appointing women administrators. Many people call these convents, but this is inaccurate.

Ribats provided a space for women scholars, but they were also open to old women, widows and single women.

Ribats were a sanctuary for women without any means of support and those abandoned by their husbands. Today, ribats would be called shelters.

One of the most famous ribats was set up in 1285 in honor of Zainab bint Abu’l Barakat [a-BOOL BUR-a-ket]. Known as Al-Baghdadia [bagh-DA-dee-a], Zainab was a distinguished and well-known scholar.

The ribat was active for more than 150 years.

The last woman to head this ribat was Fatima bint al-Abbas, herself a woman of great learning who influenced, inspired and benefited many women until her death in 1394.
SPEAKER 2

In the south eastern corner of Nigeria, the Igbo [ee-bo] and Ibibio [ee-BEEB-bio] women have always run associations for women’s affairs.

Some associations were only for wives.

Looking after women’s welfare, these groups also dealt with errant husbands.

Sanctions were meted out and, to put pressure on the man, women had a tradition called sitting on the husbands.

This took the form of women staging a sit-in outside his home, and singing abusive songs until he gave in.

The British colonial power banned this custom, but it is still practiced today.

Women have revived the tradition, except that instead of sitting outside, the women move in, enjoy themselves at his expense and try to eat him out of house and home.
Nigerian women - Detail of a Photograph
SPEAKER 1

Bibi Zainab [bee-bee ZAY-nub] and her women’s militia took Iran by storm during the 1880s strike against the British Tobacco monopoly.

With the military forcing people to open shops, news spread of a women’s militia that was fighting back, armed with guns and anything else that came to hand.

Once, when men gave up the fight, Bibi Zainab appeared with her women. Taking off her scarf she threw it at the gathered men, and announced:

You can all go home. From now on, I and my women will fight the battles.

The British monopoly was cancelled but the militia continued.

Seven regiments, each under its woman leader monitored different parts of the city and took the law into their own hands wherever they saw injustice.

The stores of shopkeepers hoarding food would be broken open and the grain distributed to the poor.

Zainab - a poor woman from Tabriz - always escaped the skirmishes, but several of her female soldiers were killed.

These ordinary women broke many taboos: veiling, seclusion, engaging in warfare and mixing freely with men in tea houses.

No one has written or researched about these women, but small notes in official reports complaining about them, tell us Zainab and her women existed; and Tabrizi [tab-REE-zee] mothers and grandmothers have kept them alive in their stories and poems.
**SPEAKER 5 (NARRATOR)**

By the turn of the century, women’s voices were being heard all over the Muslim world.

Many women, whose names we will never know, started coming out in protest against colonial rule, but also for women’s rights.

**SPEAKER 4**

In Nigeria, women revolted against a new tax on women. Between 1927 and 1929, they challenged both the colonial rulers who imposed the tax and the local chieftains and authorities trying to collect taxes. Mass meetings and demonstrations did not always end peacefully. At least ten courts were destroyed. Other courts, houses of officials and some factories were badly damaged. Many, many women were injured and 55 died in this revolt.

The War of Women, as it came to be known, was sparked off by **Nwanyeruwa [N-WINE-yeh-ROO-wa]** who stopped the chieftain from counting the people in her compound for this tax. After an exchange of hot words that led to a physical fight with the chieftain, Nwanyeruwa quickly told other women who decided to “sit on” the chieftain and his aide. Thanks to rapid networking through palm leaf messages the movement spread up and down the country.

At the subsequent collective punishment inquiries, women continued to be defiant, one telling the officers “I wish you would stop asking stupid questions”. Another dismissed a question on whether she had told her husband she was coming to give witness, saying

“Didn’t he see me when I was going out? I did not fly to come here.”

Not surprisingly, the tax was dropped.
In the early morning of the 16th December, the District Officer met the people of Opobo at the Rest House. A great crowd of women had assembled the leaders being the wives of clerks or office domestic servants, of European. The women were armed with sticks, and a number of men armed with matchets landed from the numerous war canoes which had arrived, and hung around the outskirts of the mob. It is stated that a carefully prepared plan had been evolved, on the presumption that the women would not be fired on, the women were to rush the officials into the office and the men were then to plunder the factories.

For one and a half hours the District Officer parleyed with the crowd, in spite of a great uproar. Apart from the demand that women should not be taxed, the complaints and requests of the people were frivolous. The mob surrounded the office and rest house, and sent off the small detachment of police twelve men in all, from the rest of the town.

At about 8 a.m. a platoon of soldiers of the 2nd Infantry Regiment, under Lieutenant Hill, arrived by motor lorries from Uyo and with some difficulty forced their way through the mob, and joined the District Officer. The District Officer continued in his endeavor to reason with the women, but had been hit with a stick, were gradually pushed back to the troops who were drawn up with their backs to the office wall. Lieutenant Hill warned the people more than ten times that he would be compelled to fire unless the rioters, ceased, and fired his revolver in the hope of frightening back the mob. At last, as attempts were being made to snatch the rifles from the hands of the troops, he gave the order to fire. Twenty women were killed, and a number wounded of whom eight have since died. The recall of the mob after the firing pushed some of the crowd into the river and six were drowned.

About the same time, in view of possible disturbances in the Island Police were sent there. No extra disturbances appear to have occurred and the situation there is normal. Subsequently it was reported that disturbances had occurred at Owerri and Ara. At the former nothing serious seems to have happened, but at Ara a large crowd broke into factories, Government offices and private houses and did much damage. It became necessary to fire to disperse the crowd. No casualties were reported. There is now a small force of troops and police at Ara to prevent any recurrence of disorder.

It is reported that the total number of casualties among the rioters during the disturbances is as follows:

At Ogbomoh, nineteen women and one man killed, ten women died of wounds, and eight women drowned.

In the Owerri Province, sufficient force of troops and police is available to prevent any overt act of violence, although the women continue to be excited and to hold meetings, a few of which have been dispersed. Owerri and Ara...
SPEAKER 5 (Narrator)

At the turn of the 20th century, women's organisations mushroomed in South Asia, across the Arab world and Africa, in Iran, in Turkey and in Indonesia.

Women's magazines, many written and edited by women proliferated.

But some women were larger than life; active in all aspects of the struggle for women's rights whether it was starting organisations, promoting education or engaging in political activism.
**SPEAKER 4**

The Egyptian, Malak Hifni Nasif [MUH-1ek HIF-nee NA-sif] was a woman of firsts.

In her thirty-three years, she was the first woman to get a degree from government schools in 1900; the first to lecture publicly;

the first to address the Egyptian parliament with a list of demands in 1910, and the first to lay the foundations for the feminist movement in Egypt.
SPEAKER 2

Leela Naag, born in 1900 in Sylhet [SIL-het], Bangladesh forced the Dhaka University to become co-educational by making it accept her as a student.

Leela started a women’s organization and a women’s journal Jayashree [jeh-YAH-shree]. Ensuring girls’ access to education, Leela personally opened fifteen schools.

She campaigned tirelessly for women’s rights and against colonial rule. Whenever her radical politics landed her in jail, Leela used the time to promote literacy and activism amongst the other women inmates.

Leela combined her grassroots work for women with mainstream political activism and was one of the few women elected to the pre-independence Legislative Assembly in 1946.
SPEAKER 3

Halidé Edip Adivar [ha-LEE-deh eh-dib a-dee-VAR] was a Turkish writer, scholar, and public figure dedicated to the rights of women and their emancipation. She started publishing newspaper articles in 1907.

In her 80 years Halidé achieved fame as a novelist, social philosopher, and academic.

She took a divorce from her husband in 1910 when he decided to take a second wife.

She was the first woman to speak at a mass meeting in Istanbul in 1919.

And, she was condemned to death in absentia along with Mustafa Kemal, who later became the Atatürk, and four others.

Internationally active, she set up the girls' education system in Syria and taught in America, England, and India apart from her native Turkey.
Halide Edip Adivar

Halide welcomes Mustafa Kemal, The Atatürk
SPEAKER 4

Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz [BAY-gum jah-han-AR-a SHAH-NA-vaz], was born in 1896 and lived to be 85 years old. She fought her battles politically and was one of only two Muslim women elected to the pre-independence federal assembly of India.

Jahanara served in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and it is thanks to her that women were included in the fundamental rights clauses.

A polished politician, she linked street politics and women’s organisations with her battle in the assembly to limit polygamy and promote women’s equality.
"Prominent People" - nominated by The Statesman, 1932.
Jahanara Shahnawaz, the only woman on extreme left.
SPEAKER 1

And, of course, Huda Shaarawi, associated with all of the activities of the early feminist movement of Egypt.

Born to a concubine in 1879, this amazing woman became role model and patron to so many; an adept politician, Huda was a born leader who inspired women across the Arab world and far beyond.
SPEAKER 5 (NARRATOR)

Between 1880 and 1930, women met in conferences; they wrote about their oppression, and devised ways to increase their rights in the political arena and at home.

And, they dreamed of a different world.
Indian & Egyptian delegates—
The International Alliance of Women Conference
Rome, 1923

The All-Asian Women’s Conference, Lahore, 1931

Huda Shaarawi and other women at a Pan-Arab Women’s Conference on Palestine
Speaker 5 (Narrator)

In 1905, Rokeya Hossain [ru-QAY-ya hos-SEIN] published Sultana’s Dream in which Sultana goes to sleep. Waking up in a new place, Ladyland, she sees no men in public. Curious, she asks:

Note: Dialogue between Speaker 1 & Speaker 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPEAKER 3</th>
<th>Where are the men?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>In their proper places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 3</td>
<td>‘Proper places’, what do you mean?</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>O, I see, you cannot know our customs. We shut our men indoors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 3</td>
<td>Just as we are kept in the Zenana [ze-NA-na]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>Exactly so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 3</td>
<td>(Laughing): How funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>(Laughing): And you think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 3</td>
<td>Of course not!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>Yet, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do - or at least are capable of doing - no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana!</td>
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**Speakers 1 & 3 continue**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPEAKER 3</th>
<th>We have no voice. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 3</td>
<td>Because they are stronger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 3</td>
<td>But sister Sara, if we do everything by ourselves, what will the men do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 1</td>
<td>Nothing. They are fit for nothing. Just catch them and put them into the zenana.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER 3</td>
<td>But, is it easy to catch and put them inside the four walls? And, if this we do this, would all their business and politics also go with them into the zenana!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SPEAKER 5 (NARRATOR)**

Sister Sara only smiled sweetly. Perhaps she thought it useless to argue with one who was no better than a frog in a well.
SPEAKER 4

1920-Egypt-Nabawiya Musa [nub-e-WEE-ya MOO-sa]

Men have spoken so much of the differences between men and women, they seem to be two separate species... My own view is that:

Human beings are animals governed by the same rules of nature... The male animal is no different from the female except in reproduction.

No scientist has claimed that the female cat likes to jump and play and devours mice, while the male cat is reasonable, serious, does not hurt a mouse or steal meat.

Nobody has said that the male dog is honest and intelligent, and the female dog dishonest and stupid.

How then do we conclude that the woman is deceitful and cunning, and the man frank and truthful?

Men say that the man has a larger body, stronger muscles and that his brain is larger.

Nobody has said that because the male dog is stronger than the female, that he is more intelligent. No one has asserted that because the male mouse is stronger than the female, he should be her life guardian.

The same applies to man and woman.

While she is smaller in size and strength, she can take care of all her needs. She is independent of him and does not need him more than he needs her
A younger and older
Nabawiya Musa
SPEAKER 2

1910s-Egypt-Malak Hifni Nasif [MUH-lek HIF-nee NA-sif]

The majority of us women continue to be oppressed by the injustice of man, who in his despotism commands and forbids us so that now we can have no opinion, even on ourselves...

If he orders us to veil, we veil. And, if he now orders us to unveil, we unveil, and if he wishes us to be educated, we are educated.

Is he well-intentioned in all he asks of us and on our behalf, or does he wish us ill?

There is no doubt that he has erred grievously against us...in decreeing our rights in the past and no doubt he errs grievously in decreeing our rights now.

We cannot assume that all men who write about women are wise reformers. Their words must be carefully scrutinised, and we must be wary of man being as despotic about liberating us as he has been about our enslavement.

We are weary of his despotism.
Women and men in an anti-colonial protest, Cairo - 1919
SPEAKER 1

Turn of the twentieth century - Indonesia - Raden Adjeng Kartini [kar-TEEN-nee]

"The Moslem law allows a man to have four wives at the same time. And though it be a thousand times over no sin according to the Moslem law and doctrine,

I shall forever call it a sin... and if he does not choose to give her back her freedom, then she can whistle to the moon for her rights.

Everything for the man, and nothing for the woman, is our law and custom.

Do you now understand the deep aversion I have for marriage?

I would do the humblest work, thankfully and joyfully if, by it I could be independent."
Raden Adjeng Kartini -
The founder of women's movement in Indonesia
SPEAKER 3

After my mother, Zuleikha Buransheva [zu-LAY-kha boo-ren-SHAY-va] married in 1924, she found herself in a patriarchal Uzbek family, where she had all the responsibilities of a daughter-in-law;

She was under the complete control of her mother-in-law, and was expected to serve and obey her husband.

To end her slave-like existence, she left her husband, joined the Communist Party, and started working as a women’s organiser in a silk-weaving cooperative, called an artel.

She actively encouraged girls to work in the artel, become economically independent and determine their own destinies.

Many discarded the parandja [pu-run-djA] (or, headscarf).

Mother understood it took great courage for girls to work or study in defiance of their parents, so she tried to help them, especially those who needed somewhere to live.

Girls from villages did not even know how to find basic necessities. They were intimidated by people who regarded them as disobedient or as rotten fruit. Many had left home to avoid being forced to marry older men. Many dreamed of true happiness.

Women like my mother became for them a raft in the sea of life.
Central Asian women printing cloth
SPEAKER 5 (NARRATOR)

Though women had already started to discard the veil by the late 19th century in more than one country.

In the early 20th century casting off the veil became a symbolic gesture.

Returning to Egypt from a women’s conference in Rome in 1923, Huda Shaarawi Hoo-da SHAR-aa-wee], and her companions dramatically threw their veils into the Nile as a symbol of the new woman.

In India, Bi Amman [BEE AM-man] having first broken the taboo of a woman addressing a male political gathering in 1917, simply removed hers in 1921, saying it was a hindrance to her public activism.

But many other women simply stopped wearing the veil. One such woman was Atiya Fyzee [UT-ea-ya FAY-zee] of India.
Saiza Nabarawi and Huda Shaarawi, Rome - 1923
**SPEAKER 4**

After the Mohammedan Educational Conference of India excluded women in 1924, Atiya Fyze [UT-ee-ya FAY-zee] decided to gate crash the 1925 Jubilee meeting.

In the middle of the proceedings, she started speaking from behind the curtain drawn for women. And continued to hold forth until the embarrassed presiding officer escorted her to the dais. Never again were women excluded from this conference.

Atiya’s actions caused an uproar. In 1926 a man writes to his friend: You know what Atiya Begum of Bombay did at the Educational Conference?

She cared nothing for the chair Sadrus’s [SA-drus’s] strong protest, and came up openly and got on the dais unveiled and delivered a strong speech demanding equal rights with men— to go about on God’s earth freely and openly.

The poor Sadrus did his best to send those Sufferagettes back in the place screened up for them.

Failing, he left the hall himself...

I prophesy that in the course of the next generation, purdah is bound to be given up, whatever the orthodox may say or do.

This movement among our ladies of the younger generation is very strong and men will have to give way in the end.”
**SPEAKER 5**

1940s-Palestine-Fadwa Tauqan [FAD-wa TOO-qaan]

As in other societies where the lives of women make no sense, the lives of Palestinian women in every epoch and in every house, seemed devoid of significance.

Such an environment had a stifling grip on me...

The world of the harem stood between society and me... and I stopped exercising my poetic talents...

Ultimately, at the source of my struggle was a tradition whose laws and customs constantly tested me.

My afflictions tore me apart but I found relief when I thought of the wisdom of the ancient saying,

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, who am I?
CLOSING SESSION
(10-12 MINUTES)

Instructions

Turn the lights back on after the last lines of the script ‘then who am I?’ have been read out.

One of the facilitators then needs to close the module with a few comments and explanations. As for the Introduction, we give below suggested lines which should be adapted in light of the specific audience being addressed.

Note: The quotation from Mernissi is optional, the other points do need to be made. See the conclusion of the companion volume Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Context for alternative quotations.

Facilitator

The women who did the research for the script came across a comment made by the Moroccan historian and scholar, Fatima Mernissi that resonates with the purpose of the ‘great ancestors’ module. In her book Hidden from History: The Forgotten Queens of Islam, Mernissi points out that when she started her research on Muslim queens, male scholars told her she was on a wild goose chase. They refused to even entertain the idea that there could be any Muslim Arab queens. After finding dozens of queens, including the Arab queens of Yemen in the eleventh century, Mernissi concluded that:

Muslim women in general...cannot count on anyone, scholar or not, ‘involved’ or ‘neutral’, to read their history for them. Reading it for themselves is entirely their responsibility and their duty. Our demand for the full and complete enjoyment of our universal human rights, here and now, requires us to take over our history, to reread it, and to reconstruct a wide-open Muslim past. This duty, moreover, can turn out to be no drab, disagreeable task, but rather a journey filled with delight.1

We hope the great ancestors’ module confirmed for you that reading history can, indeed, be pleasurable.

Before opening the floor for questions and discussion, I should clarify a few points:

Firstly, not all the narratives and voices included in the module are of Muslim women. These voices are included to underline the fact that Muslim contexts include non-Muslims and that our ‘great ancestors’ are bound to include non-Muslim women in each context. In fact, it should be stressed that in any given context, women have usually acted together for their rights, irrespective of religious or other identities.

Secondly, this module focuses on women’s assertions within Muslim contexts. In the time available it was not possible to include examples of women’s cross border solidarity. Women extended each other support across religious, national and other identities, including across the colonizer-colonized divide. Solidarity was a vital component of women’s fight against oppression and for their rights in the past - just as it is today – and we need to remember and celebrate it.

Thirdly, it needs to be said that the notion that all men in Muslim societies are misogynistic is as much a myth as the notion that all women are silent victims. Many men qualify as ‘great ancestors’. Our reason for excluding them is not to deny their contributions, but because we want to highlight women’s assertions.

Finally, looking at the history of women’s assertions in Muslim contexts, is only one way of slicing history. We could also trace women’s assertions using a different perspective, such as focusing on a specific geographical region, and still reveal the same determination of women to fight oppression, to assert themselves, and to make a better world. But, this would be an entirely different module.
## LIST OF WOMEN AND INTERVENTIONS
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<td>(d. 728) Mecca, (Saudi Arabia)</td>
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