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Mosques and Meeting Rooms: Professional Lives of Muslim Women

Editorial

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In the wake of political, economic and social transition in post-colonial Asia, religion, religious knowledge and new forms of piety have gained remarkable momentum as devices and identity markers for professionalisation outside the field of genuinely religious work and employment. While "religious professionalism" is mostly associated with positions such as priests, imams, mullahs, monks, nuns, judges at religious courts and the like, and rooted in "classical", institutionalised sites of knowledge production and dissemination, activities deriving *from* yet not located *in* the realm of the religious are rarely present in the conceptual perception of profession and professionalism. Businesswomen from Tajikistan who sell Islamic fashion items in the local bazaar or Indonesian designers of high-end fashion for Muslim women "put religion to work" without entering religiously defined professional fields. They cultivate publicly visible pious habits based on religious knowledge that is closely related to travel, co-presence and experience in the new urban hubs of the Islamic economy, and they comfortably move in women's business networks. Similarly, women's rights activists in transnational movements such as Musawah advocate for gender equality based on *their own* knowledge of Islam, which reconciles secular and religious principles of women's and family rights.[1] Rather than being conceived of as "Muslim professionals", they are characterised as women's rights activists or Islamic feminists. Their professionalism[2] is quite different from, for instance,

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that of female Islamic scholars / jurists, who also deal with norms and rights: instead of producing particular issue-related interpretations, they build knowledge in order to disseminate fresh and bottom-up perspectives on judicial and conceptual terms.[3] Taking such activities as our vantage point, we expose the significance that is bestowed on religious knowledge in women's pathways to professions that are not genuinely associated with "the religious". We stress connectivity and relationality between knowledge, religion and professionalisation in a globalised economy and in border-crossing settings that transcend the nation state, gender norms, institutionalised social orders, as well as the academically constructed boundaries of Southeast, South, and Central Asia.

The dynamic interplay of religion, knowledge and gender as shaped by the new economic order surfaces in the specific context of global capitalism. Islam together with other religions in Asia has adapted to market logic, with Islamic Finance being a prominent element of an increasingly competitive field of business and service.[4] At the same time, the sociocultural embeddedness of markets and economic activities has become structured around moral dispositions and spiritual concerns (Botoeva 2018, Koning et al. 2017). Accordingly, "Muslim professionalism", as we examine it, goes strikingly hand in hand with the economisation of religion: turning religion, i.e. a religious practice, conviction or faith, into a business or a vocation (*Beruf* in a Weberian sense).[5] Another strand is the economisation of education, which renders economic growth and increased productivity central objectives (Spring 2015) and has a striking impact on the production, perception and mediation of religious knowledge in Muslim majority societies. Translating into new livelihood strategies and lifestyles, which tie into religious-economic developments that have served the formation of new Muslim middle classes (Schwab 2018; Fischer 2017, 2008; Nasr 2010), this global trend has simultaneously acquired new qualities linked to creativity and innovation. The pilgrimage to Mecca (Arabic *ḥağğ, 'umra*), for instance, demonstrating compliance with a principle pillar of Islamic faith, nowadays offers a highly profitable business for travel agencies – particularly when advertised as a prestigious sojourn with a prominent celebrity (as, for example, in Indonesia) or as a necessary prerequisite for becoming a successful female trader in Muslim fashion (as in Tajikistan; Stephan-Emmrich / Mirzoev 2016). The increasing economisation of religious knowledge facilitates a conflation of material technology with a highly specialised, professionally qualified expertise (cf. Fischer 2017).

1 See also https://www.musawah.org/ (accessed 28 September 2023).

2 In this special issue, we define "professionalism" as expertise and field knowledge. While we touch on its bureaucratic history, our main focus is on how experts from various fields creatively apply Islamic knowledge in their work.

3 See for example https://www.musawah.org/knowledge-building/qiwamah-wilayah/ (accessed 18 July 2023).

4 For an early and succinct account of this see Nasr 2010, and Warde 2010.

5 See Weber 1919.

Also, through the spread of neoliberal governmentalities, anchor points of professionalism such as advanced degrees, expert knowledge, work ethics and concomitant behaviour are supplemented by individual responsibility, self-regulation, the production of consumer images and a heightened access to geographical, digital and virtual/imagined mobility.[6] Although the rise of "prosperity religions", "religious markets" and "spiritual economies" has steadily confirmed that the new economic order has profound consequences for religious organisations, beliefs and moral orientations,[7] religious knowledge as a strong determinant of the professional choices of people – here: women – is rarely integrated into the study of professionalism.

Re-thinking "profession" and "professionalism" in Islam

Across regions and societies, the concepts of profession and professionalism are moulded by diverse institutional frameworks and cultural traditions, historical context and circumstantial factors. The first question to address in assessing a flexible and more contextualised understanding of these concepts is how to acquire knowledge. "Professionalism" is typically defined by academic achievements and qualifications from recognised universities, governed by legal ordinances, specific licensing requirements and examinations. Another view applies in Japan, where a culture of *shokunin* or "craftsmanship" conveys that professionalism is developed through years of internship and mentorship under "seasoned experts" (*sensei* in Japanese). Such a notion also corresponds to the traditional meaning of the Tajik term *kasb* (from the Arabic verb *kasaba*, "to earn, to gain, to acquire") in Muslim societies of Central Asia. This meaning shifted when the related understanding of professionalism as a holistic attainment through apprenticeship and mentoring underwent a crucial transformation in the course of the integration of these societies into formalised Soviet labour markets.

Meanwhile, in certain African societies, such as in Kenya, professionalism can be highly associated with one's relationship and rapport with elders and community leaders, thus mirroring mentorship and apprenticeship models. In Germany, two pathways are widely accepted. First, universities maintain rigorous standards through examinations and academic requirements. Second, so-called *Fachhochschulen* (Universities of Applied Sciences) present an alternative form of professional validation. They offer specialised, practice-oriented education, allowing students to gain hands-on experience in their fields and aligning closer with the Japanese *shokunin* model. These differences under-

6 Cf. Garrido 2017, Martikainen / Gauthier 2013, Mandaville 1999, Opatokun 2013.

7 Cf. Koning et al. 2017, Martikainen / Gauthier 2013, Meyer 2007, Rudnyckyj 2010.

score the variance in standards that people agree upon based on how they perceive the institutions of professional recognition in their local context.

Turning to practices in Islamic history, we find similar patterns. In the Sufi tradition, spiritual mastery and divine knowledge are transmitted through an intimate mentor-disciple relationship. Building on chains of knowledge transmission through "spiritual connectedness" (Arabic *silsila*), this relational, mentorship-oriented approach emphasises personal development and holistic growth. In contrast, contemporary Madrasa education, similar to the traditional university model, places a higher emphasis on formal, structured learning. Islamic scholars (Arabic *ʿulamāʾ*) are seen as the standard-bearers of professionalism, having attained their status through rigorous scripture-based theological study and examination in these institutions under the mentorship of distinguished scholars.

An important aspect for understanding professionalism in an Islamic context is the use of licensing systems for professional bodies. Particular associations often set the standard for professionalism within specific fields by certifying individuals who meet certain qualifications and maintain a defined level of ongoing professional development. Cases in point are the fields of law and medicine. A similar system was seen historically among Islamic scholars through the issuance of an *ijazah* (Arabic *ijāzah*). The *ijazah* was a certification system that granted a license to its holders, thereby sanctioning them to transmit certain knowledge or to practice specific skills (Stewart 2005). It symbolised professional achievement through the mastery of particular fields of knowledge, serving as the primary method of acknowledging and accrediting professionals. The term *ijazah*, meaning "permission, license, or authorisation", encompassed several distinct academic certificates. All *ijazah* certifications were granted within a mentor-disciple relationship, thus forming a unique genre of literacy within Islamic education.

Who decides the parameters of an *ijazah* or of licensing practices? It presumes the existence of a network of experts who can ascertain the competence needed for certification and who have the authority to acknowledge expertise. Such networks can have diverse origins and structures. In some Islamic traditions, such as the *ijazah* system, the network was composed of a lineage of masters and disciples, where a master recognised the disciples' acquired knowledge and authorized them to transmit it further. Contemporary practice in the Muslim world, on the other hand, largely depends on licensing bodies composed of acknowledged experts in their respective fields. The formation – and formalisation – of these networks of expertise is deeply intertwined with the historical, cultural and social context of their inception (cf. Stewart 2005). Once established, these structures often follow a path dependency, where earlier decisions and practices significantly influence future actions. This often results in licensing practices

becoming ritualised, perpetuated through time due to their embeddedness in the professional culture and in an institutional inertia that resists change.

The roots of the *ijazah* system can be traced back to the early Islamic period, where the veracity and continuity of knowledge, particularly in the transmission of Hadith, were paramount. The earliest *ijazahs* were given by renowned scholars and masters to their disciples, thereby endorsing the latter's authority and ability to teach the Quran and Hadith or give legal opinions. This network's formation, or chain of knowledge transmission, based on the master-disciple relationship, has left an indelible mark on how Islamic knowledge is transmitted, validated and recognised. Its practice of standardisation and social closure is very similar to contemporary practices of professionalisation and network formation. Despite societal changes and the advent of modern educational institutions, the *ijazah* system continues to be respected and employed in certain contexts, attesting to the lasting influence of its formative period. We can see this in the continued tradition of Quran recitation in religious schools (*madrasas*). Here, both memorisation and incorporation have been important means to "protect" Quranic knowledge, and to connect Muslims with the divine revelation. The existing written records, however, do not evidence a proportionate representation of women's participation in these networks.

Why focus on women Muslim professionals?

Our research applies a gender-religion-profession lens and provides new insights into how the articulation of Islam and being Muslim is connected to broader social processes concerning the emergence and expansion of new markets for women.[8] Gender-sensitive studies in this field are scarce. A few single-case studies focus on female professionalism based on religious knowledge, among them Sylva Frisk's (2009) work on (Malay) Muslim women in Malaysia. Also, Mirjam Künkler and Eva Nisa's (2018) account of female women jurists in Indonesia does indeed pertain to professionalisation via the acquisition of institutionalised religious knowledge. Yet it nonetheless deals with professions – in this case juristic ones – that are located in the ontological context of religious authority. The carriers of religious knowledge we look at are not seeking to claim religious authority or provide religious leadership, but rather are utilising their religious knowledge in order to perform in secular and everyday professional contexts. They might best be compared to Daromir Rudnyckyj's business trainers in the spiritual economy of Indonesia's corporate world (Rudnyckyj 2009), or the "intra-hegemonic struggles" over the meaning and understanding of "proper" Islamic business and economy in Kazakhstan (Botoeva 2018).

8 A first publication of this research was based on digital ethnographic methods; see Derichs et al. 2022.

A systematic gender perspective on Muslim professionalism, i.e., investigating women's methods of professionalisation via the acquisition and utilisation of religious knowledge, leads us to a better understanding of how the shift of meanings, notions, practices and experiences of Muslim professionalism are closely tied to the socioeconomic transformations taking place in the Muslim societies of South, Southeast and Central Asia. Although men are still the dominating sex in some business sectors, women are catching up and taking an active and creative part in the production and dissemination of new expert knowledge. With a gender-sensitive focus on "Muslim professionals" and "professionalism", we reveal the growing visibility of Muslim women as civic/social activists, businesswomen and entrepreneurs and thus as creative actors in the sphere of development, education, policymaking and law.[9] By contrast, Islamic and spiritual economies as well as endeavours in the pursuit of new "geo-economics" have mostly been examined without devoting a closer look at gender relations in such settings (Botoeva 2018; Rudnyckyj 2018, 2009). This gap strongly contradicts the large body of scholarship on modern Muslim reformism and revivalism, which has widely attested Muslim women's increasing presence in, as well as their active contribution to, the emergence and development of new Muslim public spheres in and beyond Asia (Deeb 2009, 2006; Frisk 2009; Tobin 2016).

While we observe these trends in contemporary women's and men's work worlds alike, the innovative angle in women's work worlds is particularly striking because women pro-actively shape the meaning of what is permissible or forbidden – Arabic *ḥalāl* or *ḥarām* – by claiming definitional power on the basis of their own, specific knowledge and professionalism (see Nor Ismah's article in this issue). While, for instance, the Quranic concept of *wilāyah* has predominantly been interpreted as a concept sanctioning men's authority over women, professional Muslim women's rights activists demonstrate that this is questionable by providing conclusive evidence for differing yet equally authoritative interpretations of the concept.[10] Not only has an enhanced access to (higher) institutional education and knowledge acquisition through the internet enabled more women to acquire scientific, academic and other forms of knowledge than before the turn of the century; more women now also occupy spaces of professionalisation in which men have always formed the majority (e.g., Islamic economics, Islamic law or international trade).

The growing field of Muslim women's professionalisation in Asia displays a dynamic socio-spatial configuration that feeds into the changing balances and centre-periphery shifts in transregional configurations. The gender-religion-profession lens provides new insights into how the articulation of Islam and being Muslim is connected to broader social processes concerning the emer-

9 Cf. Bloch 2015; Borbieva 2012; Derichs 2013, 2010; Simpson 2006.

10 See https://www.musawah.org/knowledge-building/qiwamah-wilayah/ (accessed 18 July 2023).

gence and expansion of new markets for women. Within this tripartite configuration, we focus on the emergence of new vibrant hubs of valuable religious knowledge, and on how these hubs contour the conditions that create, form and regulate Muslim women's subject-formation. Our research allows us to act on the critique of hegemonic positivist knowledge formations that exclude non-European archives, as well as Muslim women's voices, from the ways in which Islam and Muslims, and in particular Muslim women, are represented in academic writing on and beyond Asia.[11]

Instead of approaching the concepts of Islam/Muslim as consisting of essentialising and unchanging dimensions, we acknowledge the embeddedness of religion in people's everyday lives (Schielke / Debevec 2012). We trace the relevance of business, entrepreneurship and activism as situated social relations for self-conscious expression, through which women link Islam and spirituality with narratives of modernity, development and progress (see Stephan-Emmrich and Toktogulova's article in this issue).

Contributions to this special issue

Acknowledging and understanding the conceptual diversity in the definition and perception of profession and professionalism is crucial to appreciating the multifaceted relationship between professionalisation, Islamic/religious knowledge and societal change within the Muslim community globally. The journeys of professionalisation among Muslim women are as diverse and multifaceted as the community itself. Each professional journey is distinct and deeply intertwined with the individual's socio-cultural environment, personal aspirations, opportunities and challenges. For instance, the professionalisation path of a female Muslim entrepreneur in Malaysia could be strikingly different from that of a Muslim women's rights activist in Egypt or a Muslim fiction writer in Indonesia. The vast array of experiences, cultural contexts and individual perspectives among this group make it impossible to generalise their professional paths or their interaction with Islamic knowledge and values. Despite this diversity, a common thread that often emerges is the influence of Islamic ethics and wisdom.

In Pakistan, as Faiza M. Din's article reveals, women have been actively participating in various professional fields, and a recent development has been the emergence of networking strategies facilitated by social media platforms. Through social media, Pakistani women are finding solidarity and creating virtual communities where they can seek solutions, share experiences and gain insights from one another. These networks provide a space for them to discuss

11 Amir-Moazami 2018, Rehbein 2015, Chakrabarty 2007, Burrawoy 2005, Harraway 1988.

common obstacles, such as gender biases, societal expectations and limited opportunities, and to collectively work towards overcoming these barriers. By leveraging the power of social media, they expand their professional networks beyond traditional boundaries, reaching out to peers and mentors across different fields and regions. The social media activities of these urban middle-class Muslim women professionals transcend not only urban-rural divides but also class boundaries, showcasing an inclusive approach without forming exclusive bubbles.

For Pakistani women in the diaspora, networking platforms provide a unique space to address specific challenges by bridging the geographical gaps that previously hindered collaboration. The virtual nature of these networks also allows for open and inclusive participation, making them accessible to a wide range of professionals across different regions and backgrounds. In the context of Pakistan, the establishment of online business networks has also played a crucial role in overcoming the fragmentation caused by crackdowns and restrictions imposed during periods of martial law. These oppressive measures had led to the disintegration of physical networks and associations, making it challenging for professionals to connect and collaborate effectively. However, with the restoration of democracy, the advent of online networking platforms has provided Pakistani women with a powerful tool to rebuild their professional connections.

In the context of Kyrgyzstan, the interaction between the legacy of Soviet modernism, post-Soviet secularism, Islam and everyday concerns of religious communities has shaped the choices made by Muslim women in their professionalisation strategies. Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Mukaram Toktogulova focus on one notable initiative in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where the personal development training courses led by female Muslim practitioners form an illustrative empirical case. In their online and offline seminars and consultations conducted for veiled Muslim women (*joolukchan ayaldar* in Kyrgyz), these female practitioners translate religious knowledge into professional activism. As women leaders, these active practitioners invoke moral values and principles for both female trainers and students, who participate in personal development sessions on combatting gender violence, inequality and poverty. Thus, the seminars aim to shape a "modern" and "progressive" image of veiled Muslim women through an educational activism that champions equality and success. Utilising Islamic knowledge and moral principles, these female trainers seek to enhance women's self-confidence, leadership skills, problem-solving abilities, effective communication and habits for personal development.

The professional choices and strategies these female practitioners make reflect the complex interplay between Soviet history, Islamic renewal and the unique challenges faced by Kyrgyz women. During the Soviet era, religious practices were severely restricted and disappeared from the public eye, while religious

institutions were either closed or converted for secular use. Following the collapse of the USSR, the Muslim societies in post-Soviet Central Asia were gripped by a resurgence of religious identity in the interplay of post-Soviet nation-building and the global economy. The personal development trainings led by female Muslim practitioners reflect this religious resurgence and the transformation of women's roles within the Muslim community. Instead of breaking with cultural, patriarchal and Soviet values and traditions, the female educators embrace the great diversity of values, traditions and orientations in Kyrgyzstani society, using them to counter radical secular and religious forces in society.

Cultural context has a significant impact on the professionalisation strategies of Indonesian female writers belonging to the Muslim *pesantren* tradition, as Nor Ismah's case study shows. *Pesantren* are usually referred to as Islamic boarding schools. Students are expected to maintain the authenticity of their experiences of cultural and religious identity and the ethical values they have absorbed from their education. For a group of female writers from several *pesantren* who have formed a collective, it is a unique challenge to reconcile their personal and religious convictions with the demands and trends of a highly competitive and largely consumer-driven literary market. Online platforms have served as critical avenues for these women to explore their professionalism and assert their presence in the literary world. They have been able to experiment with different genres and themes, incorporating their religious and cultural experiences and ideological commitment to the *pesantren* tradition while also adapting to the trends and expectations of the reader market. Digital platforms have also facilitated professional development for these writers, as they can access resources for improving their writing skills and collaborate and network with other writers, both within and outside their cultural context.

Nevertheless, it is a constant struggle to uphold the meaningful messages they intend to convey while satisfying their readers' expectations for popular themes. Overall, the cultural context profoundly shapes these writers' professionalisation strategies. They navigate the path of professional writing within this unique intersection of tradition and modernity, maintaining a delicate balance between their personal beliefs and the demands of their readers. Digital platforms have democratised access to literature; the flipside, however, is that writers are now more exposed to market pressures.

Language is a living entity, continuously evolving and heavily influenced by context. Words can take on entirely different meanings based on the situations in which they are used, the speaker's intent and the listener's interpretation. "Professionalism" is indeed one such word that has developed into an abstract concept, where its meaning can shift based on the parameters set by specific institutions, fields or cultural contexts. When we talk about Muslim women professionals, it is important to remember that their shared reference to Islamic teachings does not mean that they interpret or apply these teachings in the

same way. They may employ the same Islamic vocabulary and reference the Quran or Islamic history, but the ways in which they make these concepts productive in their professional work can differ greatly. One example is the interview with a Japanese translator of the Quran in this issue. The interviewee's decision to write a new translation in the contemporary context of female believers perfectly exemplifies this idea. While the core teachings of Islam remain the same, their interpretations can, and often do, adapt to fit evolving personal circumstances, beliefs and experiences, societal expectations and legal frameworks. It is this very shift towards Muslim women's lifeworlds, and the associated specific spatial and temporal situatedness of how women interpret and give meaning to religious knowledge and form their Muslim selves, that prompts us to conceive faith-based activities as professional ones.

Inferences: Flexibility and adaptation

In the study of Muslim women's vocational activities as introduced in this issue, established definitions of professionalism may not be fully applicable, necessitating not only a critical questioning but a re-adjustment of existing analytical frameworks. To foster meaningful advancements in a more grounded, context-sensitive and integrative study of faith-based professional activity, there should be an openness to moving beyond the horizons of a "sociology of the professions" and to venturing into the appreciation of individual as well as collective narratives, stories and experiential accounts. Using the stories of women's everyday work worlds – whether those of Muslims or women of other faiths – to productively re-conceptualise professions and professionalism, placing the emphasis on epistemologies that de-center the scholarship, should be a top goal for future research agendas. This special issue is an explorative first step into this direction. The contributions to this issue offer a glimpse into Muslim women's professional work worlds. They open up avenues for taking the reflection further: towards the study of contemporary applications of *ijazah* systems, entanglements between religiously inspired and "secularised" concepts of professionalism, the methodological merit of transregional perspectives on professions/professionalism and, last but not least, towards the epistemic merit of zeroing in on gendered perspectives of faith, piety, everyday life and work.

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