

Ethics of Care as Practical Theology and the Autonomous Sphere for Muslim Women in Gender Jihad

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Abstract

This article analyzes the concept of the ethics of care within Amina Wadud's thought, not as an abstract ethical theory, but as a manifestation of practical theology that shapes spaces of autonomy and agency for Muslim women. Focusing on the practices of grassroots movements such as Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.), this study argues that the care work they perform constitutes a concrete form of Gender Jihad a transformative struggle for gender justice. This practice reconstitutes the central Islamic concept of mu'amalat (just social relations), while also functioning as a tacit corrective to the failure of patriarchal Islamic structures in realizing social justice. The article demonstrates how the ethics of care builds legitimacy through impactful praxis, creates an alternative epistemology grounded in women's lived experiences, and offers a relational, justice-centered, and sustainable paradigm of Islam. These findings underscore the importance of reading theology not only from texts but also from the bodies and actions of women in everyday

Received: 06 January 2026 Revised: 22 March 2026 Accepted: 06 May 2026 Published: 25 May 2026

Keywords: *Ethics of Care, Gender Jihad, Grassroots Movements, Muslim Feminist Community, Practical Theology*

INTRODUCTION

Discourse on Islam and gender is often characterized by a polarized dichotomy (Ask & Tjomsland, 2021). On one end lies state-centric legal-textual reform discourse focused on formal institutions, and on the other, fundamentalist narratives that reject critical interpretation. Within this divided landscape, the voices and practices of Muslim women at the grassroots level are frequently marginalized or reduced to mere social activism, seldom acknowledged as a legitimate theological resource (Piedalue, 2022). This article addresses this gap by foregrounding the scholarship of Amina Wadud, who locates the genesis of a vibrant, lived theology precisely in women's daily practices, particularly in community-based care work.



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Through her concept of Gender Jihad, Amina Wadud not only deconstructs patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts but, more fundamentally, shifts the locus of religious authority from scholarly circles (*ulama*) and formal institutions toward the embodied experiences of women practicing an ethics of care (Wadud, 2009). This article argues that, within Amina Wadud's framework, the ethics of care is not merely an activist strategy. Rather, it constitutes a form of practical theology that simultaneously operates as a space for autonomy, a source of legitimacy, and an epistemological foundation for Muslim women to articulate and enact a vision of Islam rooted in justice (Wadud, 2013).

This research proceeds from the assumption that theological authority and Islamic knowledge are not the exclusive preserve of textual exegesis or institutional doctrine. Instead, it posits that authentic religious meaning and legitimacy can be generated through everyday ethical praxis, particularly the often-overlooked, embodied labor of care performed by women in community settings. Therefore, the lived experiences and social actions of grassroots actors represent a critical, yet under-examined, site for theological innovation and Islamic renewal.

The analysis will focus on the practices of women's networks such as Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.) in Richmond, Virginia, which serve as central case studies in Amina Wadud's work (Wadud, 2013). This article investigates the following questions: How can seemingly mundane care work such as cooking, providing care, and creating safe spaces be interpreted as (1) a radical reinterpretation of the Islamic concept of *mu'amalat* (ethical social relations); (2) a strategy for cultivating internal autonomy and emancipatory space; (3) an alternative method for establishing Islamic legitimacy that transcends discursive conflict; and (4) a source of authentic feminist knowledge? By examining these questions, the article demonstrates that the ethics of care forms the core of Gender Jihad, presenting a transformative vision of Islam centered on relational justice and communal sustainability.

RESEARCH METHOD

To achieve its objectives, this study employs a qualitative approach based on an intrinsic case study design (Mey, 2022), integrated with critical discourse

analysis, to explore how the ethics of care are operationalized as practical theology. Data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of the Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.) networks in Richmond, Virginia, as well as through analysis of their internal documents. This primary data was then thematically analyzed to identify patterns of meaning and contextualized within the theoretical framework of Amina Wadud's Gender Jihad. The aim is to address how everyday care work can serve as a foundation for theological reinterpretation, autonomous space, an alternative source of legitimacy, and authentic feminist epistemology in Islam.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Brief Biography, Life Journey, and Works Of Amina Wadud

Amina Wadud is a globally influential Muslim intellectual, feminist, and gender justice activist. Born Mary Teasley on September 25, 1952, in Bethesda, Maryland, United States, she converted to Islam in 1972 and changed her name to Amina Wadud. Her cross-cultural and interreligious upbringing raised in a Methodist Christian family shaped her unique perspective in interpreting Islamic texts through lenses of justice, equality, and inclusivity (Majeed, 2025).

Her educational background is robust in Islamic studies. Amina Wadud earned a bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic from the University of Pennsylvania in 1975, followed by a master's degree in Near Eastern Studies from the University of Michigan in 1976. She obtained her Ph.D. in Islamic Studies and Arabic from the same university in 1988. Her innovative dissertation laid the foundation for her magnum opus (Majeed, 2025).

Amina Wadud's most seminal work is the book *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. This book revolutionized Qur'anic hermeneutics by introducing a holistic and gender-inclusive reading methodology (Wadud, 1999). Amina Wadud challenged traditional patriarchal interpretations by emphasizing the universal principles of justice (*'adl*) and mercy (*rahmah*) as central messages of the sacred text. Her work has become a cornerstone of contemporary Islamic feminism (Alfani, Mukhsin, Khusnadin, Chodijah, & Luthfia, 2025).

In her subsequent book, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, Amina Wadud introduced the concept of Gender Jihad as a non-violent transformative struggle for justice within Muslim communities (Zuhri, 2021). This concept frames jihad not as armed conflict but as a continual effort to reform oppressive social and theological practices, grounded in the praxis of an ethics of care. The book also reflects her personal and intellectual journey as an activist-scholar (Wadud, 2013).

Amina Wadud's theoretical contributions are transformative. She developed a woman-centered Qur'anic hermeneutic that incorporates historical, linguistic, and lived experiential contexts (Ray, 2025). Furthermore, she articulated ethics of care as practical theology, positioning care work and social justice as forms of worship equal to formal rituals. Most radically, she expanded the notion of experience-based religious authority, recognizing knowledge born from lived marginalization as a legitimate source of authority alongside textual and institutional sources (Hamington, van Nistelrooij, & Sander-Staudt, 2022).

In March 2005, Amina Wadud became the focus of global controversy when she led a mixed-gender Friday congregational prayer in New York. This historic event sparked international debate on women's leadership in Islamic worship. Although harshly criticized by conservative circles, this act inspired similar movements worldwide and solidified her position as a courageous challenger of the status quo (Urbah Rusydiana, Lusri Virga, & Afri Muadom, 2025).

In activism and academia, Amina Wadud has taught at the International Islamic University Malaysia and Virginia Commonwealth University. She actively mentors grassroots movements such as Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.), making her work relevant not only in academic spaces but also in direct community transformation. Her approach, which integrates deep theological reflection with concrete social action, is a hallmark of her contribution (Wadud, 2013).

Amina Wadud's intellectual legacy continues to thrive. She left an intellectual foundation that challenges patriarchal interpretive hegemony while paving the way for an inclusive, justice-centered theology. Her work bridges academia, activism, and spirituality, clearly demonstrating that the struggle for gender equality is not an

external influence on Islam but an integral part of the deepest call to faith within Islam. Through her life and work, Wadud demonstrates that theology is not merely for study but to be lived and enacted in tangible action for humanity (Stack, 2020).

Ethics of Care as a Theological Reinterpretation of Mu'amalat: From Discourse to Justice Praxis

Amina Wadud emphatically positions *mu'amalat* just and ethical social relations as the ultimate objective of Shari'ah, taking precedence over and underpinning formal rituals (*'ibadat*). This perspective forms the theological foundation for interpreting the practices of groups like Muslim Women United (MWU). When they provide meals for families in need or care for sick community members, their actions are not charity in a secondary sense. Instead, they constitute a form of social worship that directly engages the essence of *mu'amalat*. They transform abstract principles of divine mercy (*rahmah*) and justice (*'adl*) into material reality (Wadud, 2013).

This practice entails a sharp, albeit implicit, theological critique. By assuming the function of securing basic welfare a collective responsibility (*fard kifayah*) of the Muslim community (*jama'ah*) under the concept of public interest (*maslahah*) these groups highlight the failure of formal Islamic institutions, such as mosques and religious organizations, which are often managed patriarchally. This failure is not merely administrative; it is a theological failure: an inability to realize the ideal of social justice that lies at the heart of Islam's message. Consequently, their care work functions as a corrective praxis. It is a peaceful jihad to remind the community of its foundational commitment. It demands that Islam be felt not only from the pulpit but also in sated stomachs, cared-for bodies, and provided safety. Thus, the ethics of care performs a direct hermeneutic on the social text, reinterpreting *mu'amalat* as justice embodied through the labor of women (Kvakhadze, 2020).

Forging Autonomous Spaces: Personal Spirituality as a Sphere of Liberation

A vital contribution of grassroots movements like Muslim Women United (MWU) is their capacity to create autonomy independent of external structures. Unlike NGOs such as Sisters in Islam (SIS), which must navigate state political and legal arenas and adhere to donor logic, these grassroots groups root their work in personal spirituality and organic communal commitment (Wadud, 2013). This

autonomy represents a unique form of empowerment. Their motivation springs from an inner conviction that serving others is a direct manifestation of faith (*iman*) and piety (*taqwa*). This conviction becomes a sustainable source of energy and grants them freedom from external political and economic calculations (Scheer, 2012).

The implications are profound. The private sphere the home, the kitchen, small meeting spaces transforms into an alternative, liberating public sphere. Here, women are no longer mere objects of law or religious edicts (*fatwa*); they become active subjects formulating their own theology (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006). They are practical jurists (*faqihah*) who articulate Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) through acts of care (Qibtiyah, Andeska, & Salsabila, 2025). Amina Wadud astutely employs the ethics of care to dismantle the public-private dichotomy that negates women's work. She demonstrates that precisely within spaces deemed domestic and non-economic, the moral foundations of society are built. These spaces become the primary madrasah (school) for social justice education, where values of responsibility, empathy, and reciprocity are learned and practiced long before they are codified in public discourse. The autonomy born here is inherently subversive, as it constructs power from the margins, from what has long been deemed insignificant.

Legitimacy Strategy: Validity Born from Impact Not Debate

Movements for Islamic gender reform often become mired in an exhaustive discursive struggle with conservative authorities over the question of religious legitimacy (Islamicity). In contrast, groups such as Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.) advance a strategic alternative by shifting the grounds of legitimacy from theoretical discourse to tangible praxis (Wadud, 2013). Their claim to Islamic authenticity does not rely on defensive hermeneutical justification it becomes performatively established through measurable socio-ethical outcomes, including the protection of children, support for survivors of violence, and the cultivation of resilient communities.

This is a form of performative legitimacy. Their moral authority is built not through scholarly titles but through the consistency of being a living example of Qur'anic values, such as, *Whoever saves one life, it is as if they have saved all of humanity* (QS. Al-Maidah [5] :32). QS. Az-Zalzalah [99] :7-8 (*So whoever does an*

atom's weight of good will see it) find their most convincing interpretation in these micro-level acts of care. Their method is *dakwah bil-hal* (proselytization through action), which speaks louder than a thousand sermons. This strategy is effective because it touches the most fundamental logic of faith: that the truth of a belief is seen in its fruits. In this context, cared-for bodies and built-up communities become a living sacred text, whose authenticity is irrefutable.

Embodied and Experiential Epistemology: Knowing from the Site of Struggle

Amina Wadud emphasizes that a just knowledge of Islam and society must be inclusive of women's experiences (Wadud, 2009). Grassroots groups are not merely case studies for theories developed elsewhere; they are themselves producers of knowledge. For instance, theories about community resilience are born from the experience of individuals like Latifah, who runs a safehouse while juggling odd jobs. The concept of servant leadership is shaped by the daily patience of someone like Jennah, caring for a chronically ill neighbor (Wadud, 2013).

The knowledge generated is situational and embodied knowledge. It is knowledge about how to endure scarcity, how to build trust from scratch, how to sense a community's needs before they are articulated. This knowledge is often tacit, yet it constitutes their operational strength. This is the essence of the feminist epistemology championed by Amina Wadud. The center of knowledge production shifts from the ivory towers of academia or councils of scholars (*ulama*) to shared kitchens and psychological support spaces. It is from these marginalized locations that the sharpest critique of structural injustice and the most concrete vision of a liberating Islam emerge. Their experience becomes a new source of authority for defining what constitutes a good Islam.

Analysis and Contextualization: The Story of Jennah and Latifah as a Gender Jihad

The story of the struggle of Latifah Abdus-Sabur and Jennah Aminah Qadir, who founded Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.), provides a concrete example of how Amina Wadud's theory of Gender Jihad and ethics of care is translated into practice (Marcotte, 2010). Both women experienced profound personal suffering, yet they transformed those experiences into a spiritual foundation and motivation for collective action. In doing

so, they reversed the common narrative that often marginalizes women's voices, turning private lived experiences into a legitimate source of religious authority based on direct, embodied engagement (Mejia, 2008). This represents a shift in authority from texts and formal institutions toward authority born from lived experience, positioning them as practical theologians whose knowledge stems from processes of personal and communal healing (Jonas, 2010).

The activities they undertake providing food, medical support, and spaces for sharing stories while appearing as ordinary social work, are in fact a living reinterpretation of the Islamic concept of *mu'amalat* (ethical social relations) (Wadud, 2013). These concrete actions demonstrate that the core of Islamic teachings lies in just and compassionate social relationships. In other words, the communal kitchens and safe spaces they manage function as social worship spaces where principles of justice and care are tangibly realized (Fadel, 2008). This approach not only actualizes Islamic values but also offers an alternative legitimacy strategy grounded in tangible evidence rather than doctrinal debate.

When confronted with accusations of being un-Islamic, Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.) respond through visible work and impact, not through textual debate. Their legitimacy is earned through community recognition of the direct benefits they provide, thereby constructing an authority independent of mainstream religious institutions. Implicitly, their presence also constitutes a critique of religious structures perceived as having failed in their social responsibilities. The financial and operational independence of these organizations further creates an autonomous space for women to lead and design agendas based on real needs, without relying on traditional hierarchies (Wadud, 2013).

Reflection on this story underscores three important principles: first, meaningful social change can begin with small, local actions. Second, the skills of care and management, often associated with women's domestic roles, are in fact highly valuable leadership and organizational competencies. Third, everyone can contribute to justice according to their capacity, without needing to be a religious scholar. Thus, the practices of Muslim Women United (MWU) and Together Righteousness Unites The Hearts (T.R.U.T.H.) do not merely apply Wadud's theory;

they refine it by demonstrating that the struggle for gender justice in Islam has many faces. The most effective and liberating jihad is often the one carried out with gentleness, through building community from within, and through a daily commitment to responding to suffering with concrete action.

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates that the ethics of care within Amina Wadud's thought extends far beyond being merely an additive value in the struggle for gender justice. It constitutes the very substance and methodology of Gender Jihad itself. As substance, it offers an alternative theological vision of Islam centered on relational justice, collective responsibility, and the sustainability of life. This vision stands in direct opposition to hierarchical, legal-formalistic, and androcentric interpretations of Islam.

As a methodology, the ethics of care provides a liberating framework for praxis. First, it offers an interpretive tool for reading and reforming *mu'amalat* (social relations) from the ground up. Second, it opens autonomous spaces by relying on personal spirituality as an independent source of strength. Third, it supplies an effective legitimacy strategy by prioritizing tangible impact. Fourth, it affirms a valid epistemology sourced from the lived experiences of women who are both the most vulnerable and the most resilient.

Consequently, Gender Jihad does not always manifest as a shout from the pulpit or a debate in the courtroom. Often, it is silent in action, present in a shared bowl of food, in an embrace for the grieving, and in safe spaces built together. Through the ethics of care, Amina Wadud and the women at the grassroots invite us to recognize that the most radical struggle for justice often begins, and is sustained, through the care of life's most fundamental aspects. This is a transformative and sustainable jihad, planting the seeds of significant social change within the fertile soil of caring human relationships.

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