

## **Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority**

*Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, eds.*

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Edited by Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* is a compilation of papers presented at a 2009 conference of the same name. The book's twenty chapters represent a diverse range of geographic, thematic, and methodological approaches to questions of female leadership within mosques, religious scholarship, education, Muslim organizations, and other Islamic spaces. Together, they paint a rich and complex picture of the intersections of gender, religion, culture, history, politics, class, and migration, as well as the impact of these intersections on female authority in Islamic contexts.

In their introduction to the first of the book's three sections, the editors describe the section's chapters as reflecting the impact of "male invitation, state intervention, and female initiative" (p. 31) on women's leadership roles. The first chapter, by Maria Jaschok, looks at female *ahong* (imams) in women's mosques in China, who provide religious education, counselling, and prayer leadership in gender-segregated spaces. She discusses the complex debates about segregation, empowerment, and religious innovation (*bid'ah*) that these mosques represent. The second chapter, by Margaret J. Rausch, examines the context of Morocco's *murshidahs*, women trained and certified by the Moroccan government as preachers, teachers, and counsellors, and who have an important influence on women's religious education and mosque par-

ticipation. In the third chapter, Mona Hassan explores a similar phenomenon in Turkey. She argues that the role of state-employed female preachers in answering religious questions and preaching to women in mosques is changing perceptions of religious leadership and mosques as male-only domains.

The fourth chapter, by Amélie Le Renard, considers how Saudi policies of gender segregation and female exclusion have led to the development of female leadership within alternative – and relatively independent – physical and online women’s-only spaces. She notes that while these female preachers’ approaches are not “revolutionary,” they nonetheless do claim a space in which female leadership is visible and women’s concerns can be centered. In the following chapter, Mirjam Künkler and Roya Fazaeli talk about the lives of two female *mujtahidahs* in Iran: Nusrat Amin and Zuhrah Sifati. Although the two *mujtahidahs* rose to prominence in apparently opposite contexts – one during the reign of the shah and the other after the Islamic Revolution – the authors argue that they faced similar challenges as women seeking to further their Islamic education and teaching. The section’s final chapter, by Sarah Islam, examines the Qubaysiyyat movement of female religious study circles in Syria. She notes that the movement’s authority comes from its leaders’ religious knowledge, practice, and professional accomplishments, and that its spread is also due to its officially apolitical nature, which helped it avoid government censure.

Section 2 focuses on how Muslim women leaders engage with the limitations they face in their work. In the first chapter, Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey talk about women who teach in madrasahs in rural Uttar Pradesh, India. They pay particular attention to these leaders’ efforts to inculcate middle-class urbane manners in a population perceived as uncouth, including efforts to increase social gender segregation. In the next chapter, Nathal M. Dessing examines Muslim women’s groups in the Netherlands, describing the majority of them as active in Islamic learning without challenging the power structures that have traditionally limited women’s authority. She also profiles one organization that takes a more explicit stance in favor of women’s equality and individual *ijtihad*, thereby reflecting different claims to authority among Muslim women. The following chapter, by N. R. Micinski, focuses on two prominent female religious teachers in Kazan, Russia, who represent, respectively, “invited” (affiliated with a state religious board) and “invented” spaces (having no formal affiliation with official bodies). Micinski discusses the advantages and disadvantages for women’s leadership in both types of spaces.

In the section’s fourth chapter, Catharina Raudvere discusses Bosnian women’s diverse engagements with religious interpretations by looking at

women who take an explicit gender-focused approach in creating alternative spaces for Muslim women, as well as women working and teaching within more conservative madrasah structures. The following chapter, by Petra Bleisch Bouzar, looks at an organization of mainly female converts in Switzerland. She examines the structure and texts to which formal authority is attributed, but also emphasizes the importance of acknowledging women who hold positions of informal authority as role models or experts on specific topics.

In the sixth chapter, Els Vanderwaeren argues that, among Muslim women in Flanders, Belgium, women-only meetings in private living rooms provide spaces for young women to develop their own religious interpretations away from established institutions and male religious figures. Next, Petra Kup-pinger's chapter on the leaders of Muslim women's groups both within and outside of mosque spaces in Stuttgart, Germany, considers the role of these women's groups not only in discussions of explicitly religious matters, but also in questions of the Muslim public sphere and Muslim identity in Germany. The section ends with a chapter by Matthew Pierce on images of Fatimah within Shi'i literature, pointing out how particular framings of her life are used as models for Muslim womanhood and Muslim women's authority.

The book's third section centers on the impact of female leadership for Muslim communities and how Islamic authority is understood. It begins with a chapter by Pia Karlsson Minganti on women's participation in mosques and Muslim youth groups in Sweden. Minganti uses the term *tactical orthodoxy* to characterize how these women may appeal to religious responsibilities and principles in order to shift gendered power dynamics within their families and communities. In the second chapter, Hiroko Minesaki writes about female preachers working in Egypt. Looking at one preacher working among upper-middle-class women in Cairo and another in a lower-class suburb, Minesaki outlines two ways that women leaders are shifting women's negotiations with gender norms. The next chapter, by Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, draws a distinction between "Muslim feminists" and "shari'ah-minded activists" in Indonesia. The author further discusses the work of Muslim feminist groups in gaining the support of religious groups in campaigns against human trafficking and domestic abuse, pointing to subsequent legislation on both issues as an indication of the successes of the activists' methods.

In the following chapter, Riem Spielhaus considers the case of Halima Krausen, a religious leader in Germany. Spielhaus notes that questions of representation, segregation, and legitimacy are significant issues affecting Muslim women's leadership in German mosques and Islamic organizations. Next, Juliane Hammer focuses on Muslim women's activism in North America, using examples such as Asra Nomani's "Muslim Women's Freedom Tour" and the

2005 mixed Friday prayer led by Amina Wadud, to frame contestations of gendered mosque spaces and women-led prayer as actions through which an “embodied tafsir” can be carried out. Examining similar issues in a South African context, the final chapter by Uta Christina Lehmann analyzes the reactions of South African Muslims and Muslim newspapers to Amina Wadud’s *khutbah* delivered in Cape Town in 1994 and to her sermon and prayer in New York City in 2005. Lehmann argues that these discussions brought greater visibility to concerns about inadequate women’s prayer spaces in South Africa, while also reflecting the borders drawn around the spaces and roles in which women’s leadership is seen as legitimate.

The book’s conclusion, written by Masooda Bano, presents as a case study the armed resistance carried out at Pakistan’s Jami’ah Hafsa female madrasah in response to the state’s plan to demolish it. She then goes on to consider what the movement reflects about the authority and charisma of the school’s principal, using this as a way to draw larger conclusions about the confluences of political context, religious understandings, and personal agency in how female Islamic authority can be understood.

This book is an impressive depiction, from a variety of ideological approaches, of some of the varied forms that female authority can assume within Islamic communities. The varied types of methodological strategies represented in the chapters (e.g., ethnography, interviews, and discourse analysis) mirror the range of textual, discursive, community-based, formal, and informal contexts through which female Islamic authority is developed, negotiated, challenged, and enacted.

The diversity of geographic regions is also a major strength, as the book’s coverage far exceeds what is often depicted as the “Muslim world,” although much of Africa remains noticeably absent. Shi’a communities are also under-represented; increased attention to Shi’a and other minority sects would further expand the understandings of Islamic authority that arise in the book. Given the large number of chapters, the collection could have benefitted from more editorial analysis of the connections and divergences within the research and what these chapters say about the state of research in the field as a whole.

*Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* is an important interdisciplinary compilation of research on female Islamic authority around the world and a valuable resource for researchers working on gender, religious authority, or contemporary Muslim societies.

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