

Article No. 10

Equality and the Muslima: Negotiating Gender Justice in the Online Muslim Public Sphere

Saman Talib
[Rutgers University](#)

Keywords

Progressive Muslim, women, Islam, gender, justice, Internet, public sphere, Muslim.

Abstract

The emergence of the transnational progressive Muslim movement was one of the major, yet largely overlooked, consequences of the events of September 11, 2001. The central element of this movement is a belief that the concepts of peace, mercy, equality and justice must be crystallized through meaningful communication among diverse interpreters of Muslim source texts. The movement is adamant that gender justice should govern Muslims' daily lives. The role of the Internet has been critical in enabling and mediating the growth of this nascent movement and in facilitating its attempts to debate issues relating to social justice for women. This paper examines the distinct ways in which the progressive Muslim movement is using the Internet to sustain itself and advance its views. Discourses on gender that the Progressive Muslim Union (PMU) posts online were compared with parallel texts published in the mainstream Muslim online magazine, *lviews*. The results show that PMU is developing an active online community and using the Internet to coalesce an offline progressive Muslim discourse community.

Introduction

Since 9/11 violence associated with Muslims has raised questions about Islam's values and ideals. While the Western media daily represent Islam as steeped in "fundamentalism" and "terrorism" many Muslims and their allies have challenged the accurateness of these claims. One of the foci of this discussion about Islam has been Muslim women, their roles, their rights and their oppressions. Mass media are replete with narratives that feature honor killings, prohibitions against educating girls and women, and other instances of women's curtailed rights in Muslim-majority nations. This study is not concerned with the veracity of these reports or how widely practiced these atrocities are. Rather, it focuses on the role that the Internet is playing in providing a platform for progressive Muslims to discuss gender justice, which is one of their primary concerns.

Engaging in a sustained discourse is no easy matter for Muslims because they reside in multiple areas of the world and, as a result, they are immersed in cultural contexts that inhibit dialogue. In the non-Muslim world the media is saturated by images of violent Muslims, apologies for Muslims, and mainstream non-Muslim explanations of Islam. In the Muslim world established organizations do not encourage the progressive Muslim movement, whose views often are at odds with tradition. As a result, the progressive Muslim movement has turned to the Internet to carve out a space for itself in the Muslim public sphere because the Internet offers the movement's proponents opportunities to articulate and share perspectives that otherwise would be ostracized or ignored.

For example, the Progressive Muslim Union (PMU), which is a network advocating for progressive Islam, maintains an Internet site where its members discuss many issues, especially

gender justice. Comparing these postings with parallel texts published in the mainstream Muslim online magazine, *Views*, reveals that the PMU strongly supports gender justice for Muslim women.

Theory Public Sphere

This study relies heavily on public sphere theory and its utility in understanding political communication in the context of nascent Muslim movements. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991) Habermas conceives of the public sphere as a place where individuals engage in reasoned discussion on subjects of mutual interest. In so doing they cultivate a locale for rational public deliberation.

The Internet offers progressive Muslims a new venue for public deliberation; hence, the Internet can be said to host an electronic public sphere. It provides a forum where Muslim political and religious viewpoints can be debated: "Situating outside formal state control, this distinctly Muslim public sphere exists at the intersections of religious, political, and social life" (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003, p. 1). Significantly this new medium allows progressive Muslims to challenge conventional exegesis of Islamic source texts and articulate new interpretations of them.

New Media in the Muslim Public Sphere

The nature of the Internet is changing public sphere deliberations. First, the traditional power asymmetry between orators (senders) and audience (receivers) is breaking down as more individuals have access to Internet spaces where they can publish their ideas with little restriction. Second, the boundaries between public and private communication are disappearing on the Internet. This allows an influx of new opinions into the public sphere and transforms audiences into participatory discourse communities (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). These characteristics of the Internet are facilitating the emergence of a new class of Muslim exegetics who are using it to establish like-minded, progressive discourse communities and to introduce to the public sphere novel understandings of Islam (Anderson, 2003).

September 11, 2001 provided the external impetus that spurred the formation of this Muslim discourse community while other factors, including an increase in mass education and the rapid evolution of media technologies (Eickelman, 1999), were the internal impetus. Initially this movement attempted to respond to questions about Islam that arose after 9/11. Later the movement fostered an ongoing effort to articulate a form of Islam that represents a vast, silent majority of Muslims.

Scholars who study this phenomenon say that it incorporates ordinary Muslims worldwide in discussions of the fundamentals of Muslim faith and practice (Eickelman, 1999). This departs from conventions of religious authority that subordinate the masses to one or more individual leaders. In contrast to tradition, the new Muslim electronic public sphere permits much greater interpretive agency among individuals. The Internet, because of its porousness—its ability to sidestep information blocking and censorship—also admits more, newly literate, ideologically diverse participants into current debates (Eickelman, 1999). This tends to put Muslims dispersed around the world into direct contact with each other and confounds the global/local divide that previously inhibited the free flow of information among them.

The growth of the electronic Muslim public sphere began when early users posted Quranic texts and traditions of the prophet online. They also started discussion forums (Anderson, 1999). Many of these posters and visitors to their sites were expatriates in search of a community. However, as the technology of web production has become increasingly accessible, the Internet has become home to "web pages for traditional schools and modern universities, transnational

Sufi networks and national religious movements, traditional missionary organizations, and for nationwide organizations of Muslims in Western countries” (Anderson, 1999, p. 896).

As content on Muslim web sites diversified so have the numbers of online Muslim spokespeople, opinions and dialogs. Consequently two schools of thought, liberal and progressive Islam, have initiated sustained discussions of their values on the Internet. Of these two, liberal Muslims have been accorded more coverage in the Western media. This is because liberal Muslims identify themselves as western, meaning that they are Muslims who believe in capitalism, secular values and the separation of church and state. They also argue that terrorism is the most significant problem facing their community (Qamar-ul Huda, 2002). Progressive Muslims have different points of view. They are more concerned with challenging the status quo and achieving justice for the disenfranchised than with assimilating into non-Muslim cultures.

The Progressive Muslim Movement

This study focuses primarily on progressive Muslims because of their insistence on changing Islam from within. Another reason for focusing on the progressive Muslim movement is that it makes gender justice a cornerstone of their philosophy (Safi, 2003).

Irfani first popularized the label “progressive Islam” in his book, *Revolutionary Islam in Iran* (1982). This term’s meaning was standardized by the Progressive Muslim Network (PMN), an aggregate of activists and scholars from around the globe who used electronic media to facilitate conversations that led to the creation of a document entitled “Progressive Islam: A Definition and Declaration.” This document established the criteria for PMN membership. It is also formed a framework for discussions among progressive Muslims (Esack, 2002).

One of the major constitutive elements of this framework is the progressive Muslim view of justice: “An important part of being a progressive Muslim is the determination to hold Muslim societies accountable for being fair and open. It means resisting and overthrowing injustice. It means contesting gender apartheid” (Safi, 2003, p. 15). Hence, for progressive Muslims justice includes the core values of social justice, pluralism, and gender justice.

Progressive Muslims emphasize that gender injustice is a manifestation of broader problems of social justice and pluralism. Pursuing gender justice, writes Safi (2003), is a binding responsibility, as is contesting gender apartheid. Significantly, progressives believe that gender injustice oppresses both individual women and societies that tolerate such injustice.

Method

This study compares discourses on gender and women on PMU’s website, pmuna.org, and on Islamicity.com, a popular mainstream site, in order to determine 1) how the PMU’s conception of gender justice differs from mainstream Muslim beliefs, and 2) how PMU is using the Internet to stimulate discussion on gender justice in the Muslim public sphere.

Data were collected from pmuna.org and Islamicity.com because they represent different segments of the online Muslim community. Islamicity.com is one of the most popular Muslim destinations on the Internet (Lawrence, 2002, p. 242); hence, it is a suitable source of sample opinions among mainstream Muslims. PMU’s website was selected because it is the online locus for an active community of self-proclaimed progressive Muslims.

These websites also were selected for study because their content is comparable. Each of the sites carries an online magazine. The magazine associated with Islamicity.com is *Iviews* (Iviews.com) and PMU produces a magazine called *Muslim Wake Up!* (Muslimwakeup.com). One feature shared by these magazines is that independent contributors write all the articles. Consequently both magazines constitute an open online Muslim space.

Archived sections of each magazine were tapped for samples. Iviews.com's archives were searched using keywords "woman" and "women." This produced 36 results from which 5 articles were chosen randomly. These articles were compared with 5 articles randomly selected from Muslimwakeup.com's "Gender Issues" section (the site does not have a search tool).

PMU's online and offline strategies, articulated in materials published on pmuna.org and Muslimwakeup.com, were examined to determine how PMU is using the Internet to stimulate discussion on gender justice in the Muslim public sphere. Furthermore, the researcher attended, in the role of participant observer, 5 of PMU's monthly meetings in New York City.

Results and Discussion

The first research question, how the PMU's conception of gender justice differs from mainstream Muslim beliefs, seeks to understand what is distinctive about PMU's discourse on gender justice. Articles from *Iviews* and *Muslim Wake Up!* were compared to reveal traditional and progressive Muslim perspectives on gender and equality. The analysis shows that the sources use three broad themes to discuss women's issues: hijab, women and politics, and women and society.

The most significant discovery was that while the magazines and their contributors have different perspectives on gender justice, their discussion topics are the same: Contributors to both magazines focus on hijab, women and relationships, and women and political rights. There is not much attention to literacy, economic opportunity, or healthcare. This topical parallelism probably occurs because the primary participants in these online discussions share bourgeois class status. Hence, the magazines' themes are similar.

Nevertheless, PMU remains true to its vow to contest and problematize accepted social norms, especially when gender is involved. For example, Muslimwakeup.com's articles discuss hijab in terms of women's liberty. Requiring women to wear hijab is depicted as a form of oppression and dialog centers on the validity of claims that hijab is a religious imperative. In contrast, Iviews.com's articles support hijab, representing it as good Muslim women's responsibility and a source of their empowerment.

An example of the second common theme, "women and politics," is present in articles on Saudi women and their activism. Both magazines discuss Saudi Arabian women's attempts to organize and address their lack of freedom of association, political liberty, and equal rights. However, while the article, "Saudi Women Talk Rights," (Ambah, 2004) on Iviews.com focuses on the logistics of women's activism, such as their venues for organizing, little is written about their motivation. In contrast, Muslimwakeup.com's article, "For Saudi Women, Votes are Keys to the Kingdom" (Eltahawy, 2004) highlights the lack of gender justice in Muslim societies and emphasizes the curtailment of women's liberty in Saudi Arabia. This discussion subsequently is situated within a broader examination of the religious sources—Islamic religious texts and traditions—of gender justice and equal rights for women.

The magazines' differing perspectives are most obvious in the "women and society" category. Here the magazines focus on different topics altogether. An Iviews.com article features the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian Muslim, and the implications this has for Muslim women (Iviews.com, 2003). This article exploits the honor bestowed on Ebadi to highlight rights and freedom available to women living in Islamic majority societies.

Muslimwakeup.com takes a different approach to women and society. "Let Them be Scandalized" (Rauf, 2005) is an article about Hind el-Hinnawy's paternity suit against Ahmed el-Fishawy, an Egyptian film celebrity. Hinnawy and Fishawy contracted an Urfi marriage, a clandestine, temporary civil marriage often used to lend religious legitimacy to otherwise

prohibited sexual relations. Although Hinnawy's and Fishawy's relationship was brief, Hinnawy became pregnant and gave birth after the Urfi marriage's dissolution. Even though Urfi relationships and pregnancy among single women are viewed with disdain in Egypt, the Muslimwakeup.com article praises Hinnawy for being courageous enough to acknowledge the relationship and for opposing an unjust social practice.

Significantly, there is not much crosspollination between the two online Muslim communities. The contributors to and audiences of each magazine seem oblivious to the existence of the other. This raises questions about the efficacy of these online discourses, since each magazine seems to be preaching to the converted. However, such "preaching" is not an entirely futile process if, using Dewey's theories, we are willing to expand our notion of the public sphere.

Dewey wrote that a multiplicity of publics exist simultaneously and he suggested that it is possible if not necessary to coordinate these spheres and "improve" interactions among them through (inter)dialog. Moreover, in perhaps the most significant development of public sphere theory since Habermas, Dewey lends communication a central role in his theory of the public sphere when he "insisted that the discovery of solutions to pressing social problems would not aid the public's recovery unless this knowledge was disseminated through the art of communication" (Asen, 2003, p. 182).

If we expand our concept of the Muslim public sphere to include the elements and functions that Dewey attributed to the modern public sphere, it's clear that both magazines contribute to civic deliberation on gender equality even though their readers do not interact. Moreover, the two magazines represent separate audiences and the Internet allows them to circulate their respective points of view publicly. This facilitates the expression of interpretations and opinions that otherwise would be shut out of public debate. PMU, moreover, uses the media to foster interactions among isolated progressive Muslims dispersed throughout the world by bringing these individuals together in a virtual community.

The second research question, how PMU is using the Internet to stimulate discussion on gender justice in the Muslim public sphere,

considers the processes through which PMU creates the conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion conducive to their notions of gender justice. Longitudinal analysis of PMU's presence on the World Wide Web shows that initially PMU members identified themselves and their objectives on their website: "The Progressive Muslim Union of North America (PMU) aims to provide a forum, voice and organizing mechanism for those in the Muslim community who wish to pursue a progressive religious, intellectual, social and political agenda" (pmuna.org). This online declaration led to a process of defining the issues that PMU members wished to introduce into discussion in the Muslim public sphere.

PMU's Muslimwakeup.com also contributes to defining the progressive Muslim agenda by introducing to the public sphere points of view that contest mainstream Muslim conceptions of gender justice. To this end the magazine invites and publishes articles from a diversity of authors, inserting new voices into public debate on what constitutes gender justice in Islamic society:

Through online and offline media, events, and community activities, *Muslim Wake Up!* champions an interpretation of Islam that celebrates the Oneness of God and the Unity of God's creation through the encouragement of the human creative spirit and the free exchange of ideas, in an atmosphere that is filled with compassion and free of intimidation, authoritarianism, and dogmatism. In all its activities, *Muslim Wake Up!* attempts to reflect a deep belief in justice and against all forms of oppression, bigotry, sexism, and racism. (Muslimwakeup.com/info)

Importantly, a discussion forum allows audiences to respond to the magazines' articles. This enables the audience to engage in conversation with the author and other audience members, which also fosters public deliberation.

In an effort to create momentum for the movement PMU also uses its Internet platform to build networks among geographically proximate progressives. For example, PMU directs visitors from its website to its space on meetup.com, a website that permits individuals to organize regular meetings of special interest groups.

Using the meetup.com mechanism PMU has been organizing the Progressive Muslim Meetup in New York City since February 2004. Monthly meetings move public deliberation out of the cyber world into the real world. Organizers describe them as "monthly informal get-together[s] of progressive Muslims in the New York area to get to know each other and share our ideas about whatever comes to mind: politics, culture, the arts, spirituality, life in general" (Progressive Muslim Meetup Group). In recent months these meetings have spread to other North American cities, including Toronto, Washington, San Francisco, and Santa Monica.

PMU also has been successful in introducing its agenda into the broader public sphere, particularly in the U.S. PMU board members have been invited to give talks in different academic settings including Occidental College and Harvard University. Additionally, PMU has garnered national press attention. Articles about PMU have been published in *Newsday*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*.

Thus, we can see the progressive Muslim movement move offline, at least in the West, where members find a more hospitable environment.

Conclusion

This study seeks to examine the current Muslim discourse on gender justice online, particularly as it is being shaped by PMU. In so doing, the project has explored differing views on gender justice introduced into the Muslim public sphere through the associated online magazines of *islamicity.com* and PMU. In addition, this paper considers the processes through which PMU is negotiating ideas about gender justice in Islam by using the Internet. The results show that PMU, in addition to cultivating an online community, is using its online presence to foster an offline progressive Muslim discourse community that engages in public deliberation on gender justice.

References

- Ambah, F.S. (2004). Saudi women talk rights. Retrieved June 2, 2005, from <http://www.iviews.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=CH0407-2381>.
- Anderson, J.W. (1999). The Internet and Islam's new interpreters. In D.F. Eickelman & J.W. Anderson (Eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World* (pp. 1-19) (1st ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Anderson, J.W. (2003a). New media, new publics: Reconfiguring the public sphere of Islam. *Social Research*, 70(3), 887-905.
- Anderson, J.W. (2003b). The Internet and Islam's new interpreters. In D.F. Eickelman & J.W. Anderson (Eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World* (pp. 1-19)(2nd ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Asen, Robert (1999). Toward a normative conception of difference in public deliberation. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 35, 115-129

Asen, Robert (2003). The multiple Mr. Dewey: Multiple publics and permeable borders in John Dewey's theory of the public sphere. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, (39), 174-188.

Dewey, J. (1926). *Experience and Nature*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing.

Eickelman, D.F. (1999). The coming transformation of the Muslim world. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 3(3). Retrieved August 4, 2005, from <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue3/jv3n3a8.html>

Eickelman, D.F. & Anderson, J.W. (2003). Redefining Muslim publics. In D.F. Eickelman & J.W. Anderson (Eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World* (pp. 1-19). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eltahawy, M. (2004). For Saudi Women, votes are the keys to the kingdom. Retrieved June 2, 2005, from http://www.Muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2004/12/for_saudi_women.php.

Esack, F. (2003). In search of a progressive Islamic response to 9/11. In S.Omad (Ed.), *Progressive Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society* (T. Burger, Trans.). Boston: MIT Press. (Original work published in 1989).

Iviews.com. (2003). Nobel surprise. Retrieved June 2, 2005, from <http://www.iviews.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=IV0310-2111>.

Lawrence, B.B. (2002). Allah on-line: The practice of global Islam in the information age. In S.M. Hoover & L.S.Clark (Eds.), *Practicing Religion in the Age of The Media* (pp. 237-253). New York: Columbia University Press.

Progressive Muslim Meetup Group (n.d.) About this meetup group. Retrieved January 14, 2005, from <http://progMuslim.meetup.com/2/about/>.

Muslim Wake Up! (n.d.). Our mission. Retrieved August 4, 2005, from <http://www.Muslimwakeup.com/info/>

Ethic and Public Policy Center. (2003). Searching for Islamic democracy and developing progressive voices in Islam. Retrieved August 4, 2005, from http://www.eppc.org/publications/pubID.1590/pub_detail.asp

Rauf, G. (2005). Let them be scandalized. Retrieved August 4, 2005, from http://www.Muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2005/01/public_shaming.php.

Rawls, J. (1996). *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Safi, O. (Ed.). (2003). *Progressive Muslims: On justice, gender, and pluralism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

S.Benhabib (Ed.). (1992). *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the boundaries of the political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Irfani, S. (1983). *Revolutionary Islam in Iran: Popular liberation or religious dictatorship*. London: Zed Books.

About the Author

Saman Talib currently is a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Her professional background spans the entire range of mass media. She has worked at publishing houses, broadcast networks, radio stations, and digital news organizations. Her scholarship considers the conjunctions of media and politics. She is particularly interested in researching the effective use of new media to foster knowledge, literacy and participation in civil society. She has presented this work at conferences and has been invited to contribute articles to the forthcoming *Routledge Encyclopedia of American Journalism History*. Her e-mail address is stalib@eden.rutgers.edu.