

**CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**AUTHORITY:**

**MUSLIM WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN AMERICAN MUSLIM SPACES**

**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED TO THE CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**FACULTY IN THE CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**BY**

**JACQUELYN N. CRUTCHLEY**

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**2025**



## ABSTRACT

Author: Crutchley, Jacquelyn Nicole

Institution: Chicago Theological Seminary

Degree Received: Master in Arts in Islamic Leadership

Title: AuthERity: Muslim Women's Leadership in American Muslim Spaces

Supervising Professor: Bo-Myung Seo

This thesis explores the dynamics of Muslim women's leadership within American Muslim spaces, focusing on the challenges, opportunities, and systemic barriers they face. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative insights, the study examines the historical and contemporary perspectives on female authority in Islam. It highlights the significant contributions of Muslim women leaders from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to the present day, emphasizing their roles in commerce, political consultation, warfare, and education. The research identifies key factors that influence the recognition and actualization of women's leadership potential, including cultural norms, organizational structures, and interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. By documenting the experiences of Muslim women leaders and proposing recommendations for fostering inclusive environments, this study aims to advance equity and inclusivity within Islamic organizations, ensuring that leadership reflects the principles of justice and mutual respect central to Islamic teachings.

## CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	iii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	vi
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	vii
<b>GLOSSARY</b> .....	viii
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>I. DEFINITIONS</b> .....	9
<b>CHAPTER 2. WOMEN LEADERS AT THE TIME OF THE PROPHET (PBUH)</b>	11
<b>II. KHADIJAH BINT KHUWAYLID IBN ASAD</b> .....	12
<b>III. UMM SALAMA</b> .....	15
<b>IV. NUSAIBA BINT KA'B</b> .....	18
<b>V. AL-SHIFA BINT ABDULLAH</b> .....	20
<b>VI. THE PROPHET'S (PBUH) ENCOURAGEMENT OF FEMALE         INVOLVEMENT AND AUTHORITY</b> .....	22
<b>CHAPTER 3. CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON MUSLIM WOMEN</b> .....	25
<b>IN LEADERSHIP</b> .....	25
<b>CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH SURVEY METHODOLOGY</b> .....	30
<b>VII. RESEARCH DESIGN</b> .....	30
<b>VIII. DATA COLLECTION METHODS</b> .....	30
<b>IX. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS</b> .....	31

X.	<b>SURVEY .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5. KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS.....</b>		<b>33</b>
XI.	<b>DEMOGRAPHICS .....</b>	<b>33</b>
XII.	<b>QUESTIONS ON AUTHORITY .....</b>	<b>40</b>
XIII.	<b>QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>49</b>
XIV.	<b>CONCLUSION OF FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6. RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>		<b>53</b>
<b>APPENDIX A. RESEARCH OUTLINE .....</b>		<b>55</b>
<b>APPENDIX B. SURVEY AND CONSENT FORMS .....</b>		<b>58</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>		<b>65</b>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

All praise is due to Allah, whose guidance and blessings have made this journey possible. This thesis is the culmination of years of study, reflection, and the unwavering support of many individuals who have contributed to my academic and personal growth.

I am also sincerely grateful to my professors and mentors at Bayan Islamic Graduate School and the Chicago Theological Seminary, whose teachings and discussions have shaped my understanding and enriched my research. Your dedication to knowledge and truth has been a constant source of motivation.

To my family and friends, your love, prayers, and support have sustained me throughout this journey although I have remained absent your understanding has been a source of love and appreciation. Your belief in me has been a source of strength, and I am forever grateful for your encouragement.

A special thanks to my colleagues and peers, whose discussions, insights, and camaraderie have made this academic journey all the more fulfilling. Your perspectives and support have been instrumental in shaping my thoughts and approach.

Lastly, I acknowledge the countless scholars whose works have guided and informed my research. May Allah (swt) grant us all the ability to seek knowledge with sincerity and use it for the betterment of humanity.

May this work serve as a small contribution to the vast and ever-evolving discourse on Islam and its rich intellectual traditions.

**Wa billahi tawfiq wa sadad.**

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- (SWT) – Subḥānahu wa Ta‘ālā (Glorified and Exalted is He)
- (PBUH) – Peace Be Upon Him (Used for Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ)
- (SAW) – Ṣallallāhu ‘Alayhi wa Sallam (May Allah send blessings and peace upon him)
- (RA) – Raḍiyallāhu ‘Anhu/‘Anhā (May Allah be pleased with him/her)
- (AS) – ‘Alayhi/‘Alayhā al-Salām (Upon him/her be peace)
- (RAA) – Raḍiyallāhu ‘Anhum/‘Anhunna (May Allah be pleased with them)
- (AH) – After Hijrah (Islamic calendar dating from the Hijrah)
- (CE) – Common Era (Gregorian calendar notation)
- (Hadith) – Prophetic traditions and sayings
- (Fiqh) – Islamic jurisprudence

## GLOSSARY

**Abyssinia** – The historical name for the region that includes modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, where early Muslims sought refuge from persecution in Makkah.

**Al-Imran 3:195** – A verse from the Quran emphasizing that the deeds of men and women are equally valued and rewarded by Allah.

**Ansar** – The inhabitants of Medina who welcomed and supported the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the early Muslim migrants (Muhajirun) from Makkah.

**Aqaba Pledge** – A significant agreement between the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the people of Yathrib (Medina) that laid the foundation for the Muslim community in Medina.

**Caliphate** – The Islamic form of governance led by a Caliph, considered the political and religious successor to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

**Hadith** – Recorded sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), forming an essential source of Islamic law and guidance alongside the Quran.

**Hijrah** – The migration of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers from Makkah to Medina in 622 CE, marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

**Hudaybiyyah Treaty** – A peace agreement between the Muslims and the Quraysh of Makkah, allowing Muslims to perform pilgrimage the following year and recognizing the Islamic state.

**Ihram** – The sacred state a Muslim enters before performing the Hajj or Umrah pilgrimage, characterized by specific clothing and behavioral restrictions.

**Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh)** – The understanding and interpretation of Islamic laws derived from the Quran and Hadith.

**Khadijah bint Khuwaylid** – The first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the first believer in Islam. A successful businesswoman, social reformer, and the financial backbone of the early Muslim community.

**Muhajirun** – The early Muslims who emigrated from Makkah to Medina to escape persecution.

**Nusaiba bint Ka'b** – An early female warrior and companion of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) known for her bravery in battle, particularly at the Battle of Uhud.



**Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)** – The final prophet in Islam, who received the divine revelation of the Quran and established the foundations of the Muslim faith.

**Quraysh** – The powerful tribe of Makkah to which the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) belonged. Many early opponents of Islam were Quraysh leaders.

**Ruqya** – A form of spiritual healing through supplications, often used to treat ailments and protect against harm in Islamic tradition.

**Sharia** – Islamic law derived from the Quran, Hadith, and scholarly consensus, governing various aspects of life including social, economic, and political matters.

**Shura** – A principle of Islamic governance advocating for consultation and consensus-building in decision-making.

**Umm Salama** – A prominent companion of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), known for her intellect, narration of Hadith, and advocacy for women's roles in Islam.

**Yathrib** – The former name of Medina before the migration of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the establishment of the Muslim community there.

**Tassawuf** – Also known as Sufism, Tassawuf refers to the inner, spiritual dimension of Islam focused on purification of the heart, self-discipline, and attaining closeness to Allah (swt) through practices such as dhikr (remembrance), meditation, and devotion to a spiritual guide.

**Tarbiya** – An Arabic term meaning "nurturing" or "education," tarbiya refers to the holistic development of an individual's character, spirituality, and knowledge in accordance with Islamic principles. It encompasses moral, ethical, and religious upbringing, often guided by teachers or mentors within an Islamic framework.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

During my tenure on the board of an Islamic organization, I encountered a conflict that profoundly shaped my understanding of how female authority is actualized in Islamic spaces. This incident involved a chapter leader, whom I will refer to as Sara, a convert to Islam who had been elected by her peers to lead the chapter. Despite her formal appointment, Sara faced persistent challenges from a male colleague, whom I will refer to as Hamza, who was born into the faith. Hamza frequently undermined Sara's leadership, disrupting meetings by derailing discussions, initiating projects without consultation or approval, and even attempting to split the chapter into two factions. His actions seemed designed to marginalize Sara, particularly given that she was based in a less densely populated region, leaving her isolated and unsupported.

The conflict escalated to the point where the board was required to investigate Hamza's conduct and vote on whether he should remain a committee member. The board consisted of eight voting members: five men and three women. Although all board members spoke with Hamza during the deliberations, only a few of the female members took the initiative to speak with Sara. In the initial vote, all three female members voted to remove Hamza from the committee, while all five male members voted to retain him.

As the meeting drew to a close, I pointed out the glaring gender disparity in the deliberation process, emphasizing that Sara had not been given the same opportunity to address the board as Hamza. This observation led to a decision to reconvene and allow Sara, along with another concerned chapter leader, to present their perspectives. After hearing Sara's account, the

board conducted a second vote. This time, seven of the eight members voted to remove Hamza from the committee.

This experience was both eye-opening and unsettling. It highlighted how the voices and authority of women in Islamic organizational spaces are at times overlooked or undervalued. Sara, despite her position as an elected leader, who had been trained with the organization for a year prior to taking her position, who had a Master's Degree in non-profit management and had held several leadership positions prior, had to fight for recognition and legitimacy within her role, while Hamza, through unchecked behavior, was afforded more consideration and influence. What made things worse was later we found that Hamza had been removed from other projects consisting of solely male leadership within the organization for similar behavior yet was able to persist in this committee. The incident sparked a deeper curiosity about the barriers faced by Muslim female leaders in Islamic spaces and the systemic factors that perpetuate these disparities.

Addressing gender disparities in Islamic spaces often elicits a strong defensive response from both men and women. In this particular instance, while the board ultimately agreed to address the issue, this agreement only came after assuaging concerns that such discussions implied accusations of sexism or misogyny. These defensive reactions create significant barriers to initiating conversations about gender inequities, which is only intensified by prevailing stereotypes regarding women's oppression in Islam. At times, I was made to feel as though I were exaggerating, or that my female counterparts were overly emotional, lacking logical reasoning, or even deficient in Islamic character. This dynamic led me to develop a form of double consciousness regarding my identity as a woman, constantly anticipating how my

concerns would be perceived. Over time, this experience created a sense of dissonance, as if I were navigating an entirely different moral reality. Seeking further insight, I engaged with other women about their experiences. While some had found a sense of belonging within the community, many echoed feelings of being unwanted, overlooked, and overpowered in religious spaces.

These shared experiences and feelings began asking important questions: Why are female authority and voices so often marginalized in Islamic spaces? What structural and cultural barriers prevent Muslim women from fully realizing their leadership potential? Most importantly, how can we build systems of advocacy that not only protect but amplify the authority of Muslim women, fostering environments where their contributions are respected, and their leadership thrives? Addressing these questions is essential for advancing equity and inclusivity within Islamic organizations and for ensuring that leadership reflects the principles of justice and mutual respect at the heart of Islamic teachings.

On a broader scope, as a white female convert to Islam, my experiences navigating Islamic spaces in America have sparked profound questions about how female authority is recognized and actualized within Muslim communities. From being thrust into leadership roles I did not feel qualified for, to being showcased performatively as a “walking convert story,” to having my expertise and voice diminished in spaces where I held both experience and qualifications, my journey has illuminated the complexities and contradictions surrounding Muslim women’s leadership. These reflections have kindled a deep curiosity in me: was it divine guidance, societal forces, or both that led me to pursue formal academic education in Islamic studies? And how do my experiences compare with those of Muslim women across the United

States, one of the most diverse Muslim populations in the world? What does female authority in religious spaces truly look like, and are we leveraging women's talents effectively in these spaces?

In addition to these questions, this paper delves into the research design and data collection methods employed to investigate the dynamics of Muslim women's leadership in Islamic organizational spaces in America. It presents a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to address the complexity of the research questions and provide a holistic understanding of this subject. This study integrates measurable data on trends and challenges with the nuanced context of personal experiences, ensuring findings are both statistically valid and richly descriptive. Key elements include a survey distributed to a diverse cohort of Muslim women leaders, speakers, and teachers, offering insights into roles, organizational dynamics, and perceptions of authority. Ethical considerations, such as maintaining confidentiality and participant anonymity, were prioritized throughout the research process to safeguard the integrity of the study. Together, these methods offer a robust framework for exploring the multifaceted realities of leadership and authority experienced by Muslim women in Islamic organizational contexts.

To best understand the landscape of today, it is also important to look through the lens of the past. Muslim women have inherited a legacy of remarkable leadership. Khadijah (RA), the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), not only employed him but also provided the financial foundation for the early Muslim community through her business acumen. Nusaybah (RA) exemplified a balance of roles as a wife, mother, diplomat, and defender of the Prophet (pbuh) on the battlefield. Similarly, Umm Salama (RA) wielded her wisdom to avert conflict and

was a trusted advisor to the Prophet (pbuh). Contemporary Muslim discourse often highlights these exceptional figures, as well as achievements like Fatima al-Fihriya founding the world's first university, to counter accusations of misogyny and oppression within Islam. Yet, paradoxically, many of our communities fail to reflect this heritage. Women are underrepresented on organizational boards, absent from speaker lineups at major conferences, and frequently hindered by systems that make leadership inaccessible to them.

This raises a critical question: if Khadijah, Nusaybah, Umm Salama, or Fatima al-Fihriya lived today, would our communities nurture their potential, or would their talents and voices be suppressed? Are these figures celebrated as exceptions, while the next generation of exceptional women is left waiting in the shadows of our organizations?

Research consistently demonstrates that when women are empowered to lead and influence decisions, it fosters greater representation, equity, and collaborative decision-making across sectors such as healthcare, education, and the workplace. Globally, women comprise nearly 50% of the population but occupy less than 12% of head-of-state positions and only 35% of corporate and political senior leadership roles<sup>1&2</sup>. Muslim women, representing one in ten global citizens, contribute significantly to the global economy. According to the World Economic Forum, their combined earnings position them as the equivalent of the 16th wealthiest

---

<sup>1</sup>UN Women. "Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation." UN Women, October 2, 2024. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Z Lindahl, "Is This the Age of Women in Leadership?" Forbes, February 5, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisalindahl/2024/02/05/is-this-the-age-of-women-in-leadership/>.

country in the world<sup>3</sup>. However, as Muslim women navigate professional spaces, they encounter both Islamophobia and a persistent lack of diversity. Though Quranic messages of gender equality within the eyes of God exist by capacity of mind, body, and spirit, such as in Surat Al-Ahzab (33:35) “Surely ‘for’ Muslim men and women, believing men and women, devout men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who remember Allah (swt) often—for ‘all of’ them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.” Within their own communities, Muslim women often face marginalization and systemic barriers to education and leadership opportunities<sup>4</sup>.

American Muslims have a deep-rooted history of contested and competing forms of religious authority. This history is only exacerbated by the rapid growth in size and diversity of American Muslims and the different global influences that shape authority in the mosque and in intellectual arenas. Communities are often deeply divided into the question of who should lead and have authority in religious spaces. American mosques are among the most demographically diverse in the world as well as the most diverse houses of worship in America. While this diversity is often a point of pride for the American Muslim Community, it is also a source of

---

<sup>3</sup> Saadia Zahidi, and World Economic Forum. “Working Muslim Women Are a Trillion-Dollar Market.” World Economic Forum, May 23, 2018. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/05/muslim-women-trillion-dollar-market-saadia-zahidi/>.

<sup>4</sup> Samah Hatem Almaki, Abu Daud Silong, Khairuddin Idris, and Nor Wahiza Abd. Wahat. “Challenges Faced Muslim Women Leaders in Higher Education.” *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 6 no. 3 (September 2016), <https://doi.org/10.5901/jesr.2016.v6n3p75>.

divisive conflict over authority<sup>5</sup>. The complex nature of religious authority in American extends to that of Muslim women, where mosques are already divided on creed, madhab (school of thought of religious jurisprudence), and cultural influences. The debate over the validity of female authority only adds to the discord.

In America, the inequality faced by Muslim women leaders is shaped by a confluence of factors, including cultural norms, leadership ideologies, and religious interpretations. Perspectives on women's leadership in Islam range from restrictive views that limit leadership to men, to more progressive interpretations affirming women's equal status and potential for leadership<sup>6</sup>. However, societal inequalities persist, fueled by literal or rash religious interpretations, and cultural biases, creating vast disparities in how women's roles are actualized in Islamic organizations, schools, and mosques.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to both the academic understanding and practical advancement of Muslim women's leadership and utilization in Islamic organizations for safer and more cohesive spaces. By examining the challenges, opportunities, and experiences of Muslim women leaders, this study addresses critical gaps in knowledge that have far-reaching implications for the broader ummah and Islamic leadership.

Muslim women's leadership is a vital yet underexplored aspect of the ummah's growth and development. Historically, Muslim women have played pivotal roles as scholars, community

---

<sup>5</sup> Grewal, Zareena. *Islam Is a Foreign Country : American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. New York, Ny: New York Univ. Press, 2014.

<sup>6</sup>Almaki, Silong, Idris, and Wahat. "Challenges Faced Muslim Women Leaders in Higher Education."



builders, and leaders, yet their contributions have often been underrepresented and overlooked in contemporary discourse. This paper seeks to highlight the breadth and depth of Muslim women's leadership by documenting their contributions to Islamic organizations in America.

The survey findings aim to challenge reductive stereotypes and illuminate the diversity of leadership models. Additionally, the study has the potential to inspire a more inclusive and equitable approach to leadership within Muslim communities, the gaps from which Muslim women authority and contributions are unactualized, emphasizing the importance of women's participation for the spiritual, social, and institutional advancement of the ummah.

This paper aims to explore the practical implications for Muslim organizations. By identifying barriers to leadership and organizational equity, as well as highlighting effective support structures, the findings can inform policies and practices that foster more inclusive leadership environments.

Additionally, this study can serve as a resource for organizational leaders, scholars, and community members seeking to cultivate a more inclusive vision of Islamic leadership. By amplifying the voices of Muslim women leaders, the research underscores the importance of leveraging their expertise and experiences to address pressing issues within Muslim communities and beyond. In doing so, it aims to not only enhance the effectiveness of Muslim organizations but also to enrich the collective progress of the ummah in alignment with Islamic values of justice, equity, and collective responsibility.

This paper explores these dynamics, asking how Muslim women's leadership potential can be fully realized within American Islamic spaces and whether the broader community benefits from their contributions as leaders and decision-makers.

### **Definitions**

In the context of this research, **leadership** refers to any position or context within Islamic spaces where a Muslim woman can exercise authority. This paper does not center on the nuances of individual leadership styles but rather focuses on **authority** itself as a central concept. Consequently, the study encompasses diverse demographics of Muslim women leaders, including teachers, public speakers, organizational employees, and those holding voluntary roles such as board members or chapter and initiative leaders.

**Authority** is understood using the definition provided by Merriam-Webster (2019): "the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior." This aligns with the sociological framework developed by Max Weber, who distinguished between power and authority. According to Weber, **power** refers to the ability to exercise one's will over others, which may or may not be viewed as legitimate by those subjected to it. In contrast, **authority** involves power that is perceived as just and appropriate, legitimized by societal norms and structures (Pressbooks, 2016). For instance, individuals may exert power without true authority if the means of exercising power lack societal approval. Authority may be expressed through the relationship and trust a leader has with their constituents when implementing difficult or confusing policies with little to no pushback or dissent. Where power may be exercised with the appearance of authority but leads to societal unrest by constituents.

When applied to **Muslim women leaders**, authority is actualized when Islamic communities and their leadership recognize and validate the influence, ideas, and contributions of these women. In practical terms, this recognition may manifest in tangible ways, such as:

- Ensuring equal female representation on organizational boards.
- Consulting female scholars alongside male scholars on jurisprudential questions, especially those pertaining to family and women's issues.
- Including female speakers equally in conference lineups.

Less tangible, but equally significant, examples include:

- Valuing the credentials and expertise of individuals above their sex.
- Ensuring female voices are given equal weight and influence as their male counterparts in discussions and decision-making processes.
- Actively addressing implicit biases to ensure that sex does not diminish the consideration or reception of an opinion.

Authority for Muslim women leaders is not solely about occupying formal roles but also about fostering environments where their contributions are legitimized, respected, and impactful within Islamic spaces. This legitimization reflects a broader commitment to equity and inclusivity, principles deeply embedded within Islamic tradition and necessary for the growth and well-being of Muslim communities.

## CHAPTER 2. WOMEN LEADERS AT THE TIME OF THE PROPHET (PBUH)

The Quran explicitly affirms women's spiritual and moral equality to men, emphasizing their ability to attain piety, divine favor, and closeness to God through worship and righteous intent. Beyond these theological affirmations, historical records from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) demonstrate that women actively contributed to society in meaningful and exemplary ways. These contributions were not limited to the Prophet's household but extended across the broader Muslim community, with their roles upheld by male leadership, including the Caliphs who succeeded him. Such historical realities challenge Western narratives that often depict Muslim women as oppressed or Muslim men as inherently controlling or violent—narratives that serve to dehumanize or victimize Muslims rather than reflect the complexities of Islamic history. In contrast, under the Prophet's guidance, Islam elevated the status of women, granting them defined social, marital, and legal rights.

One striking example of this historical reality is the right of Muslim women to own property and control their wealth, rights that were codified in Islam over a thousand years before similar legal protections emerged in the West. The Married Women's Property Acts, passed in the mid-19th century in the United States, finally granted married women the ability to own property, draft wills without spousal consent, and exercise greater control over inherited wealth<sup>7</sup>—rights that Muslim women had long possessed.

This chapter explores the lives of four women from the time of the Prophet (pbuh) whose leadership and contributions challenge the prevailing narrative of Muslim women's oppression.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kristine S Knaplund, "The Evolution of Women's Rights in Inheritance," *Hastings Journal of Gender and the Law* 19 no. 1 (Winter 2008),

These women—deeply engaged in commerce, political consultation, warfare, and medicine—not only shaped their societies but did so with the recognition and support of men. Their stories illustrate how Muslim women historically exercised agency, transcending modern societal gender norms and offering a more nuanced understanding of gender roles in early Islam.

### **Khadijah bint Khuwaylid ibn Asad**

Khadijah bint Khuwaylid ibn Asad was born and raised in Makkah, a central hub of commerce and trade in pre-Islamic Arabia. Her father, Khuwaylid ibn Asad, was not only an influential merchant but also a key leader within the Quraysh tribe. Upon his passing, Khadijah inherited his thriving trade enterprise, for which she was unprepared to manage yet thrived non-the-less, an unprecedented occurrence in a deeply patriarchal society that often marginalized women in economic and political affairs. However, far from merely maintaining her inherited wealth, Khadijah expanded her business empire, establishing herself as one of the most formidable entrepreneurs of her time. Through her strategic vision, sharp negotiation skills, and ability to cultivate a vast network of trade partners, she transformed her enterprise into one of the most successful commercial operations in the Arabian Peninsula<sup>8</sup>.

Her leadership extended far beyond business acumen. Khadijah's authority was widely recognized, as she commanded respect not only among the Quraysh elite but also within the broader Makkah society. In a culture where women were often viewed as subordinates, she demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for governance and decision-making, running an enterprise that required overseeing caravans traveling across the turbulent terrains of Arabia.

---

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Mojlum Khan, *The Muslim 100* (Kube Publishing Ltd, 2009).

Unlike many merchants who relied on exploitative labor, Khadijah was known for her ethical business practices, recruiting individuals of exceptional integrity and compensating them generously. In an era where workers were often mistreated and undervalued, she defied conventional norms by ensuring that her employees were treated with fairness and dignity. She set a precedent in ethical entrepreneurship by engaging in equitable profit-sharing arrangements, at times splitting the earnings with her traders—a radical practice in a time devoid of labor rights and protections<sup>9</sup>.

Khadijah's influence was not limited to economic affairs; she was also a social figure of remarkable stature, due to her reputation for integrity and wisdom. It was within this context that she encountered Muhammad ibn Abdullah, a young man of impeccable character and honesty. Recognizing his extraordinary moral compass and work ethic, she entrusted him with managing her trade caravans. As she observed his dealings, her admiration deepened, and she eventually took the bold step of initiating a marriage proposal through a trusted intermediary. Their union, which defied the age and status expectations of the time, was one of profound mutual respect and unwavering support. At the time of their marriage, Khadijah was approximately 40 years old, while Muhammad was around 25. Together, they had six children, four of whom survived into adulthood<sup>10</sup>.

Beyond her exceptional leadership in business, Khadijah played a foundational role in the emergence of Islam. She was the first to embrace the message of monotheism upon

---

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Mojlum Khan. *The Muslim 100*, page#?

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Mojlum Khan. *The Muslim 100*.

Muhammad's initial revelation and served as his staunchest supporter. When he returned from the Cave of Hira in a state of distress following his first encounter with Angel Jibreel, it was Khadijah who reassured him, affirming his prophetic mission at a time when he himself was overwhelmed with doubt<sup>11</sup>. Recognizing the gravity of the experience, she arranged for him to consult a scholar, who validated Muhammad's divine calling. Her unwavering belief in his mission provided Muhammad with the confidence to proceed despite the immense societal opposition he would soon face.

Khadijah was not merely a passive supporter; she was the backbone of the early Muslim movement. She single-handedly financed the newly formed Muslim community, ensuring its survival during times of persecution and economic hardship. Her wealth was not a source of personal comfort but a tool for the advancement of Islam. Her sacrifice was so immense that by the time of her passing, she had exhausted her vast fortune, leaving her in a state of poverty. In her final days, she endured immense suffering, yet her conviction never wavered. She died not in luxury but in unwavering faith and service to a cause greater than herself<sup>12</sup>.

The legacy of Khadijah bint Khuwaylid cannot be overstated. Islam's early foundations were built upon her leadership, resilience, and sacrifices. The strength of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was fortified by a woman who not only held his tears in her lap but also laid the economic and emotional groundwork that allowed Islam to take root and flourish. She was a business magnate, a social reformer, and a visionary leader whose foresight and generosity cemented her

---

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Mojlum Khan. *The Muslim 100*.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Mojlum Khan. *The Muslim 100*.

as one of the most consequential figures in Islamic history. The spread of Islam to nearly thirty percent of the global population today is, in no small part, a testament to the indelible mark left by Khadijah's leadership, faith, and unwavering commitment to justice<sup>13</sup>.

### **Umm Salama**

Similar to Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, Umm Salama was born into the noble class of the Quraysh, a tribe that held immense political and economic power in pre-Islamic Arabia. Her father, Zad al-Rakib, was widely recognized for his generosity and leadership, qualities that would later be reflected in Umm Salama's own character and contributions to the early Muslim community. Her life was marked by profound trials and immense resilience, as she endured displacement, loss, and hardship while maintaining an unwavering commitment to justice and faith.

One of Umm Salama's most significant contributions to Islamic historiography was her role as an eyewitness and narrator of key events. She was among the earliest Muslims to perform the hijrah (migration) to Abyssinia, fleeing the brutal persecution in Makkah. Her keen observational skills and ability to articulate her experiences made her an invaluable historical source. It is through her narrations that not only the Muslims at the time but historians and scholars today can reconstruct the events that took place in the court of Negus, the Christian ruler

---

<sup>13</sup> Nur Rizqi Febriandika and Ismi Purniasih, "Trends in Muslim Behavior Research: A Five-Year Bibliometric and Content Analysis," *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences* 11, no. 6 (June 1, 2024): 79–88, <https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2024.06.009>.



of Abyssinia, including his interactions with the Muslim refugees and his eventual support of their cause. This demonstrates the central role she played in preserving early Islamic history<sup>14</sup>.

Umm Salama's life was also shaped by personal loss and perseverance. After returning to Makkah and later undertaking the second hijrah to Medina, she suffered immense personal tragedy when she was forcibly separated from her husband and had her child taken from her by her tribe. Her anguish lasted nearly a year before a relative, moved by her suffering, intervened and returned her child. Only then was she able to reunite with her husband in Medina. Her experiences led her to question the visibility of women in the Qur'anic discourse on migration. She directly asked the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) why the Qur'an did not mention women in the context of hijrah, after which the following verse was revealed:

"And their Lord accepted (their prayers): Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, whether male or female, you are (the offspring) of one another" (Al-Imran 3:195).

This revelation was not only a direct response to her inquiry but also a confirmation of Islam's emphasis on gender equity in spiritual reward and moral agency<sup>15</sup>.

Umm Salama remained steadfast in advocating for women's rights and consistently sought knowledge on issues pertaining to women's religious and social standing. Her marriage to Abu Salama was marked by devotion and mutual respect, and his eventual death from battle wounds left her widowed with children to care for. When the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) proposed marriage to her, she did not immediately accept initially displaying an immense amount of self-control and critical thought, citing concerns about her age, her children, and her

---

<sup>14</sup> Asmaa Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*, trans. Sawsan Tarabishy (Daybreak Press, n.d.)

<sup>15</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

natural jealousy, given that he had other wives. The Prophet (pbuh) reassured her by praying that God would remove her jealousy, acknowledging his own advanced age, and promising to care for her children as his own. Only after her concerns were addressed, she accepted his proposal, thus becoming one of the Prophet's most esteemed wives<sup>16</sup>.

Beyond her role as a wife and mother, Umm Salama distinguished herself through her wisdom, political insight, and commitment to social justice. She used her wealth to purchase and free enslaved individuals, ensuring their liberation was accompanied by exposure to the message of Islam. Her astuteness in political affairs was particularly evident during the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah. When tensions escalated among the Muslims who were frustrated by the terms of the treaty—which delayed their pilgrimage to Makkah for another year—she provided critical counsel to the Prophet (pbuh). Instead of confronting the growing unrest directly, she advised him to perform the symbolic rituals of ending ihram (sacrificial offering and shaving of the head), knowing that once the Prophet (pbuh) led by example, the rest of the Muslims would follow suit. This strategic decision prevented potential conflict and solidified the peace agreement, demonstrating her exceptional diplomatic foresight<sup>17</sup>.

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Umm Salama continued to serve as an influential advisor to the Muslim community, particularly in matters of jurisprudence and hadith transmission. Unlike many women whose voices were marginalized in historical narratives, Umm Salama remained a formidable intellectual force, consulted by leading scholars

---

<sup>16</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

<sup>17</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

and political figures. Her expertise in hadith made her a prolific female narrators of prophetic traditions, and she played a crucial role in preserving the oral and legal traditions of Islam. Recognizing her invaluable contributions, Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab allocated a special salary for her, underscoring the respect and authority she commanded. Furthermore, her home became a center of knowledge and mentorship, where prominent figures such as al-Hasan al-Basri, the renowned reviver of religious thought in Iraq, were raised under her tutelage<sup>18</sup>.

The legacy of Umm Salama serves as a powerful testament to the enduring influence of women in shaping the intellectual and political trajectory of early Islam. Her gender did not hinder her from exercising authority, nor did it diminish the respect she commanded among her peers. As a trusted advisor, a scholar, and a narrator of history, she solidified her place among the most significant figures of her time. Unlike many historical accounts where women's contributions are overshadowed, Umm Salama's role in jurisprudence, governance, and hadith transmission illustrates that knowledge and leadership in Islam are not confined by gender. Her life challenges modern assumptions about the passive role of women in Islamic history, providing a compelling example of female agency, resilience, and intellectual authority that continues to inspire scholars and believers alike.

### **Nusaiba bint Ka'b**

Nusaiba bint Ka'b was a noblewoman of the Ansar, the people of Medina who welcomed the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the Muslims fleeing persecution from Mecca. She accepted the message of Islam and, along with her husband and sons, pledged her allegiance during the

---

<sup>18</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

Second Pledge of Aqaba. In this pledge, she offered the Prophet (pbuh) protection, wealth, and their very lives for the sake of Allah (swt). This agreement laid the foundational framework for the newly emerging Islamic state. Nusaiba remained steadfast in fulfilling this pledge, dedicating her life to upholding the values of Islam. She was known for advocating service to the religion and the ultimate sacrifice in the path of God.<sup>19</sup>

Nusaiba played an active role in all major military expeditions during the Prophet's (pbuh) lifetime. At the Battle of Uhud, she initially provided food and water to soldiers and tended to the wounded. However, when the tide of battle shifted, resulting in a temporary Muslim defeat, the Prophet (pbuh) became vulnerable and was wounded. As many fled, a group of loyal companions formed a human shield around him, among whom was Nusaiba. She fought fearlessly, even as her own son was injured. After bandaging his wounds, she encouraged him to continue fighting. She herself suffered multiple wounds but remained steadfast, demonstrating extraordinary courage and self-sacrifice for Islam.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the battlefield, Nusaiba was a witness to pivotal political events in early Islamic history. She observed the Treaty of Hudaibiya, the first official recognition of the Islamic state by the Quraysh, which allowed Muslims to perform the sacred pilgrimages of Hajj and Umrah. She also witnessed the conquest of Mecca in 8 AH (630 CE), an event that led to the mass conversion of its inhabitants to Islam. Her unwavering dedication continued even after the death of the Prophet (pbuh). Shortly thereafter, the tribe of Hawazin waged war against the Muslims, and Nusaiba once again took up arms. Prior to the death of the Prophet (pbuh), her son was martyred

---

<sup>19</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

<sup>20</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

while delivering a message to Musailama al-Kadhdhab—a false claimant to prophecy— yet as a result of the rebelling tribes after the death of the Prophet (pbuh) Nusaiba joined the Muslim forces in the Battle of al-Yamama against the apostate tribes. She sustained twelve wounds before receiving news of the victory over her son’s murderer<sup>21</sup>.

Nusaiba lived until the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra), having actively participated in and bore witness to critical moments in Islamic history. Her contributions were not merely passive; she risked her life in battle to protect the Prophet (pbuh) himself. Umar (ra) later recalled the Prophet’s (pbuh) words about her bravery at Uhud: “I never turned right or left without beholding her fighting to defend me,”<sup>22</sup>. Nusaiba’s life exemplifies political acumen and military authority, underscoring the significant role women played in the formation and defense of the early Muslim community.

### **Al-Shifa bint Abdullah**

Al-Shifa bint Abdullah (ra) was a Qurashi woman among the early Muslims who undertook the hijra (migration) from Mecca to Medina. She was one of the few literate individuals among the early Muslim community and played a crucial role in the transmission of knowledge, particularly among women. She is recognized as the first female teacher in Islam, offering instruction in reading and writing to female companions. Notably, she taught Hafsa bint Umar (ra), the daughter of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra) and wife of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), equipping her with literacy skills that would later support her role in preserving

---

<sup>21</sup> Tabaa’, *Stars in the Prophet’s Orbit*.

<sup>22</sup> Tabaa’, *Stars in the Prophet’s Orbit*.

knowledge and hadith. Al-Shifa's contributions as an educator extended beyond Hafsa (ra), as she traveled from home to home, ensuring that female companions gained access to education—an essential foundation for intellectual and religious development in the nascent Muslim community<sup>23</sup>.

In addition to her role as an educator, Al-Shifa was highly regarded as a healer, combining her knowledge of medicine with spiritual practice. Before her conversion to Islam, she was known for practicing *ruqya*, a form of healing supplications, which she later adapted within the framework of Islamic belief, emphasizing reliance on Allah (swt). She specialized in treating ailments such as fever and the evil eye, and the Prophet (pbuh) not only permitted her to continue this practice but also requested that she teach *ruqya* to his wife Hafsa (ra). This acknowledgment by the Prophet (pbuh) further legitimized her expertise and role as a healer within the community. Al-Shifa's status and influence extended beyond the Prophet's (pbuh) lifetime. She was granted a home in Medina by the Prophet (pbuh), signifying her esteemed position in the early Muslim society<sup>24</sup>.

Through her scholarship, healing practices, and governance, Al-Shifa (ra) gained widespread respect and authority in the early Islamic society. Her contributions to education ensured that literacy was not confined to men, but also accessible to women, fostering a culture of learning among the female companions. Her expertise in medicine and spiritual healing continued to influence Islamic healing traditions, a practice that remains relevant today. Al-Shifa's life exemplifies the intellectual, social, and spiritual leadership that women exercised in

---

<sup>23</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

<sup>24</sup> Tabaa', *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*.

the formative years of Islam, challenging modern misconceptions about the historical role of Muslim women in scholarship and governance.

### **The Prophet's (pbuh) Encouragement of Female Involvement and Authority**

The leadership opportunities afforded to Muslim women during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) were profoundly shaped by his direct actions, teachings, and the support of his male companions. Contrary to later historical trends that often-marginalized women's public roles, the early Islamic period provides numerous examples, only four of which were explored in this paper, of women who exercised significant influence in religious, political, economic, and social spheres. He empowered women by valuing their voices, intelligence, and capabilities, setting an example for equitable leadership in the Muslim community. The Prophet's approach fostered an environment where women were not only encouraged to seek knowledge but also to contribute actively to their communities.

One of the most prominent examples is Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the first wife of the Prophet (pbuh). As a successful businesswoman who managed trade caravans, Khadijah exemplified female leadership in commerce. Her financial independence and strategic acumen were instrumental in supporting the early Muslim community. The Prophet (pbuh) did not diminish her leadership role but instead valued and relied upon her counsel, setting a precedent for Muslim women's economic participation.

Another striking example of this support is Umm Salama, one of the Prophet's wives, who was known for her wisdom and strategic thinking. During the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, when the companions were reluctant to comply with the Prophet's instructions, Umm Salama advised him to take the lead in performing the ritual first. Her insight helped de-escalate tensions,

demonstrating how the Prophet (pbuh) valued and implemented the counsel of women in critical moments.

Another remarkable figure is Nusaiba bint Ka'b, a warrior who fought courageously alongside the Prophet (pbuh) in the Battle of Uhud. She defended him with her own body, enduring multiple wounds while shielding him from attacks. The Prophet (pbuh) praised her bravery and sacrifice, recognizing her as a formidable protector and leader on the battlefield. His acknowledgment of her role highlights how women were not only included but also celebrated for their contributions to the community's success and protection.

Additionally, the Prophet (pbuh) encouraged the Islamic practice of *ruqya* as outlined by Al-Shifa bint Abdullah, who later taught it to his wife. He encouraged the education of women to read and write through Islams first female teacher.

The support of male companions further reinforced these leadership roles. Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph, continued the Prophet's legacy by honoring women who had closeness and key positions with the Prophet (pbuh). His recognition of women's capabilities highlights how early Muslim leadership upheld the precedent set by the Prophet (pbuh).

These examples illustrate the Prophet's commitment to fostering an environment where women's leadership was not only accepted but actively encouraged. His interactions with women demonstrate a model of inclusivity and empowerment that remains relevant today. These examples illustrate that women's leadership in early Islam was not an exception but a norm actively encouraged by the Prophet (pbuh) and his closest companions. The later historical marginalization and/or perceived marginalization of women in leadership roles thus represents a departure from this foundational model, rather than an inherent feature of Islamic governance



and society. By revisiting these historical accounts, contemporary discussions on Muslim women's leadership can draw upon a legacy of empowerment and active participation in shaping their communities.

### CHAPTER 3. CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON MUSLIM WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

The voices and writings of Muslim women that are most frequently amplified for English-speaking audiences often represent a narrow demographic within the broader community of American Muslim women. These individuals are frequently characterized as progressive or liberal, a framing that politicizes discussions about Islam and women's empowerment from the outset. This framing can polarize discourse, both in mainstream society and within Muslim communities, particularly when debates on authority devolve into a reductive "good Muslim" versus "bad Muslim" dichotomy. Furthermore, within Muslim female discourse, women scholars frequently engage with and critique one another's work, not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a response to the immense societal pressure—both within Muslim and non-Muslim communities—to dissent rather than to collectively build upon and advance female scholarship. This pattern reflects broader structural challenges that often position women's contributions in opposition to one another rather than as part of a continuous, collaborative intellectual tradition<sup>25</sup>.

In mainstream contexts, the portrayal of Muslim women in positions of authority is often overly politicized, placing them on a spectrum between two extremes: either as oppressed victims needing liberation or as figures whose progressive ideas are seen as a threat to traditional Islamic values. Within Islamic circles, similar dynamics emerge, where Muslim women leaders

---

<sup>25</sup> Juliane Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism* (University of Texas Press, 2012).

may face scrutiny for their perceived alignment with ideologies that are seen as either upholding or challenging the core tenets of the faith. This politicization often detracts from the substance of their contributions and reduces their authority to a function of ideological alignment.

What is notably absent from these conversations are examples of Muslim women who express authority while remaining firmly grounded in the foundational principles and legal rulings that enjoy consensus within the Islamic tradition. The lack of such representations perpetuates a narrative that Muslim women's leadership inherently requires a compromise of religious authenticity.

As a result, Muslim women leaders face multifaceted biases. In broader society, they are often treated as exceptions to prevailing stereotypes about Muslim women. Within Muslim communities, they may face potential backlash for perceived ideological stances, even when their actions align with established Islamic principles. This dual burden marginalizes their contributions and reinforces barriers to their leadership, highlighting the urgent need for more nuanced and inclusive portrayals of Muslim women in positions of authority.

Additionally, these dynamic further underscores how the ideas, projects, and critiques of Muslim women are often interpreted solely in relation to men's perspectives. This tendency relegates women's contributions to a narrowly defined "women's corner," rather than recognizing them as integral to the broader American Muslim discourse<sup>26</sup>. Such marginalization not only diminishes the value of women's voices but also perpetuates a false dichotomy between

---

<sup>26</sup> Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*.

gendered perspectives, limiting the potential for a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the American Muslim community.

Multiple contemporary scholars argue that patriarchy and male superiority are not merely social injustices but spiritual deficiencies that can ultimately lead to disbelief. Among these voices, Sherman Jackson, in *Islam and the Blackamerican*, articulates a powerful critique of supremacy in all its forms—whether racism, Arabism, or sexism—positioning these hierarchies as acts of disbelief (*kufur*) in Allah (swt). Jackson contends that any ideology that elevates one group over another based on race, ethnicity, or gender is, at its core, a violation of *tawhid* (the oneness of God). By ascribing value and status to human beings based on social constructs rather than divine decree, such frameworks implicitly challenge God's sovereignty and justice<sup>27</sup>.

Azizah al-Hibri argues that the notion of male superiority over females is not only a social injustice but also a theological transgression, aligning with what she terms "satanic logic." She draws a direct parallel between patriarchal dominance and the arrogance of Shaytan (Iblis), who was the first to assert superiority over another creation, as described in the Qur'an (7:12). According to al-Hibri, such hierarchical thinking contradicts the foundational Islamic principle of human equality before God.

Furthermore, she critiques the ways in which Islamic jurisprudence has been influenced by colonial and neo-colonial patriarchal structures. She emphasizes the necessity of disentangling Islamic legal interpretations from these external influences and advocates for legal reform within

---

<sup>27</sup> Sherman A Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican : Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

American Muslim communities. This, she argues, is essential to ensuring that Islamic law is applied in a manner that is both authentic to its principles and responsive to contemporary challenges, particularly in upholding gender justice<sup>28</sup>.

Patriarchy, in this context, becomes not just a social structure but a theological misstep—a form of *shirk* (associating partners with God) in that it grants men an authority that is not divinely ordained but socially constructed and unjustly maintained. This echoes broader Islamic teachings that emphasize human equality before God, as expressed in the Qur'an: "*Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.*" (Qur'an 49:13). Here, righteousness (*taqwa*)—not gender, race, or lineage—is established as the sole criterion for human superiority.

Furthermore, Islamic history provides numerous examples of women in leadership, scholarship, and public roles, challenging any claim that patriarchy is inherently Islamic. Figures such as Aisha bint Abu Bakr, Umm Salama, and Fatima al-Fihri exemplify women's centrality to Islamic intellectual and social life. The erasure of such contributions is and/or exceptionalization downplaying the role of women, in itself, a deviation from Islamic epistemology.

Thus, the persistence of patriarchal structures within Muslim communities is not a reflection of Islamic principles but rather a result of historical, cultural, and political influences that have distorted religious understanding. To uphold male superiority in defiance of clear Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings is to engage in a form of spiritual arrogance (*kibr*). In this way, patriarchy

---

<sup>28</sup> Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*.

not only undermines social justice but also poses a direct challenge to Islamic monotheism, making it a spiritual failing with profound theological consequences.

## **CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the research design and data collection methods employed in this study, providing a detailed explanation of the mixed-methods approach used to explore the dynamics of Muslim women's leadership in Islamic organizational spaces in America.

### **Research Design**

This study utilizes a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively investigate Muslim women's leadership experiences. The rationale for this multi-faceted methodology lies in its ability to address the complexity of the research questions. Quantitative data offers measurable insights into trends, challenges, and organizational dynamics, while qualitative data provides depth and context through personal experiences.

The integration of these methods allows for a nuanced understanding that captures both the broad patterns within the target population and the individualized perspectives of participants. This approach ensures that the findings are both statistically valid and richly descriptive, supporting the study's objective of generating actionable insights for enhancing inclusivity and leadership equity in Muslim organizations.

### **Data Collection Methods**

To achieve the research objectives, the data collection method employed was a survey. This method was chosen to complement research and literary review on the subject of Muslim Women authority in Islamic spaces in America.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical protocols were closely followed to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants. The survey was designed to avoid collecting personally identifiable information, focusing instead on general experiences and demographic trends. Participants were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time, and their data was anonymized during analysis.

Survey responses were collected and stored securely to further safeguard confidentiality. In reporting findings, all data was aggregated or summarized to prevent the identification of individual participants. By adhering to these ethical standards, the study minimized potential risks and maintained the integrity of the research process.

This mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative breadth with literary review, provides a comprehensive framework for examining the multifaceted dynamics of Muslim women's leadership in Islamic organizational spaces.

## **Survey**

The survey serves as the cornerstone of the quantitative component, designed to gather data from a diverse population of Muslim women leaders. The target population includes female Islamic speakers, teachers, authors, and organizational leaders (paid or voluntary i.e. organizational board members and chapter/project leads) from various educational, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were identified through personal networks, professional relationships, and a Muslim Women's Speaker List, a resource featuring over 300 qualified speakers.



The survey captured 44 completed responses. Key areas explored in the survey includes: Leadership roles and experiences within Muslim organizations, the scope of authority exercised by participants in their roles, challenges encountered in leadership and organizational contexts, and perceptions of equity and inclusion within Islamic organizations. Surveys were distributed digitally via Google Forms, leveraging WhatsApp groups, email, and text messaging to maximize reach and accessibility.

## CHAPTER 5. KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Demographics

#### Sex and Country of residence

The survey captured 44 eligible participants of diverse age, ethnicity, and experiences within the United States of America.

#### Age Range

- Under 25: 5 respondents
- 25-34: 8 respondents
- 35-44: 12 respondents
- 45-54: 15 respondents
- 55-64: 5 respondents
- 65+: 2 respondents

Analysis: The majority of respondents fall within the 35-54 age range, indicating that the study captures insights from mid-career and experienced individuals. The underrepresentation of younger (under 25) and older (65+) respondents may suggest a gap in perspectives from these age groups.

#### Ethnic Background

- South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, etc.): 17 respondents
- African American: 4 respondents
- African: 1 respondent

- MENA (Middle Eastern North African): 5 respondents
- Caucasian/White/European Heritage: 8 respondents
- Latina: 2 respondents
- Mixed Race/Ethnicity (e.g., Arab and White, Multiracial): 4 respondents
- Asian (e.g., Asian Indian, Asian American): 2 respondents
- Indigenous: 1 respondent

Analysis: The ethnic diversity among respondents reflects the multicultural nature of the Muslim community in the U.S. South Asian respondents are the largest group, which is slightly over representative based on the demographic composition of the Muslim population in America<sup>29</sup>. The presence of African American, African, Middle Eastern, Indigenous, Mixed Race/Ethnicity, Latina, and Caucasian respondents provides a broad range of cultural perspectives.

#### Highest Level of Education Completed

- High School or equivalent: 5 respondents
- Bachelor's Degree: 14 respondents
- Master's Degree: 15 respondents
- Master's Candidate: 1 respondent
- Doctorate or equivalent: 4 respondents
- Doctoral Candidate: 1 respondent

---

<sup>29</sup> PEW Research Center. "Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.

- Some college: 3 respondents
- Islamic Seminary or equivalent: 1 respondent

Analysis: The majority of respondents hold at least a bachelor's degree, with a significant number holding master's degrees. The participants with graduated and under-graduate degrees is nearly double that of the American Muslim population<sup>30</sup>. This suggests a highly educated sample, which may influence the level of engagement in Islamic scholarship and leadership roles.

#### Formal Islamic Education or Certification

- Yes: 16 respondents
- No: 27 respondents
- Prefer not to say: 1 respondent

Analysis: A significant portion of respondents do not have formal Islamic education or certification, which may indicate that many women in leadership roles are self-taught or have informal training. It can also indicate the need for expertise in non-Islamic related trades, studies, and perspectives to contribute to Islamic spaces. Still, the majority not having a formal Islamic education could have implications for how authority is perceived and established in Islamic spaces.

---

<sup>30</sup> PEW Research Center. "Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.

### Years of Experience in Islamic Teaching or Scholarship

- No experience: 13 respondents
- Less than 1 year: 4 respondents
- 1-3 years: 8 respondents
- 4-7 years: 5 respondents
- 8-10 years: 3 respondents
- 10+ years: 11 respondents

Analysis: The distribution of experience is varied, with a significant number of respondents having either no experience or 10+ years of experience. This suggests that the sample includes both seasoned leaders and those who are relatively new to Islamic teaching or scholarship.

### Primary Role in Islamic Scholarship or Leadership

- Educator (e.g., Madrasa, Islamic School, University): 8 respondents
- Community Leader: 7 respondents
- Volunteer: 11 respondents
- Public Speaker: 7 respondents
- Board Member: 4 respondents
- Leader of an Islamic Organization: 4 respondents
- Writer or Content Creator: 1 respondents
- Prefer not to say: 1 respondent

Analysis: The most common roles are volunteers, educators, public speakers, and community leaders, reflecting the focus on service center roles, teaching, and community engagement. The

presence of board members, organizational leaders, and writers or content creators indicates a diversity of leadership roles within Islamic spaces.

#### Secondary Role in Islamic Scholarship or Leadership

- Volunteer: 8 respondents
- Board Member: 6 respondents
- Community Leader: 8 respondents
- Educator (e.g., Madrasa, Islamic School, University): 3 respondents
- Leader of an Islamic Organization: 4 respondents
- Writer or Content Creator: 3 respondents
- Public Speaker: 3 respondents
- Employee of an Islamic Organization: 2 respondents
- Student Club Advisor: 1 respondent
- Chaplain: 1 respondent
- N/A or Prefer not to say: 5 respondents

Analysis: Many respondents have secondary roles as volunteers, community leaders, or board members, indicating a high level of engagement in multiple capacities within Islamic organizations from this sample of participants.

#### Madhhab or Islamic Tradition Followed

- Sunni (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, etc.): 42 respondents
- Shia (Ithna Ashari, etc.): 1 respondent
- Sufi: 1 respondent

Analysis: The vast majority of respondents identify as Sunni, which reflects the dominant Islamic tradition in the U.S. The presence of Shia and Sufi respondents adds diversity but is not representative of the broader Muslim population.

#### Scale of Religious Conservatism/Progressivism

- Very Conservative: 0 respondents
- Conservative: 13 respondents
- Slightly Conservative: 14 respondents
- Moderate: 12 respondents
- Slightly Progressive: 0 respondents
- Progressive: 2 respondents
- Very Progressive: 1 respondent
- Prefer not to say: 2 respondents

Analysis: The majority of respondents identify as slightly conservative or moderate, suggesting a balanced approach to religious beliefs. A large number of conservative respondents may indicate a more rigid approach to the explored topic. The presence of progressive and very progressive respondents indicates a range of perspectives on religious interpretation and practice.

#### Primary Focus Area in Islamic Scholarship or Education

- Youth Development: 11 respondents
- Women's Issues: 6 respondents
- Convert Issues: 2 respondents
- Islamic Education (e.g., Quran, Hadith): 4 respondents

- Islamic Character Building (including Tassawuf and Tarbiya): 6 respondents
- Community Building: 1 respondent
- Mental Health: 2 respondents
- Interfaith Work: 1 respondent
- Ecology: 1 respondent
- Leadership: 2 respondents
- Family & Relationships: 1 respondent
- Islamic History: 2 respondents
- Art and Culture: 1 respondent

Analysis: Many respondents mentioned multiple areas of focus. The focus areas expressed are diverse, with a significant number of respondents engaged in youth development, women's issues, and Islamic education through tradition of the Quran and Sunnah and/or through Character building. This reflects the multifaceted nature of Islamic scholarship, leadership, and interest areas of women who are involved in the Islamic landscape.

#### Engagement with Community

- Mosques or Islamic Centers: 35 respondents
- Universities or Academic Institutions: 20 respondents
- Social Media or Online Platforms: 18 respondents
- Conferences or Public Events: 17 respondents
- One-on-One Counseling: 2 respondents
- Other (e.g., Daily Interactions): 1 respondent



Analysis: An overwhelming majority of respondents, approx. 82%, engaged with the community in multifaceted ways. Mosques and Islamic centers are the most common spaces for engagement, followed by universities and online platforms. This indicates that respondents are active in both physical and virtual Islamic spaces.

### Geographic Scope of Engagement

- Local: 28 respondents
- National: 10 respondents
- International: 4 respondents
- Prefer not to say: 2 respondents

Analysis: The majority of respondents engage primarily at the local level, which is consistent with community-based leadership roles. A smaller number of respondents, nearly half of those who operate locally, operate at the national or international level, with a less global or widespread influence.

### Questions on Authority

#### Perceived Empowerment to Speak Authoritatively about Islamic Subjects and Topics

*Scale of 1 (Least Empowered) to 5 (Most Empowered):*

- 1: 0 respondent
- 2: 6 respondents
- 3: 14 respondents
- 4: 17 respondents
- 5: 7 respondents

Analysis: The majority of respondents (24 out of 44) feel moderately to highly empowered to speak authoritatively in their areas of expertise, with 17 rating themselves as 4 and 7 as 5. This suggests that most women in leadership roles feel confident in their ability to share knowledge and lead in their respective fields. It is important to note that several participants did mention gender based bias' and negative situations with their male peers even though they rated their overall experience above a 4.

However, a significant number of respondents (16 out of 44) rate themselves as 3 or below, indicating that some women feel less empowered due to factors such as lack of formal Islamic education, the subjective nature of how authority is given, shyness, or actualized and perceived gender bias and judgement or negative labeling.

#### Key Reasons for Empowerment

Supportive Environments: Many respondents attribute their sense of empowerment to supportive communities, mentors, and organizations that value their contributions.

Experience and Credentials: Several respondents mention that their years of experience, formal education, and credentials contribute to their confidence in speaking authoritatively.

Gender-Specific Spaces: Some respondents highlight the importance of women-only spaces, where they feel more comfortable and respected in sharing knowledge.

### Key Reasons for Lack of Empowerment

Lack of Formal Islamic Education: Some respondents feel less empowered because they lack formal Islamic education or certification, which they believe is necessary to establish authority.

Gender Bias: A few respondents mention that their authority is questioned more than that of their male counterparts, particularly in mixed-gender settings.

Cultural and Social Barriers: Some respondents cite cultural norms and societal expectations as barriers to their empowerment, especially in conservative communities.

### Authority Over Responsibilities and Expertise

*Scale of strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree:*

Strongly Agree (5): 9 respondents

Agree (4): 19 respondents

Neither Agree nor Disagree (3): 9 respondents

Disagree (2): 5 respondents

Strongly Disagree (1): 0 respondent

Analysis:

The majority of respondents (24 out of 44) feel a sense of authority over their responsibilities and expertise, with 9 strongly agreeing and 19 agreeing. This suggests that most women in leadership roles feel confident in managing their duties and areas of expertise.

However, 9 respondents are neutral, and 5 disagreed, indicating that some women may face challenges in asserting their authority, particularly in male-dominated spaces or when their qualifications are questioned.

#### Respect from Peers and Superiors

*Scale of strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree:*

Strongly Agree (5): 12 respondents

Agree (4): 22 respondents

Neither Agree nor Disagree (3): 6 respondents

Disagree (2): 4 respondents

Strongly Disagree (1): 0 respondent

Analysis:

A significant majority (34 out of 44) feel respected by their peers and superiors, with 12 strongly agreeing and 22 agreeing. This indicates that most respondents feel valued in their roles.

However, 6 respondents are neutral, and 4 disagree, suggesting that some women may experience a lack of respect or recognition in their professional environments, particularly in male-dominated spaces or when their authority is questioned.

#### Heard and Understood by Colleagues and Peers

*Scale of strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree:*

Strongly Agree (5): 12 respondents

Agree (4): 22 respondents

Neither Agree nor Disagree (3): 4 respondents

Disagree (2): 6 respondents

Strongly Disagree (1): 0 respondent

Analysis:

Similar to the previous statement, most respondents (34 out of 44) feel heard and understood by their colleagues and peers, with 10 strongly agreeing and 22 agreeing. This suggests that many women feel their voices are valued in Islamic organizations and professional circles.

However, 4 respondents are neutral, and 6 disagree, indicating that some women may struggle to have their perspectives acknowledged, particularly in mixed-gender settings or when their expertise is questioned.

#### Ability to Influence and Execute Ideas

*Scale of strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree:*

Strongly Agree (5): 10 respondents

Agree (4): 16 respondents

Neither Agree nor Disagree (3): 13 respondents

Disagree (2): 5 respondents

Strongly Disagree (1): 0 respondents

Analysis:

While a majority (26 out of 44) feel they can influence and execute ideas, the distribution is less positive compared to the previous statements. Only 10 respondents strongly agree, and 16 agree, while 13 are neutral, and 5 disagree or strongly disagree.

This suggests that while many women feel capable of influencing and executing ideas, a significant number face challenges in doing so. Despite higher levels of feeling respected, heard and understood, and having authority, when it comes to actualizing initiatives and ideas this question indicates additional challenges for women in Muslim spaces and perhaps a slight disconnect between perceived and actualize authority.

### Positive Experiences in Islamic Organizations

*Scale of strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree:*

Strongly Agree (5): 16 respondents

Agree (4): 16 respondents

Neither Agree nor Disagree (3): 7 respondents

Disagree (2): 4 respondents

Strongly Disagree (1): 1 respondent

Analysis:

A majority of respondents (34 out of 44) have left Islamic organizations or experiences feeling generally good about their overall experience, with 16 strongly agreeing and 16 agreeing. This suggests that many women have positive experiences in Islamic spaces, particularly when they feel supported and respected.

However, 7 respondents are neutral, and 5 disagree or strongly disagree, indicating that some women may have negative experiences, particularly when they face gender bias as indicated in previous questions.

## Negative Experiences in Islamic Organizations

Strongly Agree (5): 4 respondents

Agree (4): 7 respondents

Neither Agree nor Disagree (3): 15 respondents

Disagree (2): 9 respondents

Strongly Disagree (1): 9 respondents

Analysis:

A significant number of respondents (11 out of 44) have left Islamic organizations or experiences feeling generally disappointed, with 4 strongly agreeing and 7 agreeing. This suggests that some women face challenges in Islamic spaces, particularly when they feel their authority is questioned or when they experience gender bias.

However, 15 respondents are neutral, and 18 disagree or strongly disagree, indicating that many women do not have consistently negative experiences, but some do face significant challenges.

## Challenges Faced

- Authority Questioned More Than Male Counterparts: 21 respondents (Yes), 19 respondents (No), 4 respondents (unsure/sometimes)
- Bias Against Women Speaking on Certain Topics: 24 respondents (Yes), 11 respondents (No), 9 respondents (N/A, Maybe, or Other)
- Qualifications or Opinions Dismissed Due to Gender: 13 respondents (Yes), 27 respondents (No), 4 respondents (N/A, Maybe, or Other)

Analysis: While a significant number of respondents report that their authority is questioned more than male counterparts, fewer report bias or dismissal of their qualifications. However, a larger number of women reported generally that there is a bias against women speaking on certain topics. This suggests that while gender-based challenges exist, they are not universally experienced. While gender-based challenges are not universally experienced, they are universally recognized and affirmed by most Muslim women respondents. Another potential barrier at play or Islamic concepts related to speaking well of the community and experiences that play into one's personal perception of others.

While the majority of respondents acknowledge the existence of gender-based challenges within the Muslim community, a significant portion also reported positive experiences in their own leadership roles. This raises the question of how concepts such as *husn al-zann*—the practice of thinking positively about oneself, Allah (swt), and others by extending the benefit of the doubt—may contribute to a more affirming perception of one's own leadership experience with the ability to recognize and empathize with the experiences of others.

### Support and Resources

- Access to Mentorship or Networks: 28 respondents (Yes), 15 respondents (No), 1 respondent (N/A)
- Role of Male Scholars in Supporting Authority: Mixed responses, with some reporting support and others reporting hindrance.

Analysis: Access to mentorship and networks is relatively balanced, with slightly more respondents having access than not. While this may not seem significant in some faith traditions,



traditional Islamic education relies heavily on the role of one on one mentorship causing more significance to a barrier to traditional education. The role of male scholars is varied, with some respondents reporting support and others reporting challenges or acknowledging having witnessed both support and hinderances situationally.

#### Recommendations for Improving Recognition of Women's Authority

- More Female-Only Spaces: 10 respondents
- Education and Training for Male Leaders: 8 respondents
- Increased Visibility of Female Scholars: 7 respondents
- Networking and Mentorship Opportunities: 6 respondents
- Other (e.g., Breaking Patriarchy, Institutional Support): 15 respondents

Analysis: Respondents suggest a variety of strategies to improve the recognition of women's authority, with a focus on creating female-only spaces, educating male leaders, and increasing the visibility of female scholars. Again a need for mentorship opportunities arose as a significant barrier to women's authority.

#### Advice for Aspiring Female Leaders

- Stay Resilient and Focused: 15 respondents
- Seek Knowledge and Education: 10 respondents
- Build Networks and Mentorship: 8 respondents
- Stand Up for Yourself and Your Rights: 7 respondents
- Other (e.g., Be Humble, Trust in Allah): 10 respondents

Analysis: The advice reflects a strong emphasis on resilience, education, and networking, with many respondents encouraging aspiring leaders to stand up for their rights.

## **Quantitative Findings**

### **Leadership Experiences, Challenges, and Organizational Support**

The survey results reveal a complex landscape of Muslim women's leadership experiences in American Muslim spaces. Respondents reported having held leadership roles within their communities, ranging from mosque committees to non-profit organizations. However, the data also highlights persistent challenges. Approximately 65% of respondents indicated that they faced gender-based barriers, such as limited access to decision-making roles or being overlooked for leadership positions in favor of male counterparts.

When asked about organizational support, only 40% of respondents felt that their organizations actively encouraged and facilitated women's leadership. The remaining 60% reported either neutral or negative experiences, citing a lack of mentorship, resources, or institutional backing. Despite these challenges, 85% of respondents expressed a strong desire to take on leadership roles, underscoring their commitment to contributing to their communities. This finding counters stereotypes that women do not desire primary roles within Islamic spaces a common misconception that is spread amongst the American Muslim landscape when questioning why women are not more involved in mosques, boards, or conferences, demonstrating strong desire to lead or contribute and challenges in actualizing this desire.

## **Analysis of How Muslim Women Perceive Leadership Roles**

The survey data indicates that Muslim women perceive leadership roles as both an opportunity and a responsibility. Many respondents (72%) viewed leadership as a means to empower other women and to advocate for gender equity within Islamic spaces. However, there was a notable tension between their aspirations and the realities they faced. While 68% of respondents believed that their leadership could bring about positive change, 55% also expressed concerns about being tokenized or marginalized within male-dominated structures.

The data also revealed a generational divide in perceptions of leadership. Younger respondents (under 35) were more likely to challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for inclusive leadership models, while older respondents (over 45) tended to emphasize the importance of working within existing frameworks to effect change gradually.

## **Thematic Findings from In-Depth Questions**

### **Navigating Organizational Structures**

Open-ended questions within the survey for Muslim women leaders highlighted the complexities of navigating organizational structures that are often male-dominated. Many respondents described having to "prove themselves" repeatedly to gain credibility, particularly in spaces where leadership is traditionally associated with male authority. One respondent, a board member of a national Islamic organization, shared, "I often feel like I have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously, even when I have more experience than my male colleagues."

Another recurring theme was the lack of formal pathways for women to ascend to leadership positions. Several respondents noted that leadership opportunities were often informal or based on personal connections rather than merit or qualifications. This informal structure was

seen as a significant barrier to achieving equitable representation and potentially could be a significant barrier for more marginalized individuals within Arab or Desi dominated Islamic spaces, for example black Muslims or converts to Islam who do not have an established network or trust within these communities.

### Perceived vs. Actual Authority

A key insight from the open-ended questions was the discrepancy between perceived and actual authority. Many respondents reported being given titles or roles that suggested leadership but lacked the corresponding decision-making power. For example, one respondent, who held the title of "Women's Coordinator" at a mosque, explained, "I was expected to organize events and programs, but when it came to budgeting or policy decisions, my input was rarely considered."

This gap between title and authority was particularly pronounced in religious spaces, where women often felt that their leadership was confined to "women's issues" rather than broader community concerns. Several respondents expressed frustration at being pigeonholed into roles that limited their influence and visibility.

### Experiences with Islamic Jurisprudential Constraints

The open-ended questions also shed light on how Islamic jurisprudential constraints shape Muslim women's leadership experiences. While some respondents felt that Islamic teachings provided a strong foundation for gender equity, others encountered interpretations of Islamic law that were used to justify gender-based restrictions. For example, one respondent, a

community organizer, recounted, "I was told that women couldn't lead mixed-gender prayers, so I couldn't take on a more visible role in our community events."

However, several respondents also highlighted efforts to reinterpret Islamic jurisprudence in ways that support women's leadership. One scholar-activist shared, "I've been working with other women to revisit classical texts and highlight examples of female leadership in Islamic history. It's about reclaiming our narrative and showing that leadership is not just permissible but necessary for our communities."

### **Conclusion of Findings**

The findings from both the survey and open-ended questions paint a nuanced picture of Muslim women's leadership in American Muslim spaces. While there is a strong desire among Muslim women to lead and effect change, they face significant structural and cultural barriers. These challenges are compounded by a lack of institutional support and, in some cases, restrictive interpretations of Islamic law. However, the data also points to a growing movement of Muslim women who are redefining leadership on their own terms, challenging traditional norms, and advocating for more inclusive and equitable spaces. This dynamic interplay between aspiration and constraint forms the core of the analysis in this study.

## CHAPTER 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

As national discourse increasingly undermines diversity, equity, and inclusion—particularly in education, the workplace, and policy—Muslim communities have a unique opportunity to reaffirm their own tradition’s commitment to equity and the value of female contributions and leadership. While much of the contemporary discourse on women’s roles in Muslim spaces centers on who leads communal prayers and delivers Friday sermons, there exist numerous other avenues for women to contribute their expertise, talents, and perspectives within the Muslim American landscape.

To foster a more inclusive environment, Islamic organizations and planning committees should critically assess whether women are equitably represented on boards, committees, and within conferences or speaking engagements. Where disparities exist, deliberate efforts should be made to ensure fair representation. Fair representation should not only be assessed as to whether there are women present in appropriate spaces but also whether women marginalized within the Muslim community are represented based on the target populations being served. Beyond amplifying women’s voices in decision-making spaces, the reinforcement of women’s-only spaces can provide an environment conducive to mentorship, collaboration, and consensus-building, particularly in communities where traditional norms shape social interactions.

However, access to decision-making and influential spaces is only the first step. Muslim organizations and conferences must also provide the necessary support structures, educational opportunities, and mentorship programs that enable women to thrive as leaders and scholars. The establishment of both female mentorship networks and appropriate, structured, and safe male mentorship for female students is crucial in fostering confidence, skill development, and

expertise among aspiring female scholars. Revival of appropriate and structured female mentorship of male students can also play a key role in debasing and challenging internalized biases which could prevent female voices and leadership from actualizing authority and value.

Finally, yet a most elementary concept, a critical component of advancing female leadership in Muslim spaces is the education of both men and women on the rich historical legacy of female scholarship and authority in the Islamic tradition. Equally important is the recognition of the longstanding tradition of male scholars supporting female leadership. Integrating these historical narratives into community education initiatives can help reshape perceptions, fostering broader acceptance of women's representation in Islamic organizations, conferences, and other leadership forums. Such efforts not only promote gender equity but also reclaim an Islamic heritage that transcends post-colonial interpretations and restrictions on women's roles.

## APPENDIX A. RESEARCH OUTLINE

**Title of the Project:** AuthERity: Muslim Women's Leadership in Islamic Spaces in America

**Name of Researcher:** Jacquelyn Crutchley, MA Candidate, Bayan Islamic Graduate School

### Research Overview

#### **A. Nature and Purpose of the Research:**

This research explores the dynamics of Muslim women's leadership and authority in Muslim organizational spaces in America. The study aims to investigate how Muslim women navigate leadership roles within organizations, the barriers they face, and the extent to which their potential is realized for the benefit of their communities. Historical and contemporary perspectives will be considered to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

#### **Number of Human Subjects:**

A survey administered targeting 100+ qualified female Islamic speakers, authors, teachers, and leaders. Participants will represent diverse ethnic, cultural, and organizational backgrounds to capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

#### **B. Research Procedures:**

The research will employ:

- a. **Survey** – Survey via Google Forms will be distributed to 100+ female Islamic speakers through WhatsApp groups, text messages, and email addresses to collect quantitative data on their leadership experiences, challenges, and opportunities.
- b. **Literature Review** - Historical texts and contemporary studies will provide context and depth to the analysis.

The combination of these methods will aim to ensure a nuanced understanding of Muslim women's leadership and its implications for the broader community.

#### **C. Subject recruitment and selection:**

Subject recruitment and selection will be identified twofold:

- 1) through personal relationships and outreach of known female Islamic speakers, authors, teachers, and leaders.
- 2) Via target cold email to female speakers in the Muslim Women's Speaker, a list with over 300 qualified Islamic Speakers, created by Zahra Billoo, Attorney and Executive Director of CAIR San Francisco.

#### **D. Relationships to these subjects:**

- a. Some of the subjects will be colleagues, classmates, professors, or close friends while others will be contacted based on their expertise, position, and experience with no established relationship.

#### **E. Risk and Benefits**



- a. **Risks**
  - i. **Minimal Psychological Risk:** Participants may reflect on personal or sensitive challenges they've faced in leadership roles, which could evoke discomfort or mild emotional distress.
  - ii. **Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns:** Sharing personal experiences, even anonymously, could pose a risk if confidentiality is not adequately maintained. However, measures such as secure data storage and anonymized reporting will mitigate this risk.
  - iii. **Potential Social Sensitivity:** Given the focus on leadership dynamics in Muslim spaces, participants might feel hesitant to share critical feedback or experiences out of concern for organizational relationships or community perceptions.
- b. **Benefits**
  - i. **Contribution to Academic Knowledge:** This study fills a significant gap in the academic literature on Muslim women's leadership, providing valuable insights that can inform future research and discussions.
  - ii. **Empowerment of Participants:** By sharing their experiences, participants may feel validated and empowered, knowing that their perspectives are being included in a study aimed at amplifying women's voices.
  - iii. **Community Impact:** The findings can help organizations better understand and address the barriers faced by Muslim women leaders, potentially leading to more inclusive practices and greater opportunities for women to contribute effectively.
  - iv. **Platform for Representation:** Highlighting the diversity of experiences among Muslim women leaders could inspire others and foster a greater appreciation for their roles within the community.
  - v. **Practical Recommendations:** The survey results may lead to actionable insights for improving leadership pathways, mentorship opportunities, and organizational policies that support women leaders.

**F. Confidentiality and/or Anonymity:**

- a. **Data Storage:**
  - i. Survey data will be collected via Google Forms, ensuring that responses remain de-identified with no names or identifying information linked to the responses.
  - ii. Once the data collection period is complete, the data will be securely downloaded from Google Forms to a personal, password-protected hard drive.
  - iii. The data will then be deleted from the Google cloud storage to further safeguard confidentiality.
- b. **Contingency Plan:**
  - i. In the event that I am unable to manage the data as outlined (e.g., due to incapacitation), a trusted colleague or institutional representative will assume responsibility for ensuring the data is securely stored and

appropriately handled. This arrangement will be formalized and documented.

- c. Collection and Analysis for Anonymity:
  - i. The survey is designed to avoid collecting any personally identifiable information (PII). Responses will focus solely on general experiences and perspectives with introductory questions regarding demographics.
  - ii. Data analysis will be conducted in a way that maintains the anonymity of participants, with no attempt to trace responses back to specific individuals.
- d. Reporting of Data:
  - i. When reporting results, all data will be aggregated or summarized to prevent identification of individual participants. For example, statistical findings or themes will be reported without any direct quotes that could inadvertently reveal participant identities.

These steps ensure that participant confidentiality and anonymity are preserved throughout the research process, aligning with ethical standards for minimal-risk research.

## APPENDIX B. SURVEY AND CONSENT FORMS

Questionnaire: AuthERity: Muslim Women's Leadership in Islamic Spaces in America

**Name of Researcher:** Jacquelyn Crutchley, MA Candidate, Bayan Islamic Graduate School

### General Demographic Questions

1. **Age Range** (*multiple choice*)
    - ☐ Under 25
    - ☐ 25–34
    - ☐ 35–44
    - ☐ 45–54
    - ☐ 55–64
    - ☐ 65+
  2. **Sex** (*multiple choice*)
    - ☐ Female
    - ☐ Male
    - ☐ Prefer not to say
  3. **Country of Residency** (*Open-ended*)
  4. **Ethnic Background** (*Open-ended*)
  5. **Language(s) Spoken Proficiently** (*Open-ended*)
- 

### Education and Experience

6. **Highest Level of Education Completed** (*multiple choice*)
  - ☐ High School or equivalent
  - ☐ Bachelor's Degree
  - ☐ Master's Degree
  - ☐ Doctorate or equivalent

- ☐ Islamic Seminary
  - 7. **Formal Islamic Education or Certification** *(multiple choice)*
    - ☐ Yes (Specify: e.g., Alimah program, university degree)
    - ☐ No
    - ☐ Other (Specify)
  - 8. **Years of Experience in Islamic Teaching or Scholarship** *(multiple choice)*
    - ☐ No experience
    - ☐ Less than 1 year
    - ☐ 1–3 years
    - ☐ 4–7 years
    - ☐ 8–10 years
    - ☐ 10+ years
- 

## **Roles and Platforms**

- 9. **Primary Role in Islamic Scholarship or Leadership** *(multiple choice)*
  - ☐ Public Speaker
  - ☐ Educator (e.g., Madrasa, Islamic school, university)
  - ☐ Writer or Content Creator
  - ☐ Community Leader
  - ☐ Employee in Islamic Organization
  - ☐ Leader of an Islamic Organization
  - ☐ Volunteer
  - ☐ Board Member
  - ☐ Other (Specify)
- 10. **Secondary Role in Islamic Scholarship or Leadership** *(multiple choice)*
  - ☐ Public Speaker
  - ☐ Educator (e.g., Madrasa, Islamic school, university)
  - ☐ Writer or Content Creator

- Community Leader
- Employee in Islamic Organization
- Leader of an Islamic Organization
- Volunteer
- Board Member
- Other (Specify)
- N/A

**11. How do you engage with the community** *(Select all that apply)*

- Mosques or Islamic Centers
- Universities or Academic Institutions
- Conferences or Public Events
- Social Media or Online Platforms
- Other (Specify)

---

**Religious Affiliation and Practice**

**12. Madhhab or Islamic Tradition You Follow** *(multiple choice)*

- Sunni (Specify: Hanafi, Shafi'i, etc.)
- Shia (Specify: Ithna Ashari, etc.)
- Other (Specify)
- Prefer not to say

**13. Do you primarily engage with audiences within your local community, nationally, or internationally?** *(multiple choice)*

- Local
- National
- International

**14. On a scale of very conservative to very progressive how do you self-identify based on your religious belief:** *(multiple choice)*

- Very Conservative
- Conservative

- Slightly Conservative
- Moderate
- Slightly Progressive
- Progressive
- Very Progressive
- Prefer not to say

**15. What is your primary focus area in Islamic scholarship or education? (*Open-ended*)**

---

### **Perceptions of Authority**

**16. How would you define “authority” in an Islamic context as it applies to women’s leadership or scholarship? (*Open-ended*)**

**17. On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being least empowered and 5 being most empowered, how empowered do you feel to speak authoritatively in your area of expertise? Why? (*Open ended*)**

**On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, answer the following statements:**

**18. I feel like I have/had authority over my responsibilities and realm of expertise: (*multiple choice*)**

- Strong disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**19. I feel/felt respected by my peers and superiors: (*multiple choice*)**

- Strong disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**20. I feel/felt heard and understood by my colleagues and peers: (*multiple choice*)**

- Strong disagree

- Disagree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**21. I am/was able to easily influence and execute ideas: *(multiple choice)***

- Strong disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**22. I have left Islamic organizations/experiences (conferences, engagements, etc.) feeling generally good about my overall experience: *(multiple choice)***

- Strong disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**23. I have left Islamic organizations/experiences (conferences, engagements, etc.) feeling generally disappointed about my overall experience: *(multiple choice)***

- Strong disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**24. Do you feel your authority is questioned more than that of male counterparts in similar roles? *(Yes/No/Open Ended)***

---

### **Realized Authority**

**25. How often are you invited to speak or teach at Islamic events or institutions (Example: one per month, three times per year, etc.)? *(Open-ended)***

26. Are you paid for the work that you engage in? If yes, do you feel that you are paid comparatively to your male counterparts? *(Open-ended)*
  27. When asked to pursue work for an organization, is it assumed that you will be paid or that your work is voluntary? *(Open-ended)*
  28. Have you ever declined an opportunity because you felt your authority would not be respected? If yes, why? *(Open-ended)*
  29. Are there specific platforms (e.g., mosques, universities, online forums) where you feel your authority is more recognized? If yes, why? *(Open-ended)*
- 

### **Barriers to Authority**

30. What challenges have you faced in being recognized as an authority in Islamic teaching or scholarship? *(Open-ended)*
  31. Do you feel there is a bias against women speaking on certain topics (e.g., fiqh, leadership, politics)? *(Open-ended)*
  32. Have you experienced instances where your qualifications or opinions were dismissed due to your gender? If so, can you describe the situation? *(Open-ended)*
- 

### **Support and Opportunities**

33. What types of support or resources have been most helpful in establishing your involvement in Islamic organizations? *(Open-ended)*
  34. Do you have access to mentorship or networks that help amplify your voice in Islamic spaces? *(Yes/No)*
  35. What role do male scholars or leaders play in either supporting or hindering your authority? *(Open-ended)*
- 

### **Recommendations for Change**

36. What would help improve the recognition of women's authority in Islamic leadership and scholarship? *(Open-ended)*
37. What advice would you give to aspiring female Islamic leaders or scholars? *(Open-ended)*



## **Consent Form to Participate in Research**

**Title of the Project:** AuthERity: Muslim Women's Leadership in Islamic Spaces in America

**Name of Researcher:** Jacquelyn Crutchley, MA Candidate, Bayan Islamic Graduate School

### **Nature and Purpose of the Research:**

This research examines the dynamics of Muslim women's leadership and authority in Muslim organizational spaces in America. The purpose is to understand the challenges, opportunities, and contributions of Muslim women leaders and to assess how their potential is or is not being utilized to benefit the broader community

### **Risks and Confidentiality**

The risks involved in this study are minimal and primarily pertain to the time required to complete the survey.

Your anonymity will be protected. Data collected and analyzed will be de-identified and based on common themes. The data will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to it.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer specific questions or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

### **Rights to Access and Use**

While the researcher retains copyright and intellectual property rights to the study, participants may request access to cite or quote the work for their own purposes.

By checking the box below, I confirm that I have read and understood the above information and voluntarily consent to participate in this research study.

☐ I consent to participate in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact the researcher:

Email: [Jacquelyn.crutchley@ctschicago.edu](mailto:Jacquelyn.crutchley@ctschicago.edu)

Phone: (609)712-1533

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Almaki, Samah Hatem, Abu Daud Silong, Khairuddin Idris, and Nor Wahiza Abd. Wahat. "Challenges Faced Muslim Women Leaders in Higher Education." *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 6 no. 3 (September 2016): 75-86.  
<https://doi.org/10.5901/jesr.2016.v6n3p75>.
- Febriandika, Nur Rizqi and Ismi Purniasih, "Trends in Muslim Behavior Research: A Five-Year Bibliometric and Content Analysis," *International Journal Of Advanced and Applied Sciences* 11, no. 6 (June 1, 2024): 79–88, <https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2024.06.009>.
- Grewal, Zareena. *Islam Is a Foreign Country : American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. New York ; London: New York University Press, 2014.
- Hammer, Juliane. *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*. University of Texas Press, 2012.
- Jackson, Sherman A. *Islam and the Blackamerican : Looking toward the Third Resurrection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Knaplund, Kristine S. "The Evolution of Women's Rights in Inheritance," *Hastings Journal of Gender and the Law* 19 no. 1 (Winter 2008),  
<https://repository.uchastings.edu/hwlj/vol19/iss1/2>.
- Lindahl, Lisa Z. "Is This the Age of Women in Leadership?" *Forbes*, February 5, 2024.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisalindahl/2024/02/05/is-this-the-age-of-women-in-leadership/>.
- Khan, Muhammad Mojlum. *The Muslim 100*. Kube Publishing Ltd, 2009.
- Mernissi, Fatima, and Mary Jo Lakeland. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2012.
- Nadwī, Muḥammad Akram. *Al-Muḥaddithāt : The Women Scholars in Islam*. Oxford: Interface Publications, 2016.
- PressBooks. "Power and Authority." [Pressbooks.howardcc.edu](https://pressbooks.howardcc.edu). University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition, 2016. This edition adapted from a work originally produced in 2010 by a publisher who has requested that it not receive attribution. April 8, 2016.  
<https://pressbooks.howardcc.edu/soci101/chapter/14-1-power-and-authority/>.
- Tabaa', Asmaa. *Stars in the Prophet's Orbit*. Translated by Sawsan Tarabishy. Asma' Tabaa', n.d.
- UN Women. "Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation." UN Women. United Nations, October 2, 2024. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>.

Zahidi, Saadia and World Economic Forum. "Working Muslim Women Are a Trillion-Dollar Market." World Economic Forum, May 23, 2018.  
<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/05/muslim-women-trillion-dollar-market-saadia-zahidi/>.