Female Islamic Education Movements

Since the 1970s, movements aimed at giving Muslim women access to the serious study of Islamic texts have emerged across the world. In this book, Masooda Bano argues that the creative spirit that marked the rise and consolidation of Islam, whereby Islam inspired serious intellectual engagement to create optimal societal institutions, can be found within these education movements. Drawing on rich ethnographic material from Pakistan, northern Nigeria and Syria, Bano questions the restricted notion of agency associated with these movements, exploring the educational networks which have attracted educated, professional and culturally progressive Muslim women to textual study, thus helping to reverse the most damaging legacy of colonial rule in Muslim societies: the isolation of modern and Islamic knowledge. With its comparative approach, this book will appeal to those studying and researching the role of women across Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, as well as the wider Muslim world.

Masooda Bano is Associate Professor at the Oxford Department of International Development, and Senior Golding Fellow at Brasenose College, University of Oxford. She is the author of *The Rational Believer: Choices and Decisions in the Madrasas of Pakistan* (2012).

"One of the more striking developments in the Muslim world over the past century has been the way in which individuals have, to varying degrees, been taking responsibility for their Islamic understandings. In this important book Masooda Bano explores this process amongst women in three different Muslim societies and concludes with a cautiously optimistic view of the future."

Professor Francis Robinson, Royal Holloway, University of London

"Persuasive and clearly written, *Female Islamic Education* offers stunning insight into why women's mosque- and home-situated Islamic education and study circles have expanded in scope, impact, and prestige in recent years. Bano combines long-term field research in West Africa, the Arab world, and South Asia with a thorough knowledge of historical sources. The reasons for the growth in women's religious education also provides a key to understanding why Islamic education, far from conventional predictions, is gaining ground today."

Professor Dale F. Eickelman, Dartmouth College

"Tectonic shifts are at play within Muslim societies that remain overshadowed by more spectacular phenomena like Jihadi militancy. The rise of female Islamic education movements since the late 20th century is one of such tectonic shifts, and it could very well constitute a major turning point in the history of the Islamic tradition at large. The drivers of this transformation and its implications for Islamic knowledge are masterfully unpacked by Masooda Bano through a unique combination of analytical breadth and empirical depth."

Dr Thomas Pierret, University of Edinburgh

Female Islamic Education Movements

The Re-democratisation of Islamic Knowledge

Masooda Bano
University of Oxford

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In the loving memory of Hasan Baba (2000–2015) –
The much-loved Little Master of 129 Market Road

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Preface

It was in 2006, when I was doing fieldwork with religious schools in Pakistan, that I first came across female madrasas. They had emerged only in the 1970s, but within the last thirty years had started to catch up fast with male madrasas, which have a centuries-old tradition in South Asia. In successive years my comparative work in Bangladesh and India confirmed similar patterns. As I was writing up my research (later published as *The Rational Believer*, with a chapter on female madrasas duly included), a colleague at Oxford proposed to host a conference on the increasing presence of women within the mosque and madrasa networks, which have traditionally been dominated by male religious elites. The resulting conference and the subsequent volume noted the prevalence of this trend across the Muslim world and also among Muslim diaspora communities in the West; the point of its origins seemed to be the 1970s. Much has been written about the global Islamic revival since the 1970s; on-going research on these women's movements, however, often views them as a contemporary stand-alone phenomenon, rather than seeing them as part of the broader trend (a notable exception being Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*). As I have explored this phenomenon in more depth, I have concluded that these movements are indeed part and parcel of the broader societal shifts that have shaped the Islamic revival since the 1970s. But, more importantly, I have become convinced of the great creative energy generated by some of these movements (especially those attracting the modern-educated, professional and culturally progressive Muslim women) which existing scholarship consistently fails to recognise.

The arguments that I build in this volume are based on prolonged fieldwork with a diverse range of female Islamic education platforms across three Muslim-majority contexts: Pakistan, northern Nigeria, and Syria. Pakistan has been the base of my previous studies, and this project was thus a natural extension of them, especially given that South Asia represents a major share of the world's Muslim population. From within the Middle East, which for many is still the heartland of Islam, Syria made a

compelling case, as it was less studied than Egypt, and admittedly, the region identified as Bilad-i-Sham has historically been of great interest to me. Prolonged fieldwork in Damascus and Aleppo during the summer of 2010 saved the project, despite the inevitable sadness associated with having to work on a country (even if remotely) where things have gone horribly wrong. Kano, in West Africa, opened up to me rather unexpectedly. In January 2008, as a result of my growing comparative work on Islamic education systems, I was requested by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to take a trip up to Kano to advise on how best to support education in Islamic schools in northern Nigeria; engaged with a region where the 23,000 recorded Islamiyya, Quranic, and Tsangaya Education (IQTE) schools far outnumbered the fewer than 6,000 modern state schools, DFID's education advisers wondered how to proceed. When I did reach Kano, what I wrote to a friend then still holds true for me today: 'I have never seen such high demand for Islamic schooling in any other region where I have worked.' This West-African region, which to me was the most foreign of all my three research sites, is in fact the one where in the long run I have had the most easy and wide-ranging access to religious scholars, Islamic intellectuals, Sufis heading the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya *tariqas* (Sufi orders), female preachers and their students, and government officials.

Two central questions guided the fieldwork across the three sites: why have these female Islamic education movements emerged?; and what do they mean for women, as well as for the way in which Islam will be interpreted and lived in the future? Existing work has focused on identifying their orthodoxy; I instead have been struck by their creative energy and their pursuit of alternative modernities rather than that of the Western liberal tradition. I argue that we need to see these movements not just through a narrow theoretical lens of female agency or piety: we need to understand how knowledge creation is in fact a complex process, where the outcomes of an educational experience are directly shaped by the socio-economic and professional background of the students, but – even more importantly – by their cultural background. While considering the experiences of women of diverse profiles who join these movements, the focus of this volume is on documenting the creative potential that is unlocked in the religious imagination when educated, culturally liberal, and progressive societal elites, engage with Islamic texts. Women of this profile do not absorb orthodox rulings uncritically, nor do they absorb modernist arguments without question; they are convinced of religious ideals only when they are intellectually convinced of their moral superiority to competing moral frameworks, Western liberalism included, or of their optimality in addressing challenges as well as opportunities offered

by contemporary realities. Unlike the modernists, these women retain due respect for the shari'a and the scholarship within the four Sunni *madhhabs* (schools of Islamic law); they do, however, put pressure on the *'ulama* (Islamic scholars) and traditional religious elites to find optimal answers to issues posed by modern life, while respecting the Islamic frame of reference. The significance of these women's engagement with Islamic texts becomes particularly clear when we juxtapose them against the historical developments whereby colonial rule led to the exit of Muslim elites from Islamic education platforms, which led to a clear division between Islamic and modern knowledge. This process led to the isolation of Islamic knowledge production and its disengagement from modern socio-economic and political institutions; the earlier patterns of knowledge production in Muslim societies which allowed for the mixing of Islamic knowledge with other fields and the realities of people's lives were severely distorted.

My central argument in this book is that by bringing educated, professional, and culturally progressive women to the field of Islamic studies, these platforms (often unintentionally) are contributing to the revival of a democratised process of Islamic knowledge production, a process which had historically been central to unleashing the creativity that led to the rise of Islamic civilisational identity – hence the emphasis on 'Re-democratisation' in the book's subtitle. The number of such women within these movements might arguably be small, but given that they come from influential families and elite networks, their impact is wide ranging. Further, as I show in Chapter 7 of this volume, these movements are not alone; rather, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century we are witnessing a major societal shift in Muslim societies, and even more visibly among Muslim diaspora communities in the West, leading to changed modes of religious engagement. There is growth in an array of Islamic movements which are bringing not just modern-educated Muslims (arguably the Islamists were and are modern-educated too) but also culturally progressive Muslims to the study of Islamic texts, working towards an intellectually rigorous, yet spiritually grounded, approach to the study and practice of Islam. The outcome, I argue, indicates the potential for a revival of creative energy within Muslim societies, at a phenomenal pace, in the next few decades.

Predictably, the comparative dimension of this study has been made possible only by generous support from a series of research council fellowships and grants. Between 2009 and 2012, I held the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) flagship Ideas and Beliefs Fellowship, which facilitated the fieldwork in Pakistan; Oxford University's Fell Fund award and research grant awards from my department covered

the fieldwork in Syria; and DFID's ESSPIN programme in northern Nigeria facilitated the fieldwork in Kano. But the arguments advanced in this volume would not have taken their final shape if I had not won the European Research Council (ERC) five-year start-up grant (ERC grant agreement no. [337108], funded under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme [FP7/2007–2013]), which I took up in March 2014. Apart from allowing continued access to these field sites, the fieldwork that I began with new Islamic revival movements in the West (briefly covered in the last chapter of this volume, and my next book project) has been critical to convincing me that the creative potential that I see in some of the female Islamic education movements is in fact part of a broader shift which is a product of the dramatically changed global context in which Muslims find themselves today. In ensuring that such comparative claims remain incisive while being cognisant of the complexity of each context and time period, I have greatly benefitted from the insightful comments and suggestions from four anonymous reviewers. I remain indebted to Maria Marsh, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for securing these reviews and equally for her own deep engagement with the actual text. She proved a wonderful editor to work with. I am also grateful to Lucy Rhymer for the enthusiasm she shared for this project.

Finally, over the seven years of fieldwork, involving repeat annual visits in the cases of northern Nigeria and Pakistan, I have incurred debts to a countless number of people. It is impossible to list them all here; I hope that those who gave me their time were aware of my gratitude, and I trust that if they read this book they will find their experiences justly recorded. I must, however, name those who not only gave their own time, but also helped me to become embedded in the local networks that with time make a foreign land appear familiar. In Syria, the support of Professor Abdul Nabi Isstaif from the University of Damascus was instrumental to getting me access to the networks that were important for my research. An acquaintance formed in Oxford during 2004 when he was there on sabbatical has developed over the years into a relationship of strong mutual respect; when in 2008 I wrote to him announcing my plans, he gave me the warmest of welcomes. The access that he secured for me to the Al-Fatih Institute and the family of Shaykh Farfour in turn helped me to approach prominent Syrian scholars, such as Shaykh Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi, who come from old Syrian scholarly families and were known to be both independent and critical of the state. Muazzan from the Al-Fatih Institute was instrumental in securing access to many of the female Islamic education circles both in Damascus and Aleppo; he was also the one to introduce me to Razzan, a former student and associate of Mahmud Abu al-Huda al-Husseini (at the time Director of the

Directorate of Awqaf in Aleppo), who opened up Aleppo to me. Now living in the UK, she remains a trusted source to tap developments in Syria. I must also note the hospitality of Shaykh Mahmud and his two wives, who acted as my hosts during my time in Aleppo.

In Pakistan, my debts are old, too many, and already well documented. In Kano, the list is again long, but three people must be named: Yardada, the Islamic and Quranic Schools State Specialist with the DFID ESSPIN programme, has not only been instrumental to developing my understanding of Islam in Nigeria, but she has also been the most wonderful companion during my visits to Kano; Auwalu Diso, who was introduced to me in 2009 by Dr Bashir Galadanci (then Special Adviser to the Governor of Kano on Islamic and Quranic Schools) and remained my main liaison in the initial years of my work there, has been fundamental to my eventual familiarisation with Kano; finally, the encouragement I have received over the years from Dr Bashir Galadanci, who himself heralds from a family of learned scholars of Islamic and modern sciences, has been essential to the development of a thesis concerning Kano, which I am confident has local resonance. It is not just the formal interviews or observations that I have conducted across the three sites over the seven years, but equally importantly, these deeper bonds, developed with people who are embedded in these networks, that have left me convinced that what is viewed as mainstream Sunni Islam within these three respective societies is actually remarkably similar; studies arguing for local Islam thus in my view often fail to see the wood for the trees.

Last but not least, I must also thank my students who over the years have studied different dimensions of Islam and Muslim societies with me at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level. These include my DPhil and MPhil students at Oxford, who have written their theses on Islamic movements or aspects of Muslim societies; the visiting undergraduate exchange students to Oxford from the US universities to whom I have at times agreed to give tutorials on related themes; and the students who took the 'Islam and Democracy' module with me at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 2009 over two terms, when Matt Nelson asked me to cover for him. But most of all, they include the students who over the years have taken the Gender and Development module that I have convened at Oxford since 2009. Designed primarily for MPhil Development Studies students, this module has with time attracted students from many other Oxford degree courses, most noticeably MSt Women Studies, in which the emphasis otherwise is on studying Western feminism. These cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural discussions have made me interested in tracing the evolution of Western feminism in a bid to understand whether Muslim societies, despite their current

resistance, will inevitably, as they develop economically, experience shifts in gender norms similar to those experienced in the West during the last two centuries – an analysis presented in Chapter 6. I have predicted against it. Predictions of course are risky affairs; but they are what make social science exciting.

Masooda Bano
Oxford, October 2016

A Note on Transliteration

This volume draws on fieldwork in three regions, with three distinct languages: Syria (Arabic), Pakistan (Urdu), and northern Nigeria (Hausa). The first two share the Arabic script, while Hausa, which from the fifteenth century to the early twentieth century was written in Arabic script (*'ajami*), switched during the colonial period to use of the Roman alphabet. The need for transliteration is therefore confined to Arabic and Urdu words; in both cases, transliteration has been kept simple in view of the multidisciplinary nature of the expected readership. With the exception of the (') to indicate the Arabic and Urdu letters 'ayn and 'hamza, diacritical marks have been avoided. Except for the word 'ulama, the plural form of Arabic or Urdu words is indicated by addition of an *s* to the singular form. To avoid strain on the eyes and minimise distractions while reading, words that are frequently repeated (such as madrasa) are not italicised. Other non-English words are italicised only on their first occurrence. Non-English words used only once in the text are defined where they occur but are not included in the glossary. It is also worth noting that most of the words in the glossary are closely associated with Islamic practices, and thus, though of Arabic origin, they have been absorbed into the other two languages. While translating them, I have emphasised their Islamic meaning because that is the context in which these words are used in this volume; however, where I think it would be useful, I have also indicated the root meaning of such words in Arabic. Words that are specific to Hausa or Urdu have been indicated by (*) and (**), respectively. Finally, while in interview quotes transliterated words have been standardised in line with the glossary, extracts from written publications (including those by the movements being studied) as per the standard rules retain the original transliteration. The resulting inconsistency in spellings of some transliterated words (at times visible on the same page), though potentially annoying for the reader, is inevitable.

Glossary

Adab	Islamic etiquette; the root meaning is 'good manners'
*'Ajami**	African languages written in Arabic script; comes from Arabic root word *ajam*, meaning 'foreign' or 'stranger'
'Alim	Learned man, religious scholar
'Aqida	Creed
'Ashra	Here refers to the last ten days of Ramadan; the root meaning is ten
Awqaf	Religious endowments
Azan	Islamic prayer call
Bid'a	Innovation; heretical doctrine
*Boko**	Western schools or Western education; developed with reference to the English word 'books'
Dars	Lesson; here specifically refers to Islamic sermons
Fajr	The Muslim morning prayer at dawn
Falsafah	Greek philosophy
Fiqh	Technical term for the science of Islamic jurisprudence
Hadiths	Sayings of the Prophet Mohammad
Hajj	The annual pilgrimage to Mecca
Halaqas	Study circles; literal meaning is 'ring'
Haya	Modesty
Hifz	Memorisation of the Quran; literal meaning is 'save'
Hijab	Headscarf worn by Muslim women
'Ibadah	Worship; performance of Islamic prayer rituals

Ijtihad	Systematic reflection on the foundational sources of the law to arrive at legal rulings expending great effort
*Ilmi**	Islamic schools in northern Nigeria for the specialist study of Islamic texts; root word comes from Arabic word *'ilm*, meaning 'knowledge'
Imam	Prayer leader at the mosque; literal meaning is 'leader or head of the community'
'Iqra'	Read
'Isha'	The Muslim night-time prayer
Islamiyya schools	Islamic schools in northern Nigeria which attempt to combine teaching of Islamic and modern subjects
Itter	Concentrated perfume
Jizya	A tax imposed on non-Muslims living under the protection of Muslim political authority
Jihad	Struggle, including armed struggle against non-believers, as well as inner struggle for spiritual purification
Khayrat	Religious alms
Khutba	Sermon
Madhhabs	Schools of Islamic law
Maghrib	North-West Africa
Mahram	Unmarriageable kin
*Malam**	Islamic scholar
*Malamai**	Female Islamic teacher
Maqasid-al-shari'a	A technical term for a particular approach to Islamic legal interpretation; literal meaning is objectives of shari'a
Mukhabarat	Intelligence
*Munshi***	Secretary (originally from Persian)
Qadi	Judge
Qaida	Beginner's book introducing the Quranic alphabets; root meaning is 'base'
Qanun	Law
Ramadan	The Muslim month of fasting
Rihla	Journey; especially one linked to spiritual pursuits
Sabr	Patience
Sadaqa	Religious alms

Salafi	Comes from root word, *salaf*, meaning 'ancestors'; today the word is widely associated with puritanical Islamic movements stemming from Saudi Arabia
Seerah	Life of the Prophet Mohammad
Shari'	Road
Shari'a	Islamic law and morality; literal meaning is 'path to water', with the connotation that following the shari'a leads to salvation
Shaykh	Islamic scholar (male)
Shaykha	Islamic scholar (female)
Shukr	Gratitude; here used in specific reference to God
Sufi Tariqa	Muslim mystic order
Suhar	The predawn meal during Ramadan to mark the beginning of the fast
Sunnah	Practice of the Prophet Mohammad
Surahs	Chapters of the Quran
Tafsir	Commentaries; exegesis of the Quran
Tahajjud	Optional predawn prayer
Tahara	Bodily purification
Tajdid	Renewal or rebirth
Tajweed	Proper pronunciation of Quranic Arabic
Tarawee prayer	Special night prayer in Ramadan; literal meaning is 'to rest'
Tarbiya	Moral training, especially in childhood
Tariqa	Way, a Sufi order
*Tsangaya**	Quranic boarding schools for boys in northern Nigeria
'Ulama (singular: 'alim)	Islamic religious scholars
Viziers	Ministers
*Wafaq***	Central madrasa boards in Pakistan
Waqf	Religious Endowment
Zakat	Islamic alms – tax paid annually on one's accumulated wealth
*Zauq***	Taste
Zikr	Remembrance of God; it also has a technical meaning referring to a type of Sufi practice or ritual