



TRIBUTE TO SHAMIMA SHAIKH

14 September 1960 to
8 January 1998;
9 Ramadan 1418.

Muslims believe that the person
who dies in the month of
Ramadan goes straight to
heaven.

By Farid Esack, Acting CEO,
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If this be madness.

Shamima Shaikh (37), South Africa's leading Muslim gender equality activist passed away in the early hours of last Thursday at her home in Mayfair, Johannesburg when her physical body succumbed to cancer. Shamima left behind her husband, Na'eem Jeenah, and two sons, Minhaj (9) and Shir'ah (7).

Shamima was a member of the National Executive of the Muslim Youth Movement and former editor of the progressive Muslim monthly, *Al-Qalam*. More recently, at a time when other co-religionists were denying women the right to be on air, she served as chairperson of Muslim Community Broadcasting Trust, which runs *The Voice*, a Johannesburg Muslim community radio station. It was, however, as a gender activist within the Muslim community that she made her mark. She spearheaded the formation and headed the Gender Desk of the Muslim Youth Movement. In this capacity, she rapidly became a thorn in the flesh of conservative Muslim clerics on the now-defunct Muslim Personal Law Board who were keen to develop and implement a set of Shari'ah laws which would entrench gender inequality.

In an event that drew widespread controversy in the Muslim community, she led a rebellion of Muslim women worshippers at the 23rd Street in Fietas in 1994. Throughout the month of Ramadan she and a number of other women prayed upstairs in the mosque. On the 27th night, the most spiritually significant one for Muslims, when she arrived, the upstairs was occupied by men and a tent was set up outside for the use of women. Braving numerous angry offended men with tiny egos, she led a group of comrades to re-occupy their space. By then she had acquired the well-deserved description as "that mad Shaikh woman." Yet to friends and foes, Shamima was the epitome of gentleness and politeness.

In the same way that for anyone committed to gender justice a woman's place cannot be confined to bedrooms and kitchens, she ultimately became frustrated with being an "upstairs" woman. In a little known move, and unprecedented in the world of Islam, she and a number of comrades – male and female – started an "alternative" congregation where gender equality and all its implications for Islamic thought and practice were the norm.

Shamima first learnt that she had cancer about three years ago. Nothing changed for her. Her life was full of laughter, courage, and the will to change the world and she merrily continued. "If the last hour strikes and finds you carrying a sapling to the grove for

planting" said the Prophet Muhammed, "go ahead and plant it." Her hour had struck but her planting continued unabated. Knowing that her life was rapidly ebbing away, she delivered a lecture in Durban three weeks ago on the "Qur'an and Woman." She inspired us and taught us that there is nothing inevitable in life. She insisted that while death may be inevitable we are free to shape our responses to it. She chose not to undergo various forms of chemotherapy and, other than resorting to some traditional and homeopathic options, she was determined not to return to her Lord kicking and screaming. A poem, penned by a cousin and posted at the entrance to her bedroom said it all.

What Cancer Cannot Do

Cancer is so limited
It cannot cripple love,
It cannot shatter hope,
It cannot corrode faith,
It cannot destroy peace,
It cannot kill friendship,
It cannot suppress memories,
It cannot silence courage,
It cannot invade the soul,
It cannot steal eternal life,
It cannot conquer the spirit.



The day of her death and burial was a day of relentless pushing of the religio-cultural limits. Shamima's death was testimony to the Qur'anic verse which says "Do not say about those who are slain in the path of God that they are dead; nay they are alive." She requested that a close female friend lead her funeral prayers. (As part of her obsession with retrieving subversive theological and juristic memories which accorded women a more just place in the Islamic scheme of things, she had come across a report that the funeral prayers for Imam Idris bin Shafi', a revered Islamic jurist, was led by a woman). Thus it came to pass that, for the first time in the last few centuries, a Muslim's funeral service, albeit at her home, was led by a woman.

At another service in the nearby mosque later, her husband led the prayer despite the presence of a number of theologians and clerics. In what is possibly unprecedented in the contemporary Islamic world, a large number of women attended the funeral prayers at the mosque. (And no, they did not go upstairs, nor to an outside tent.) When her physical remains arrived at her final earthly resting place, in the town where she was born, Pietersburg, the women were again there to offer the funeral prayers. While a narrow pathway separated the women mourners (mostly clad in black) from the men (mostly clad in white), who surrounded the grave, it was nevertheless a historic occasion.

What a life! What a way of passing on! What a death!

"If this be madness, God," her husband Na'eem, prayed, at her funeral service, "Give us all the courage to be mad."

Amen.