



# musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

## Musawah Vision

Issue 20: March 2015

*Special Issue:*

**Honouring A Fierce Feminist Foremother**

**Fatima Mernissi.**  
Luminary.  
Love.



*Fan art by: Seba Al Afif*

## I. In Memory & Appreciation of Fatima Mernissi

### Ziba Mir-Hosseini: Honouring Fatima Mernissi

"There are years that ask questions and years that answer." ~ from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston

As fate would have it, the day that Fatima Mernissi left this world, Musawah was in Morocco holding one of its capacity building courses - Islam & Gender Equality and Justice (*I-nGEJ*, pronounced 'I engage'). It was Sunday 30 November 2015, the second day of the course; we were at Dar Eddiya, only an hour away from Rabat. The news reached us around noon, during Amina Wadud's session on "Reading for Gender in the Qur'an: Text and Context", with Zainah Anwar as facilitator. It was Amina's first visit to Morocco, and she was keen to meet Fatima for the first time. Asma Lamrabet had arranged to bring them together over lunch, but Fatima was too ill to come; there was no chance to schedule another meeting, as Asma had travel plans, and Amina was leaving before the end of the course. So they never met.



L-R: Asma Lamrabet, Hatoon Al-Fassi, Zina Lamrabet, Fatima Mernissi, Zainah Anwar, and Nouzha Guessous

Asma had left Rabat on the day Fatima died. On 5 December, the last day of the course, she sent us this email from Lisbon:

Just wanted to share with you this last words on the phone with Fatema when she apologized for not attending the lunch with Amina... she said "tell her that she is a pioneer and Musawah is the future." With a very weak voice. She was suffering but still with hope for the future... *Rahimaha Allah.*

When writing this piece to honour her I came across this sentence from a 1937 novel by African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston: "There are years that ask questions and years that answer." Hurston's words captured for me what appear to be two phases in Mernissi's writings on Islam and gender issues; those phases also marked the journey that some of us shared with her (though not all at the same time) and that brought us together in Musawah.

*"She was clearing  
the ground and  
loudly placing her  
feminism in  
Islam."*

- ❖ To read the complete article and download the PDF, click [here](#).
- ❖ To read the above preface in Arabic, click [here](#).

## Asma Lamrabet: Fatima Mernissi as I Knew Her



I would like to talk about Fatima as I knew her.

Actually, I have known two Fatimas. One through her books and the other since our first meeting a few years ago. At first, I knew her as an academic icon and thought she must be inaccessible, like any other icon.

Whenever I read her books, I was struck by her intellectual courage, her style, sometimes ironic but always deep and subtle, on a highly serious taboo topic, namely religion and women. Yet I have to say that I was touched mainly by three of her books: *Le Harem politique* (*Women and Islam*), *Sultanes oubliées* (*Forgotten Queens of Islam*) and *Islam et démocratie* (*Islam and Democracy*).

In *Le Harem politique* - a book that I consider Fatima's masterpiece - I remember being deeply touched by her sincerity, her intellectual honesty and above all by how she formulated problems in an open and direct way. It was undoubtedly she who broke through the first locks of religious interpretation concerning women. From the very beginning, her aim was, to quote her mythical book, *Le Harem politique*: "to shed light on those obscure zones of resistance, those entrenched attitudes" - a remarkable expression. She undoubtedly opened the way to the necessity for: "a study of the religious texts that everybody knows but no one really probes" (*Women and Islam*, Blackwell, 1991, p. 2).

To reread *Le Harem politique*, published in 1987, is to find oneself in almost the same sociological setting as that of the Muslim world today, apart from some new features. The book is still up-to-date, nearly thirty years later! That's the power of Fatima the visionary. In fact, when she talks of the "Sacred Text as a political weapon" (title of the first part of her masterpiece), she is reminding us of the painful history of the Muslim world, and how the current reality of the Muslim world is only repeating this title.

*"She was bursting with ideas. She needed a hundred more years to achieve what she longed for."*

- ❖ This is a translation of a talk that Dr Lamrabet delivered in "A Tribute to Fatima Mernissi" at the Villa des Arts, Rabat on 6 January 2016.
- ❖ To read the complete article and download the PDF, click [here](#).
- ❖ To read the above preface in Arabic, click [here](#).

## Zainah Anwar: Fatima, the Storyteller

It was a warm Sunday morning, December 6th, as Asma from Morocco, Ziba from Iran, Marwa from Egypt and I from Malaysia, stood around Allahyarhamah Fatima Mernissi's fresh grave in Rabat - each contemplating our memories of what she meant to us in our own long journey to reconcile our faith with our feminism.

That four women from different countries, ranging in ages across four decades, were together paying our respects to Fatima shows the global and lasting impact of her pioneering work on women in Islam. She inspired us all with knowledge to reclaim a faith that can be empowering and, with courage to question the tradition of misogyny we have inherited.



When I first met her in the 1990s at a conference in Berlin, it was as if I was meeting a long lost friend. I still remember the riot of colours on her - the long dress in splashes of blue, green, yellow and red and a contrasting hot pink headband, and the huge smile and warm hug.

She was this big name feminist academic whose work had a global following and I was a young activist. And even when years went by before we met again, with a beaming smile and open arms, she would always exclaim, "Zainah where have you been? I've been looking for you!" like I would have avoided any chance of meeting her!

That was how Fatima was - always warm, welcoming, giving, interested, enquiring, and telling stories of yet another problem for which she is searching for a solution. And always in a riot of colours from head to toe.

More than anything, Fatima to me was a storyteller. Through her books and her study of tafsir materials, she brought to public attention wonderful stories of strong women in the early history of Islam. In her book, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, she introduced me to my favourite character, Sakinah, the Prophet's great granddaughter, who was married at least four times and stipulated in her marriage contracts that she would not obey her husbands, they did not have the right to marry another woman, and they could not stop her from acting according to her own free will.

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- ❖ To read the above preface in Arabic, click [here](#).

## Zakia Soman: What Fatima Means to Me

I was a college student when a family friend presented a copy of *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Le Harem politique) to me. I just put it aside as I was taken up by other pursuits at the time. Nearly fifteen years later I read it for the first time when a lot had changed in my life. I became an instant admirer of Fatima Mernissi. All of what she was saying was so much connected to me and my life.



We may be divided by continents and belong to different age groups but the realities we face as Muslim women are so similar. Mernissi's account of life in a harem in Morocco rings so many bells with scores of Muslim women in the Indian sub-continent with their lives behind *chilmans* (curtains). Allah is *Rehman* and *Rahim*; we are followers of a kind and compassionate God and yet remain unequal. Islam is a religion of peace and justice and yet violence is an intrinsic part of our lives as female Muslims. We are confined physically, socially and emotionally thanks to the tradition of misogyny.

The *hadith* "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" from Abu Bakr is in many ways at the root of this misogyny. Mernissi thoroughly investigates and delightfully demolishes the truthfulness of this hadith. She puts together scientific evidence from different sources to elucidate the ethical character of a Muslim and a Companion of the Prophet. She puts forth ample corroboration to question the authenticity of this mischievous and mala fide statement.

*"She learnt about the poetic religion from her grandmother as I did from mine."*

What is most important for me is that in the process, she elaborates some of the key Islamic ethics and principles for any reader to easily comprehend! I cannot help but contrast this with the ambiguity and obfuscation that marks the writings of so many scholars of repute. We learn that for a Muslim, just and moral conduct is more important than position and power. And good conduct is not the prerogative of any one gender!

- ❖ To read the complete article and download the PDF, click [here](#).
- ❖ To read the above preface in Arabic, click [here](#).

## Amina Wadud: We Were Soul Sisters

We were never far apart. We shared Berber roots. We shared sheer determination when they said we had not a leg to stand on. I began my career as an Islamic feminist, before I could accept the title feminist. But Fatima Mernissi saw through the dialectics and identified with the global feminist movement as a Muslim, an Arab, an African, and a woman.



However, when I entered graduate studies in 1980, I stepped into the minefield that has been Islam and gender reform and I thought we were standing on two separate planes of reality. As a spiritual idealist, unaware of my slave roots from an African Muslim Berber, I followed a utopia towards an Islamic ideal that eventually led me to Malaysia and the International Islamic University. Then the dream was deferred: the dream that somehow, just saying "Islam" would bring peace and harmony to the planet.

Mercifully, when the door to that dream closed, another door opened and it was much more transformative. I became a founding member of [Sisters in Islam](#). That was 1989. All the members were so impressed by the outstanding work done by Fatima Mernissi who had tackled headlong myriad ways for unraveling the mystery of why this perfect "way of life" had failed so many women. Still, I introduced another dimension: women can take full agency to reclaim "Islam" for the full empowerment of women.

With that I moved closer to the work of Dr Mernissi. Over the years, both of our works would transform. I took an intensely personal and radically political step towards reconciling gender analysis of Islamic primary sources with the lived realities of Muslim women. Fatima already started with that lived reality. We were soul sisters on this journey: speaking truth to power from our own locations. It was inevitable that those locations would cross paths. After all, the journey is for us all - especially to embrace our differences. We do not become one and the same just because of gender oppression.

*"We were soul sisters  
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## Sarah Marsso: Fatima Mernissi, Inner Beauty



"Looking at the sky from the courtyard was an overwhelming experience. The sky looked tame because of the man-made frame. But then the movement of the early morning stars, fading slowly in the deep blue and white, became so intense that it could make you dizzy."

Fatima Mernissi mastered the art of transforming walls into horizons, deserts into oases of hope, and dreams into realities. She has taught us how to tame the boundaries, *hududs*, and frequent them, not as limits but rather as passageways and places of metamorphoses. Such as the sky. She realised the Qur'an looked tame because of the man-made frame. She liberated the Divine Text from its patriarchal harem and revealed its inner beauty of love, justice and equality.

She taught us that freedom of crossing the boundaries, walls and limits to seek knowledge is a God-given privilege from which no one should be excluded. Her writings were rooted in lived realities, not only her life experience but also the realities of women and men she loved meeting in popular areas of Moroccan cities.

She revealed the true nature of the Qur'an is neither a text nor law, or a moral code but rather a spiritual guide to discover and highlight the natural wonders of here and there.

Lalla Fatima is gone but her spirit lives on in several generations of Muslim feminists. She not only left behind rich literature but planted the seeds of courage and hope in my heart and in that of thousands of women and men.

*"She realised the Qur'an looked tame because of the man-made frame."*

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## II. Muslim Family Law News & Beyond

<b>Algeria</b>	New law on violence against women	Star Tribune
<b>Denmark</b>	Women-led mosques	Quartz
<b>Gambia</b>	New FGM law applied in court	WUNRN
<b>India</b>	First female <i>qazis</i> in Rajasthan	Times of India
<b>Iran</b>	Women to be compensated equally as men in road accidents	Reuters
<b>Morocco</b>	Sexual harassment against women criminalised	Moroccan Times
<b>Pakistan</b>	Legislating to protect a child's innocence	Dawn
<b>Tunisia</b>	Single mother stigma	Al-Monitor

## III. Building Our Movement

### Musawah Advocate Updates

#### 60<sup>th</sup> Session of UN CSW, New York



Musawah Advocate from Egypt, Marwa Sharafeldin, was a member of a moderated discussion panel on the role of faith in achieving gender equality by 2030 at the 60<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York in March 2016. Marwa spoke about strengthening the social justice movement bringing in the example of Musawah in enhancing cohesion and synergies among multiple stakeholders.

The side event recognised the role of faith leaders, faith-based organisations and institutions in implementing the 2030 agenda for the achievement of gender equality. The discussion centered on ways faith actors can contribute in leading a transnational advocacy campaign to implement the agenda, including in dismantling and interrogating the patriarchal roots within faith constructs, discourses and practices.

❖ To catch up on tweets from this event and other events, look up [#CSW60](#) on Twitter.

#### Dialogue: 'Islam and Feminism - Compatible or Conflicting?', London

A dialogue session between Musawah Advocate Marina Mahathir and Zara Faris, a representative of the Muslim Debate Initiative (MDI) took place at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London in February 2016. The event was organised by the student body Malaysian Progressives United Kingdom (MPUK) and attended by about 60 participants, mostly Malaysian students.

Marina emphasised the importance of considering women's lived realities in justifying whether practices such as polygamy are Islamic or not. Citing the nationwide study conducted by Sisters in Islam on the material and emotional impact of polygamy on families, Marina highlighted the fact that many laws and public policies that justify such practices do not consider the injustices faced by women and children.

Zara noted that the Muslim world today is a "post-colonial mess" and has become "very tribal". She encouraged looking back at classical understandings of Islam in order to bring back an Islamic revival.

Questions raised by the audience covered family law, *fiqh*, customary practices, and feminism in its entirety.

- ❖ To read a personal account of the dialogue by Marina, click [here](#).
- ❖ To watch a video documentation of the debate by MDI, click [here](#).



Marina (second from left) with Zara and a few representatives of the Malaysian student body

## Musawah in the News

- ❖ Activist group Anonymous quoted Musawah Advocate Ziba Mir-Hosseini in their online blog post [Gender Equality: Muslim Women Question the Way Quran is Interpreted](#):

*'While the ideals of Islam call for freedom, justice, and equality, Muslim norms and social structures in the formative years of Islamic law impeded their realization. Instead, these norms were assimilated into Islamic jurisprudence through a set of theological, legal, and social theories based on certain underlying assumptions: women are created of men and for men; women are inferior to men; women need to be protected; men are guardians and protectors of women; and male and female sexuality differ and the latter is dangerous to the social order.'*

- ❖ Musawah Advocate Amina Wadud contributed a chapter entitled "The 99 Names: Allah is not He or She" in the new publication [Jesus, Muhammad and the Goddess – A Girl God Anthology](#):

*'...I think God transcends gender. So the only way to remind myself (and others) of this is to use all of the English pronouns; but especially to use "She". It became clear that we are so comfortable with using "He" with Allah that we slip into thinking Allah is male, a literal "He". If we take "He" unquestionably, then we should be able to take "She" equally unquestionably – but we don't. That's why we need to use "She" more often. I use "It" too, but not as often as the other two because we have all three pronouns in English. A pronoun is a certain kind of marker in language, not the essence of the divine.'*

- ❖ Blogger Orbala reviewed the Musawah publication [Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition](#) (2015) in her [blogsite "Freedom from the Forbidden"](#):

*'Men in Charge? carries immeasurable value for scholars and students of Islam, religion, and women's and gender studies, activists working towards gender-egalitarianism, and (Muslim) feminists seeking empowerment within a religious framework; it also speaks to reform leaders and lawmakers in Muslim states, who might better understand the fundamental assumptions upon which family laws operate and their disconnect from the reality that women and families face. The book's major success lies in covering several important layers of the myth of men's authority: from the theoretical gaps in the notions of qiwamah, wilayah, istikhlaf, to a practical examination of the impact of these legal principles, and proposals for new and creative approaches for feminists to apply in their vision of a gender-egalitarian Islam.'*

## IV. International Advocacy

### Musawah Oral Statement on Article 16: Tanzania

An [Oral Statement](#) on Tanzania was submitted to the CEDAW Committee on behalf of Musawah by IWRAW-AP at the 63<sup>rd</sup> CEDAW Session in February 2016. Musawah highlighted the discriminatory practice of polygamy in family law and challenged the government's statement that '[it] is not a practice in contention, as it is associated with people's religions and traditional beliefs which sanction polygamy.' Musawah challenged the use of religion and tradition to justify male authority over women, and the government's position that legitimises only patriarchal voices in defining belief and practice.

- ❖ To read past Musawah Thematic Reports and Oral Statements, click [here](#).
- ❖ To keep abreast of new and upcoming activities from the Musawah International Advocacy Programme, click [here](#).

### Calling All Activists Engaging at 64<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> UN CEDAW Sessions

Musawah seeks to connect with activists working on rights of Muslim women, including in minority contexts, from France, Myanmar, Philippines, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Canada who are engaged in the shadow reporting process for the 64<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> CEDAW Sessions in Geneva.

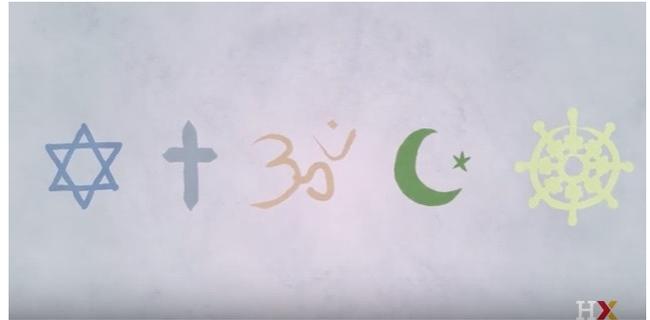
Musawah's international advocacy work supports activists living in Muslim contexts to strengthen their arguments, critically examining the status of marriage and family relations, as encapsulated largely in Articles 2, 9, 15, and 16 of the CEDAW Convention.

- ❖ Please contact Natasha Dar, the Musawah International Advocacy Officer, [natasha@musawah.org](mailto:natasha@musawah.org).

## V. Resources

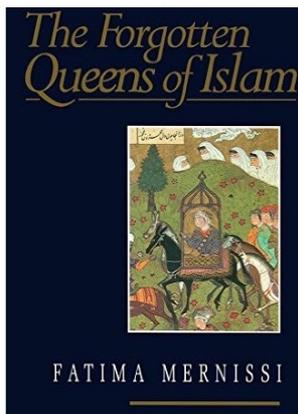
- ❖ Harvard's online XSeries on *World Religions Through Their Scriptures* is a series of 6 courses on understanding the world's religions through their scriptural traditions and socio-historical contexts:

*'Just as religion cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural contexts, it is impossible to fully understand a culture without considering its religious dimensions. Religion is inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience, and a better understanding of it is crucial for meeting the variety of opportunities and challenges we face today and into the future.'*



[Click for video](#)

- ❖ The late Fatima Mernissi's *Forgotten Queens of Islam* documents the lives and reigns of 15 women who ruled between 1000 and 1800 AD throughout the Islamic world. Originally written in French, the book has been translated and published in 9 languages:

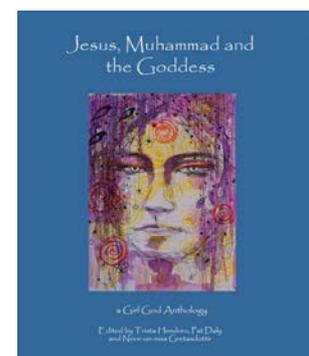


*'...perhaps we should begin by answering a question that is both more prosaic and more fundamental: How did these women contrive to take power in states which, as a matter of principle, defined politics as an exclusively male pursuit? There is no feminine form of the words imam and caliph, the two words that embody the concept of power in the Arabic language, the language in which the Koran was revealed. The Lisan Al 'Arab dictionary informs us without qualification that "al-khalifatu la yakuna illa li al-dhakar" (caliph is used only in the masculine). In such a context, where the principle is exclusion, any infiltration into the realm of political decision-making by women, even under the cloak of and in the corridors of the harem, even behind dozens of curtains, veils and latticed windows, is an utterly laudable and heroic adventure.'*

- ❖ *Jesus, Muhammad and the Goddess* is a rich anthology of writings by 35 international contributors that marries faith with feminism, and asks pertinent questions:

*'By altering tradition – and amending the translation from the (now) traditional "He" to "She" – does the collective consciousness of the Ummah shift? Do we authentically reclaim the Divine Feminine inside Allah that was acknowledged 1400 years ago? Do we eliminate the neo-patriarchal paradigm that infects the Islam of our modern era?'*

~ Shahla Khan Salter, author of chapter *Inside Allah, the One Divine Mother and the Conscience of Islam*



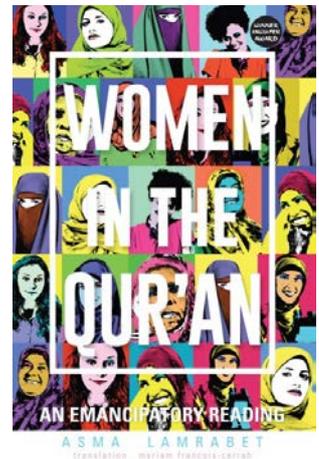
- ❖ **Information and Guidance on Muslim Marriage and Divorce in Britain** by Musawah Advocates in the UK, **Muslim Women's Network**, covers common questions raised on Muslim marriage and divorce in Britain:



*'The word zawaj is used in the Qur'an to signify a "pairing", hence used in religious language to mean marriage. South Asian communities commonly use the term nikah for marriage or the marriage contract... according to some people the term nikah literally means "sexual intercourse." Linguistically it is disputed whether the term in origin means sexual intercourse, or actually does not mean the contract of marriage... it is used to describe a formal contract that makes the sexual relationship between a man and a woman lawful under Muslim law (General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta). Although a Muslim marriage ceremony may have a religious component, it is in fact a civil contract.'*  
 ~ Shaista Gohir, author

- ❖ Musawah Advocate Asma Lamrabet's latest publication **Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading** is a testament to Muslim women who are calling for the revival of the Islamic spirit of equality through their demand for reform as an act of devotion to the Most High:

*'Indeed, today many Muslim female intellectuals, living both in Muslim societies and in Western countries, through their academic, social and theological research, but above all in the name of their faith, are challenging a vast array of prejudices on this issue. In particular, they dispute the classical analysis stipulating that inequality between men and women and its corollary of discriminatory measures are an inherent part of the sacred Text, by demonstrating that it is, in fact, certain tendentious readings endorsed by patriarchal customs, which instead legitimised these very same inequalities. It is crucial to emphasise that these new positive forms of resistance are being generated by Muslim women who, while holding a critical perspective on certain religious readings, are practicing believers, and its in the name of their faith that they claim the right to have their say.'*



## CONTACT US

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