Citation: Khoja-Moolji, Shenila. (2011). Redefining Muslim Women: Aga Khan III's Reforms for Women's Education. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal.* Volume 20. University of Texas at Austin.

Redefining Muslim Women: *Aga Khan III's Reforms for Women's Education*

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Abstract: In the history of Muslim India, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century formed a period that witnessed intense public contestation over the role of women in society. Against that background, this article explores the writings and institutional initiatives of the forty-eighth Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III, with reference to women's education. It compares and contrasts his thinking with the foundational texts on women's education written by four other prominent Muslim leaders of that time period: Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Nazir Ahmed, Mumtaz Ali and Ashraf Ali Thanawi. An analysis of the writings demonstrates that the Aga Khan's approach was markedly different; while other leaders saw women's roles primarily in the domestic sphere, as dependent daughters, wives or mothers, the Aga Khan recognized the dignity of women as individuals worthy in and of themselves and not simply due to the function that they performed in society. He, thus, not only advocated for women's education to promote their socioeconomic well-being but also argued for it as a basic right that could promote inner happiness through intellectual growth. The article discusses a variety of factors that may have influenced the Aga Khan's thoughts, including exposure to first-wave feminism, and concludes with the implications of his reforms for Ismaili women today.

A Note on Sources: The Aga Khan gave much of his guidance to the Ismaili Muslim community in the form of *farmans* (directives). These *farmans* are private documents, and as such, I have limited myself to materials that are readily available through other publications or library holdings.

Acknowledgements: The author thanks Professor Ali Asani at Harvard University for his guidance in developing this article.

Introduction

Over the last century, the landscape of economic, educational and social opportunities available to women has changed significantly. In Muslim India, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed intense public contestation over the role of women in society. This was also the time when Indian Muslims were engaged in the balancing act of participating in a rapidly modernizing environment under the British colonial government while attempting to retain their cultural heritage, traditions and religion. Discussions regarding women and their role in the uplift of the Muslim community became symbolic of the many contradictions they faced; debates about women's education, suffrage, legal status, rights in Islam etc. were commonplace and demonstrated the deep anxieties of Muslims in colonial India. In this context, the article explores the writings and institutional initiatives of the forty-eighth Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III (d. 1957). Specifically, it compares his thoughts on women's education with a number of foundational texts on the topic written by four other prominent Muslim leaders of that time period: Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (d. 1898), Nazir Ahmed (d. 1912), Mumtaz Ali (d. 1935) and Ashraf Ali Thanawi (d. 1943). After a brief consideration of the Aga Khan's background and his context in colonial India, the article delves

into a deeper discussion of his writings on women's education. An analysis of the Aga Khan's writings demonstrates that his approach towards women's education was markedly different than that of his contemporaries. He recognized that women had the same potential as men, which informed his conceptualization of the wide-ranging roles they could perform in society. He not only advocated for women's education to promote their socioeconomic well-being but also argued for it as a basic right that could promote inner happiness through intellectual growth. This recognition of the emancipatory potential of education prompted him to institute a range of reforms for his female followers, which have had far-reaching impact on their educational, economic and social progress. The article discusses a variety of factors that may have influenced the Aga Khan's views on these issues, including exposure to first-wave feminism. It concludes with an assessment of the implications of his reforms for Ismaili women today.

The Institution of Ismaili Imamat

The institution of the Ismaili Imamat is represented by the Imam of the time. The Ismaili Imams are direct descendants of the final Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. They trace their lineage to the Prophet through his daughter, Fatima, and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, who was also the first Imam. With respect to their followers, it is the mandate of the Imams to "safeguard the individual's right to personal intellectual search and to give practical expression to the ethical vision of society that the Islamic message inspires."[1] This mandate has translated into wide-ranging efforts by the Imams towards improving the quality of life of their followers and the communities in which they live.

Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III was born in Karachi, in today's Pakistan, on November 2, 1877. He became the forty-eighth Imam of the Ismaili Muslims at the age of eight on the passing away of his father, Aga Ali Shah Aga Khan II. He went on to establish himself as an influential political leader, not only in colonial India but also on the international scene. Due to his responsibilities as the Imam of Ismaili Muslims and as a leader of Indian Muslims, he operated within a variety of socio-political and religious contexts that undoubtedly influenced his thoughts and provided him with opportunities to further his goals. In his Memoirs he notes his dual responsibilities to serve "first, in India, as the leader of an influential group within the wide Muslim community at an epoch when political aspirations were stirring and second, as the head of a far-ranging international community [of Ismaili Muslims]."[2] He worked with the British colonial government on a variety of social and political issues aimed at improving the quality of life of Indian Muslims. For instance, he helped with the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, and worked closely with the leaders of the Aligarh movement to secure the recognition of Muslims as an independent political entity. In 1902, he was appointed to the Legislative Council set up by Lord Curzon, and in 1906, he was elected as the first President of the Muslim political organization, the All-India Muslim League.[3] He remained active on the Indian political front throughout his life but over time increasingly took on

[1] "His Highness the Aga Khan," Theismaili.org, accessed October 2, 2011, http://www.theismaili.org/?id=14
[2] Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan, World Enough and Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954a), 58.
[3] Ibid., 103 and 125.

international policy-orientated tasks, including serving as the President of the League of Nations for a brief period.[4]

While the Aga Khan advocated comprehensive reforms for Muslims both as a leader of Indian Muslims and as the Imam of Ismaili Muslims, he adopted a more hands-on approach when it came to the latter. It was his religious authority as the Imam that allowed him to pioneer a system of social service agencies for the well-being of his followers, particularly the women. Before considering his efforts to develop women's education, it is critical to understand the political, religious and social trends in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that influenced and informed his work.

Context: Colonial India

During the second half of the nineteenth century, India saw the ascendency of the British and the decline of the Muslim rule and influence. It was a time of increasing anxiety for the Muslims of India, who were concerned about the future of the Muslim *quam* (nation) under foreign rule.[5] Muslims underwent a political and social dislocation;[6] the Muslim service gentry such as the court-sponsored *ulama* (religious scholars), poets, *qazis* (judges), aristocrats etc., who had a claim to authority in the prior arrangements under the Mughul rulers, were increasingly marginalized by colonialism, particularly after the 1857 mutiny which cast suspicions on Muslim loyalty to the British establishment. The British also articulated their cherished ideal of the separation of religion and state, and clearly demarcated the arenas for religion, education, politics, and the market. These structural changes motivated a reinterpretation of Islam in order to make the religion relevant to the new realities of the Indian Muslims. It was hoped that this exercise of reinterpretation and self-reflection would lead to a revival of the Muslim *quam*, and allow them to regain the lost political space and social status. The effort of reinterpretation, however, was no longer the exclusive domain of the traditional religious scholars or *ulama*; another group of Muslims – the modernists – emerged and participated actively in this endeavor of reviving the Indian Muslims.[7]

Broadly, traditionalists – such as the '*ulama* of *Dar-al-Ulum* at Deoband – sought to revive the Muslim community by appealing to textual Islam. They believed that if the Muslims of India followed Islam as presented in the foundational texts and eschewed the heterodox practices prevalent in India, they would be able to rejuvenate themselves socially and politically. Thus, the group aimed to reform the beliefs and practices of ordinary believers to bring them in-line with 'proper' Islam. The extent of conformity of Indian Muslims to these prescriptions of Islam was to be measured by women's religious practices. Women were to reform their superstitious customs and rituals, and comply with textual Islam; they were to become the symbols of Islamic morality. Traditionalists, therefore, advocated religious education for Muslim

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[4] Ibid., 283.
[5] Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi: Islam in modern South Asia, Makers of the Muslim world* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).
[6] Barbara Metcalf, "Islamic Reform and Islamic Women: Maulana Thanawi's Jewelry of Paradise," in *Moral Conduct and Authority*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 184.
[7] Barbara Metcalf, "Madrasas and Minorities in Secular India," in *Schooling Islam. The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 94-95.

women in so far as it brought women's religious practices in-line with their understanding of Islam. This form of religious education did not prioritize women's intellectual engagement with the faith. Instead, it focused on elaborating the correct *performance* of religion for women. In addition, most articulations for women's education by this group excluded the need for secular, scientific education, which was becoming increasingly relevant but was only offered outside the domestic sphere.

The modernists – such as Mumtaz Ali and the Aga Khan – on the other hand, believed that a combination of religious and secular education was essential for the revival of Muslims in India. To them, Muslims needed to take advantage of western education and familiarize themselves with the social tools necessary to function and compete in the colonial environment. Still, theirs was not an aggressively westernizing and secularizing view. The language and directives of Islam deeply influenced them as well, as they grounded, articulated and legitimized their programs for social reform within the context of Islam. Women featured in their narrative primarily as nurturers of civilizations and guardians of domestic happiness, though these reformers made some moves towards acknowledging women's individuality as well.

Thus, while the leaders from both the traditionalist and the modernist camps worked towards addressing the status of Muslims in India on a variety of fronts, reforming the religious and social practices of Muslim women remained a key objective for them and a barometer for the success of their efforts. It was against this background that education for women featured prominently as a primary means to halt the decline of the Muslims of India.

Women's Education in Colonial India

Muslim reformers were by no means alone in their efforts to reform the status of women in India. Hindu reformers had begun focusing on this issue since the early nineteenth century as is evidenced by the reforms against the customs of *Sati* (burning of widows) and the campaigns in South India to suppress the *devdasi* system (marrying women to a deity or temple).[8] There was a general agreement among Muslim leaders, including Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Nazir Ahmed, Mumtaz Ali, Ashraf Ali Thanawi and the Aga Khan, on the need for educating women. While they agreed in principle, they differed on the extent to which women should be educated and what that education would look like. The cause of their differences seems to be rooted in their divergent views of women and gender roles.[9]

The Aga Khan opposed the social, religious, political and cultural structures and institutions that excluded women from the public sphere, deprived them of opportunities to make a living, or limited their rights. Realizing the interconnectedness of women's issues and the 'intersectionality'[10] of their lives, he urged comprehensive reforms to all aspects of women's

[8] Rehana Ghadially, "The Campaign for Women's Emancipation in an Ismaili Shia (Daudi Bohra) Sect of Indian Muslims: 1929-1945," *Women Living under Muslim Laws* (1996): 1.

[9] Gail Minault (1998) has categorized the thoughts of these intellectuals into separate generations with Sir Syed and Altaf Hussain Hali (d.1914) belonging to the first generation and the rest of the intellectuals belonging to the second generation. This article will avoid using the same categories as these intellectuals were deeply influenced by each others' work and sometimes even presented their thoughts in conversation with earlier scholars. For instance, at several points in his text, Mumtaz Ali quotes Sir Syed's ideas and presents his own thoughts to counter them.

[10] The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) in the context of African American women's history. She notes that the experience of a specific group of women will differ from another due

experience. His efforts for women's educational advancement, hence, were not undertaken in isolation, but impacted, and were impacted by, his efforts to reform women's legal, political and religious status. Therefore, even as we focus on the Aga Khan's reforms in the realm of education, it is crucial to take into account the comprehensive nature of his approach to women's emancipation. For instance, in arguing for the provision of primary education for girls on the grounds of gender equality, he remained aware of the important role that local philanthropists and reformers could play in promoting education, and therefore, demanded appropriate and favorable legislation for their operational efforts as well.[11]

The Aga Khan placed extraordinary emphasis on the education for women so as to enable them to direct their own lives and obtain personal happiness. He sought to provide women with the tools with which they could better their own situations, as well as improve the welfare of their families. He said, "I am trying to guide our young women's lives into entirely new channels. I want to see them able to earn their living in trades and professions, so that they are not economically dependent on marriage, nor a burden on their fathers and brother."[12] In contrast, most other articulations for the necessity of women's education were based on the impact of such an education on women's abilities to manage their households, educate their children and practice proper Islam; women were the guardians of Islamic morality and their education was to help further communal goals. It was believed that if women could get an education in the religious sciences, they would be able to contribute to the proper upbringing of their children and maintain peaceful homes for their husbands.

This was the line of thought adopted by intellectuals such as Nazir Ahmed and Ashraf Ali Thanawi. Nazir Ahmed in his novel *Mirat ul-Aroos* (The Bride's Mirror), published in 1869, employs the character of Asghari to exemplify the model Muslim woman – a woman who has elementary education of religious sciences, is an expert at household management, and abides by Muslim practices. Due to her education and intelligence, she is able to create a happy and harmonious home for her husband and in-laws. Asghari is educated at home in a *zenana*-based school system, similar to those attended by the upper class *ashraf* (elite) Muslim women of the time. Since upper class Muslim women practiced seclusion, they were educated at home by visiting *ustanis* (female teachers), who were usually the wives and daughters of the *maulvis* (religious functionaries) and had limited literary skills.[13] The content of education at the *zenanas* typically consisted of memorizing passages of the Quran and reading some Arabic, Persian and Urdu script.[14] By focusing on the education of females in a *zenana*-style school system, Nazir Ahmed avoids commenting on the access to education for working-class Muslim women. Despite having written this novel with the intention of providing some literature for Muslim

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to the multiplicity of identities that they embody. Factors such as gender, class, race, culture, political and legal status interact to influence the opportunities available to women, and the challenges that they must overcome.

[11] Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, *India in Transition, A Study in Political Evolution.* (New York: G. Putnam: 1918), 260.

[12] Quoted in Qayyum Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan: Guide, Philosopher and Friend of the Islamic World (*Karachi: Ismailia Association for Pakistan, 1969), 211.

[13] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23.

[14] Ibid., 23.

women to study,[15] he seems to be more concerned about the future of the *ashraf* Muslims than the welfare of the Indian Muslim women at large.

Similarly, Ashraf Ali Thanawi in his text *Bahishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments), published in 1905, provides detailed guidance to women on religious rituals, duties, laws and etiquette, in the hopes to cure their corrupt beliefs and practices.[16] The text is a discursive effort in constructing women as the guardian of Islamic morality in an environment where the authority of Muslims, especially the *ulama*, was being threatened. Thanawi details the proper etiquette for religious practices, acceptable relations between men and women, nuances of public transactions such as loans, contracts, and property ownership, and the rights of men and women according to Islamic law, among other things. He also employs the text to impart basic literacy skills to his female readers, which could potentially have enhanced their authority within their families.[17] Recognizing that his text is of an introductory nature, Thanawi encourages women to study advanced religious sciences.[18] However, he does not propose a plan for women to accomplish this. As noted earlier, the *zenana*-school system was limited in what it could offer women in terms of educational enhancement. Women, therefore, would have had to leave the domestic sphere in order to obtain the advanced knowledge that Thanawi proposes. By showing a strong preference for seclusion, Thanawi thus limits his own proposal. Indeed, as Metcalf notes, one of the aims for increasing women's basic literacy skills was to enable them to communicate with the outside world without compromising the practices of seclusion.[19] Clearly, while Thanawi writes about the importance of women's contributions to society and their elevated status, the purpose of his work is not focused on increasing women's socioeconomic well-being through education, but on addressing larger social, economic, and political issues. As Zaman notes, while the book deals with women's issues, its broader function seems to be to establish the ulama's authority to guide Muslims in a time of extensive religious contestation.[20] Thus, women's educational advancement appears to be important only insofar as it aids religious and communal objectives of the Muslim *quam*.

We observe a similar viewpoint in the policies adopted by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. While of the opinion that Muslims needed to study the English language and western sciences in order to recover their status in India, Sir Syed emphasized the education of boys over girls. He did not think that education beyond the religious sciences was necessary for girls, or that separate schools had to be established for them. Gail Minault notes that Sir Syed subscribed to the "trickle-down theory"[21] whereby educated men would be able to educate their wives, sisters and daughters at home, who in turn might educate their sons. According to Sir Syed, "the present state of education among Muhammadan females is, in my opinion, enough for domestic happiness, considering the present social and economic condition of the life of the Muhammadans of India."[22] Although a pragmatic stance, Sir Syed's views were representative of

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[15] Nazir Ahmed, *Mirat-ul-Uroos* (Lucknow: 1869), 10-27.
[16] Ashraf A. Thanawi, *Bahishti Zewar* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 1905, Reprint 2007-2008).
[17] Metcalf, "Islamic Reform and Islamic Women," 194.
[18] Ibid., 194.
[19] Ibid., 192.
[20] Zaman, *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi,* 70.
[21] Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 18.
[22] Ibid., 19.

the societal views on women's roles and status: women were to live *through* their male relations. Note that much of the elevation of women's status granted through this narrative is *functional* – it is so that they can guard the domestic sphere and instill the proper values in their children (especially sons), who will then perform the important tasks of Islam in society.

In contrast, both Aga Khan III and Mumtaz Ali advocated a broad education for women. The Aga Khan believed that education for girls should not stop with basic literary or elementary religious knowledge, but that "all knowledge in the world should be open to girls."[23] Similarly, Mumtaz Ali, in his work *Huquq un-Niswaan* (Women's Rights) published in 1898, argues that since God has given women equal intellectual faculties as men, they deserve access to the same education.[24] He counters his critics, who believed that too much education would lead to vulgarity in women, by noting that any education that did so could lead to the same vulgarity in men as well.[25] He then goes on to present a strategy for expanding women's education through establishing a women's newspaper, *Tahzib un-Niswan* (Women's Culture), and publishing a list of novels suitable for study by women.[26] Mumtaz Ali, however, is unable to escape the then prevalent worldview. To him, the rationale for providing women an education is to enable them to develop the skills that could make them better, more interesting companions for their husbands.[27] His articulation for the need for companionship within marriages seems to be premised on the complementarity between the male provider and female housewife,[28] which leads him to prioritize women's roles as wives. He, therefore, stresses the significance of a well-rounded education for women so that they could fulfill their domestic responsibilities.

We observe that all four Muslim leaders - Ashraf Ali Thanawi, Sir Syed, Nazir Ahmed and Mumtaz Ali – focused on women's education as a means to creating a harmonious home and ensuring domestic happiness, and not for women's own emancipation. The idea of the home or private sphere as a source of meaning and identity for men is a nineteenth century construction. As noted earlier, with the onset of British colonialism, Muslim *ashraf* men increasingly lost their economic and social privileges. They no longer controlled critical public positions and were instead employed in non-entrepreneurial and clerical government work. This threatened aspects of their masculine identity that were derived from the authority and control they had exercised in the public sphere. Even as Muslim masculinity retained its power vis-à-vis Muslim femininity, it was increasing losing its place in the masculine hierarchy to non-Muslim, western-educated, British masculinities, as well as rapidly secularizing, Hindu masculinities. In some ways, this nineteenth century "crisis" of Muslim masculinity is similar to the twentieth century "crisis" of American masculinity. Whereas in the latter, American men were seeking to locate "internal efficacy and sense of power"[29] in response to the gains made by the women's liberation movements, in the former the threat arose from the ascendancy of British political, social and

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[23] A.K. Adatia and Noel King, "Some East African Firmans of H. H. Aga Khan III," *Journal of Religion in Africa,* Vol. 2, (1969): 187.
[24] Mumtaz Ali, *Huquq un-Niswaan* (Lahore: Punjab Publishers, 1898), 43.
[25] Ibid., 44.
[26] Ibid., 56.
[27] Ibid., 48.
[28] See Benajmin Lindsey, *The Companionate Marriage*, 1927 for additional information on the early twentieth century concept of companionate marriage
[29] Michael Kimmel, "Has a Man's World become a Woman's Nation?" *The Shriver Report* (2009), accessed January 10, 2010, http://shriverreport.com/awn/men.php.

economic structures in India, as well as the rise of the Hindu working class. New forms of power, thus, had to be located and included in the definition of Muslim manhood. It is against this background that the domestic sphere was transformed to take on new significance as Muslim men sought to draw meaning and identity from it.

The Aga Khan's Reformist Ideas

The Aga Khan, like his contemporaries, also wrote about women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere as bearers of the civilization.[30] However, he did not define women solely through domestic roles. To him, women were not to get an education simply so that they were able to educate their children, or become better companions to their husbands - he considered education essential for women's own happiness and welfare. By adopting this view, the Aga Khan affirmed the dignity of women as human beings, and as individuals worthy in and of themselves and not simply due to the function that they performed in society. In his text, *India in Transition*, the Aga Khan notes that one of the reasons why reforms for women's progress in the realm of education had been slow was because they had been motivated by the end purpose of service to the other gender and not for women themselves. He suggests that "the constant argument has been that of the necessity for providing educated and intelligent wives and daughters, sisters and mothers, for the men… the time has come for a full recognition that the happiness and welfare of the women themselves, must be the end and purpose of all efforts towards improvement."[31] Clearly, his stance on the purpose of women's education is dramatically different when compared to his Muslim contemporaries.

The Aga Khan's views on women's capabilities and roles also impacted the way he implemented his strategies for women's education. He argued for universal and compulsory access to education for the masses, and worked with the British government to instate legislation that would make primary education compulsory, for both boys and girls.[32] He deplored the disproportionate distribution of literacy between the two sexes – "only ten female per mille [sic] as compared with 106 men."[33] In his view, there were a variety of cultural and social constructs that impeded women's access to schools. For instance, he opposed the strict practices of seclusion and exaggerated purdah (veiling), which relegated women to the domestic sphere. He noted that the exaggerated practices of purdah condemned "…half the population to slavery or retirement from an active and gainful life"[34] and that "the free social and intellectual part played in the life of Arabia by Imam Hussain's daughter, Sakina, and by the daughter of Talha and the great grand daughters of Khalifa Abu Bakar can be contrasted with the position of women in the 19th century."[35] The Aga Khan considered such practices to be misogynistic cultural traditions that had become codified in Islam and resulted in a marked decline in the status of women.[36] He, therefore, ensured that his female followers were free of this restriction; in his Memoirs he notes,

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[30] Aga Khan, *India in Transition*, 254.
[31] Ibid., 258.
[32] Ibid., 220-221.
[33] Ibid., 217.
[34] Quoted in Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan,* 217.
[35] Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, *Message to the World of Islam* (Pakistan: Ismailia Association of Pakistan, 1977).
[36] Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, "Presidential Address to the All Indian Muhammadan Educational Conference," 1902: 5-6, http://www.iis.ac.uk/SiteAssets/pdf/1902.pdf

"In my grandfather's and my father's time the Ismailis were far ahead of any other Muslim sect in the matter of the abolition of the strict veil, even in extremely conservative countries. I have absolutely abolished it; nowadays you will never find an Ismaili woman wearing the veil."[37] The release from cultural practices of seclusion enabled his followers to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities wherever they found them. In contrast, Muslim leaders such as Sir Syed, Ashraf Ali Thanawi and Nazir Ahmed, were staunch proponents of strict forms of purdah and preferred educating women at home or in *zenana*-based schools. Even Mumtaz Ali, while advocating the toning down of the strict purdah observed by Indian women,[38] was neither in favor of its abandonment nor for the integration of women in the public school system. The *zenana*-based schools, however, often translated into schools for the *ashraf* families and provided limited access to educational opportunities for the Indian Muslim women at large.

In this context, it is also significant to bear in mind that the majority of the Aga Khan's followers were likely not a part of these elite, *ashraf* Muslim classes. Thus, while he advocated for reforms aimed at the advancement of Muslim women in general, he remained focused on improving the lives of his female followers. He not only focused on eliminating the cultural and social hindrances to women's education but also instituted legal reforms that maximized the chances for his female followers to access education.[39] He emphasized that a girl should not be married off too young, and instead be given a chance to develop and study.[40] To ensure that Ismaili girls had this opportunity, he outlawed child marriages, and set the minimum age at which Ismaili girls and boys could get married.[41] He is also noted to have said, "personally, if I had two children, and one was a boy and the other a girl, and if I could afford to educate only one, I would have no hesitation in giving the higher education to the girl."[42] In doing so, he reconstituted the priorities of the Ismaili community. In addition, he supplemented his guidance by contributing material resources to advance women's education. He established over 200 schools in India and East Africa during the first half of the twentieth century, the first of them in 1905 in Gwadar (in today's Pakistan) and Mundra (in India).[43]

At the same time, the Aga Khan realized that lasting change in women's lives could not be implemented without a legitimizing environment at the community level that valued women's education and contributions to society. He, therefore, used his authority as the Imam to initiate changes in the social organization of the Ismaili community. He appointed women to influential Ismaili social governance bodies and encouraged them to serve in leadership positions. Through these appointments, he not only provided women the opportunity to lead and build social capital, but also bring their agendas to the table. Women were encouraged to organize at the community level and participate fully in religious life. As early as the 1920s, Ismaili women had formed

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[37] Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan,* 27.
[38] Ali, *Huqooq-e-Niswaan,* 60-70.
[39] Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan,* 187.
[40] Adatia and King, "Some East African Firmans," 187.
[41] Ali Asani, "Improving the Status of women through reform in marriage contract law: The experience of the Nizari Ismaili Community," in *The Islamic Marriage Contract: Case Studies in Islamic Marriage Law,* eds. Quraishi and Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.
[42] Quoted in "Aga Khan: A study in Humanism," Institute of Ismaili Studies, accessed January, 26, 2010, http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=101066#anchor2
[43] "Aga Khan Schools in South Asia," Aga Khan Schools, accessed January, 26, 2010, http://www.agakhanschools.org/about_asia.asp

volunteer organizations in India. The Aga Khan's wife, Begum Um Habibeh, guided Ismaili women through her own example and took on a public role in the leadership of many community affairs. The Aga Khan, thus, put in practice an ideal leadership model for his community – one that included both men and women.

Influences on the Aga Khan

The analysis above demonstrates that the Aga Khan was markedly different in his approach to women's education when compared to his contemporaries. Muslim leaders, such as Ashraf Ali Thanawi, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Nazir Ahmed and Mumtaz Ali, saw women's roles primarily in the domestic sphere. While they recognized women's capabilities and contributions, they did so by prioritizing women's identities as dependent daughters, wives or mothers. Therefore, their articulations for the need, impact and usefulness of women's education were limited. The Aga Khan, however, held a different view of women's capacities and roles, which seems to have been influenced by a variety of factors.

From a young age, the Aga Khan's travels took him across the world, where he met and established relationships with leading aristocrats and government officials. His participation in high-level meetings provided him exposure to global trends and ideas in all aspects of life, including developments in the educational, social and economic arenas. Indeed, he could not have afforded anything less than a global view since his followers resided in many different parts of the world.[44] Given the ascendency of women's liberation movements in the United States, Britain and some Muslim nations during this time, it would not be incorrect to assume that he was exposed to feminist ideas as well.

The years leading to Egypt's nationalist revolution in 1919 saw the emergence of an organized women's movement, which was the first of its kind in the Muslim world.[45] Led by Huda Sharawi (d. 1947), the movement argued for women's suffrage, education and changes in personal laws. It, however, had "westernizing, secularizing tendencies" and "promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress toward Western-type societies."[46] An alternate viewpoint was presented under the leadership of Malak Hifni Nassef (d. 1918) that was distrustful of Western feminism, and searched for a way to articulate emancipation for women within a native, Muslim discourse.[47] Similar movements for women's rights emerged in other Muslim regions, such as Palestine, as well.[48] In the West, American women were agitating for their political rights and, by the time the nineteenth amendment for women's enfranchisement was ratified in 1920, large segments of women had been mobilized in the United States. Analogous developments were taking place in Britain as well, where women were contesting Victorian ideals of femininity, actively obtaining education and working outside the home. Many English women chose to work as missionaries and travelled to India and Africa to further bolster

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[44] Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 58.
[45] Mohja Kahft, "Huda Sha'rawi's 'Mudhakkirati: The Memoirs of the First Lady of Arab Modernity," *Arab Studies Quarterly* Vol. 20 (1998): 1.
[46] Leila Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate, (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 174.
[47] Ibid., 174.
[48] Ellen Fleischmann, "The Emergence of the Palestinian Women's Movement, 1929-39." *Journal of Palestine Studies* vol. 29. no. 3 (2000): 16-32.

their claims for independence.[49] In this era of contestation over women's roles and capacities, the Aga Khan might not only have been aware of these discourses about women's rights, but also influenced by them.

For instance, in his text, *India in Transition*, in a chapter entitled, *Status of Women*, the Aga Khan brings to bear similar arguments for Indian women's enfranchisement as those put forward by American and English suffragists. He appears to be acutely aware of the gendered concept of full citizenship – one that is based on the ability to bear arms – and highlights Indian women's participation in the army during the Great War as a case for women's enfranchisement.[50] He notes that, "the natural material for feminist progress in India is good, but it is artificially kept in swaddling clothes."[51] Separately, in a letter to *The Times* on August 8, 1919, he disagrees with Lord Southborough's denial of suffrage for Indian women on the grounds that Muslim women in purdah would not be willing to go to the polling booths; he argues that "purdah ladies go into the law and registration courts all over the country, and give evidence in relation to the transfer of property,"[52] and that women's electoral franchise is an issue of justice. Clearly, the Aga Khan was familiar with feminist arguments for women's equality and through his reforms encouraged the use of this "natural material for feminist progress" to produce social change in India.

In addition to exposure to feminist ideas, the Aga Khan's interaction with highly accomplished women in India and elsewhere, presented him with alternate models of women's role in society. In his Memoirs he discusses being impressed with the intellectual prowess and character of women such as Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale, Lady Randolph (Winston Churchill's mother) and Fatima Jinnah[53]. Women with whom he had relations reflected high degrees of independence: his second wife, Teresa Magliano, was a professional ballerina and later attained international acclaim as a sculptor,[54] and his third wife, Andr□e Carron, had a dressmaking shop in Paris.[55] These women represented to him what women could achieve when provided with adequate opportunities. In that vein, it is also essential to investigate the role that the Aga Khan's own mother, Nawab Aaliya Shams-ul-Muluk (d.1937), played in influencing his understanding of gender roles.

Nawab Aaliya was related to the royal family of Persia through her mother. In 1867, she married His Highness Aga Ali Shah and after his death assumed the primary responsibility for the education and upbringing of her son. She provided the Aga Khan with a well-rounded education, which he later acknowledged by noting "the inestimable advantage of receiving the fostering care of a gifted and far-seeing mother."[56] While women of Nawab Aaliya's social class

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[49] See Antoinette Burton's following articles for more information*:* "Thinking Beyond the Boundaries: Empire, Feminism and the Domains of History," *Social History* Vol. 26, No.1 (2001): 60-71; and "Contesting the Zenana: The Mission to Make Lady Doctors for India," *Journal of British Studies* Vol. 35, No. 3 (1996): 368-397.
[50] Aga Khan, *India in Transition*, 255.
[51] Ibid., 257.
[52] Quoted in K.K. Aziz, *Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah*. 2 vols. (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1997), 646.
[53] Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 50, 72-73, 79-80, 239, 341, 115-116.
[54] Ibid., 135.
[55] Ibid., 219.
[56] Quoted in Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan,* 54.

commanded sufficient material resources and even managed their properties and investments, it was the premature death of her husband - when the Aga Khan was only eight years old - that required her to take on an even more active role in the public affairs of the Ismaili community. She consciously presented herself as a model for Ismaili women and encouraged Ismaili girls to get an education. Malick notes that, "it was through her influence that social reforms were introduced in the community."[57] In addition, she took "unflagging interest"[58] in the Aga Khan's later international political endeavors and seems to have been his advisor and confidant. As the Aga Khan notes in his memoirs, "Each year that I went to India we talked together as fully and as frankly about this [his work as the President of the League of Nations] as we had throughout my life shared our interests, our joys and our sorrows."[59] The model of leadership and independence that Nawab Aaliya presented must have undoubtedly impacted the Aga Khan's conception of gender roles. The Aga Khan's later efforts for improving the status of his female followers were thus likely informed by the examples put forth by his own mother and the many accomplished women with whom he was acquainted.

Conclusion: Implications for Ismaili Muslim Women Today

Aga Khan III's recognition of women's humanity informed his conceptualization of the wide-ranging roles they could perform in society. This influenced his thoughts on women's education and distinguished him from fellow Muslim reformers. His reforms have had far-reaching impact on improving the quality of life of Ismaili Muslim women globally, and his work continues to be strengthened and expanded upon by his grandson, the present Imam of Ismaili Muslims, His Highness the Aga Khan. Today, a majority of Ismaili women are well educated and participate actively in the public life of the religious community.[60] In the West, in common with other Muslim immigrants, they work outside their homes and such work is not stigmatized at the communal level. While hindrances to economic and social progress still exist for Ismaili women, the cultural barriers to obtaining education and employment have been significantly lowered.

That said, since most of the reforms were initiated and sustained by the religious authority of Aga Khan III himself, Ismaili women did not feel the need to organize themselves on a large scale to demand their rights. For some time, this resulted in a lack of ownership and complacence in Ismaili women with regards to their own development. This lack of ownership also meant that on occasion women's development was taken for granted or even marginalized. Asani demonstrates that there have been times when the patriarchal culture reasserted itself and some of the Aga Khan's reforms had to be toned down.[61] This is in contrast to other groups of women who themselves have had to, and continue to, struggle to achieve an equal social and religious footing with men. Consider the case of the Daudi Bohra Ismailis in India at the turn of the century. Ghadially notes that the campaign for women's education and emancipation was undertaken by a group of reforming Bohras themselves instead of the *Dai* (Bohra spiritual

[57] Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan,* 55.
[58] Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 283.
[59] Ibid., 283.
[60] Asani, "Improving the Status of women," 6.
[61] Ibid., 7.

leader), Dr. Tahir Saifuddin.[62] Bohra reformers agitated against the clergy's control and wanted to bring an Anglo-vernacular education to the Bohra girls. As part of these efforts, they formed activist organizations, such as the Daudi Bohra Women's Association, and published their thoughts in a magazine entitled *Aage-Kadam* (March Forward).[63] Unlike the Nizari Ismailis who had the progressive leadership of their Imam, Daudi Ismailis had to struggle to obtain women's emancipation. The situation, however, is changing for Nizari Ismailis under the guidance of the current Imam, who has encouraged leadership and organization of women at the grassroots level.

Like his grandfather, His Highness the Aga Khan has emphasized gender equality and women's development as areas of focus. His strategy includes a combination of gender-specific and general socioeconomic reforms. For instance, during the last couple of decades of his Imamat, the inclusion of women in the Ismaili social governance institutions has gained more force, with the goal to appoint at least 40 to 50 percent women in countries where qualified and educated women are available.[64] In various countries, such as Afghanistan, Kenya, Portugal and United Kingdom, women are appointed to the highest governance bodies to lead Women's Activities portfolios. These portfolios spearhead social, economic and educational programming for Ismaili girls and women. [65] In addition, the creation of women's groups at the level of the congregation is also encouraged.[66] Such faith-based organizing within and across congregations can be a powerful way for Ismaili women to construct a politics that addresses their needs.[67] These groups have immense potential for raising consciousness among Ismaili girls and women by providing them with a platform for engaging in critical reflections about their identity. Thus, contemporary Ismaili women's organization and leadership is positioning them to supplement and sustain the efforts of the institution of the Ismaili Imamat.[68] It would be fair to credit Sultan Mohamed Shah Aga Khan III for pioneering much of this reform, and His Highness the Aga Khan for taking these reforms to a new level.

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[62] Ghadially, "The Campaign for Women's Emancipation," 6.
[63] Ibid., 6.
[64] Asani, "Improving the Status of Women," 6.
[65] See Huma Kamjo, Salima Naikbeen and Karim Paulo, "In Lisbon, Kabul and around the world, Ismailis gather for International Women's Day," April 1, 2010, http://www.theismaili.org/cms/969/In-Lisbon-Kabul-and-around-the-world-Ismailis-gather-for-International-Womens-Day; Jazzmin Jiwa, "International Women's Day brings women from around the world to the Ismaili Centre, London," March 10, 2010, http://www.theismaili.org/cms/957/International-Womens-Day-brings-women-from-around-the-world-to-the-Ismaili-Centre-London; Karishma Makhani, "Entrepreneurial women transform home-cooked meals into a source of income," August 21, 2010, http://www.theismaili.org/cms/1066/Entrepreneurial-women-transform-homecooked-meals-into-a-source-of-income; Faheen Allibhoy and Nazim Karim, "Ismaili Council for USA sponsors 2009 Women's Conference in California," January 12, 2010, http://www.theismaili.org/cms/927/Ismaili-Council-for-USA-sponsors-2009-Womens-Conference-in-California
[66] Several Ismaili congregations in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States now have Women's Reading Circles or Book Clubs. See Areebah Ajani, "Books, bonding, and new beginnings," April 16, 2010, http://www.theismaili.org/cms/984/Books-bonding-and-new-beginnings
[67] See Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 195.
[68] See Sameera Gokal, "Empowered women work to improve the lives of other women and their communities around the world," February 9, 2011, http://www.theismaili.org/cms/1155/Empowered-women-work-to-improve-the-lives-of-other-women-and-their-communities-around-the-world

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