

## TALKING ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

FIRDOUZA WAGGIE AND YUMNAH HATTAS

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**Abstract:** Firdouza Waggie and Yumna Hattas of the Gender Desk of the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and Margot Badran met in Cape Town on July 17, 2002 to exchange views on Islamic feminism and to discuss issues relating to Muslim communities in South Africa prior to Badran's presentation at the MYM Gender Desk Roundtable on Islamic feminism on August 3, 2002. The round table was part of the initiative to revive the MYM Gender Desk. Below is an edited narrative of their conversation.

**Keywords:** Islamic feminism, Muslim Youth Movement

**Firdouza Waggie (FW)** The term Islamic feminism is still not widely accepted in South Africa but people are not completely closed to the idea now. Two years ago I did not call myself a feminist. I was not comfortable with the term because society did not accept it. People have the idea that feminism is Western and therefore unsuitable to Muslims.

**MB** *Are you Western, Eastern, Northern, or Southern?*

**FW** (laughter) South African and Western. But whether I am Eastern or Western I see myself as Muslim.

**MB** *If you see yourself as Western why would you have a problem with something Western or allegedly Western?*

**FW** Because of the connotations. You cannot not speak of women's rights.

**MB** *Huquq al-mar'a (women's rights) is an Arabic construct and used in Arab Muslim contexts.*

**FW** Where we are coming from it is a problem. It is the problem for the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) Gender Desk. Before, speaking of feminism or calling ourselves feminists would completely alienate us from Muslim society. Nowadays we in the leadership of the Gender Desk are more comfortable calling ourselves feminists. We have a greater understanding of feminism. We can now engage the Muslim community nationally and locally. We are a society in transformation. During the time of the anti-apartheid struggle Muslims took different approaches to political struggle. We in the MYM invoked Islamic principles in our political activism. Islam fights injustice. We were active not only around issues of color, ethnicity, and origin but also religion.

**Yumnah Hattas (YH)** In the 1980s we had to fight a national political battle as well as a battle inside our own households. At home we lived conservative Muslim lives and we dressed in a particular way. (She points to her jeans and top and says if she had dressed that way then it would have been unacceptable.) When we tried to get an English translation of the Qur'an into our homes we were told it was *haram* (forbidden). Our parents could not marry politics with Islam. They did not speak about politics but we youth discovered that Islam is politics, that Islam is about justice. That is the kind of history we experienced. Islamic feminism is now at the cutting edge of where as a community we are deciding to head. It is fear that prevents us from taking the first step in defining Islamic feminism. We need to share our views and address our activism to the larger community, not just the academics at the University of Cape Town. Our community is at the point where they might accept Islamic feminism and see that it is not *haram* (religiously forbidden)

**MB** *Why is the community now ready?*

**YH** Because the leadership has changed. Half the community now are those who were part of the progressive battle getting us to where we are today. The old generation is dying out. We the progressive thinkers are becoming the new senior generation.

**FW** The time is now ripe because the Muslim Judicial Council has a new leadership which is much more open-minded. They are the same age as the upcoming progressive groups: thirty or thirty-five to forty. They have been having an open dialogue around issues concerning women. The media has also been playing a crucial role, especially the Muslim radio stations like the VOC (the Voice of the Cape) and 786. Two months ago, VOC, for the first time, had a debate on Islamic feminism which opened up thinking. I was there along with Sa'diyya Shaikh (a graduate student at the University of Cape Town) and Akida Muhammad (a filmmaker). Hadija Ali, an imam's wife, pulled out at the last minute.

Munadia Karaan, a respected radio journalist, ran the program. We on the Gender Desk do not only want academics to debate Islamic feminism but we wanted to reach ordinary women at home. There still is a problem in this country because people don't understand the difference between feminism as something coming from outside and Islamic feminism which expressed in our religious framework. If Muslims understood this I don't think they would have problems with it.

**YH** South Africa is unique. When we speak of Western and Eastern I do not see myself in either category. I am South African. We are making our own history and our own feminism.

**MB** *How did you get into the different space you are in now?*

**FW** There are two new realities: 1) a greater familiarity with the idea of Islam-based gender equality and 2) the new democracy in the making in post-apartheid South Africa. We are now an open society. We have more freedom. People are traveling more. Women are travelling more and are working abroad. There is a shift in attitude and a shift to a new era. We have made important strides but there is more work to be done. We have to struggle to get rid of certain demons. Women have always been quoted selected verses of the Qur'an and *hadiths* (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, of varying degrees of authenticity) to uphold their subordination. Now we are offering women alternatives. We are engaging with the *ulemah* (religious scholars) saying if you look at the principles of Islam you find freedom, justice, and equality. We point to verses of the Qur'an supporting gender equality. Also, very importantly, we are telling the *ulemah* about the day-to-day problems our women are facing. I think we are getting through to the *ulemah*.

**YH** Economic rights are also important. The right of a woman to control her own wealth. The issue of inheritance. What is being said about women and wealth. We could take examples from the Prophet's life. We could learn more about Khadija (the Prophet's first wife and the first person to subscribe to Islam). We just heard that she was a business woman but how did she conduct her business and what were her business principles? I would like to develop an Islamic discourse around women's economic autonomy. We need to know more about the history of Muslim women's economic experience and relate it to our society today.

**MB** *You mentioned that you need a strong Islamic feminist discourse. Is developing that now the way to go?*

**FW** Yes. It is the only way we are going to be able to move forward. We want to do it in a way that does not alienate people. We are embarking on several campaigns including an education campaign and a roundtable with open debates and discussions with mainstream organisation leaders. We aim to bring people together around current campaigns dealing with HIV, domestic violence, etc. But education is our major focus. The Gender Desk wants to have smaller reading groups to help people move from acquiring a new Qur'an consciousness to initiating new practices.

**YH** If something comes from an Islamic country people overall buy into it. For example, they listen to what Saudis are saying. In your Roundtable talk (speaking to Badran) it would be interesting for us to hear what other women are experiencing. For example, what Egyptian women or Yemeni women are going through. We do not get women's side of the story from abroad. We have tested the waters with the first Roundtable. There is an interest in hearing what you have to say on Islamic feminism because the debate is current and people are curious to know what is happening elsewhere. We want to hear from someone who has studied this. The audience will not care about your identity. There will be a crowd who want to hear what you have to say even if maybe later they will challenge it. As the organisers of the Roundtable we are telling people it is all right to be in an uncomfortable zone. Maybe this will help you to question further and to develop your own Islam. If you are just a passive recipient of ideas, you are not evolving.

**MB** *Are people more uncomfortable with Islamic feminist ideas out of concern for the reactions of husbands, family, community, and traditional authorities or because it shakes up their certitudes about Islam bringing into question their long-held ideas and asks people to figure things out for themselves?*

**YH** I think their fears are connected to change, even positive change. They will say: I grew up with this and now I have to unlearn it.

**FW** I think their fear has to do with patriarchy.

**MB** *Concluding thoughts?*

**FW** We at the Gender Desk want to take all our women with us. I do not ever want to convey the idea that I own Islamic feminism because I do not.

**YH** In this new era we can choose how to be a Muslim. We are thinking about how to go. We see this inside the community. I would like to see what the community will look like in five to ten years. We could be at the forefront of change but we could also take another path and dip but I think it is unlikely.

### **Contributors:**

**YUMNAH HATTAS.** An experienced public health professional and development specialist, has worked in development for the last twenty years. She started as a volunteer coordinating youth and gender related camps and development projects. She then became a full-time employee and consultant in gender, sexuality and HIV related projects, and health systems strengthening. A firm belief in conducting life with integrity, responsibility and accountability are key principles and values she lives by. Her choices of work are driven by a deep passion to define herself in a world that is fair, just and equal. Her efforts are inspired by leaders who are accountable, responsible and respectful of the rights of every human being, especially those who have a full understanding of the magnitude of the contribution of women in this world. She lives her life daily inspired by her three daughters trying to carve a future for them to be able to fulfil their purpose as women who are just, fair and possess integrity.

**FIRDOUZA WAGGIE.** Is a registered physiotherapist and senior lecturer at Cape Town University of Technology. She holds a BSc and MSc in physiotherapy, and PhD from the University of the Western Cape. She completed a postgraduate certificate in project management at Cape Town University of Technology. She worked as a physiotherapist at Groote Schuur Hospital where she became a senior physiotherapist. She is currently the Director of the Inter- professional Education Unit in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape. The unit is responsible for developing and coordinating interdisciplinary community-oriented core courses and service-learning in both rural and urban communities for health science students. Her expertise and research areas include: health professions education, community engagement and development, interprofessional education, service-learning and school health promotion.