

Emergence of Female Preachers and Shaping of Islamic Authority: Case of Institutional Change or Persistence¹?

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Abstract

Until the 1970s, in most Muslim societies formal teaching of Islamic religious texts has remained an exclusive preserve of ‘ulama (male scholars) trained in madrasas (Islamic schools). In the last three decades, however, the religious authority in Islam has undergone an important transformation whereby space has emerged for female preachers to speak in the name of Islam. These preachers are today visible across the Muslim world and so are their growing numbers of followers. However, the emergence of these preachers presents a complex case for those interested in understanding the implication these preachers will have for the future of orthodox Islam. Their emergence is expected by some to result in reinterpretation of the Islamic texts to establish gender-parity, therefore leading to institutional change. Others, however, see these preachers endorsing the orthodox interpretations leading to institutional persistence instead of change. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with female preachers and their followers in Pakistan, northern Nigeria, and Syria, and drawing on survey data, this paper shows how strategic play on part of the existing elites, namely the ulama, led to emergence of these new players. Faced with fast changing socio-economic and political institutions due to globalization, the ulama deliberately created space for emergence of female scholars, as a mechanism to prevent future dissent and facilitate institutional persistence. However, the paper also shows that this strategic intervention would have had limited impact if it was not supported by two other factors: one, lack of co-evolution of institutions, and, two, information about societies at an advanced level of institutional change. The state failure to provide economic opportunities for women despite increased access to modern education made Islamic emphasis on gender-based division of labour appear as a superior alternative to many. At the same time, increased access to western societies and exposure to western feminist project, led some to make concentrated efforts to avert evolutionary pressures for gender-parity. For many Muslim women, western feminism became associated with breakdown of family structure—leading them to conclude that Islamic emphasis on division of labour offers an optimal equilibrium for the Muslim societies. The implication of cross-societal institutional learning thus needs to be more closely examined in the theory of institutional persistence and change.

Introduction

¹ *Note: This paper has been specifically prepared for presentation at this conference and is not written with the intent to publish. It draws on a book project I am currently completing. Here I have focused on capturing the core arguments with a hope to generate a good discussion rather than addressing all the technicalities expected of a paper being prepared for publication.*

Until the 1970s, in most Muslim societies formal teaching of Islamic religious texts has remained an exclusive preserve of ‘ulama (male scholars) trained in madrasas (Islamic schools). In the last three decades, however, the religious authority in Islam has undergone an important transformation whereby space has emerged for female preachers to speak in the name of Islam. These preachers are today visible across the Muslim world and so are their growing numbers of female followers, many of whom make serious time commitment to formal study of Islamic texts. Many of these groups acquire status of a movement, developing a formal membership. The phenomenon is visible in Muslim majority countries as well as within Muslim diaspora communities in the West and in other minority contexts (Bano and Kalmbach 2012).

Across these different contexts, these movements share three striking similarities. One, in all these contexts they have mainly emerged in the 1970s. Two, the rate of expansion is fast both in terms of the number of groups as well as the membership of each individual group. The members of these groups clearly outnumber the members of western styled feminist NGOs or modern women rights groups operating in the same context. Three, in all cases despite their organizational and doctrinal differences, which are significant, these movements apparently focus on the orthodox rather than the reformist scholarship² within Islam. The last factor in particular has been puzzling for social scientists focusing on Muslim societies for two main reasons.

One, these movements have emerged during the period, which is associated with modernization and globalization of most Muslim societies. With the exception of Islamic revolution in Iran, most Muslim countries have seen push for socio-economic and political reforms with growing demands for access to modern education, democratic participation and gender reforms³ since the 1970s. Given their birth during a time of changing socio-economic and political institutional matrix one would expect members of these movements to work towards negotiating greater protections for women than attributed to orthodox Islam. Two, an influential line of thinking within scholarship on women and Islam has maintained that it is the ulama, and not the Islamic text themselves, that are responsible for many of the gender discriminations⁴ associated with Islam. Female Islamic movements emerging in modern times are thus expected to have greater demand for this reformist scholarship within Islam, which argues for context bound instead of literal interpretations of the Islamic texts. However, that has not been the case.

This paper sets out to understand what led to the emergence of these new movements? And, what led to their expansion? The distinction between the two stages is well-

² Defining orthodox or reformist Islam is always a contentious scholarly exercise. In line with the dominant practice, here orthodox refers to the approach that is heavily committed to literal interpretation of the Islamic text and the term reformist represents the approach defending context bound interpretations of these texts.

³ In many contexts, these reforms have been triggered or facilitated due to intervention of the international development agencies either through grant projects or loan related conditionalities.

⁴ The nature of gender disparities associated with Islam could be quite varied depending on the personal positioning of the reviewer. The most contentious debates are around discrimination allegedly associated with core Islamic principles, defended in the Quran itself. These include: women receiving half share in inheritance, provision for four wives, testimony of two women compared to one man.

established within theoretical debates on institutional emergence and consolidation and within literature on the tipping point. These movements emerged in the 1970s and by 1990s they had started to expand massively in terms of sheer numbers of groups emerging, as well as the number of followers that each given group was commanding. What factors thus led to their initial emerge and subsequent growth and why in this specific period?

Further, given the evidence that most of these movements are following orthodox Islamic precepts, as gleaned from their position on gender norms, do they represent a case of institutional consolidation or institutional change? In linking these empirical questions with theoretical debates on institutional evolution, the paper looks at these movements as organizations which represent the institution of Islam, i.e., the paper maintains the distinction as set out by North (2000) between rules of the games and the players in the field. While Islamic precepts set the framework that regulates the behavior of the believers, it is these organisations, which play an active role in interpreting that framework. They thus are shaped by the framework, but in the process of operationalising the framework, they also often end up making adjustments to it.

This paper addresses these questions drawing on qualitative data on these movements from three different contexts: Syria, Pakistan and northern Nigeria. In the process it shows the limitation of overly culturist or piety driven arguments currently influential in anthropological studies of these movements (Mahmood 2005). Instead, the paper argues for recognizing that these movements can only be understood when studied in relation to the broader institutional matrix, consisting of the socio-economic and political institutions, within which they evolve.

The puzzle

The proponents of the position that there is an inevitable clash of civilization between Islam and western modernity most often than not, draw on their competing conceptions of gender equity, democracy and human rights, to defend their position. These scholars have highlighted the biases inherent in the core Islamic text against women⁵. Those opposing the clash of civilization position have often argued for making a distinction between the interests of the ulama, who have traditionally controlled interpretation of the Islamic texts, and the principles themselves. Many in this camp were actually female Muslim academics based in western universities, who came to represent what has been termed by some as Islamic feminism. These scholars labeled many of the existing Islamic laws vis-à-vis women discriminatory but instead of holding Islam responsible for this discrimination, they attributed it to the male ulama. Since the tradition whereby women scholars actively taught in mosques and madrasas, disappeared early on in the Islamic history⁶, these female scholars argued that the formal sphere of Islamic authority has

⁵ In the book I test this claim by looking at the positions of these groups against the spectrum of positions available within Islamic scholarship before moving on to explain the reasons for the preference for orthodox Islam. In this paper, however, the orthodox positioning of these movements is being taken as a given drawing on existing evidence (Mahmood 2005; Bano 2012, Bano and Kalmbach 2012).

⁶ During Prophet Mohammad's time and the first century of Islam, women scholars did teach men and women inside the mosques as well as madrasas. This tradition was most

been controlled by men who in turn interpreted the text in ways to use Islam to extend their control over women. Seen from this historical context whereby male scholars have controlled the structures of Islamic authority and interpretation of Islamic texts, the emergence of female preachers and growing demand for formal study of Islamic texts by modern Muslim women was heralded by some as a step towards institutional change. It was expected that these preachers and their followers will support the case for reinterpretation of Islamic texts as has been argued by the Islamic feminists based in western universities.

However, evidence on these movements to date counters this assumption. Apart from a few exceptional cases in the western context, such as Amina Wadud, an American Islamic feminist, who has led mixed-gender prayers⁷ and thereby challenged one of the major orthodoxies in Islam, studies on these movements show that female preachers are in general upholding the traditional interpretations of the Islamic texts rather than arguing for their reinterpretation. Rather than maintaining that Islamic laws are discriminatory towards women, these preachers and their followers actually argue that these laws are in fact just and better protect the interest of women than can western feminism.

Existing scholarship on these female movements, most within the disciplinary domain of anthropology, has sought answers to this puzzle, by emphasizing the need to recognize different forms of female agency. Saba Mahmood, an anthropologist, whose work on female mosque movements has been very influential in the field, has in particular highlighted that to become more pious can itself become quite a compelling force for participation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, she presents cases of women who are joining these movements actively sought to become more and more pious. The argument thus made is that feminist theory needs to recognize alternative conceptions of agency and that agency does not always have to involve a dimension of resistance against the existing order. Mahmood (2005) argues that agency can also be exercised to inculcate those very values, which curb one's desire to challenge the dominant structures. This paper on the other hand will show how institutional analysis rather than a culturalist approach or heavy emphasis on value of becoming pious provides a more accurate lens to understand the emergence and spread of these movements.

Fieldwork

There are a number of justifications for undertaking a three country comparative analysis to understand the puzzle under study. While there has been growth in studies aiming to explain the appeal of Islamic movements whether political or piety based⁸, there is still

nurtured in Cairo and Damascus, where there is recorded evidence of female preachers teaching to men as well as women till thirteenth century (Nadwi 2007). After that this tradition however disappeared almost entirely till its recent revival in 1970s. China and Iran however had a revival of this tradition earlier than the other contexts.

⁷ Amina Wadud's following remains limited to a few liberal Muslims mainly in the West.

⁸ Most movements representing political Islam such as Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East or Jama'at-i-Islami in South Asia also have strong female sections. However, these are distinct from the piety-based movement, which are the focus of this paper. The latter are purely concerned with the study of Islamic text and are not involved in direct

no comparative study that helps examine the explanatory variables in-depth. Most comparisons are available only in edited volumes and given their qualitative methodology yield limited comparable data. The lack of comparative studies is a consequence of limited opportunities for multi-sited fieldwork available to the researcher but also the inability to often find really comparable cases in different contexts. The emergence of female Islamic movements, due to their shared emphasis on orthodox precepts, and their commonality in time of origin provides the opportunity for such a comparative analysis.

Further, what makes the comparative study particularly illuminating is that there is no evidence that the emergence of this phenomenon at one site was triggered by similar phenomenon at the other sites. Existing studies (Bano and Kalmbach, 2012) and the fieldwork carried out across the three contexts under study show that none of the movements covered actually know about female movements in other contexts— even in a few cases where there was awareness, it was actually very recent. The fact that a similar phenomenon emerged at the same time across different sites though the phenomenon at one site was not aware of the phenomenon at the other sites, makes the emergence and growth of these movements an even more interesting research inquiry.

The actual selection of the three sites was dictated by desire to cover dominant regional variations in Islam? The three selected regions (Middle East, South Asia, and West Africa) present three of the four regions⁹, which have traditionally hosted large Muslim communities. The actual country selection was however dictated by more pragmatic concerns about access. In all three contexts, there was first an informal contact with that society under a prior research project, which made it feasible to gain access for the new study in a limited time period.

The fieldwork across the three sites has been spread over five years (2008-2013) though in Syria the last prolonged visit was made during July-October 2010. The main methods for data collection include in-depth interviews, group discussions, and observation of activities and core personalities involved in these movements. At times, the fieldwork also involved participation observation in the study groups. In Syria, the fieldwork focused on the cities of Damascus and Aleppo. In northern Nigeria, focus was on the Muslim majority state of Kano with research visits to the neighbouring states of Jigawa and Kaduna. In Pakistan, due to my prior country-wide coverage of madrasas (Bano, 2012) the findings draw on evidence from all four provinces.

At each site, the fieldwork started by mapping the main providers of Islamic education to girls and adult women and then focusing on covering the diversity of providers within each site. Thus, the method consisted of purposive as opposed to random sampling. Interviews were conducted with the leaders of these movements, the students, their families as well as representatives from NGOs, and media groups often seen to be opposed to the orthodox women movements and study groups. A comparative survey of girls' backgrounds, perceptions and future aspirations in secular and Islamic schools in

political process. Some however argue that by imbibing more religious values through their education, members of these movements eventually end up Islamising the society and political sphere as their members make religiously inspired choices in all sphere of life (Mahmood 2005).

⁹ The fourth region with a dominant Muslim presence is East Asia. With growing number of Muslims in diaspora in the West, these regional categorisations are however influx.

three LGAs in Kano and in the cities of Islamabad, Lahore and Multan in Punjab province of Pakistan also provides some comparative data on the socio-economic profile of the girls opting for formal Islamic education over secular education.

Last but not least, the existence of growing number of case studies on these movements has further facilitated the comparative analysis. While some interesting work was already published at the time of the start of this project, the full diversity of these movements is captured in an edited volume presenting cases from 22 different country contexts (Bano & Kalmbach).

Landscape

While there are growing studies on these female Islamic study movements, most of these focus on a specific mosque, madrasa, preacher, or a movement. It is therefore not surprising that arguments based on one category of players within the broader field lead to partial explanation of this phenomenon which might be quite valid for that particular group but which when applied to the other models representing the same phenomenon lead to misleading conclusions. In order to understand the plurality of impact of these female study movements, it is important to start by mapping the complex organizational forms in which these women study movements manifest themselves in each context and how the landscape is quite diverse in each case and complex though sharing some core features. In all three contexts under study, we see a great diversity of organizational players who are today teaching Islam to women but what is most interesting is that in all three contexts these organizational forms fit two organizational patterns: formal and informal. The formal groups focus on textual study as a professional degree or a set curriculum, while the informal groups focus on more loosely structured pattern of teaching.

In case of Kano, these two categories take form of Islamiyya schools and a Muslim women movement called FOMWON. In case of Pakistan, they take the form of female madrasas and a movement called Al-Huda. And, in case of Syria, they take form of female halaqs (study circles) in mosques and a movement called Qubasiyat. Further, what we also see is that the informal structure attracts the more socially and economically empowered and educated Muslim women, while the formal structures normally cater to the lower middle income groups and girls and adult women with limited economic opportunities. In order to understand this dynamic it is important to explain these formal and informal networks in each context in some detail.

In northern Nigeria, the most popular form of education for Muslim girls and women today is known as Islamiyya schools. Compared with the South Asia context, these schools are closest to what is called madrasa (Islamic school). The model of Islamiyya school is new to the region when compared to the centuries old tradition of Tsangaya or Ilmi schools, which traditionally taught Quran and Islamic texts to boys. The appeal of the Islamiyya school rests in its hybridity. As opposed to exclusive emphasis on memorization of the Quran, it focuses on teaching of core Islamic texts and thus enabling the child to gain better understanding of the principles of Islam. As opposed to modern education system introduced during British colonial period, which focuses primarily on modern subjects, Islamiyya schools provide Islamic education with some modern subjects. What is striking about the Islamiyya model is that though introduced in

the 1950s for both boys and girls, by 1970s, it had started to attract many girls and many purely female Islamiyya schools not just for school going girls, but even for adult women had started to open. Today, majority of the Islamiyya schools in Kano, have more girls than boys. Further, the female adult Islamiyya schools are thriving: they cater to all ages and socio-economic groups, and hold classes in affluent districts as well as the poor and remote rural ones. There are morning, afternoon, evening, night and even weekend Islamiyya schools to ensure that women with different professional or home obligations can come at a time that works best for them. These schools offer formal degree certificates and when catering to adult women mostly draw on those with limited educational and professional background.

But, the trend for textual study of Islam among adult women is equally prevalent among socially and economically more affluent and professional women in Kano. This category of women is more visibly represented by FOMWON, a Muslim women network, which emerged to counter what it saw as western feminist styled and funded NGOs' attempt to take over Islamic debates in the country. The network is run by very educated and professional Muslim women in Kano most of whom come from very influential families. They focus on development work, but they also host Islamic education classes, radio shows, lectures for female students to gain better access to textual knowledge of Islam.

If there is a heavy demand for Islamic education among women in Kano across the socio-economic divide, the same is the case in Pakistan. Pakistan has five registered madrasa boards and all five started to establish female madrasas starting 1970s; the initial experiment however became a major trend by late 1980s to early 1990s. Currently, 25% of all registered madrasas in Pakistan cater to female students— this represents a very fast rate of spread given that they have become 25% of the total madrasa population in 30 years while the male madrasas have been around for over eight centuries. These madrasa offer boarding facilities to their students and run formal degree courses ranging from four to six years.

As compared to this formal madrasa movement is Al-Huda movement, which is more informal like the independent FOMWON network in Kano. Led by a dynamic preacher who did her doctorate from International Islamic University in Islamabad, Al-Huda has a central institute in Islamabad, which offers formal degree programmes, but its main work is through the informal study sessions it holds in five star hotels. Al-Huda members meet in five star hotels. The movement places a lot of emphasis on encouraging its members to spread their knowledge of Islam to others especially in one's immediate neighbourhood. The background of the women coming to these hotel based study circles is very diverse. Majority of these women belong to upper-income groups. Many are wives or daughters of senior government officials, military generals, and big businessmen. Some are highly educated professional women and many have studied in the West or at least have travelled for shorter periods to visit family and friends.

The story of Syria in terms of demand for Islamic education among women and increased provision for it since 1970s is no different. What however is different is that in Syria there is no real parallel of full time Islamiyya education or madrasa education. Instead, in case of Syria across the socio-economic classes, schools of thought, and urban and rural areas, there has been a revival of mosque-based halaqs (study circles), which fit the more informal organizational structure explained above rather than formal school or madrasa structure. But, within the mosque halaqs, very similar differences are present. The urban big mosques located in elite areas have more educated, socio-economically

affluent and professional female students, while those located in the low-income areas, have less educated, normally non-professional, and less well-off students. Further, the former operate more informally focusing around study of a specific book selected by the members of the group, while the latter often offer formal degree certificates following a set curriculum.

Further, Syria also has the counterpart of FOMWON and Al-Huda in form of Qubasiyat movement. They Qubasi women are known by their distinct dress code, by their high-income status and for being very independent and often being single. Qubasiyat is seen to be a very important Islamic force in Syria today. It is seen to command following of 30-40 per cent of the mosque going female audience. The public perception of Qubasi women is that many are often single, and that most join this group in opposition to their families as most are seen to come from very liberal Syrian families. There is known to be very high secrecy around this movement where the senior leaders of the movement as well as followers refrain from sharing details of their activities even with their family members and interviews to media and researchers are rarely accommodated. Another common perception about the movement is that women in these movements are very independent of their husbands when it comes to religious matters and might go out for religious gatherings without giving details to their husbands.

The comparative analysis reveals three critical dimensions of this phenomenon, which are common to all three sites. The growth in demand and provision of platforms for Islamic education within Muslim women of all age groups is real. Second, the platforms catering to this demand are different and differ in terms of what they are called and how they are organized at day-to-day level to fit the local needs. However, across the three contexts, two similar structures have emerged: formal and informal. One is more formal and structured as a school, the other is more informal and organized in form of study circles. The third critical feature about the profile of the followers is their diversity: socially, economically, politically, and most importantly educationally. The informal groups cater to more upper income and educated women, the formal groups mainly later to women from lower income groups.

The question thus is why did these groups emerge and why across these different contexts did they emerge at the same time?

The emergence: strategic intent of existing elites

In answering why the west extended the franchise, Acemoglu and Robinson (2000) argue that such political reforms can be viewed as strategic decisions by the political elite to prevent widespread social unrest and revolution. The explanation of emergence of female preachers and female study movements in Islam is a bit similar. Fieldwork shows that it in all cases leading male ulama were actually behind the initiation of the female movements whether formal or informal and the motive for this action was the recognition that the socio-economic and political context in which they live is changing. Recognizing that the forces of modernity supported by the state, global development players, and the forces of globalization are likely to sway the women even within their own families away from Islamic precepts, the ulama actively created space for women within the structure of Islamic authority with the hope to prevent major resistance from the women to Islamic way of life in future. However, what we also see in this case is that along with this

strategic intent genuine commitment of some reformatory ulama to the need for change of women status also played a role in this transition.

The decades between 1930-1970s saw dramatic transformations in all three societies—the most significant being the end of colonial rule. The sub-continent got independence from the British in 1947 leading to birth of two independent nations of India and Pakistan. Northern Nigeria, which encountered colonial rule for limited period compared to South Asia, saw end to British influence in 1961. Syria, which out of all the three states had experienced least intensive colonial intervention, was also the first one to secure independence from the French directorate in 1935.

The core feature of this transition was that the post-colonial elites shared the modernizing vision of the colonial elites as many had studied in western institutions and irrespective of their religious beliefs had in many ways come to appreciate not only the western economic or military advancement but had also developed appreciation for western sensibilities. If the civil and political elites were the products of the colonial education system, the third domestic elite group that was to play the most important role in the future governance of these societies, mainly the military, had even more actively absorbed the influence of the colonial period.

It was thus not surprising that these states embarked on what they viewed to be a modernization agenda soon after partition. Part of this modernization drive involved increasing access to education for women. The other part involved actively curbing Islamic influences in the society. For example, within Pakistan, an active debate on the need to reform and modernize the madrasas started within the government soon after partition. It was argued that madrasas provided orthodox knowledge of Islam and thus were a conservative influence on the society, which was a hindrance to the state modernization plans. State led madrasa modernization plans were thus initiated. Similarly, in Syria, during the time of Hafiz Asad, father of the current president, cultural modernization agenda was pushed even more aggressively. Veiling of women on streets of Damascus was actively discouraged by the state, sometimes even by force. An active state push to modernize the society and curb religious influences, combined with increasing influx of new ideas inside the homes due to growing access to TV in the 1970s and an increasing support by many international development agencies for gender empowerment programmes, started to create a social context in which the ulama became quite conscious of the changing gender dynamics. More importantly, they recognized the potentially dramatic outcome of this shift for their own authority and the influence of Islam in the society, if it is left unchallenged. During my field, across the three contexts, there is ample evidence that it is in this context that the ulama made conscious effort to initiate female madrasas, Islamic schools or women study circles to actively encourage textual study of Islam within females.

While one way to record the role of ulama is to see who established which madrasa, school or movement, the other is the recurrent reference made to their role in interviews with senior ulama as well as the female preachers across the three contexts. The fieldwork provides ample evidence of both types. Acknowledging the active role of her father in teaching her Islamic text and encouraging her to teach others, sister of the current Shaykh heading Al-Faith Foundation, a leading Islamic education foundation in Damascus, noted:

“When in the 1950, religious education started in the government schools with the help of the women scholars who did not have deep knowledge of the text, my father who was a prominent Shaykh thought something must be done about it. These women were formally qualified but they did not have the depth of Islamic knowledge required of an Islamic studies teacher and could misguide the students. Then my father had the idea to teach the women, and he started to teach me and my sister. My father arranged with other women scholars to open a new college for women. It was opened in 1963. The male branch had opened in 1958. And then they sent for female teachers and they did not find one, not even for hadith. Also, for Arabic language there was not a single teacher. Therefore, my father started to teach me and my sister, we taught in the morning and learnt from him in the evening. He encouraged us and taught us. He reassured us that he will support us. I started to teach Quran and Tajweed to the whole institution under his supervision. He later also sent me to al-Azhar in Egypt to acquire further knowledge.’

Examples like this one abound in all three contexts. The strategic intent of the ulama played a central role in the rise of these movements. Many of these ulama were driven with a concern to resist the state led process of cultural modernization which they saw as a threat not just to Islam but to the family structure and thus the entire social order. Westernization in their mind was closely associated to break down of family structure. The more enlightened ulama however also had a genuine concern for female education and as the opportunities grew to facilitate that access, they also took active part in it. However, in their view religious education as opposed to modern education was more critical for women in their role as future mothers and that is where they focused. Thus strategic intent to retain their authority but also a conscious commitment to increasing access to education within women (albeit Islamic education rather than modern) both played an active role in motivating them to initiate these movements.

However, while the emergence of these movements is to be attributed to the strategic intent of the ulama who were responding to the changing societal context that was a product of both state’s strategic actions but also evolutionary societal pressures, the question is that why were they successful in recruiting and retaining members. The answer to this has to be found both at the parental as well as student level given that the decision to join these movements is at times taken by the parents and at times by the students (Bano 2012). What factors then explain the shaping of parental and student decision to join these movements?

Lack of Co-evolution of institutions

Analysis of the factors shaping parental preferences for sending girls to formal study of Islamic texts across the three contexts reveals a striking commonality. At the heart of parental preference for female Islamic education rests the same concerns as those which motivated the ‘ulama to establish female madrasas: an anxiety to preserve traditional values, and thereby the family structure, in the fast changing external environment. The parental choices are based on a calculation that once trained in Islamic texts, the girl will so imbibe the religious values that she would by choice, rather than under compulsion, constrain her choices in favour of tradition.

The study of these movements, in particular the formal groups organized around a degree programme, highlights the heightened probability of the reassertion of tradition in societies where the state is failing to put in place formal institutions to reap the benefits of modernisation. Indeed, it reveals the challenges of engaging with the global influences when there is a mismatch in society's ability to engage with processes of economic modernisation and those of cultural modernisation. Economic modernisation in these societies led to public appreciation of western living standards, increased demand for formal sector jobs, and recognition of benefits of investment in education. Space also opened up for women to seek higher education and employment in the formal economy. With the spread of media and increasing involvement of development agencies in implementing of development programmes, the ideas of material prosperity spread from cities across to rural areas. Public expectations were raised but the institutional mechanisms required to gain access to this economic prosperity were never institutionalized; rather, access to modernity was contingent on the initial resource endowment of each individual family. The state education system did not improve, jobs in the formal sector did not expand— and, especially not in proportion to match the increase in population. The middle-income groups, even when willing to invest in private education, could only afford low-level schools whose students ultimately could not compete with graduates from elite educational institutions in the employment market.

This uneven distribution of the benefits of economic modernization on its own might not have triggered a reaction if economic changes were not being fast outpaced by the twin process of cultural modernisation, whose spread, unlike the process of economic development, was not contingent on the state developing a level playing field for all. Central to this was the role of the media, where revolution in information technology has made cable TV, the internet and mobile phones accessible to the poorest income groups even in rural areas in these three societies, especially during the last decade. The TV cable network in particular has become the most economical pastime for families and young girls; it, however, also poses most serious threat to traditional values. Most watched channels on the cable network are ones airing movies and local and western soap operas. These give girls ideas of an economically empowered lifestyle and promote fanciful notions of romantic love affairs outside the institution of marriage while at the same time implanting the idea of the right to choose one's own partner.

For the parents, especially those within the middle-income group, this mismatch in the pace of economic and cultural modernity creates a most unsettling sense of loss of control because many feel unable to regulate these new forces. Hopeful of reaping the benefits from economic modernisation, these parents do make their girls enter secular educational institutions, but the government schools and colleges that they can afford provide no security of economic employment. Further, the secretarial level jobs, which are at times available, record high incidences of female exploitation. The result of this mismatch between economic and cultural modernity has thus been increased frustration among the girls and the sense of a loss of control among the parents.

The new reality for girls within middle-income families in these societies, especially in Pakistan and Nigeria, is that their sole prospect of upward mobility, still remains a good marriage. The difference, however, is that unlike their mothers, these girls have studied, are exposed to the latest fashion trends, know about the significance of Valentine's Day, and have fanciful notions of romantic relationships with happy endings, drawn from modern soap operas and movies. In a context where age at marriage is recording an increase, and cheap access to mobile phones and internet has made it possible to meet

new people and sustain prolonged interaction without leaving the confines of the home, the fear that the girls could entertain ideas of having affairs has become a real and constant concern for these families. The objection to these affairs is not simply moral; the real fear is that of a failed relationship, where the girls get drawn into physical contact by men who have no intention of marriage, thereby ruining their prospects of attaining a suitable match.

The massive demand for formal study of Islamic texts among women is thus a result of increased access to what liberal theorists qualify as negative freedom (the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals) as opposed to positive freedom (the capacity to realize an autonomous will, only generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of 'universal reason' or 'self-interest' and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition)¹⁰. This in turn is due to failure of the state to develop institutionalized structures to provide equal opportunities for all to engage with economic modernisation. This illustrates, as has been upheld by many studies within the institutional literature, that when formal institutions fail, informal institutions, which are more responsive to local needs, become more dominant (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). The dramatic spread of the informal institution, namely Islamic beliefs, as manifest in the popularity of female Islamic study movements, is thus a direct result of the failure of the formal institutions of the state to make the economic and political institutions co-evolve with the changing social institutions.

During the interviews, across the three contexts it was a common refrain that 'how the times have become very bad.' Many students in madrasas in Pakistan, for example, themselves defended Islamic education, on the ground that it encouraged simplicity, which not only relieved the girls of the pressures to follow changing trends but made them more productive members of their families. The Islamic education thus becomes not only a means for securing women's piety, it provides much more comprehensive moral training in which the girl learns to cope with existing circumstances in the role of daughter, sister, wife, and future mother, rather than acquire expectations which aggravate the economic burden on the male members of the family. This in turn makes madrasa education also an important signal in the marriage market as it indicates the likelihood of the girl being pious and family-oriented.

Thus what we see is that religious beliefs, by aligning the incentives of the girls from the middle-income families with those of the parents minimize the cost of monitoring and enforcement, thereby making them the most efficient means of reducing the cost of intergenerational transactions between the parents and daughters. The logic of the parental preference for sending girls to female madrasas or Islamiyya schools is thus clear, namely a desire to inculcate their children with their own values. The question, however, is that what is the process which convinces the girls to constrain their choices in line with Islamic beliefs— mere exposure to text does not guarantee an automatic assimilation of information by a rational actor. The answer to why the parental efforts were successful in convincing daughters to pursue that path again rest in the same lack of co-evolution of socio-economic and political institutions.

¹⁰ For discussion on negative and positive freedoms in liberal theory, see Mahmood (2005).

While parents might send their daughters for study of formal Islamic texts in the hope of retaining parental control over their choices by aligning their interests with their own and thereby reducing the need for maintaining external checks, the factors shaping the girls' conviction in the religious beliefs have very different dynamics. Interviews across the three sites revealed a genuine desire among a large number of students to enhance their grasp of Islamic beliefs— seventy per cent of the respondents stated their aspiration to learn about Islam as the primary motive for enrolling in the madrasa or an Islamiyya school. But more importantly, the results also highlighted the role of the socio-economic and psychological relevance of the religious beliefs in the girls' day-to-day lives in building conviction in those beliefs and the many tangible everyday social and economic benefits of participation.

First, participation in these movements is socially empowering as it leads to the acquisition of a wealth of social networks and contacts. In a society where religion matters, on return to their homes, these girls become an asset to the community. They become an authoritative voice to answer religious questions regarding the day-to-day matters of concern for local women; they are requested to conduct religious rituals and lead prayers at religious gatherings frequently hosted within the households; and others acquire social respect and recognition by teaching the Quran to neighbourhood children free of cost. Interviews across these movements show the emphasis they place on the importance of spreading the knowledge they have acquired during their studies.

If textual knowledge of Islam makes the girls socially influential, it is not devoid of the potential to contribute to their economic prosperity. It is very common practice among the female students in Pakistan for instance, especially the ones from rural areas and smaller cities with limited opportunities for religious education, to open a madrasa of their own on their return home: sixty per cent of the survey respondents stated that they would like to establish their own madrasas. Given that the female madrasas charge monthly tuition fees, though such charges are routinely waived to accommodate students from poor income group especially in big madrasas, they have the potential to be turned into profitable sources of income. The madrasa education thus enables women with entrepreneurial skills to open their own madrasas, an option that students of secular schools and colleges can rarely exercise. The primary reason for this difference is that initiating a madrasa, which can even be started in one room within the teacher's house, is less cost-intensive than establishing a secular school, where the parents would prefer a proper building. Since 2002, truly entrepreneurial students can even enter national politics: the policy of reserving 33 per cent seats for women in the national parliament has opened up opportunities for women from madrasas to seek reserved seats through the platform of religious political parties. In Kano similarly many of the Islamiyya schools aimed at adult women also promoted simple economic activities such as basic skill training and provision of rotating credit schemes for the income generation activities.

A much deeper factor than the ones analyzed above, and arguably the most significant in sustaining girls' conviction in Islamic beliefs, is the strong psychological incentives provided by Islamic education. Interviews and discussions with students reveal that religious beliefs help reduce the importance of many material aspirations, making them more content with their existing circumstances, in addition to giving them the confidence of being a positive force in the society. Teachings in these movements highly emphasizes the role of women as mothers and homemakers given their student a sense of worth.

In addition to making the girls feel of worth by assigning great social significance to the roles they play as members of the family, Islamic education also empowers them by removing the fears they might have of individuals or social structures. The basic premise of Islamic teaching is, since all good or bad that comes to an individual rests in the will of God, no one can harm anyone else unless this is so willed by Allah. This for girls, who are exposed to numerous pressures especially when living in joint families in the initial years of their marriage, is psychologically very empowering. To know the rights that Islam has bestowed on them as wives and daughters-in-law makes them confident of their place within the household, besides enabling them to resolve more amicably any tensions by using the religious discourse.

Another Islamic precept that pays-off significant dividends in generating a sense of contentment within members of these movements is the emphasis on the virtue of simplicity; to be grateful for whatever one has. Islam encourages the believer to strive for material prosperity but also highlights the virtues of being content with little; the Prophet's life is an example of simplicity. The Islamic education repeatedly draws on incidents from the Prophet's life, and those of his daughters, to psychologically empower the girls to deal with material scarcity. This emphasis on the value of simplicity makes the girls from low and middle incomes families cope better with their economic realities.

Thus one major reason for expansion of these movements is the lack of co-evolution of socio-economic and political institutions due to failure of state to provide right opportunities through reform of economic and political institutions. Religious institutions on the other hand are co-evolving and are offering options, which have meaning and relevance for the lives of these girls. They offer social recognition, better marriage prospects, better psychological training to deal with the social context and real life options, and in addition carry the promise of religious salvations. They are also co-evolving in terms of making adjustments to their own way of working in response to the changing times. Their decision to allow women the space to play a bigger within the sphere of religious authority by becoming preachers in recent decades is in itself a perfect example of co-evolution.

The above explanation however draws mainly on responses from students who enroll for the formal degree programmes in Pakistan and Nigeria or in rural mosque in Syria. The above explanation does not hold for the expansion of informal study circles within women from upper income groups for whom these material benefits of Islamic education are relevant. In explaining the appeal of Islamic education to this more educated and upper income Muslim women, especially women who are member of movements such as Qubasiyat in Syria, one has to account for ideological appeal and appeal of piety based behavior (Mahmood 2005) but more importantly one has to acknowledge the impact of cross-societal learning on processes of institutional evolution.

Ideological appeal and knowledge about advanced societies

The factors explaining the spread of informal study circles especially within the upper income and educated professional women are quite different. In this case, the ideological or intellectual appeal of the Islamic way of life becomes a more important explanation. Even the respondents enrolled in the formal degree programmes, discussed in the preceding section, always attribute their decision to study Islamic text to the logical

appeal of the Islamic precepts. In their case, however, given the numerous material benefits of participation, these assertions can be doubted. In case of educated professional women who join the informal study circles mainly out of their own choice, however, it is difficult to attribute participation to material benefits such as social recognition or income from tuition fee, as given their status and professional standing, such incentives are not important. Rather for this category of respondents there are arguably explicit costs of participation such as time, mental commitment, and for some even questioning of their social status given that the elites in particular in Syria and Pakistan are often not expected to show explicit signs of religiosity. In many of these movements, which are focused on upper-income groups, many women in fact join against their family wishes, who are often quite liberal and find participation in religious group a sign of backwardness.

In discussions with these respondents, the explanation for their participation primarily revolved around the superiority of Islamic beliefs for women's actual well-being. For the respondents, Islam provided a more viable vision of gender equality than western feminism. For these women it was absolutely clear that, in terms of equality, Islam placed men and women on the same pedestal; the difference rested mainly in the role designed for them to optimize their respective biological strengths. In their reasoning, the denial of biological difference was unrealistic and thereby counter-productive because it placed an additional burden on the women and threatened the family structure; both developments, in their view, were detrimental to women's interests. 'Why would women want to compete with man or rival him when rationally it is in everyone's individual as well as societal interest for the two genders to cooperate and build on their respective strengths?' was a very common retort when asked if by putting excessive emphasis on women's maternal role, were they not ignoring the benefits of attaining economic independence.

For these women, the dividends associated with women's economic empowerment were deceptive, as such an approach neglected the additional burden posed on women. In the words of one respondent, 'it leads to a societal structure where collective expectations are so developed that for a woman, the choice to be at home with her children becomes a non-option.' This economic independence to many was the cause of the break-down of the family structure in the west because, in their view, where there is no natural reasons for interdependence between partners, family unity is automatically threatened: 'If I am earning as much as my husband it is only natural I will be less inclined to heed to my husband. This will automatically reduce the tolerance level within the household threatening its unity.' As compared to these options, by placing the responsibility of ensuring economic security squarely on the shoulders of men while giving the women the freedom to pursue professional activities as a matter of choice, Islam provided a more viable model to these women.

On the subject of sexual liberty, these women were again quick to counter arguments for female sexual liberty as posed in western discourse. For them the natural instinct of the woman is to restrain her sexuality; they argued that the sexual liberation of women was actually of greater benefit to men who, in their view, were naturally more prone to seeking sexual gratification than women who, by their very nature, seek emotionally secure and stable relationships. For these women, sex outside marriage was wrong because it marginalized the rights of the child conceived out of a relationship, which had no social or legal recognition; at the same time, abstinence from sexual experience till marriage was argued to give a special meaning to marital relationship. 'When women

change partners frequently, they will only reduce the charm of the ultimate relationship because it is very natural that they will always be comparing; therefore I will say why follow a route which is bound to leave you dissatisfied,' argued a western-educated respondent; 'Why live with the baggage of failed relationships,' she added.

What is particularly noteworthy about these responses is that these women pose the defense of Islamic way of life more often than not by critiquing life practices associated with western feminism. A striking aspect of the fieldwork was the frequency with which these women made references to what they viewed to be the outcomes of the western feminist model—the high divorce rates in western societies, single motherhood, and the tendency to leave parents in old-age homes. Whether these women acquire these views about western society through the media, Islamic textbooks or through a conscious propaganda campaign by the “ulama is unclear, but what became evident during the fieldwork was that even in the smallest madrasas in remote areas, girls were quick to refer to what they viewed as the failure of western society to defend the Islamic precepts. The modernity of the west has thus ironically, it appears, become proof for these women of the wisdom to embrace tradition.

There were repeated expressions of disappointment with what was perceived to be the outcomes of western feminism. A highly educated Pakistani woman noted how disappointed she was when, during a year-long stay in the United States, she ended up accompanying her host family to a wedding ceremony where the bride already had two children fathered by two different men. “I am liberal by Muslim standards. I don't wear hijab and work with male colleagues but this kind of liberty leaves me unimpressed,” she noted. These women were also of the view that early exposure to sexual relations made the women vulnerable to sexual impulses, which rushed them into unstable relationships. Further, it was argued that the emphasis on sexual liberty was all the more disadvantageous to women as they progressed through the life cycles: ‘During her twenties and thirties a woman might have equal chances of drawing attention of men, but it is more difficult for her to find a good husband as she progresses beyond forty; for men age is hardly a constraint. It is therefore in a woman's own interest to be in a binding relationship than to seek short-term interactions.’¹¹ Thus, in view of these women, because of their very biological and emotional make-up, the institution of marriage and family was more in their interest than that of men. Consequently, when women made adjustments in the short term to safeguard the interests of their family, this was not viewed as an act of sacrifice or exploitation but a rational move to protect their own long-term interest.

Thus, the paper argues that it is important to recognize the impact of cross-societal learning, especially in this age of global connectivity, as it can often reverse an apparently inevitable evolutionary path in the society lagging behind. The members of these female Islamic movements willingly resist many immediate socio-economic liberties, to which they are in principle not opposed, because they feel these will lead them down the path of western feminism, which they think has been counter-productive for women as well as the social order. The fieldwork suggests that if these women did not know about the ultimate outcomes of western feminism¹², which they now know because of extensive

¹¹ This view expressed by a middle-aged woman from an affluent background was again very widely shared.

¹² In the book, I also draw on examples from evolution of western feminism to support this position. There is evidence to suggest that many of the early feminists were opposed

globalization and information sharing, they would have willingly accepted the more day-to-day socio-economic liberties, which they now resist.

Theoretical Implications

The analysis presented above hopes to help advance our theoretical understanding of the working of informal institutions. Empirically grounded theoretical works advancing our understanding of informal institutions are rare and in demand (North 2000; Williamson 2000). This paper has tried to explain how informal institutions like the formal institutions, are open to change in hands of strategic and maximizing organizational players, such as the ulama, that have come to represent the institution of Islam. However, it has also shown that the informal institutions that persist, such as Islam, often are the ones, which combine two critical elements: one, an ability to provide solutions to the changing social, political and economic institutional matrix and a degree of inherent appeal to logic.

Second, looking at the interaction between the organizational elites and the institution, the paper has shown how elite strategic behavior is critical to shaping the institutional evolution. Evolutionary societal changes can force elites to adapt their strategies in order to retain their domination at least in near future. One particular strategy to retain control, in a context where the existing elites fear major risks of losing power dramatically if they continue on the existing path, is to allow some space for emergence of new players who pose the greatest threat, with the hope to co-opt them against larger institutional shifts. Thus at times apparent signs of institutional change, such as emergence of female preachers in Islam, can be result of strategic efforts aimed at longer-term institutional persistence. The eventual success of such a strategy is however contingent on a number of factors including how well the concerns of the new elites are accommodated in proposed institutional framework.

Third, most institutional theorists now recognize that institutional change is a product of evolutionary forces and strategic intent of the actors rather than being result of only one (North 2000; Bowles 2004). However, what this paper shows is the need for the theory to more explicitly recognize the impact of cross-societal learning, especially in this age of global connectivity, in reversing rather than accelerating apparently inevitable evolutionary institutional growth in societies lagging behind. The members of these female Islamic movements willingly resist many immediate socio-economic liberties, to which they are in principle not opposed, because they feel these will lead them down the path of western feminism, which they think has been counter-productive for women as well as the societal order. The fieldwork suggests that if these women did not know about the ultimate outcomes of western feminism, which they now know because of extensive globalization and information sharing, they would have willingly accepted the more day-to-day socio-economic liberties, which they now resist. The implication thus is that excessive exposure to societies at an advanced institutional path is not necessarily always useful for facilitating institutional change; cross-cultural information sharing can often reverse an apparently inevitable evolutionary path.

to many of the liberties that are today associated with western feminism. Instead they supported minor shifts not recognizing that they will eventually lead to outcomes, which they did not approve.

This theoretical insight has implications for many development interventions especially those aimed at reforming informal institutions. Many development interventions, especially gender empowerment programmes designed for conservative Muslim societies, are based on the premise that promoting apparent achievements of western feminism will promote demands for similar shift in gender relations among women in these societies. That, however, often is not the case. As we have seen in this paper, knowledge about the outcomes of institutional change at an advanced stage can actually make societies at a lower evolutionary stage consciously work towards resisting that change. Thus, designing incremental reforms might be more effective way to proceed than promoting dramatic reform in conservative societies. For instance, encouraging female education in conservative Muslim societies with the stated objective of changing gender roles might not be the most effective strategy in a community where publicizing such an objective can lead to extreme parental reaction of withdrawing the girl from school.

This also suggests that globalization might not lead to cultural convergence as is often presumed. Instead, globalization and increased information sharing might actually trigger an active desire for preserving cultural and religious differences especially the more the nations get educated and economically empowered. As we see in case of the female movements, it is actually the informal study groups, where the members are more educated and empowered, that the critique of western feminism is most intense. Informal institutions thus can become a mechanism of asserting ones individuality and superiority in the global context where all societies live in acute consciousness of the other.

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