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Women's Religious Leadership in Historical Perspective: An Analytical Study of Western and Muslim Contexts

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the history of women's rights in the West and how it shapes current debates on women's religious leadership. The struggle for women's rights is not a recent trend; it has deep historical roots. In ancient Greece, for instance, society was heavily male-dominated, leaving women with very few rights. Over time, some turned to monastic life, which offered them both social space and economic security. Gradually, women expanded beyond convent walls into public life, pursuing education during the Medieval period. The Protestant Reformation marked another turning point, encouraging women to study scripture directly and question traditional religious interpretations. Later, the Methodist movement gave women active roles in preaching. Along with the rise of democracy, secularism, and modernity, these shifts steadily broadened female autonomy. Having achieved greater equality in social and political life, women naturally began to demand equal leadership within their faith communities. Reflecting this cross-cultural evolution, Muslim feminist Amina Wadud—who grew up in a Methodist household—brought the debate over female-led prayer (imamat) to the forefront of modern Islamic discourse. In doing so, she opened up a groundbreaking conversation on women's spiritual leadership that continues to spark debate across Muslim societies today.

Keywords: *Women's rights, Protestant Reformation, Methodist Movement, women's Religious leadership, Amina Wadud, Imamat.*

Introduction
This article adopts a predominantly historical approach. Western and Muslim Feminist have produced extensive literature on various issues including creation, qiwamah, testimony, inheritance, divorce, Prophethood, Polygamy and women's religious leadership (Imamat). To which Muslim Scholars have responded through numerous books, academic articles incorporating Islamic teachings and the views of Muslim Jurists. Consequently, a substantial body of literature on these issues is available in the form of books and scholarly articles. Therefore,

this article focuses exclusively on the history of feminist's religious leadership rather than the stance of Muslim Scholars on women's religious leadership.

Every religion in the world, whether revealed or non-revealed, recognizes the dignity, honour and gives rights to women. No religious teaching advocates injustice, oppression and discrimination against women. Islam is a religion of peace. Allah Almighty has granted both men and women equal rights, but their responsibilities are different. It is according to their nature and roles. Like, man is responsible for the financial support and provision of family, while Allah has entrusted the woman with the responsibility of nurturing and upbringing of offspring. The selection of different responsibilities and roles for each gender reflects the wisdom of Allah Almighty that is betterment to humanity. However, some women are dissatisfied with these natural responsibilities and their desires to attain a position equal to men in all aspects that have appeared in different eras through various movements. Although in theses eras, women not only changed their social and economic status, but also sought equality with men in religious matters as well.

1. Ancient Greek Era

Among the ancient civilizations, Greek civilization was considered one of the greatest civilization. However, as its material prosperity increased, the people of Greek gradually involved in various moral and ethical vices. Male dominance was common in society and the foundation of this civilization was based on rational traditions and philosophical thinking rather than religious beliefs[1]. Therefore, in this era, women had a very low status in terms of moral concepts, social behavior and have a very limited religious right. Against the backdrop of inferior status of women. There were many myths, one was, woman born from man was particularly prominent[2]. Women were considered "Pandora"[3] and the root of Evil. Therefore, many people sent their daughters to convents[4]. Where they were forced to live secluded life. This was because monasticism was considered a means of salvation for women[5].

American feminist bell hooks wrote about this in her book: Feminism is for everybody"

"Throughout the history of the Church in western life women have to turned monastic traditions to find a place for themselves where they can be with God without the intervention of men, where they can serve the divine without male domination"[6]

2. Roman Era

The civilization of Greeks was passed on to the Romans; therefore, they shared similar customs and traditions. These people were patriotic, and their attention was mostly focused on worldly affairs. Their mindset was largely devoted to creating legal and administrative institutions. Therefore, religious beliefs among the Romans gradually took the form of laws and regulations. Due to their legal and organizational mindset, external rituals and formalities increased among the Romans, while the spiritual aspects gradually become weaker. Therefore, the status and position of women that had continued from the Greek era, could not bring any significant change during the Roman era either[7]

3. Medieval Period

The concept of women living in monastic life, which had continued from the Greek era, did not change during the Medieval Period. Infact, in this period monasticism was no longer limited to a religious duty, it became a social practice. This was because, monastic life was an economic necessity. In western families, those who had

[1] Will Durant, *The Life of Greece*, vol. 2 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), 13–14.

[2] DK, *The Feminism Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained* (New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing Limited, 2009), 25.

[3] Among the Greek, the myth related to woman is known as "Pandora". According to this myth, due to man's disobedience, the Greek god Zeus created the first woman and all gods gave her a "Pandora Box". After coming into the world, she opened the box, which caused suffering, diseases, and evils to spread throughout the world.
Hesiod, *Works and Days*, trans. M.L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 39-41.

[4] Convent is a religion institution within the Church where women lived a secluded life, dedicating themselves to religious devotion and spiritual practices.
https://www.britannica.com/topic/convent/Rev accessed on, 22 April 2025.

[5] Bell Hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 105–108.

[6] Ibid., 105.

[7] Hassan Askari, *Jadidiyat* (Lahore: Idara-e-Farogh-e-Islam, 1994), 28.

more daughters or were financially weak. They send their daughters to convent. Women who lived in convent were restricted to a secluded life from the Church. Medieval Period was the longest period in Western civilization. During this period, the lives of women living in convent underwent significant changes. They began to show interest in education and participated in social activities outside the convent8.

Australian feminist and scholar Margaret Walters wrote in her book about a German woman Hildegard of Bingen. She was a Nun, who challenged the formal system of Church. Hildegard not only received the education but also actively participated in social activities. She started the preaching activities. According to Margaret Walter, before this, time women were not allowed to preach. Along with the Hildegard, other nuns also begun to participate in educational and social activities. In this way, these nuns gradually extended their activities beyond the Church and became a source of education for other women. Inside the convent, these women (Nuns) also established educational institutions.[9]

American feminist Gerda Lerner wrote about, in her book: "For many centuries learned women appear only in convent, with the exception of few noble women at certain courts. The spread of Nunneries is therefore a rough indication of the spread of learning among women"[10]. From the Greek period to the Middle Ages, the role of nuns for the education of women remained highly positive. These nuns not only encouraged women towards education but also awakened social awareness among them. But, in ancient Greek period, women had faced strict religious and social restrictions. As women gradually gained access to education and social activities. A new consciousness emerged among them that initiated a new debate about the religious role of women in later periods.

4. Protestant Reformation

In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther, that triggered religious and social conflicts in many Western countries[11]. Martin Luther rejected the concept of women living a monastic life as nuns. Before Protestant Reformation, access to Bible was largely restricted to the Church. After this Reformation, Bible was translated into several vernacular languages that enabling women to gain direct access to its teachings and study the Scriptures for themselves.[12]

This era became a cause of change for women in terms of religious life. Because, during this period women gained greater access to religious education and engaged directly with sacred texts (Bible). The religious consciousness that emerged from their study and reflection inspired and contributed to the development of various religious movements, that eventually changed the nature of religious worship.

Australian feminist Margarat Walters wrote in her book "Feminism: A very short introduction" about the early French writer Jane Anger. She published a pamphlet in 1589 (Jane Anger: Her protection for women) in which she wrote that: "Eve was superior to Adam: a second and hence improved, model. Whereas Adam was fashioned from 'dross and filthy clay'. God made Eve from Adam's flesh, that she might be purer than he, which doth evidently show far we women are more excellent than men." American feminist bell hooks wrote in her book "Feminism is for everybody" that: "Early on feminist movement launched a critique of patriarchal religion that had a profound impact, changing the nature of religious worship throughout our nation" [13]

A new change that emerged during the Protestant Reformation, women's increasing engagement with the study of the Bible and reinterpret Biblical passage concerning to woman. These women established a religious

[8] Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

[9] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23–64.

[10] Ibid., 24.

[11] Martin Luther started the Protestant Reformation movement in Germany against the system of Roman Catholic Church in Western Society. As a result, Protestant beliefs began to spread in Germany, France and other Western Countries. Due to which not only the influence of Church began to decrease but, religious and social conflicts started in these countries. A large number of people with Protestant beliefs began to migrate from Germany and France to Britain and America. Along with men, women also included them. In the countries to which these men and women migrated, they began to organize religious movements.

Rebecca Vandoodwaard, *Reformation Women: Sixteenth Century Figures who shaped Christianity Rebirth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1982), Introduction.

[12] Ibid.

[13] hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 105.

movement[14] known as the "Quaker". In this movement, they focused their attention on developing new interpretations from women's perspective. To put all this into a practical movement, in 1895 an American feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her fellow activists wrote a book entitled "The women's Bible". In which they presented the new interpretation of Biblical teaching with the concerning of women's status, rights, roles and religious participation. In this book Stanton wrote that:

> The Old Testament makes woman a mere after-thought in creation, the author of evil, cursed in her maternity, a subject in marriage, and all female life, animal and human, unclean. The Church in all ages has taught these doctrines and acted on them, claiming divine authority therefor. "As Christ is the head of the Church, so is man the head of woman." This idea of woman's subordination is reiterated times without number, from Genesis to Revelations, and this is the basis of all Church action.[15]

Stanton's book was marked a declaration of separation of women from Church and all traditional interpretations from the Church.

5. Methodist Movement

In the Eighteen century, John Wesley started a reform movement. Wesley belonged to the Protestant Christian and he was a Priest in Church of England. Wesley felt that the teaching of Church were not effectively reaching to common people especially poor and working classes. So, he begun open air preaching. Wesley did not reject the Protestant beliefs, rather, he wanted to reform Protestant Christianity through Spiritual renewal. Which later developed a separate section called Methodist Reformation[16].

John Wesley encouraged women to participate in religious activities especially for preaching within the Methodist Church. According to John Wesley, "If God gives a woman the gift of preaching, she should not be silenced"[17]. In 1752 one woman "Sarah Crosby" began preaching within Methodist Church. When Wesley learned about her activities, he encouraged her. Later, she began preaching more openly, including outside the Church. Which became an example of women's participation in Methodist preaching for other women. [18]

During the Wesley's era, women socially gained more freedom and were included in religious activities. Wesley had permitted women to preach, but, he did not established a formal system for the ordination of women as Priest.

6. Modern Period

17th and 18th centuries, brought many changes in western countries that contributed the empowerment of women. The establishment of democracy led to political changes. When secular laws were formed, women began to demand equal political rights (Right for vote) with men. Many Human rights organizations were also established in many Western countries during this period. The African slave trade in America, which had been going on from many centuries, became the focus of these organizations. These enslaved people included both men and women. Many movements began to emerge for their freedom. Overtime, these movements discussed many other issues such as early marriages, right of woman to divorce, right to own property etc.[19]

During this period, industrial revolution also took place in many Western countries, which strengthened women socially and economically. The First World War also took place in this period, in which a large number of men joined the war and women got opportunities to work in factories. Which had such an impact on women that at the end of the war, women refused to go back in their domestic lives. They started demanding equal wages to men in factories, which was a new debate on women's economic rights[20].

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[14] "Feminism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism (accessed January 29, 2025)

[15] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895), Preface.

[16] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism/, accessed on 12 April, 2025.

[17] https://markmcelroy.com/wesley-women-and-the-wca-how-john-wesley-decided-who-should-preach/, accessed on 12 April, 2025.

[18] https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/the-reformation-and-the-wesleys-a-complex-relationship/, accessed on 8 December, 2024.

[19] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism/, accessed on 12 April, 2025.

[20] https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/, accessed on 12 April, 2025.

The French Sociologist and thinker Charles Fourier supported women's economic right in this regard and in 1837, he used the term "Feminism" in his writings to refer these movements[21]. Subsequently, in the West, the term "feminism" began to be used for these movements, while women associated with these movements referred as "Feminists".

During the first wave of feminism which emerged in the 19th century, women began to demand equal political rights, particularly the right for vote. The British Parliament granted women the right to vote in 1918, while the United States extended voting rights to women in 1920[22]. During the second wave of feminism, these feminist passed all the Acts[23] from parliament in America that brought them equal to men in social life[24].

During the 19th and 20th century, Methodist Church expanded and divided into several branches in USA. Women became increasingly involved in preaching, missionary work, education of women and particularly participation in Church leadership. In 1980, United Methodist Church elected Marjorie Matthews[25] as a first female religious leader (Bishop). This marked the beginning of the practice of appointing women as Bishop in Methodist Church.

This movement emerged from the West but, its influence subsequently extended to every religion Buddhism, Judaism and Islam. Feminist belonging to each religion increasingly focused on participation in women's leadership in religious institutions. In Muslim countries, many organizations[26] were established to spread this debate at global level. Groups such as "Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia" and "Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa" were formed along with the website Muslim Wake Up! The aim of these efforts was to promote women's leadership in Prayer at global level[27].

The issue of woman leading the prayer has been divided by Muslim scholars in two aspects: the first is that woman should lead a congregational of women only, while the second is that a woman should lead a congregational of men. The majority of Islamic scholars hold that a woman may lead a congregation of women in prayer and all jurists (except Imam Malik) are agree on this matter. As there are examples of this practice in Islamic history.

It is narrated by Hazrat Raitah al-Khanfiyyah:

عَنْ رَيْطَةَ الْحَنَفِيَّةِ قَالَتْ : أَمَّتْنَا عَائِشَةُ، فَقَامَتْ بَيْنَهُنَّ فِي الصَّلَاةِ الْمَكْتُوبَةِ. 28 :

Hazrat Ayesha led us in the obligatory prayer and stood among the women.

In another Hadith, Hazrat Hujayrah Bint-e-Hussain said:

عَنْ حُجَيْرَةَ قَالَتْ :أَمَّتْنَا مُسَلَّمَةُ فِي صَلَاةِ الْعَصْرِ، قَامَتْ بَيْنَنَا.29 :

Hazrat Umm-e-Salmah led us in the afternoon prayer and stood among us.

There are no common examples in Islamic history of a woman leading men in Prayer. Because, this is not a common practice. This has been the practice of Muslim Ummah for the past 1400 years that man led the Prayer. Muslim feminist Amina Wadud was first woman to bring this debate in Muslim world. She led Friday Prayer for a congregation of men and women.

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21 https://livewire.thewire.in/livewire/charles-fourier-the-man-who-coined-the-term-feminism/, accessed on 3 November, 2025.

22 https://www.britannica.com/event/womens-movement/ , accessed on 12 April, 2025.

23 Equal Pay Act, Civil Rights Act, Equal Employment Opportunity Act, Equal Credit Opportunity Act

24 https://www.britannica.com/topic/second-wave-feminism/, accessed on 2 February, 2025.

25 https://www.umc.org/en/content/marjorie-matthews-journey-as-the-umcs-first-female-bishop/ , accessed on 16 April, 2025.

26 These organizations were also established in the same countries where Muslim Feminist Amina Wadud belonged. Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 191.

27 Juliane Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 39.

28 Abdul Razzaq Ibn-e-Hammam al-Sanani, *al-Musannaf*, ed. Habib al-Rehman al Azami (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1983), 3, Hadith no 5132.

29 Ibid.

7. Amina Wadud: Introduction and Methodist Background

African-American Muslim feminist and Theologian30 Dr. Amina Wadud was born in Malaysia on September 25, 1952. Her birth name was Mary Tesly[31].

Amina Wadud's mother was from Arab and of "Berber" descent[32]. During the first wave of feminism along with the issues such as women's legal rights and social equality. This movement was also connected with the issue of slavery and the buying and selling of enslaved people in the United States[33]. The ancestors of Amina Wadud also belonged to the African descent community, whose were brought to America as Slaves[34].

She received her early education at a secondary school in Massachusetts, USA, and earned her Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from University of Pennsylvania[35].

In 1972, at the age of twenty Amina embraced Islam[36]. In this time the second wave of feminism was underway in Western countries and the debates was taking place in both Western and Muslim societies regarding the equal rights of men and women, interpretation of religious text and women religious leadership (as Imam) within religious institutions.

In 1988, she did PhD37 in Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan, USA. In 1992, she wrote her first book, "Quran and woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective" which was her PhD dissertation. In this book, Amina critically examines the interpretation of classical exegetes and presented new interpretations of specific Quranic Verses. She included many of the same themes that had previously explored by American feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her book "The women's Bible" in nineteenth century. Amina's book is included in the curriculum of western academic institutions.

In her books, Amina writes38 about two of her teachers who have influenced her. One of them is Fazlur Rehman39, whose hermeneutical approach Amina adopted in her book. The other is Khalid Abou El-Fadl40, who introduced Amina to modern Islamic jurisprudence.

One very interesting point is that Amina was belong to a Methodist Church. Because, her father belonged to a Protestant Christian family and served as a religious leader (Priest) in Methodist Church of America41. Her brought up was with Protestant Methodist beliefs, values and environment. Which became an important factor that led to the inclusion of women's preaching and religious leadership debate in Muslim world. Because, this practice was already prevalent within the Methodist tradition.

8. Amina Wadud's First Sermon "Khutba" (1994)

In 1994, Amina Wadud delivered her first sermon at a mosque in Cape Town, South Africa. The sermon reflected feminist perspectives, as its theme was "Woman and Childbirth". In this sermon, she not only discussed the challenges and stages of the childbirth process faced by women. Infact, she also shared her

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[30] This term is used for those feminists, who, by interpreting religious text from a new perspective and emphasize the religious and social rights of women.
https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/ , accessed on 12 April, 2025.

[31] https://www.icrs.or.id/visiting-professor/, accessed on 26 March, 2025.

[32] https://www.calem.eu/Amina-Wadud-doctor-imam.html/, accessed on 25 December, 2024.

[33] https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism /, accessed on 29 January, 2025.

[34] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 102.

[35] https://aminawadud.com/about-amina-wadud/, accessed on 25 February, 2025.

[36] One the factors that influenced her conversion to Islam was the circumstances and struggles of her life, including the challenges and deprivations she faced.
Amina Wadud, *Once in a Life Time* (Manchester: Kantara Press Limited, 2022), 18-20.

[37] https://aminawadud.com/about-amina-wadud/, accessed on 12 April, 2025.

[38] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Preface.

[39] Fazlur Rahman was a prominent advocate of modernism, who sought to reinterpret Islam in accordance with modern thought.

[40] Khalid Abou El-Fadl was a mufti at Al-Azhar University in Egypt who promoted the IJTIHAD to established equality between men and women.
https://www.searchforbeauty.org/2010/04/05/fatwa-on-women-leading-prayer/, accessed on 22 March, 2025.

[41] Ibid., 20.

personal experiences of giving birth to her five children[42]. This sermon marked the beginning of Amina Wadus's participation in religious activities within religious institutions.

9. Fatwa of Khaled Abou El-Fadl (2000)

In 2000, the Islamic scholar Khaled Abou El-Fadl issued a religious opinion (Fatwa) arguing that a Muslim woman may lead a congregation prayer of men and women. Thereby granting juristic legitimacy to women's religious leadership in congregational prayer. [43][44] American Feminist Juliane Hammer wrote in her book (American Muslim Women Religious Authority) that after this Fatwa, women Imamat gatherings were started at various places. For which many organizations were established to provide protection to these gatherings[45].

10. Asra Nomani interview on Amina's Congregational Prayer

The American feminist Juliane Hammer discussed in her book, an interview given by Indian-American feminist Asra Nomani to Al-Jazeera TV concering Amina's views and activities regarding women's religious leadership. These were the words, she used in her interview.

> "Today is the dawn of a new day in the history of Islam. We are opening the door of the Muslim world to WOMEN and to people of all faith. This is not just about Mosques, It is about opening up the doors of Islam to everyone. I am so excited about today. We are going to change the history and the course of Muslim world…...We have the right to stand without barriers. America and the West have to deal with glass ceilings, we have bricks walls in front of us, and we are hammering them dawn and it is so that we can bust open the Muslim world for a better day[46].

The event of Amina's Imamat was organized by American feminist Asra Nomani and her organization "Muslim Women Freedom"[47]. Fatwa of Egyptian scholar Khalid Abou El-Fadl and Asra Nomani's interview served as a formal call for Muslim women to pursue the role of leading congregational Prayer.

11. Amina Wadud's Congregational Prayer (18th March 2005)

On March 18th, 2005 Amina's led a mixed gender congregation Prayer of over one hundred women, children and men in a church of New York. [48] The call to Prayer (Adhan) was given by a woman named Suhaila al-Attar, who was dressed in western attire.[49]

According to Amina wadud, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) permitted Umm-e-Warqah to lead a congregation Prayer that included men[50].

The wording of the hadith of Umm-e-Warqa is as follows:

> حَدَّثَنَا الْحَسَنُ بْنُ حَمَّادٍ الْحَضْرَمِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ فُضَيْلٍ، عَنْ الْوَلِيدِ بْنِ جُمَيْعٍ، عَنْ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنِ خَلَّادٍ،عَنْ أُمِّ وَرَقَةَ بِنْتِ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ الْحَارِثِ، بِهَذَا الْحَدِيثِ، وَالْأَوَّلُ أَتَمُّ، قَالَ: وَكَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَزُورُهَا فِي بَيْتِهَا، وَجَعَلَ لَهَا مُؤَذِّنًا يُؤَذِّنُ لَهَا وَأَمَرَهَا أَنْ تَؤُمَّ أَهْلَ دَارِهَا[51].
>
> "Al-Hassan Ibn Hammad al-hadrami narrated to us, Muhammad Bin Fudayl narrated to us, from Al-Walid Bin Jumay, from Abdul Rehman Bin khallad, from Umm-e-Warqah Bint-e-Abdullah Bin Harith, that the Rasool Allah (ﷺ) used to visit her home. He appointed a mu'adhdhin for her to call the Adhan and instructed her to lead the people of her household in Prayer".

In this hadith Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) appointed a mu'adhdhin for her, while another hadith also provides further details that Umm-e-Warqah also had a male slave. So, this hadith can be interpreted in two ways. First, it

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42 Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 191.
43 https://www.searchforbeauty.org/2010/04/05/fatwa-on-women-leading-prayer/, accessed on 22 March 2025;
44 Hammer, *American Muslim Women*, 39.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 19.
47 Hammer, *American Muslim Women*, 40.
48 https://www.calem.eu/Amina-Wadud-doctor-imam.html/, accessed on 15 January 2025.
49 Hammer, *American Muslim Women*, 40.
50 Wadud, *Once in a Lifetime*, 39.
51 Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud, Kitab al-Salah*, vol. 1 (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Asriyyah, n.d.), 592.

may be inferred that only women offered Prayer under the leadership of Umm-e-Warqah and after gave the Adhan, mu'adhdhin and slave may have gone another mosque to perform the Prayer.

Second, it may be understand that men also participated in the Prayer led by her. Muslim scholar Dr. Hamidullah responds to this by stating that[52], at times, exceptions to general rules may be necessary under specific circumstances. He further relates a personal experience from his stay in Paris. He recounts a woman once approached him and said that she had married a newly converted Muslim man, who wanted to practice Islam but didn't know how to perform the Prayer. She asked "Can I lead him in Prayer". Dr. Hamidullah replied that until he learned how to perform the Prayer and memorized the required Quranic Surah. He could Pray behind her as a follower.

Dr. Hamidullah permitted the women to do so as an exceptional case, emphasizing that such permission is limited to only exceptional circumstances, as it is not an established or customary practice. But there were no exceptional circumstances in Amina Wadud case, as no valid Shariah-based justification was presented for it.

Now, the question arises that why Umm-e-Warqah needed a mu'adadhin and why she was not permitted to give the call to prayer herself? The answer is that according to traditional Islamic understanding, a woman cannot serve as a mu'adhdhin. If a woman is not permitted to give the Adhan for men, it may be questioned… how she could lead men in congregational prayer?

Another point is that according to classical Muslim scholar Allama Ibn-e-Hajar al-Asqalani, the chain of transmission in the Hadith of Umm-e-Warqah is weak. In Tahdhib-al-Tahdhib, while discussing the narrator Abdul Rehman Ibn-e-Khallad, who is the original narrator of this hadith. Ibn Hajar cites Abu-al-Hassan Ibn-e-al Qattan that his status is unknown (حالہ مجھولہ), meaning that nothing is known about his condition or reliability as a narrator53. Therefore, it is not an appropriate way to raise doubts in people's minds on the basis of narrations transmitted by a narrator whose status in unknown.

After Amina Wadud's religious leadership, Muslim societies took place a new turn. She opened the door for other women to led the Friday Prayer. Her Imamat in Friday Prayer became a controversial issue and media-worthy event globally. Because, she was considered one of the first Muslim feminist to bring the debate of women leading Prayer in global media attention.

Juliane Hammer wrote that, the news of this event spread throughout the World with newspapers, television, internet, websites, and blogs. It was not merely a news, rather, it became a global debate among Muslims. Articles based on the opinions and analysis of different scholars and commentators began to appear in newspapers. Due to the impact of media coverage, this event was also discussed and partrayed as a subject in books and movies[54]. In 2007, Iranian-American film-maker Ellie safari made a documentary film on Amina's life and its name was "The Noble Struggle of Amina Wadud".[55]

After Amina Wadud's led the Friday Prayer, women in Muslim societies became more open about leading prayers within religious institutions.

- In 2004, Maryam Mirza delivered the Eid sermon at a mosque in Toronto, known as the United Muslim Association[56].
- In 2005, Pakistani-born Canadian author and feminist Raheel Raza led a mixed congregational prayer at University of Oxford in United Kingdom[57].
- In 2016, Shireen Khankan established a Maryam Mosque in Copenhagen (Denmark), where the call to prayer (Adhan) and leading of prayers (Imamat) are performed exclusively by women[58].
- In 2020, Kahina Belloul established the Fatima Mosque in France, where prayers are led exclusively by women.[59]

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[52] Hamidullah, *Khutbat-e-Bahawalpur* (Islamabad: Idara Tahqiqat-e-Islami, 2002), 343.

[53] Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*, vol. 6 (Hyderabad: Dairat al-Maarif al-Nizamiyyah, 1326 AH), 172.

[54] Ibid.

[55] https://emro.libraries.psu.edu/record/index/, accessed on 2 March 2025.

[56] Hammer, *American Muslim Women*, 38.

[57] https://twocircles.net/2010jun10/muslim_woman_invited_lead_mixed_gender_prayers.html/, accessed on 2 March 2025.

[58] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3760962/Denmark-opens-female-led-mosque-rare-sound-woman-singing-Friday-call-prayer.html/2 March 2025

There are numerous examples of women leading mixed gender prayers and this practice continue to this day.

Conclusion

The struggle for women's basic rights throughout different historical periods has been closely connected with the emergence of women's religious leadership in later periods. No religion advocates women's leadership as Rabbi, Priest and Imam in religious institutions. This is not a common practice but now it has become more prevalent with women increasingly entering religious leadership in contemporary era. They are supported by feminist movement, modernist interpretations and certain progressive religious institutions and communities that advocate the religious leadership. In Muslims societies, Muslim feminists are following the path adopted by Western feminists. This has been the practice of Muslim Ummah for the past 1400 years that man led the Prayer. Islamic history also demonstrates that a woman may lead only women in Prayer. Muslim Feminist Amina Wadud with Protestant Methodist background led a mixed congregational Prayer of about 100 Men and Women in Church of America. On this occasion, there was neither an exceptional circumstances nor any Sharia Justification was presented. The aim of this was to attain equal status to man within religious institutions, as had occurred in the West. After Amina Wadus's, there are numerous examples instances exist in Muslim societies, in which women have led the congregational prayer. Infact, this practice continues to persist in contemporary time.

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