

Inaugural Shamima Shaikh Commemorative Lecture

Delivered by

Prof Kecia Ali

*Muslim feminism,
Islamic Law, and the
Quest for Gender Justice*

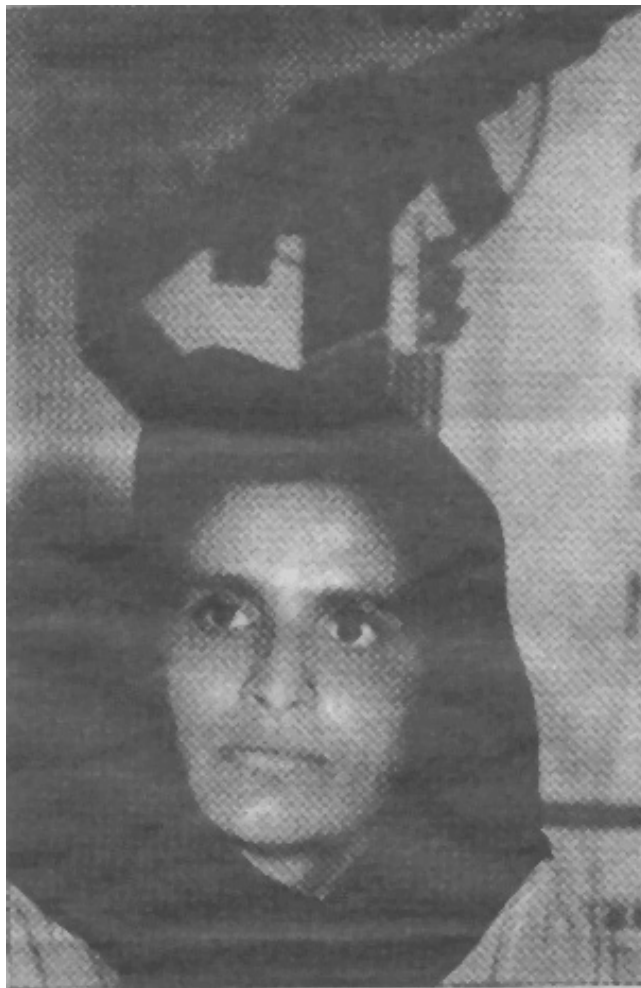
20 September 2014

Women's Gaol, Constitutional Hill
Johannesburg



A project of the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful



SHAMIMA SHAIKH

14 September 1960 - 8 January 1998

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A Leader Who Inspired Courage

Thandile Kona

I never met Shamima Shaikh; I never heard the sound of her voice; and I never viewed her mannerisms. However, I have come to know Shamima as a woman with an unwavering commitment to justice and a consuming love for humanity. Her activism, which started long before she became a member of the Muslim Youth Movement's national executive committee or a member of the movement itself, reached a high point in 1993 when, as the MYM's Transvaal regional chairperson, she led a group of women to attend tarawih prayers at a Johannesburg mosque, against the wishes of the mosque "authorities". She subsequently became the first National Coordinator of the MYM's Gender Desk, a position she held until 1997.

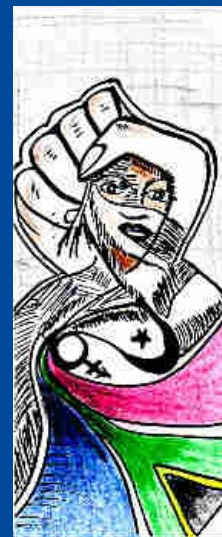
How should we best remember someone as complex as Shamima in the current context which has experienced the apparent reversal of the many small but significant victories that she helped achieve? How should we celebrate her life? I suggest that we can best remember Shamima by searching for answers to fundamental questions about the Muslims of South Africa and how far we have travelled on the road towards the realisation of social and economic justice in our country. Have we bridged the gap between rich and poor; between men and women; between african, indian and malay Muslims?

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FROM MUSLIM YOUTH MOVEMENT

Thandile Kona is the president of the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa



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We would also do well to celebrate Shamima's life by remembering that she had outgrown her "indianness"; she had, in fact, become black, Steve Biko black, the best black there can be. This is not surprising, seeing that she cut her political teeth in the political tradition of Black Consciousness. Shamima had embraced her blackness at a time when there was no gain to be had for openly identifying as black, no affirmative action appointments to be bestowed, and no Black Economic Empowerment to be enjoyed. There was only harassment, imprisonment and, even, death. What would Shamima make of us South African Muslims now, when we have retreated into ethnic, economic and social laagers?

In Shamima we have a woman, a leader, who stood by her faith and her principles, and who, literally, fell by them. This was illustrated when she fulfilled her last public engagement, delivering a talk from a wheelchair at an MYM Islamic Tarbiyyah Programme in December 1997 after her hip had collapsed due to the ravages of cancer. This was mere days before her death. She lived and died by the Qur'anic injunction in Sura Al-Nisa, verse 135: "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So follow not personal inclination, lest you be not just."

Her greatest legacy is the courage she has inspired in many of us to confront the injustices that we face today, armed with the knowledge that even if we do not succeed, Allah will be pleased with us for having, like Shamima, committed our entire beings to the task. May we be inspired by her courage and commitment to a just society, and may Allah be pleased with her, and she with Him.

Shamima Shaikh:

Brief Profile of a Struggler

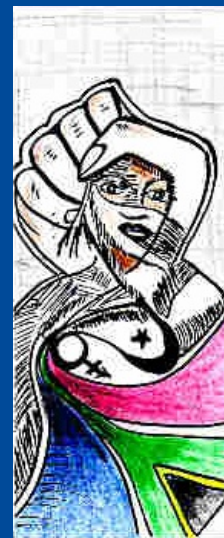
On the 14th September 1960, Shamima Salahuddin Shaikh was born in Louis Trichardt - in what is today South Africa's Limpopo Province - just north of the Tropic of Capricorn. She was the second of six children born to Salahuddin and Mariam Shaikh.

Shamima's first went to school in the town of Louis Trichardt in the north of the Transvaal province, until the family moved to Pietersburg, just over 100 km south. After completing her schooling in 1978, Shamima studied for a year at the University of Durban-Westville (UD-W) before returning home. She returned to UD-W in 1984, and completed her Bachelor of Arts Degree, majoring in Arabic and Psychology, in 1985. These were politically-charged years at the university, and Shamima got involved in a Black Consciousness organisation, the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). While a student at UD-W, she also joined and was elected to the executive committee of the university's students' Islamic Society.

Towards the end of her stint at the university, on the 4th September 1985, and in a development that was to change her life, Shamima was arrested for distributing pamphlets that called for a consumer boycott of White-owned businesses. She spent the next few hours locked up at Durban's CR Swart Police Station with her partner-in-crime, Na'eem Jeenah, who was also the national president of the Muslim Students Association. This was the couple's first meeting, but it seemed to have made a strong impression on both of them.

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BIOGRAPHY OF SHAMIMA SHAIKH





Shamima completed her BA degree at the end of 1985 and performed the 'umrah pilgrimage to Makkah. Thereafter, she returned to her home town of Pietersburg where she taught at the Taxila Primary and Secondary school.

Just over two years after her arrest with Na'eem, the two activists married on 20 December 1985. Shamima moved to Johannesburg, and gave birth to Minhaj in September 1988. Na'eem had remained involved in the Muslim Youth Movement and the family moved to Durban in January 1989, where he took up a position as regional director of the MYM. He later was also appointed editor of the MYM's newspaper, Al-Qalam, and so began Shamima's involvement the paper. She also began to get increasingly involved in the MYM, where she saw felt she could realise her political activism.

With nationwide campaigns against the racist Tricameral Parliament elections in 1989, Shamima's political activity heightened, and over the next two years she was involved in activities of the Mass Democratic Movement; marches; demonstrations; mass rallies; solidarity campaigns; etc.

In the midst of this rather frenetic activity, and around the time that South African liberation movements were unbanned and political prisoners (including Nelson Mandela) were released, Shamima became pregnant for the second time, and Shir'a was born to the activist couple on the 8th October 1990.

At the beginning of 1991, Shamima and her family moved back to Johannesburg and, by the end of that year, she became more deeply involved with al-Qalam, writing copy and sub-editing others' articles, as well as with the MYM. Two years later she was elected the Transvaal Regional Chairperson of the Muslim Youth Movement of

South Africa, and onto the movement's National Executive, becoming the second woman to hold such a position.

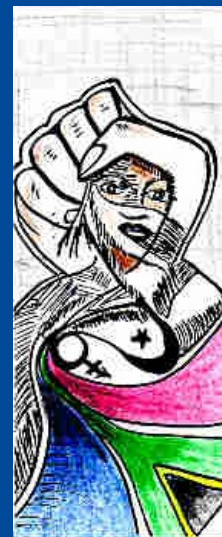
It was also around this time that she began articulating a discourse around gender and the marginalisation of women within the Muslim community, and, more broadly, within South African society. Thus, in 1993 Shamima led women in a campaign to attend the tarawih prayers at the 23rd Street Mosque in Fietas, Johannesburg, without obtaining the approval of the mosque committee. The action led to clashes between her and some of the members of the mosque committee and thrust Shamima into the public eye in a manner that she had not previously been. Suddenly, she was inundated with requests for interviews, and she was featured in various newspaper articles, and on radio and television programmes for her forthright positions on women's rights in Islam and other issues.

In December 1993 the MYM General Assembly resolved to set up the MYM Gender Desk – partly as a result of Shamima's activities – and she was elected the first National Co-ordinator of the new structure, which also granted her a place on the MYM's National Executive.

In her new position, Shamima organised workshops, seminars and campaigns around the country, and spearheaded the MYM's "Campaign for a Just Muslim Personal Law", and "Access to Mosques" campaign, among others. She was particularly keen that the discourse of gender in Islam not become an elitist one, and she travelled to poor and marginalised communities with her message of gender equality.

As political negotiations in South Africa reached certain agreements, a date was set for national elections for a new democratic parliament. With fellow activists from the MYM, Call of Islam and other organisations, Shamima co-founded the Muslim Forum on Elections –

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a coalition of groups that called on Muslims to vote in South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994, and to vote for those parties "that had formerly been part of the liberation movement" – particularly the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

In the same year that the elections took place, 1994, the MYM formed the Muslim Community Broadcasting Trust in order to apply for community radio licence in Johannesburg. Shamima helped found and became the first chairperson of the Trust. She remained its head until her death – less than five months after the radio station, "The Voice" had its launch broadcast.

One of the new bodies formed in anticipation of a democratic dispensation was the Muslim Personal Law Board of South Africa. Shamima was one of the MYM representatives on the board, and remained a member until the MPLB was unilaterally, and without consulting other members, shut down by the United Ulama Council of South Africa.

A few months after national elections in April 1994, Shamima was diagnosed with breast cancer. Doctors removed a lump from her breast, and she had to receive radiation treatment which weakened her physically. The treatment was effective for only a short period. It was discovered a year later that cancer secondaries had affected her entire skeleton. For this she was treated with high dose chemotherapy which immobilised her for periods of time. After that treatment and the disappearance of the cancer tumours, Shamima and Na'eem decided that she would not accept chemotherapy again if the cancer recurred. She preferred to die with dignity and continue until the end doing whatever she loved, rather than being sick in

hospital, she said. In 1996 she had a relapse and remained firm to her earlier decision.

That same year she was appointed Chief Editor of Al-Qalam. Under her editorship, Al-Qalam became the flagship of a progressive expression of Islam in South Africa, dealing with issues of gender, race, class, exploitation, international solidarity, and political and socioeconomic justice.

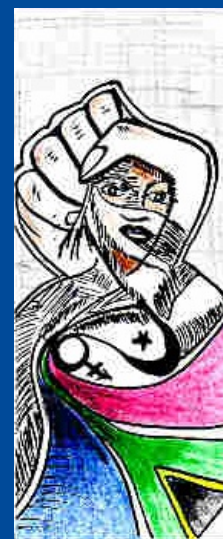
In April 1997, Shamima performed the hajj pilgrimage for the first time. After her return she and Na'eem began working on a manuscript about their hajj experiences. The result was Journey of Discovery: A South African Hajj, which was published in 2000, two years after her death.

Later that year, on the 22nd December 1997, Shamima completed her final public engagement, delivering a paper entitled “Women & Islam – The Gender Struggle in South Africa: The Ideological Struggle” at the 21st Islamic Tarbiyyah Programme of the Muslim Youth Movement, at the rural As Salaam Educational Institute on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast.

Seventeen days later, on the morning of 8th January 1998 (9 Ramadan 1418), Shamima returned to her Lord.

In death, as in life, Shamima challenged orthodoxy and traditionalism. One of the four janazah salawat (funeral prayers) performed for her was led by a woman friend – as per Shamima’s request, and a number of women attended her janazah salah at Masjid al-Islam in Johannesburg, and the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town. In Pietersburg, where her body was buried, scores of women attended the funeral prayer and the burial.

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FROM THE CONVENING COMMITTEE

Safiyyah Surtee is member of the Shamima Shaikh Commemorative Lecture convening committee, and lecturer in Religion at the University of Johannesburg



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Honouring Shamima Shaikh: Reflections of an activist and an admirer

Safiyyah Surtee

I never met Shamima Shaikh. I was only eleven years of age in the year that she returned to her Creator. Yet in all the work that I am involved in, Shamima inspires me to persevere, to push forward, and not to give up, even when the challenges seem insurmountable. We are still fighting many of the same battles that she fought, related to the subjugation and marginalisation of women in our communities through patriarchal interpretations of our source texts. However, on reading her writings, lectures and the many tributes about her, as well as listening to people who speak of her, I am not sure that we could ever do it with the same dignity and grace that she had.



Shamima's life stands as a great testament to an Islam which provides the impetus for transformation. She was a trailblazer in the struggle for gender justice in the South African Muslim community, not only laying foundations, but also building the structures on which so many of us in the gender justice discourse are able to lean on today.

Shamima had been called "mad" by some of her opponents. I suppose this was an inarticulate way of describing her courage and boldness

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in a community which idealised submissiveness and passivity as exemplary feminine qualities. Both her life and her death were symbols of struggle for the rights of Muslim women.

Once, when I delivered a conference paper on gender justice eight months into my pregnancy, feeling overworked and exhausted, it did me well to remember that my efforts were a small feat compared to Shamima's; she had presented her last paper just 17 days before she passed away, whilst very ill with cancer. I have often recalled her struggles at various junctures in my own activism. I remembered her, for example, when I was standing in a room full of male 'ulama who were hostile to my presence; and, on another occasion, when my lecture in a masjid was disrupted, and I was verbally attacked and intimidated.

We often remember Shamima just for her gender activism, but her example pushes us to extend our engagement – as she had done – for other just political causes. She was not so immersed in community squabbles that she forgot the other burdensome realities: apartheid, racism and capitalism. She was also an activist with a deep and strong spiritual commitment. One of her letters during an exchange with the 'ulama moved me since I first read it, and provided a peek into her profound insight on the spiritual foundation of Islam which she beautifully merged and immersed with her activist passions.

“Muslims throughout the world commemorate the birth date of Muhammad (saw),” she wrote. “We recall that he came as a mercy unto humankind, challenging inhumane and unjust practices. He brought the message of peace and tauhid – forever forbidding subservience to any but Allah. The unity of Allah bears testimony that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that all humankind





is equal irrespective of race, class or gender.”

It is a privilege for me to be part of the convening committee for the Inaugural Shamima Shaikh Commemoration Lecture, a long-overdue initiative. Paying tribute to the immense contribution and legacy of Shamima is the least we can do to honour her memory, and to remind us that we need to continue to champion, with all our strength, the causes that were close to her heart, for these are the causes that will ensure the spiritual, psychological and material well-being of our communities – in both its male and female members.

It is a special experience for us to be able to come together as family, friends, comrades, students and admirers of Shamima, to celebrate and commemorate her life. The Muslim Youth Movement has decided that this commemorative lecture will take place annually, will highlight critical issues in the gender justice struggle and in Islamic thought, and will be delivered by expert and accomplished speakers. This year’s lecture represents a difficult standard to maintain.

The inaugural lecture will be delivered by the internationally-acclaimed Muslim feminist scholar, Professor Kecia Ali, who has written extensively on issues of gender justice and Islamic law. We believe that a memorial lecture for Shamima is deserving of no less than speakers who echo and project what Shamima lived for, and who have themselves contributed significantly to the quest for gender justice.

May the Almighty Allah, most Compassionate and Just, allow us to strive in the manner that Shamima had striven. And may He continue to elevate her status with Him and envelop her in His Eternal Mercy.

Inaugural Shamima Shaikh Commemorative Lecture: Muslim Feminism, Islamic Law, and Gender Justice

Kecia Ali



In addition to her political and social activism on broader South African issues, Shamima Shaikh was a passionate advocate for Muslim women's full inclusion in the life of congregation, community, and country. She worked for women's incorporation into religious spaces and public ritual life. She laboured toward the achievement of a just personal law for Muslims, one that would respect and protect women. In the decade and a half since her untimely death, that combination of ritual and social concerns is at the top of the agenda for Muslim

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SHAMIMA
SHAIKH
LECTURE

*Kecia Ali is a
professor of religion
at Boston University,
USA, and is the
author of several
books*



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feminists across the globe. Shaikh was truly a pioneer.

She lived out what is increasingly, but sadly not universally, accepted today: the quest for gender justice, in Islam and outside of it, is inseparable from other liberation struggles. Gender justice has many interpretations, many components, and many real world constraints. It also has many opponents, including retrograde figures who declare women's inferiority and unsuitability for public life. More numerous – and more dangerous because they are seemingly more reasonable and caring – are those who insist on respect for women when, and usually only when, women keep their proper place, fulfil their assigned roles (assigned by whom, we might ask), and forgo the deadly peril of feminism. In the view of both of these groups, male authority in family and society, in the home and the mosque, is an essential part of how the world works.

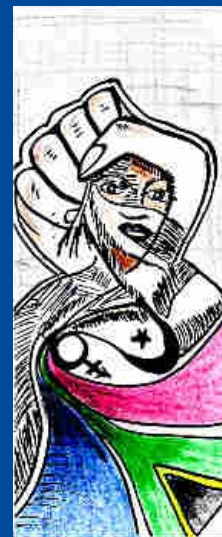
Fortunately, gender justice also has powerful and numerous advocates working on its behalf every day. Some do so as activists or professionals; they literally make it their life's work. Insisting on the inseparability of her gender justice work and her Muslim faith, Shaikh did so in her work at the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk.

Others do so in their daily actions, small or large acts of resistance when the status quo ignores, downplays, silences, or excludes women. Shaikh exemplified this sort of challenge twenty years ago when she insisted on praying at a mosque that tried to exclude her and other women. Interviewed by a journalist shortly after that incident, Shaikh discussed not only the need for persistence in claiming space for women's public piety, but also the real challenge to women's communal roles posed by men's monopoly of religious knowledge. If

one must have religious learning to make valid arguments for women's mosque access, but women are excluded from the spaces where they could gain that knowledge, what is to be done?

It remains true two decades after Shaikh's "rebellion" (as one writer called it) at the Mayfair mosque that women are still frequently excluded from traditional forms of Islamic education. And yet that exclusion, never complete, is eroding; the barriers are crumbling unevenly. The barriers that remain are – in some places more than in others, and in some classes more than in others – less important than they used to be. This is because new forms of knowledge and learning are challenging and sometimes displacing the 'ulama. Muslim women scholars constitute another group struggling for gender justice. Their interpretations of Qur'anic passages on issues involving male-female relationships, for instance, are increasingly taken into account by male thinkers – even if they are seldom credited to the women who originated them.

Let me provide an example. In 2011, the then-president of the Islamic Society of North America, Mohammed Magid, insisted that one must interpret the Qur'anic verse 4:34, which seemingly gives husbands the right to strike their wives under certain conditions, not only through the lens of the Prophet's reported practice, which rejected hitting, but also through the lens of the opening verse of the chapter where it is found, which gives an egalitarian account of creation. Thus the head of the largest American Muslim organisation took it for granted not only that this account of creation ("Revere your creator who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate") was egalitarian but also that its egalitarianism took precedence over the gendered hierarchy set forth later in the same chapter.





This may be an instance of the workings of hegemony, a co-optation by a powerful figure and mainstream organisation of just enough of a critique to maintain the big-picture status quo. This is, however, a far cry from the letter that the United Ulama Council sent Shaikh in August 1995, in which they ended a correspondence they had initiated when she questioned their view on male-initiated divorce in a radio interview. They wrote angrily to her, demanding her public acquiescence to their views. The substantive and fairly lengthy letter she wrote in reply was dismissed as “devoid of substance”, and of displaying “gross ignorance” and “an arrogant refusal to accept the truth”. The letter ended with a prayer that divine guidance would lead her to “surrender fully”.

When that exchange of letters took place, the trends in interpretation that would eventually culminate in Magid’s interpretation were already in the works; Amina Wadud’s landmark *Qur’an and Woman* had appeared in 1992. It may have taken a while for the ideas to spread, but they were circulating. Of course, ideas have unpredictable trajectories. We can, retrospectively, trace them, track their spread, and pin down their genealogies. In the moment, we can observe (partially), classify (provisionally), and debate (heatedly). When we survey the contours of Muslim feminist scholarship – past, present, and future – we see shifts in emphasis, from scripture to law to theology, but there is a coherent set of core issues: justice, dignity, equality. These were among the crucial ideas sustaining Shaikh in her struggle, cut short too soon, on behalf of Muslim women.

Let us Honour her Legacy With Renewed Commitment

Tamara Sonn



When I first met Shamima, she was performing zuhr salah, with one babe in arms and one held firmly by the hand. We were at the MYM offices in Johannesburg, headquarters of her tireless struggles for justice. I would soon learn that her public work was not something she did in addition to being a totally committed mother; for Shamima, the ongoing struggle for justice was an integral part of parenting.

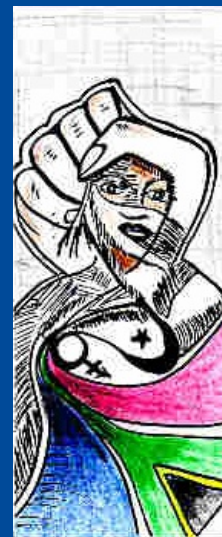
We all bear responsibility for creating a better life for the children of the world, and Shamima began her efforts before the boys were born. In fact, she met her husband Na'eem while in police detention for handing out anti-Apartheid pamphlets. But becoming the mother of two small boys seemed only to intensify Shamima's commitment to the struggle.

Shamima Shaikh became a member of the National Executive of the Muslim Youth Movement and later editor of the progressive Muslim monthly, Al-Qalam. Yet even as she struggled against racism, she encountered sexism, with traditionalists arguing against women's public activism. Undaunted, Shamima spearheaded an effort that

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Tamara Sonn is the Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani Professor in the History of Islam at Georgetown University



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resulted in creation of the Gender Desk of the MYM.

As its head, Shamima protested the practice of evicting women from the mosque in order to make room for men when the mosque was over-crowded. During Ramadan in 1994, Shamima led the women from their outside tents back into the mosque. Ultimately, she joined a growing number of South African Muslims to establish a congregation where gender equality was an integral part of Islamic teaching on social justice.

In 1997 when, as chairperson of the Muslim Community Broadcasting Trust, Shamima spoke on “The Voice,” a Johannesburg Muslim radio station, some Muslims protested vehemently, based on the traditional position that women's voices are 'awrah and not to be heard in public, a position which another Muslim station implemented. Muslims supporting Shamima submitted a petition to South Africa's broadcasting regulator, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, articulating critical Islamic values. “Islam is a religion of justice and promotes the equality of men and women. We, therefore, believe that discrimination on the basis of gender goes against the very spirit of Islam,” the petition read. The idea that women must not be heard in public, it continued, “implies that women are perpetual social minors and goes against the spirit of Islamic teachings.”

Acknowledging the contributions Muslims have made toward “South Africa's liberation struggle and its general socio-economic development,” the petition argued that the controversy over women's voices “reinforces negative stereotypes that portray Islam as an anti-women religion and all Muslim men being women-hating fundamentalists”. The petition also spoke of the essential Islamic “process of social transformation aimed at upholding the dignity and

equality of all of humankind”, and called on Muslims to commit themselves to a democratic South Africa with the entrenched ideals of non-racialism and non-sexism.

No single individual can change society. Social transformation depends on broad popular engagement. But some individuals have the gift of inspiring that engagement. Through her magnanimous personality and charismatic example, Shamima Shaikh was such an individual. She lived the Qur’anic truth that justice and equality are universal values. When she died of cancer in January 1998 at the age of 37, a funeral prayer was led by a female friend, unprecedented in modern Islam. Her funeral was massively attended by men, and by women who prayed on the main floor with the men, not sequestered upstairs, and also attended the burial service, praying with the men.

Today, more than 15 years later, we continue to feel her loss. The Apartheid government was defeated, poverty levels have declined somewhat, and expenditures on health and education have increased. But the struggle for justice – social, political, economic, environmental, national, and international – continues. The children of South Africa still live with one of the world’s highest rates of inequality. The children of Palestine live in a perpetual state of conflict, joined by their Iraqi and now their Syrian cousins. And radicalised warriors claim to speak for Islam, obscuring the efforts of those who struggle for peace through justice. We can do better, and we must.

With the inauguration of the Shamima Shaikh Commemorative Lecture Series, let us honour Shamima’s legacy with renewed commitment to improve the lives of all God’s children, the struggle Shamima so whole-heartedly embraced.

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Sa'diyya Shaikh is a senior lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town



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Extraordinary Human Being With an Abundance of Courage

Sa'diyya Shaikh

Shamima was an extraordinary human being. In knowing her as a friend and organisational colleague, there were many aspects of her personality that moved me deeply: her passionate commitment to social justice activism; her transgression of religious and cultural traditions in critically constructive ways; her fundamental refusal to be taken as a second-class Muslim because of being a woman; her openness in engaging even the thorniest aspects of the women's struggle; her capacity to extend sisterhood to women very different in beliefs from herself; her wonderful laughter, generosity and hospitality (Shamima and Na'eem's home was an "open-house", always full of people talking, eating, laughing, arguing); and her seemingly inexhaustible energy in juggling motherhood, work, political commitments and an active social life.

All of these things are what defined Shamima. However, most distinctive for me were her incredible qualities of courage and spunkiness; and it is with an abundance of both that she faced her meeting with her Creator. Shamima never faltered in the face of death, remaining true to her life commitments to the very end. Even in her death she made this manifest, requesting that her janaza (funeral) prayer be led by a woman. Very few of us are prepared or able, at the age of 37, to stand before our Creator and be sure that we have fulfilled our vicegerency in this world with the totality of who we are. I believe that Shamima will be able to do so.

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Shamima Shaikh: A Portrait of Courage

Ebrahim Moosa

During Shamima's last years we frequently exchanged views on two topics: her health and the struggle for gender justice in Islam. Thinking back, I wonder which of the two challenges consumed her more. Of course, both battles occupied her, but one was more fatal. In some places around the world,



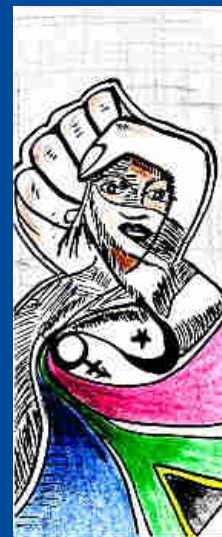
Muslim gender debates come close to resembling blood sports, and the challenges ahead are immense. Yet Shamima will be pleased to know that her passion for a more equitable future for Muslim women especially, and for men, remains an ongoing one. Her pioneering and visionary efforts are bearing fruits large and small. Over the years there have been great victories as well as reversals in this sphere. But, as she would say in her courageous voice: the struggle continues.

The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) has, over the decades, championed many causes that were previously taboo. When it did so, opponents often excoriated its advocates for engaging in initiatives that had no precedent. Individuals who studied the Qur'an were threatened they would be misled; publishers of Islamic newspapers were lambasted; and those who founded zakah collection institutions

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MESSAGES

Ebrahim Moosa is professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, former MYM vice-president, and active in the MYM Gender Desk when it was headed by Shamima Shaikh



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and Islamic banks were frequently denounced. Today, yesterday's opponents are advocates of the very issues they opposed; nay, these erstwhile opponents are flourishing in these services. I hope that, soon, opponents of gender equity will become advocates. Already, some of those who had fiercely opposed women's voices being heard in public are happy to have women speaking on radio and television.

Shamima's pioneering efforts in the sphere of gender rights initially made small gains within the MYM and beyond. Inside the MYM we collectively struggled through Qur'anic exegesis, legal texts, prophetic traditions and Islamic history to find the spaces in knowledge that would make gender justice thinkable, and then to make it applicable to our lives. I look back with gratitude at those heady and anxious days when we had few allies and little guidance to chart out new terrains within Islamic thought and ethics. Yet, nothing would have been possible were it not for the effort of a few individuals, like Shamima, who took the plunge and were in the forefront of this work. I feel privileged to have lived in her time.

It is only fitting that these pioneering efforts be evoked in the Shamima Shaikh Commemorative Lecture as a celebration in courage and leadership. There could be no better and fitting lecturer for this occasion than Kecia Ali, whose own work and contribution to questions of ethics and gender justice are unparalleled.



Ebrahim Moosa (back) at Shamima's wedding, 20 December 1987

Shamima's Grace and Clarity of Vision Compel us to Follow

Laila al-Marayati

I first became acquainted with Shamima Shaikh in January 1998 when her husband sent an email to the Muslim Women's League in Los Angeles, asking for help in affirming his late wife's request to have her janazah (funeral) prayer led by a woman. At the time, I felt that nothing could be more important than honouring her memory by coming up with the Islamic argument that would satisfy the community. Since then, we are still struggling to be represented in leadership positions in mosques all over the world.



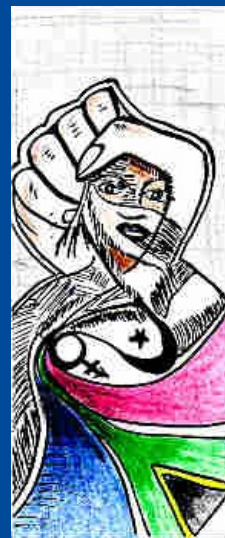
Shamima's crusade, if you will, was not about herself; rather, it was about putting into practice the Islamic ideal of justice, whether in her fight against the Apartheid regime of South Africa or against a patriarchal status quo of exclusion in her own community. She fought these battles knowing that the Prophet Muhammad himself (s) was her role model in his having advocated for women and other marginalised members of society at the time.

I can't help but wonder if Shamima knew that in the struggle to bring women to the "front" of the mosque she had to start with something

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Laila al-Marayati is the chairperson of KinderUSA and former spokesperson for the Muslim Women's League, USA



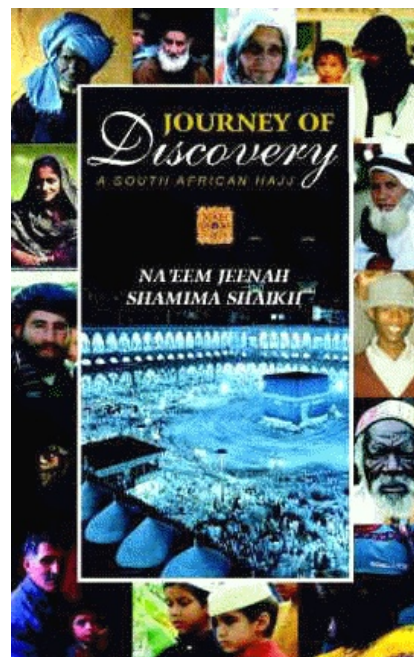


a little less controversial. After all, janazah prayer is not even fard (required); it can be performed anywhere, and half of it consists of a silent du'a. In addition, there is no bowing or prostrating. So how objectionable could it be for a woman to lead in that? Even without the "evidence" to support it (e.g., that Ibn Hanbal insisted on having one of his female students lead the janazah prayer upon his death), one could conclude that a female leading this particular prayer is not haram.

Even in her death, Shamima paved the way for her sisters to lead by providing an opportunity that could not be denied. She knew that, as Muslims, we are duty-bound to honour a dying person's request.

I like to think that Shamima would be proud of how far we've come. I suspect, however, that she would be unrelenting in her struggle for justice as Muslim women continue to endure severe poverty, violence, illiteracy and exclusion. But her enthusiastic and good-natured persistence, as reflected in her writing in *Journey of Discovery: A South African Hajj*, would have helped to win over those afraid of change.

After all, she was one of those rare individuals endowed with grace, whose sincerity, devotion and clarity of vision compel the rest of us to follow.



Symbol of a Stubborn Hope in Humanity

Mphutlane wa Bofelo

My recollection of Shamima is of a person who had truly internalised the Qur'anic injunction that the followers of the Prophet Muhammad (s) should be an ummah, a community, that is simultaneously at the centre of the action and at the centre of thought; strong and unrelenting in acting against all forms of wrongdoing, injustices and oppressions; and balanced in determining the theoretical, theological, judicial, socioeconomic, political and cultural frameworks within which the determination of what is right and wrong is to be made.

Through my interactions with her at the various forums of the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa, informal discussions with her, as well as hearing her on different public platforms, the Shamima I came to know and appreciate was a person who eschewed extremism and passivism in equal measure. From her I learnt that in the cause of fighting against injustice we must always avoid



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Mphutlane wa Bofelo is a lecturer at the Workers' College, Durban, and is a former general secretary of the Muslim Youth Movement



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dogmatism and, yet, never compromise on the essence of what we stand for.

Having been involved in sociopolitical activism since I was sixteen years old, I have countless observations and experiences of the disjuncture between the public and private lives of numerous people within activist and progressive circles. And after living at Shamima's place for almost a year as a student searching for accommodation in Johannesburg, I can attest that she and her husband Na'eem count among the handful of Muslims and progressive people who uncompromisingly ensured that their own households and social networks were laboratories for the kind of egalitarian and humane society that they envisaged. They were unapologetic in reprimanding discriminatory, oppressive and exploitative behaviour and practices – irrespective of who the culprits were.

Perhaps the most important insight about Islam that I gained from Shamima was that it was a faith that promoted a broad notion of fellowship that was not restricted only to people who shared one's religion; rather, it encompassed the whole of humankind. I vividly remember how, during our discussions in the initial stages of setting up "The Voice", the MYM's community radio station in Johannesburg, Shamima vociferously advocated for a slot by domestic workers that would address their concerns; programmes for the various refugee communities in Joburg; and a special slot that would focus on the marginalised, emerging township Muslim communities.

Her uncompromising commitment to justice lives with us and remains an inspiration to us. She is a symbol of a stubborn hope in humanity, against all odds.

Shamima Shaikh lives!

She Laid a Solid Foundation

Firdouza Waggie

Firdouza (r) with Shamima at the MYM's Islamic Tarbiyyah Programme 1997, where Shamima delivered her last address, 17 days before her death



The inaugural Shamima Shaikh commemoration lecture could not have come at a more opportune time as we reflect on twenty years of South African democracy.

Shamima's struggle was to ensure that women are afforded their rightful place in society and that women are free from all forms of exploitation and violence in both the public and private spheres. Her struggle for gender equality within the Muslim community has undoubtedly laid a solid foundation and resulted in some positive strides in the public lives of Muslim women. However, the prevalence of violence against women and children in South Africa persists and is amongst the highest in the world. South African women, including Muslim women, continue to be exploited, abused, raped and killed.

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Firdouza Waggie is the head of the Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Unit, University of the Western Cape, and a former National Coordinator of the MYM Gender Desk





The failure to deal with the continued exploitation of women is an indictment on government, civil society and non-governmental organisations – including religious institutions. It is in this context that the struggle for gender equality is probably the most important struggle of our time.

Gender equality is a cornerstone of South Africa's democracy, and new legislation has been lauded for enforcing the rights of women. However, giving effect to these progressive gender laws and constitutional rights is a much more demanding task. It is about changing attitudes and mindsets, engaging and challenging unjust practices, education and empowerment, and about building respect and equality between men and women in order to create a just society.

After 20 years of political freedom, the journey for freedom within religious communities continues to be a difficult one for many women. The exploitation, oppression and disempowerment of women are a reflection of the broad structure of gender and economic inequality in South African society, and is located in a complex set of values, traditions, customs, habits and beliefs about women and their role in society.

This inaugural lecture by Professor Kecia Ali on “Muslim Feminism, Islamic Law, and the Quest for Gender Justice” will undoubtedly contribute in our pursuit to make sense and critically reflect on the status of women and children, the challenge of gender equality and empowerment in South African Muslim society.

I commend the organisers of the Shamima Shaikh Commemorative Lecture for continuing with and upholding the legacy of my dear sister, fellow activist and friend, Shamima Shaikh. Aluta Continua.

Her Light Still Shines Brightly

Zakiyya Ismail

The light that Shamima shone as a social justice activist was bright indeed. So bright that it remains shining as she continues to inspire both young and old to commit to a world where social justice is a reality. Yes, Shamima was first and foremost an activist, and her struggles are well documented. But the personal side of Shamima, the side only seen by her friends and coworkers, is truly the brighter side; it is the light that will always burn bright in the hearts of those who knew her personally.

When one speaks to the people who were around her as friends, as apprentices, and as fellow activists, one discovers a Shamima that had an amazingly powerful impact on the personal lives of numerous people. Repeatedly, one hears about the hand of friendship that she extended to others: people new to the town, people new to the religion, or people who had recently been introduced to her circle. More often than not, one discovers that she believed so strongly in people's abilities that they too ended up surprising themselves by what they could achieve.

We hear about Shamima's courage in every fight that she took on, all of them willingly. Her personal courage was truly a marvel, but more than that, it was an infectious marvel. By simply observing her courage as she dealt with all that life threw at her, those around her were given the courage to deal with their own lives with a greater deal of strength. A stumble here and a fall there – and I mean that both literally and figuratively – did not stop her.

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Zakiyya Ismail is an advocate for alternative living models, and was a close friend of Shamima's



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There is an interesting word that sometimes comes up when people remember Shamima: “intimidating”. But the word is actually used as a compliment. To those of us who were still wavering, she was intimidating in her steadfastness, intimidating in her energy to do something when the rest of us contented ourselves with just complaining, intimidating in her sensitivity to injustice when we had become desensitised. Shamima (whose nickname, Shams, is the Arabic word for “sun”) was a light that set us all on fire on our journeys towards being better people, and towards making the world a better place. That light remains shining brightly.



Shamima at an MYM meeting in Zamdela township, Sasolburg

Like the Sun: Bright, Generous and Beautiful

Fatemah Shaikh

*Shamima (second
from left) with
her parents
(seated), and
siblings (l to r)
Hafiz, Fatemah,
Shahida and Zayn*



In our family, Shamima was the sun (al-shams): bright, generous, and beautiful. Shamima was like sparkling, shimmering shards of light that danced around all of us – optimistic, energetic, and always smiling. Although she left us many years ago, her light continues to penetrate the loneliness.

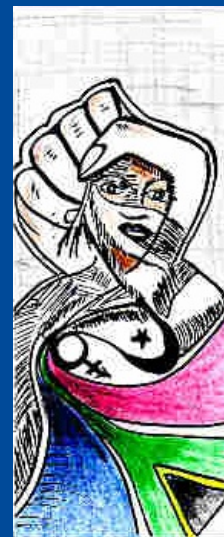
Shamima greatly supported our mother and was always at her side, assisting her with all kinds of tasks. She was the one who organised and managed things around the house and in the family. Naturally, her being the older sister meant that we all looked up to her; she directed, and we followed. And she always led by example.

Shamima took up the fight for women's rights and dignity in Islam when it was not fashionable to do so. Although she was vocal on

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*Fatemah Shaikh is
Shamima's sister,
and writes this on
behalf of Shamima's
five siblings: Hafiz,
Fatemah, Faaiza,
Shahida and Zayn*





women's rights in Islam she also focused on the broader sociopolitical issues at the time.

Personally, I always thought it too difficult and constricting to take up the fight for



women's rights as one would be forced to deal with entrenched and narrow-minded views. Also it would entail trampling on what was regarded as 'sacred ground'. It was easier, in my opinion, to take up the broader sociopolitical fight within established structures and a likeminded crowd. Shamima, however, was bold and unafraid. She stood her ground and fearlessly challenged the oppressive attitudes that Muslim women were subjected to. This meant that, in her struggles, she was forced to endure a lot of unpleasantness and opposition. Yet, throughout all this, she remained warm, nurturing and non-judgmental; nothing and no-one could daunt her spirit.

Shamima, it seemed, felt herself accountable only to God, and this bestowed on her a confidence and a commitment to her cause. She was powerfully strong. Even when she was diagnosed with cancer, her life remained filled with laughter, courage and an indomitable will to change the world.

We will always remain proud of our sister; she will always be deeply missed. In our family, Shamima is still the sun: bold and graceful.



Professor Kecia Ali teaches Religion at Boston University in the USA, and is the author of a number of books, including: *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*; *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*; *Imam Shafi'i: Scholar and Saint*; and *The Lives of Muhammad*



Muslim Youth Movement - www.mym.za.org
Shamima Shaikh - www.shams.za.org