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Women in Charge: An Examination of Normative and Non-Normative Islamic Faith-Based Gender Justice

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Abstract

Islamic Feminism is a developing field that emerged in the 1990's, arising out of debates surrounding engagement or lack thereof with dominant forms of feminism. Based on research conducted in Jordan in the Fall of 2019 and America in the Spring of 2021, this thesis employs a regional comparison to the emergences of leadership and faith-based gender justice in Islam, and further how this either supports or contests existing gender structures. In these interviews I identify two overarching approaches to Qur'anic interpretation and knowledge production. I labeled the first approach as a normative approach to faith-based gender justice and the second as a non-normative approach. While differing in style, these two approaches provide a critical analysis and understanding to how women seek to establish authority in enacting faith-based gender justice in Islam.

Key Words: Islamic feminism, faith-based gender justice, normative, non-normative, authority

Preface

"How will the fact of being women have affected our lives? What precise opportunities have been given to us, and which ones have been denied? What destiny awaits our younger sisters, and in which direction should we point them?"

Simone De Beauvoir

I first read this quote two years ago while in a feminist theory class. From that moment on, I have taken Simone De Beauvoir's words with me as I attempt to explain the lived experiences of women across the world, and how they seek to enact gender justice. Through my travels and experiences, I have noted that the path for gender justice for each individual is not the same. Because of this I seek to shed light to how those from various backgrounds reach the end goal of gender justice, despite taking differing paths. It is for this reason I chose to write this thesis and to provide a voice to alternative feminist struggles.

Acknowledgments

There are many individuals who have contributed to the creation and success of this thesis, whether they realize or not. Most importantly, I would like to thank my two advisors for this project Janet Bauer and Mareike Koertner. Without their tireless help and attention given to me, I would not have been able to succeed. I truly valued our meetings over Zoom as we grappled with both feminist theory and the experiences of every woman. These meetings challenged me to rise to a higher occasion of academics and am I grateful to be the student I am because of it.

I would also like to thank each professor I have shared a classroom with within the International Studies department. Each of them has provided me with the tools to become the student I am and inspired me to pursue an undergraduate thesis. Because of their support over the last four years, I have lit a fire of intellectual curiosity that will carry me far beyond Trinity.

I owe gratitude to my interviewees, both in Jordan and in the United States. Through our conversations my knowledge surrounding many topics was greatly expanded, and I hold a new understanding of the world from each conversation.

Lastly, I would like to thank those who shaped my time in Jordan, where this idea for the thesis began. I hold much gratitude for SIT, my research advisors, and friends I met while studying abroad who gave me the confidence to continue this line of study.

Introduction

"If we are to prosper together in our increasingly small world, we must listen to and learn from each other's stories."

Queen Noor of Jordan

Islamic feminism is a relatively new field of study, arising with the intersectional debates of the various experiences women face in feminist struggles, in both academic and personal endeavors. Islamic feminism reflects the ways in which women seek gender justice in an Islamic context. Additionally, Islamic feminism represents an alternative to Western feminism, creating a pluralistic structure to gender justice. This thesis will seek to explain the influences of gender authority structures on the ways in which women enact faith-based gender justice. Within the field of Islamic feminism, there can be three main approaches identified. Although these sects are fluid and interchanging, the core of these remain constant. The core of these themes can be identified through on the ground activism, the second through academic work, and the third through the Qur'anic text. First, one approach of Islamic feminism is activism, representing the work done by women on the ground, interacting with the secular and religious society, and operating in mass communications. The second approach is the academic sphere, engaging work completed in institutions in order to bridge complex and abstract ideas with the lived experiences of Muslim women. This approach often takes the form of academic research in a secular sphere. The last approach, and also the focus of this thesis, is faith-based gender justice. In this practice, women read and interpret the Qur'an in a feminist light, focusing on the experiences of women and the importance of context for women's places in Islam, employing both the Qur'an and the hadith to explicate women's gender justice struggles and experiences. Through my research, I

established a binary of methods in how to employ faith-based gender justice, which will explicate how diverse this sub-field of Islamic feminism is.

As stated previously, one section of Islamic feminism embraces activism. This branch is often a public movement, centered around the topic of visibility. Hibba Abugideri explains this in a piece discussing the arrival of gender jihad. Looking towards Islamic leadership, she questions whether Islamic leadership is inherently gendered, and further how language can be employed to alter a perspective towards gender justice in Islamic leadership.[1] Moreover, by examining leadership, Abugideri traces leadership hierarchies to the past, cemented in what can be described as tradition, but founded in normative gender hierarchies.[2] With women entering the leadership sphere, the impacts of this movement radiate to the religious and secular spheres. According to Abugideri, female Islamic leadership not only creates visible empowerment to the outside non-Muslim and secular communities, but also seeks to undo historical and contemporary power dyanmics.[3] Instead, Abugideri choses to abstain from the term *women's leadership*, as a label that immediately genders leadership and implies that women exist in a society in which women's leadership is unique and men's leadership is the norm, Existing in a neutral term, leadership takes its most equitable and non-gendered form, implying that neither gender dominates. Abuigideri illustrates the ways in which Islamic feminism is enacted through activism, and its interactions with both the secular and religious populations.

The second approach in Islamic feminism embraces the academic discourse. Leila Ahmed represents this field with her explanation of the importance of an Islamic feminist discourse in the academic realm. Asserting the need to connect the historical and the abstract

[1] Abugideiri, Hibba. "The Renewed Woman Of American Islam: Shifting Lenses Toward ?Gender Jihad?'." *The Muslim World*, vol. 91, no. 1–2, Mar. 2001, pp. 1–18.
[2] Ibid. Pg. 1.
[3] Ibid. Pg. 9.

with the lived experiences of Muslim women, she seeks to articulate the relationship between complex theoretical notions and the reality of Muslim women.[4] Furthermore, Ahmed seeks to explain the impact of knowledge production in feminist discourse. She states in her book, *Women and Gender in Islam*, "Discourses shape and are shaped by specific moments in specific societies."[5] Ahmed furthers this conception with the articulation of how specifically gender is rooted in the in these discourses.[6] Further still, Ahmed continues this conception with the targeted analysis of Muslim women and their relation to academic discourses. By examining the ways in which narratives are created, there is then the understanding of the founding ideals that propel conceptions around women in Islam.[7] Thus, the academic sphere seeks to articulate the experiences of Muslim women in a layered history of religion, politics, and culture.

The last section of Islamic feminism, and core focus of this thesis, is faith-based gender justice. Pioneered by the works of scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, this mode of analysis centers on Qur'anic and hadith texts, providing alternative interpretations to match the experiences of a woman in contemporary life. These interpretations seek not to redefine the texts themselves, but rather the ways in which the texts have been interpreted, most often having fit into a patriarchal society. Alternative interpretations seek to ground gender, and particular women's rights, in an egalitarian structure, one that neither benefits a male or female disproportionately. For this thesis, I have identified a binary in style of faith-based gender justice. On one end of the binary is one of norm-conforming interpretations of the Qur'an, which seeks to perpetuate preexisting authority structures of gender. Opposingly on the other side, there is the non-normative approach to faith-based gender justice. This style seeks to use faith-based

[4] Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New ed.
[5] Ibid. Pg. 2.
[6] Ibid. pg. 2.
[7] Ibid. Pg. 3.

gender justice to challenge the pre-existing gender structures of authority. Further each of these styles of interpretation shape the ways in which Muslim women in turn interact with their communities and continue knowledge production of faith-based gender justice and of Islam.

Faith-based gender justice in Islam provides a way to contextualize what the text states and the ways it can be interpreted. This field seeks to illustrate the ways in which an individual approaches a Qur'anic text in a gendered perspective. Differing from the other two approaches, faith-based gender justice is a highly personal approach, centering around the individual's relationship with gender and Islam. It is for this reason I seek to expand upon the numerous manners in which female Islamic scholars provide an explanation to which factors may provide the most influence on the styles in which these scholars enact faith-based gender justice. Furthermore, I seek to explicate the relationship between the individual's approach to faith-based gender justice and how this contributes to the transmission of gendered knowledge production. With this understanding, there is no universally accepted method of interpretation, producing a further appreciation for the variety in faith-based gender justice.

Using previous work completed as part of an independent research project while studying abroad in Jordan in the fall semester of 2019, and interviews conducted over the winter of 2020-2021, I sought to compare the ways in which female Islamic scholars from Jordan interpret the Qur'an similarly or differently than scholars in the United States. Based on the results of these interviews, I then analyzed the broader reasons as to why interpretations arise from different regions, and how these styles of interpretation interact with each other. Guiding this analysis is the concept of diversity in experience and ideals. The diversity in lived experiences articulates the variety of influences that influence the way an individual approaches their relationship with religion, and in particular faith-based gender justice. This paper will seek to articulate and

unpack the numerous ways in which the education one has, one's introduction to Islam, and the personal experiences one has endured influences how women interpret faith-based gender justice in Islam, and further how these influences shape the way female Islamic scholars approach Qur'anic texts from a normative or non-normative perspective.

I first became aware of the effects of pluralism in faith-based gender justice when completing the independent research project in Jordan. I sought to understand what Islamic feminism meant by examining how female Islamic scholars sought interpreted the Qur'an, then comparing it to Western feminist ideology to identify a presence of colonial feminism. What I found when conducting these interviews and other research was not what I expected in numerous instances, thus drawing my attention to a different question. In my classes at Trinity, there was an emphasis on the non-normative style of faith-based gender justice, reflecting the belief of altering gender structures of authority. However, this did not reflect the style of interpretation I found in Jordan. My first surprise was that when I spoke to women in Jordan, they had not heard the word "feminism" before. Thus, this brought to my awareness the ideologies attached with such labeling, and that the word feminism itself may illustrate a school of thought more aligned with Western secular values. Secondly, I had anticipated my interviews with the Jordanian scholar to interpret and hold similar values to the type of work I had read in my studies. In these readings, there were more non-normative understandings of women's rights, and of the circumstances that created the original interpretations. What I found in these interviews was that again, my expectation did not match the reality. Instead, there was a continuous pattern of a more fiqh-based style of interpretation, aligning closely with the original interpretations perpetuated for centuries. Lastly, in these conversations, when I asked the scholars what drew the truth away from the wording of the Qur'an, they mentioned the expansion of Islam and its intertwining with

new cultures. Because of this, they articulated that Islam's meaning became diluted with a foreign culture. This also brought to my attention the existence of authority within faith-based gender justice. In my comparisons with Western feminism, looking for colonial tendencies, I had not only identified the differences in regional feminism, but the differences within these communities. After completing all of these interviews and noting the opposing binary of belief, I wondered if there were truly multiple schools of thought for faith-based gender justice, or if I was looking in the wrong places.

Noting all of these concepts, I lingered still with many unanswered questions. I had remained so sure of my beliefs entering into the research project, however while in the midst of it I realized there was a deeper complexity I was just becoming aware of. Notions of context entered my mind as I considered why there was such a disconnect from the types of interpretation I had read about. I then considered how lived experiences shape the spaces for Qur'anic interpretations, and particularly how this affects faith-based gender justice. Continuing with this line of thought, I began to look less at the interpretations that were conducted, and more towards personal experiences that influenced these interpretations. At this point I sought to create a comparative analysis to test my thoughts. In this current project, I compare two entirely different regions, examining how not only geographical location influences faith-based gender justice, but also how other factors such as religious training, educational level and style of education, geographical location and one's own experience with Islam impact the ways in which women enact faith-based gender in Islam. Ultimately, I sought to examine how diversity in lived experiences shaped faith-based gender justice. With this new perspective, I provide an insight into a conversation of diversity within faith-based gender justice, and how this range of practice affects the approaches women use to explicate faith-based gender justice in Islam.

In order to accomplish this project, I took numerous steps to create a methodologically precise project. Since the thesis is an interview based project, I employed numerous actions to ensure the protection of each of my interviewees. While conducting my research in Jordan through the School for International Training, I was approved by the institution's IRB board after consideration of my project proposal. Research was conducted by completing six in-person interviews with female Islamic scholars. Additionally, I created an informed consent form for each of my interviewees, which were reviewed and approved by the School of International Training. These forms allowed for interviewees to remain entirely anonymous, have institutional affiliation with no name attached, or keep their name with no institutional affiliation. Further, the interviewees were aware that their interviews would be used for a future project such as this thesis and would be read in both Jordan and America. Additionally, these forms were translated into Arabic to ensure that these conditions were clear to the interviewees. Lastly, when conducting these interviewees, I was accompanied by an Arabic translator from the School for International Training in order to ensure language would not present itself as a barrier, in addition to ensuring each participant was fairly and accurately represented. While some interviewees chose to keep their name attached to the interviews, for the purpose of continuity across all interviews I will keep every scholar anonymous.

For the interviews conducted in the United States, additional measures were taken to ensure a fair representation of each scholar. These interviews were completed with four female Islamic scholars around the country. Three of them were completed virtually on Zoom, with permission granted to record the interviews. One interview was conducted over the phone and was not recorded. To ensure ethical data collection, I completed and research ethics course from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, completing a course on the topic of research

conduct. Second, I submitted an application to Trinity College's IRB board, however after consideration I was informed that my project would not need to go through additional scrutiny as the subject did not put interviewees at an increased risk. While the IRB did not require further steps for interviewee protection, I created an informed consent form of my own, approved by both project advisors. This consent form was read to each participant, and verbal consent was given to each statement. In each of these interviewees, I read the participants the consent form, and also allowed them to choose how they would be represented after completing the interview and based on the information discussed. While not all interviewees chose to remain anonymous, for the purpose of continuity across all interviews I will keep each response anonymous. Unless consented to, no institutional or other personally identifying information will be used for the sake of this thesis. Lastly, information gathered from these interviewees will be used only for the purpose of this project and will not be used for any additional research.

This project will seek to explain how faith-based gender justice is enacted and further provide an analysis to the numerous avenues of field of Islamic feminism. Using an analysis of previous scholarly work, and interviews conducted in both Jordan and the United States, I will explore the diversity in approaches of faith-based gender justice in Islam. Resultingly from this I will provide an explanation of the impact of authority in the field of faith-based gender justice, and how individuals center themselves in the legacy of gender knowledge production. Moreover, there will be observations made on the social implications of who is considered part of the legacy of knowledge production and who is excluded from the legacy. Ultimately, who is considered part of the legacy and transmission of knowledge results from the existing structure of gender authority. Thus, the gender structure one resides in plays the most influential role in what opportunities are provided or denied to women to enact faith-based gender justice.

Over four chapters the project will detail previous work conducted in this subject matter, and how my interviews contribute to the conceptualization of faith-based gender justice. The introduction consists of a literature review of the current academic attention brought to faith-based gender justice. Using four texts written by Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Nimat Hafez Barazangi, and Aysha Hidayatullah, I outline the numerous ways faith-based gender justice is completed, in addition to what is left unsaid and where my project will seek to complete this understanding. Results and discussion will consist of interview analysis and discussion on the implications of the results from these interviews. The conclusion will summarize the original expectations of this project, how the literature and the interviews connected to these expectations, and lastly how this shapes the conversation for future work and contributes to the field of Islamic feminism. Additionally I will also reflect and provide commentary on points of improvement for future research on this topic and reflect on factors that limited this study. With each of these points, there will be an overall explanation of the diversity in approaches to faith-based gender justice in Islam, and how although there are differences in such interpretations, there can be an appreciation to the numerous ways one creates a relationship with God, especially in regard to gender justice. Concludingly, this thesis will further contribute to the concept of authority in the field of faith-based gender justice in Islam. There are many different approaches to the gendered interpretation of Qur'anic texts and contestation over the preferred style of interpretation. By understanding the relationship between normative and non-norm conforming faith-based gender justice, we can better understand about how narratives are created surrounding authority and the "true" path of gender justice in Islam, and the impact this has on women's authority in the community.

Literature Review

"Can there be a liberation that is Islamic?"

Lila Abu-Lughod

There are numerous pieces of literature in academia published surrounding Islamic Feminism, however this chapter will focus on specifically on the scholarly work of Islamic faith-based gender justice. Although existing in academics, the fullest expression of faith-based gender justice is through one's own approach. To some such as the scholars I will discuss, this is the understanding and writing on the gendered inequities of faith-based gender justice. Each author contributes to the dialogue between scholars, and each one represents a varying definition and belief of how faith-based gender justice in Islam can be enacted. While they may hold similarities, they also exhibit diverging ideologies and open spaces for other authors to contribute their own voices. As a non-Muslim and an observer, I seek to establish the connections to each of these pieces and provide analysis on how my position as an outsider can serve to explicate on the deeper meanings of faith-based gender justice in Islam. Engaging with the works of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Nimat Hafez Barazangi, and Aysha Hidayatullah, I will provide a comprehensive analysis from Islamic Feminism's most wide read literature. Chosen specifically because of the authors' vast audiences, these readings represent the bridging of the Muslim and non-Muslim communities through scholarship. Through these works there is the explanation of how faith-based gender justice interacts in both the secular and religious sphere, including its importance to the individual and to the society, and further connect the relevance of these texts to my research.

Beginning with Amina Wadud, her book asserts the necessity of Muslim women to integrate their identity in Qur'anic discourse. Wadud definitively states that Muslim women are

not an on equal status to men.[8] She designates this to the stagnation in religious, arguing that women have been subjugated by men not by Islam, but by a culture of power grounded in historical roots. Wadud states:

> "The more research I did into the Qur'an, unfettered by centuries of historical androcentric reading and Arabo-Islamic cultural predilections, the more I affirmed I was that in Islam a female was intended to be primordially, cosmologically, eschatologically, spiritually, and morally a full human being, equal to all who accepted Allah as Lord, Muhammed as prophet, and Islam as *din.*[9]

With this assertion that women are wholly equal under the Qur'an, Wadud seeks to determine where and when women in Islam lost their agency. Furthermore, Wadud strives to reinterpret the fundamental belief that feminism must be the process of comparing women to men[10] Under this notion, men are the standard of success, where women will always be attempting to rise to the abilities of men. With this conception, there is the complete disregard of the many important and unique qualities that women hold that men should also aspire to be.[11] Thus, Wadud asserts that there must be the separation of the language itself and the biases that are understood between the lines. The language of the Qur'an must be broken down into a grammatical analysis and textual context in order to separate the broader interpretations from the unchanging words in the texts.[12] Through this process there can be the analysis of not only grammatical structures but also the historical context that lead to such interpretations of the text.

Deconstructing this concept allows not only for deep textual analysis, but rather the forces that shape the meanings arising from these texts. They will allow for spaces for

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[8] Wadud, Amina. *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the Sacred Text From a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
[9] Ibid. Pg. xi
[10] Ibid. xi.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid. xiii.

interpretations to be fluid and changing, acknowledging that these interpretations will enhance the understandings of the texts, adding a multidimensional analysis. Wadud offers insights to the rationale of why there is optimal space for these new interpretations of the Qur'an, the first being that there is sufficient information provided, the second being such undescribed details are unimportant to the message of the text, and the third being the lack of information represents an entity indescribable to humankind.[13] In regard to gender studies within the Qur'an, Wadud creates an opportunity to understand the ways in which gender is constructed out of societal norms and the ways in which the male and the female are seen as equal beings under the eyes of God. Further, Wadud claims that conceptualizations of gender are not even discussed in the Qur'an, and constructions of gender were construed out of personal understanding, not textual.[14] Wadud states: "They are defined characteristics applied to female and male persons respectively on the basis of culturally determined factors of how each gender should function. They have figured very strongly in interpretation of the Qur'an without explicit Qur'anic substantiations of their implications".

While Wadud describes the importance of separating context and text, she falls short of describing the influence and importance of the outside factors that shape the individual and her approach to interpreting Qur'anic texts. She argues that her work does not represent a specific cultural bias, but rather the ability to engage in a varied discourse. She states "It is not the text or its principles that change, but the capacity and particularity of the understanding and reflection of the principles of the text within a community of people".[15] Thus, Wadud has created a space for

[13] Ibid. Pg., 20.
[14] Ibid. Pg. 29.
[15] Ibid. Pg. 5.

plurality in Islamic feminist discourse but left it for others to interpret, further highlighting the importance of context in interpretive work.

Asma Barlas, another Islamic feminist scholar, writes on the same topic as Wadud, although takes a more descriptive stance on the effects of context in faith-based gender justice. Barlas acknowledges the historical context in which the Qur'an was revealed and transmitted in times of patriarchy and were cemented into an unchanging meaning.[16] Because of this, women have therfore been barred from Qur'anic discourse and most importantly have not been able to be seen fully in the eyes of God.[17] Barlas further asks the question in light of this understanding: does the Qur'an permit and encourage liberation for women?".[18] With this guiding question, Barlas seeks to break down the both the texts and the ways in which the patriarchy has influenced interpretations following the texts. Under this tactic, a more equal understanding of Islam.[19] Moreover, Barlas explicates the motives as to why there has been such a silence before now, connecting the personal risk and hierarchal threats to current power structures. She states "In such a context, liberatory readings are not just about redefining personal freedoms; they are also about challenging entrenched structures of political, patriarchal, state, and sexual power".[20] This may be the reason why Wadud left the space for analysis clear for others to fill. Furthermore, Barlas begins to investigate the boundaries of normative versus non-normative structures of gender authority.

Moreover, Barlas offers another explication, citing the intersectional quest of liberation for American Muslims. Tracing back to September 11th, 2001, American Muslims have thus

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[16] Barlas, Asma. *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'ān*. 1st ed, University of Texas Press, 2002.
[17] Ibid. xi.
[18] Ibid. Pg. 1.
[19] Ibid. Pg. 5.
[20] Ibid. Pg. 93.

faced not only internal pressures from within the Muslim community but external pressures from the American state, falsely critiquing Muslim oppression as a result of the religion and not the culture.[21] Both these pressures seek to challenge the self-actualization of Muslims, especially in regard to women. Muslim women not only have to liberate themselves from oppression within their communities, but also outside their communities. Barlas centers the ramifications of this intersectional oppression, stating:

> "It seeks to this by altering Muslim notions of the sacred by chipping away at the doctrine of the Qur'an sacrality, thus hollowing out Islam from the inside. This is a particularly destructive approach since assailing Muslim beliefs, and even just 'peddling the specious binary between Islam and democracy, Islam and women's rights, Islam and freedom, etc., makes it seem that Muslims can only have one or the other.' Clearly the secular hope is that Muslims will opt for secularism even if it involves gutting Islam."[22]

Connecting the multidimensional identity to the broader world phenomena, Barlas centers women's rights within Islam in a broader universe of politics and religion. Pressures and labeling of Muslim women create schisms within the Muslim community. Barlas connects the role that political context may play in coercing how women in Islam are perceived within their community and to the non-Muslim world. Recognizing the effects of such a power structure, Barlas has sought to use the academic field to shed light to this intersectional structure for Muslim women. Entering into the sphere of power, she challenges not the Qur'an itself but asserts her fears for the ways in which it has been used for political and personal gain. By engaging in this process, Barlas seeks to exhibit the Qur'an and Islam as an egalitarian text, while also drawing attention to the factors that shape the perception of the texts and the religion itself.

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[21] Ibid. Pg. 94.
[22] Ibid.

Resulting from this is the concept that men and women are equitable beings, upheld by the same virtues and expectations. Under this perception, humans are perceived by their actions and their morality. According to Barlas, gender is both seen and unseen in the Qur'an, thus equalizing gender roles while also leaving room for this equality to be manipulated.[23] Moreover, there are specific roles assigned to ensure that men and women attained the highest moral standard, thus equalizing their legitimacy within Islam.[24] Through this analysis, Barlas continues in a complementary manner to the work of Wadud by providing additional reasoning as to why Islam and women in Islam face multidimensional gendered oppression.

Taking a similar path as Wadud and Barlas, Nimat Hafez Barazangi, another Islamic feminist scholar, contributes to the field surrounding Islamic culture and interpretations of texts. Following the concepts brought forth by Wadud and Barlas, Barazangi claims that women must enter their own ideologies into Islamic scholarship discourse. Barazangi discusses the manners in which women have been excluded from higher learning as since they were not present at the transmission of the Qur'an, which resultingly was used as a rationale for the prevention of women in Islamic scholarship.[25] Thus, women's experiences were never included in analyses of Qur'anic texts. Barazangi explicates this sentiment with the claim: "By accepting the authority of text interpreters as though their authority was as binding as the authority of the Qur'an itself, the practice of '*La 'ilah 'illa Allah'* the basic tenet of the affirmation of God's sovereignty has veered away from Qur'anic intention."[26] Continuing this sentiment, Barazangi asserts the difference between the eternal words of the Qur'an and the everchanging interpretations of the text.

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[23] Ibid. Pg. 164.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Barazangi, Nimat Hafez. *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading*. University Press of Florida, 2006.
[26] Ibid. Pg. 5.

As a result, there are no longer questions of whether or not Islam is an egalitarian religion but rather *"Who has the authority to reread and interpret the Qur'anic text and how is it to be done?"*[27] This question is imperative for Muslim women and their relationship with Islam. Not only does it challenge religious authority but challenges religious agency. If women were excluded from the original interpretations of the Qur'an, then they were therefore excluded from their ability to fully relate themselves to their religion.[28] Be as this may, Barazangi addresses gender authority between men and women however leaves the space open for intergender conversation as well. A conversation about authority within the female gender would provide a deeper understanding of how authority not only shapes gender relations in Islam but also their relationship with the Qur'an.

When discussing self-actualization within Islam and the Qur'an, there becomes the encapsulation of the abstract of religion with the physicality of human life. This method reflects the process of the individual conceptualizing the meaning of the texts into their own lived experiences. If women are excluded from the process of taking the abstract and applying it to themselves, they are excluded from the ability to fulfill their identity of being a Muslim and a woman.[29] Without female Islamic scholarship there is the denial of the Self, and the denial of the lived experiences of women spanning over centuries. Because of this, women must be entering into the academic field of Islam in order to create a more accurate perception of gender relations within Islam. Furthermore, men will not be able to fully realize their own self-identity, as the Qur'an states man and woman are equal beings, but only if their perceptions, duties, and

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid. Pg. 8.
[29] Ibid. Pg. 125.

treatments are properly balanced.[30] Barazangi asserts that equality will only occur in Islam if gender biases are realized and corrected through female Islamic scholarship.

Providing some conclusions to the previously mentioned scholars, Aysha Hidayatullah, another Islamic feminist scholar, seeks to connect the sentiments of Wadud, Barlas, and Barazangi. Hidayatullah centers herself in the conversation by unpacking the consequences of female Islamic scholarship. Describing it as "the avowal and disavowal tradition-a place home to many Muslims in spiritual quandary".[31] Hidayatullah's careful wording illustrates while there are calls for women to enter the academic and religious discourse, there will also be many reactions to the altering of gender narratives. The "avowal and disavowal" draws the reader to insinuate that there is the relinquishing of one ideology and the accepting of another. Moreover the resulting message is that in order to adopt a narrative of feminine supported gender relations, there has to be the separation of the system of belief that each Muslim woman has supported since the creation of Islam. This sentiment is further continued with Hidayatullah's questioning of if these two schools of thought may ever intersect, asking the question:

> "Finally, I return to the much feared question of whether it is possible for Muslim feminist exegesis of the Qur'an to survive the conclusion that our demands for gender justice may not cohere fully with the Qur'an. If I am correct that confronting the uncertainty of this leads us to pursue other paths, then we need not despair. These paths may help us continue to read the Qur'an as Muslims and as feminist dynamically, even if we come to inhabit those position in ways we could never have imagined before. Once we are able to view this questioning not as the ending of something but also as the beginning of something else, not only as the closing of a door but also as the opening of another, we can forge ahead toward new possibilities."[32]

[30] Ibid. Pg. 79.
[31] Hidayatullah, Aysha A. *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
[32] Ibid. Pg. 195.

Based on the concept of avowal and disavowal, Hidayatullah raises the question of which of the emerging notions of feminism can coexist with the teachings of the Qur'an. In answering this question, she draws towards the conclusion that such a relationship may not exist. Be as that may, she continues this notion with the expression that it may not be all that negative. Instead of one interchangeable identity, Hidayatullah asserts that one can merely perform multiple identities, one being the Muslim identity and one being the feminist identity. It is through this avenue that she connects the dynamic, or lack thereof, of Islamic feminism. However, what Hidyatullah fails to address is the depth of this living this dual identity. To separate the two without overlap is to deny that there can ever be true agency for Muslim women, and that one identity is looked more favorably upon in the Muslim community. Thus, the scholarship created surrounding Islamic feminism becomes void, suggesting that to choose feminism would be to choose a Western identity over an Islamic identity. Though Hidayatullah explains her reasoning as the opening of another perspective, she fails to illustrate what would fall into that perspective. Because of this, it becomes challenging to follow her thoughts on how these two entities could never interact, ultimately diluting her argument. Furthermore, Hidayatullah could further address implications of her claim about feminism and Islam, as she touches on themes of authority of both how Islam should be enacted in addition to gender justice but does not delve deeper into the subject.

In my project, I seek to connect and analyze Islamic feminist scholarship across geographical spheres. As exemplified with Wadud, Barlas, Barazangi and Hidayatullah, each scholar presents an alternative manner of examining faith-based gender justice. While these similarities and differences between scholars have been noted, there has yet to be a conversation on how the diversity in belief can be identified and categorized. Each of these scholars sorted on

a spectrum of normativity to perpetuating existing gender structures. Furthermore, how does this spectrum of interpretation shape the manner in which knowledge production surrounding Islamic feminism is created, shaped and received? It is in this project that I seek to provides observations to the multitude of avenues in which faith-based gender justice can be described. Through this analysis, there will be a greater understanding of how lived experience contributes to the vast field of Islamic feminism, and further how geographical location and lived experiences shape the ways in which women interpret Qur'anic texts. Additionally, there will also be the contribution of analysis of the importance of authority, within the Muslim community and its relationship to an individual's perception of faith-based gender justice in Islam.

It is for these reasons I seek to continue this work in a different avenue, examining not only the knowledge being produced but the styles in which they align themselves to. In order to understand spectrum of normativity within faith-based gender justice in Islam, there must be the understanding of the influential factors that lead to the formulation of the knowledge, such as religious training and multicultural exposure. Through these understandings a deeper comprehension of the diversity in Islamic feminism will arise. It is no longer enough to examine the result, there must also be an examination of what shapes the process itself. Resulting from this development will be the answers to Wadud's questions and Barlas's claims, in addition to the opening of a new sphere surrounding the pluralistic nature of Islamic feminism. By examining diversity in response, the individual's approach to the Qur'an, and the factors that influence them, there can be a greater understanding of vast ranges of styles of faith-based gender, a subcategory within the broader field of Islamic feminism. Similar to the calls of Wadud, Barlas, and Barazangi for a fresh look at an old subject, I propose the same process, although expanding it to a multidimensional study. Inspired by the work of these scholars, I seek

to provide an examination beyond the text, looking to identify styles of interpretation and their relationship with religious and societal norms. Through this practice I will provide explanations to the differences in interpretations between geographical locations and how faith-based gender justice in Islam is read between the lines of the Qur'an. Using interviews conducted with scholars from the University of Jordan and from scholars and religious leaders in the United States, I have identified similarities and differences between them categorizing them into a binary of normative interpretations of faith-based gender justice and non-normative interpretive styles, providing further insight to numerous ways faith based gender justice in Islam is reflective of multiple norms and societies, rather than one hegemonic entity. Ultimately, this will add to the appreciation of the diversity in beliefs within Islamic feminism, and in particular through a faith-based avenue. Further, this will also contribute to the understanding of the impact of authority on faith-based gender justice.

Results and Discussion

"Salma had begun to recognize that the world was no longer made for certain types of women. There was a need for spine and even anger."

Hala Alyan, Salt Houses

As stated in the previous chapter, the authors Wadud, Barlas, Barazangi and Hidaytalluah presented on the importance of context and of different perspectives in faith-based gender justice in Islam, however, did not specifically elaborate on the full extent of the concepts. The authors present the importance of context when approaching a textual reading, however Barlas and Hidayatullah were the only scholars to approach the topic of the wider contextual factors, such as lived experiences or educational background, that would shape such interpretations of the Qur'anic texts. This chapter will engage interviews conducted during the fall of 2019 from Shariah scholars in Jordan, and during the winter of 2021 with female Islamic scholars in the United States. Using these interviews, I will analyze the presence of normative and non-normative styles of interpretation of faith-based gender justice in Islam. While there was the common overlap of female equality, what was discovered was the stark differences in how female equality should be enacted between each country. Where there was continuity between the scholars in Jordan, there were many different responses from the scholars within the United States. A broader analysis of the diversity in each interview response will seek to explicate the reasons as to why despite these female Islamic scholars employed the same objective practice, there were multiple methods to attain this goal of gender justice. Designated into a categorical binary, there arose the two styles of Qur'anic textual interpretation. The first was a normative style of interpretation, reflecting and perpetuating gender constructions of authority. Second,

there was the non-normative style of textual interpretation, seeks to alter and critique and alter existing gender structures through analyzing Quranic texts.

During the interviews with the Jordanian scholars, I discussed numerous different themes of gender justice within the Qur'anic texts. Throughout these six interviews there was the overlapping theme of justice rather than equality. In my first interview, I discussed with the scholar on the topic of female clothing in Islam. She spoke Surah Al-Nur, Ayat 31,[33] and how Mohamed told the people to protect women, and that the man and the woman have separate duties in order to fulfill this. Women are instructed to wear the *hamaar,* and further who is allowed to see a woman's body in nudity, and which individuals are allowed to see a woman without a hijab. Further, this was a man's role to protect women by enforcing women and women in response upheld their standards by remaining modest in action and presentation. By doing so, equality is brought about if each partner is completing their domestic justice to one another.[34]

In another conversation, one scholar discussed the necessity of a close reading of the texts rather than a broader analysis. By doing so, there will not be the influence of the human mind over the word of God. This also assures that only specific individuals hold the right to interpret texts.[35] Another scholar furthered this notion when discussing financial rights for women in Islam. The scholar articulated to me while men and women hold different duties towards each other financially, equality is formulated through the mutual fulfillment of these duties. Giving the example of a woman's dowry, she articulated that the dowry is the woman's financial right since traditionally women have not sought employment. The dowry still remains

[33] See appendix.
[34] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.
[35] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.

to the woman in a divorce and can only be taken from her if her husband or family exists in dire financial standing. The husband or male figure in the household provides the income through employment, while the woman sustains herself through her own personal work or dowry. Thus, justice towards each other is enacted in order to create and equitable sense of financial stability and protection.[36]

In another two interviews there were conversations surrounding legal rights for women in Shariah court as well as marital rights. One Jordanian scholar explained to me the rationale behind the rigidity in interpretations of texts in Shariah court. She stated that most of the changes have come from secular avenues, not religious ones. These changes represent the rigidity in interpretation, allowing for little context to influence the beliefs in the text.[37] During another interview, one scholar explained the concept of justice and equality in marital rights. She outlined two terms for me, *haquq* and *wajihibet,* translating to rights and duty. The scholar articulated to me that men and women have equal rights in marriage. In a speech given by Mohamed he asserted the need for justice towards women, pressing the need of duty towards the spouse or kin. The concept of justice as a means of equality is one again prevalent in the Jordanian Islamic feminist discourse. Lastly one scholar discussed the diversity in practice that has led to misunderstandings about women's rights in Islam. She articulated to me that misinterpretations of the Qur'an began around the era of the Ottoman Empire and during Islamic expansion as Islam became mixed with new societies and new cultures. She assured me that women and men have always been seen as equals under the eyes of God.[38]

[36] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.
[37] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.
[38] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.

Examining each of these six interviews, there were numerous topics presented, although each one traced to main theme of justice rather than equality, and a preservation of the tradition and Islamic legacy, exampled by the existing constructions of gender and authority. Further, the ways in which these Jordanian female Islamic scholars interpret and employ faith-based gender justice is one of a fiqh-based and traditionally normative approach. While each of these scholars focused on various topics, the same sub-theme arose in each of these avenues and was one of justice rather than equality. The conceptualization of justice rather than equality is founded a norm-conforming understanding of the gender binary. Rather than each individual upholding the same tasks, there are separate requirements of men and women, and if each of these requirements are fulfilled, equality will be reached to both genders. Without a strong gender binary, there cannot be a conceptualization of justice rather than equality. While this seems to contradict the notions of feminism in the West, this allows for the self-actualization of Muslim women in Jordan. For these female Islamic scholars, gender justice is enacted by the interpretations of the Qur'an and fulfilling their duty as a practicing Muslim.

After speaking with these scholars, numerous women mentioned to me that they visualize themselves as a continuation of the Islamic legacy through textual interpretation and spreading the true Islamic meaning through textual interpretation. They noted that during the expansion of the Islamic Empire, Islam became intermixed with other cultures, religions and languages. Thus, the practices of Mohamed became diluted. As female Islamic scholars, they find faith-based gender justice by preserving the word of the Prophet.[39] Additionally, another scholar explained the necessity to continue to practice and uphold notions of justice over equality as politics have now become separate from the Shariah courts in Jordan.[40] Because of this, there are differing

[39] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.
[40] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.

laws and procedures for how topics may be approached and issues may be resolved, and therefore it is their duty as practicing Muslims to present a religious understanding to daily life in tandem with the political understandings.[41] One scholar articulated to me her happiness in her role of faith-based gender justice. She said: "We are so happy with our lives, clothes, money and achievements. When we go to heaven we will live well. We spread peace and happiness to everyone with Islamic life. We are an unrestricted people"[42] For these scholars, upholding the existing Islamic traditions through textual interpretations is how they employ faith-based gender justice in Islam.

In comparison with the Jordanian scholars, I then interviewed four female Islamic scholars across the United States. What I found in these interviews were high levels of diversity in responses across all interviewees. While there was variety in each of their answers, I identified three main subthemes out of these interviews. The first theme was the concept of inner and outer community. Community is both described as within the American Muslim community and the American community. Additionally, the inner community can be described of an elite status of authority granted within the Muslim community. The outside community represents two spheres of community, the first again being the Muslim community however on the "outsider" and lesser status than the inner Muslim community. Upon observation what designates status is the Islamic scholar's style in approach to faith-based gender justice. The elite insider status is granted to those who follow the normative method of faith-based gender justice, while those who follow the non-norm conforming are considered illegitimate practicing Muslims, therefore pushing them to the outsider status within the American Muslim community. Second, there is the theme of visibility, referring to how visible one's method of faith-based gender justice is to the secular and

[41] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.
[42] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2019.

non-Muslim American community. Lastly, there is the theme of mediators, as some of the interviews sought to present themselves as mediators between the both the inner Muslim community and the greater outer community. In addition to mediating within the American Muslim community there is also the mediation between the Muslim community and the secular and non-Muslim communities.

Beginning with the theme of inner and outer community, the diversity in responses of the scholars illustrated each individual's perception of the Muslim community, and how the ways in which they fulfill faith-based gender justice in Islam affects their status within the community. One of scholars, who was a convert to Islam, detailed her experiences feeling as an outsider in the Muslim community even after conversion. She said:

> "Before I became Muslim I was outside looking in, but after I became Muslim I am still on the outside looking in because of my background and my belief in secular criticism. Even within a faith tradition, because I think that scriptures are meant to be understood by human beings, and those can only be understood by applying the places and circumstances in which they find themselves."[43]

This scholar articulated her feelings of isolation because of her past. Although she was recognized as Muslim, she still was seen on the outer edges of her community. She attributed this to her belief in the diversity of reading and of thought when approaching faith-based gender justice. Furthermore, she noted the divides in the academic conversation surrounding Islamic feminism, especially in regard to scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas.[44] She stated on the topic: "But they've done this work, and when we think of the future of Islam and the world that we're in, and in age when a lot of people believe truth is unavailable, people who try

[43] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[44] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

do believe and try to stay within any belief system."[45] Referring to the type of work conducted by Wadud and Barlas, the scholar articulated support for these authors, as she believed in the importance of critiquing structures of power. Part of her isolation, she said, was due to her support to alternative lines of thinking. Resultingly, she was accused of embracing her Western ideals over her Islamic ones. She stated on the subject:

> "Yes, I'm a convert but I am not some wild eyed Western secularist trying to foist non-Islamic views on anyone. I am asking them to read Islamic views they have not read before. Specifically about these issues with women and gender. I'm thinking that these instances happened with men, and it creates a huge controversy, and I think many Islamic women probably know what these topics can generate as far as attacks on them."[46]

The scholar detailed her own personal experiences in addition to a further comment on inner and outer community. Because of her beliefs and style of interpretation, she felt ostracized in her own community.[47] Although she is steady in her ideals, she provided additional commentary on an underlying reason as to why there are inner and outer divides within the female Muslim community. Referencing previously felt social tensions towards her ideals, she understands Muslim women may experience the same within their communities, as such a formulation of new ideas could upset traditional ways of thought and power hierarchies.

On an opposing side, another scholar presented a differing presentation of thought on the topic of inner and outer community. This scholar was born and raised as a Muslim, entering Islamic scholarly work when she was fifteen in an academy in Damascus.[48] On the topic of community, she discussed the various spaces Muslim men and women hold in scholarship, stating: " Women also do not always have the public persona that men do, so there is an element

[45] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[46] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[47] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[48] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

of inner and outer space. There are questions that need to be asked about Islamic scholarship and Islamic feminism like are we looking in the right place?"[49] From this statement, there arises a notion of which types of values and actions are most valued in faith-based gender justice. When asked about scholars such as Amina Wadud, the interviewee promptly commented on accurate representations of the Muslim community. She stated: "Amina Wadud is one of those examples. She may be one of the most vocal however does not represent the overwhelming majority. You need to be working with men to find equality, not ignoring them."[50] In this response, the scholar raises discontent with the style of interpretation Amina Wadud enacts, as she later states: Most of that is loud but there is no substance underneath, they are not taken seriously in the Muslim community and they are not practicing Muslims."[51] Not only does the scholar attribute the projection of voice in a misrepresentation of Islamic faith-based gender justice, she also asserts that individuals who support this ideology are not true practicing Muslims. Thus, the scholar remains within the "inner community" of Islamic feminism, practicing what she reflects as true Islamic interpretations. Under the topic of inner and outer community, there are examples of the ways in which challenges of authentic faith-based gender justice in Islam is present in a pluralistic community.

Moving to the topic of visibility, there were two scholars whose interviews matched this theme. One scholar is a chaplain at a local seminary. She came to this position because of an experience at a grocery store, shortly after the events of September 11th, 2001. Because of this event, she became acutely aware of how her outward appearance to the American public. She said: "September 11th, 2001 was a huge moment for me. It was one of the times where it really

[49] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[50] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[51] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

woke us up in how we were seen and perceived in the greater community because there is a lot of Islamophobia."[52] Because of this Islamophobia, she and others in her community were instructed to stay home, especially if they wore the headscarf.[53] These two cumulative events provoked a desire to create a visible space for women pursuing faith-based gender justice. These instances also shaped the way the interviewee approaches textual analysis for gender justice. When discussing the gendered language in the Qur'an, and specifically notes the ways in which either the masculine or feminine plural is taken in Arabic. She states:

> "There are so many different scholars that have addressed it in so many different ways. The important thing to note about the Qur'an in particular. If there is a group of people together, it takes the masculine plural. But many times within the Qur'an the feminine plural is specifically mentioned as well, which to me means that we as women are mentioned twice. I just like that idea that we're included, and that it specifically mentions women, like men *and* women. It's really helpful to read through the Qur'an through different lenses."[54]

Based on her own experiences and beliefs in the importance of visibility, the interviewee brought her experiences into her interpretation of faith. She asserts the significance and attention of women when interpreting the Qur'an. If women are seen in the language and in the community.

Another scholar also shed light to the weight of visibility in Islamic faith-based gender justice. She articulated the necessity for visible female and Muslim leadership, explaining her choice to become a faculty member at Harvard Divinity School. She stated:

> "At the time I went to Harvard Divinity School there weren't really many Americans and American women in leadership roles that I could visibly see and relate to. I was very much thinking about how I create a niche for what I wanted to do, which was to create Islamic leadership in the American context."

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[52] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[53] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[54] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

When describing the gravity of her choice to be at Harvard Divinity School, she explained while there was female leadership in the religious context she saw little in the way of female Muslim community leadership.[55] Further, she also commented on the male presence in the both the Muslim community and secular. The scholar stated that there were "plenty of men leaders and Muslim leaders that were men that I knew because they could be imams of mosques and prominent scholars are typically men."[56] Because of her inability to see individuals such as herself in Islamic leadership, the scholar sought to enter a position in which she could reflect female Muslim leadership. Her choice to be in this position reflects her desire to both inspire others into female leadership, as well as putting future female voices into the academic sphere. Lastly on topic of visibility, a third scholar brought forth the concept of intra-community visibility. One scholar raised the concept that visibility does not need to be a necessity in order to enact faith-based gender justice. Returning to the previous statement from this scholar, she expressed: "There are questions that need to be asked about Islamic scholarship and Islamic feminism like are we looking in the right place?".[57] While this particular quote also represents themes of inner and outer community, it also represents visibility, as she insinuates that those who are the most visible are not the ones who represent Islamic feminism in the most accurate way. Further commenting on the concept of visibility, she states how those "in sight" individuals most commonly do not reflect those who they are claiming to be a part of. Thus, the scholar said, the importance of role models for Muslim women are integral to faith-based gender justice. She articulated: "Without strong Muslim women role models then there are skewed interpretations. Then there becomes internalized sexism and a loss of the perspective of the scholarly

[55] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[56] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[57] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

tradition."[58] Visibility is noted to be of high importance to both scholars, however there are sharp differences when articulating who exactly should be filling those roles. The opposing preferences represents the presence of pluralism American-Islamic faith-based gender justice.

A last subtheme of the American scholars' interviews was a theme of mediation. To some of these scholars, they sought to engage their intersectional identity to mediate their national, religious, and cultural identities to the broader secular and religious communities. One scholar who converted to Islam uses her experiences living in a secular society while later converting to Islam to connect the American and Muslim community.[59] She described her mission, saying:

> "There has to be some sort of translation for the American public to understand the spirituality. I'm not sure what aspects might translate well for a wider audience or public. Right now, when the wider public thinks of Islam they have extremely negative stereotypes in general. That's a real hurdle to overcome."[60]

The scholar sought to bridge misconceptions between the secular American and the Muslim community. She achieves this by intra-community dialouge, describing her role as

> "It's also helping people open up to see their own biases and where those biases might be harming others or limiting themselves. When it comes to prejudice, that's part of what I'm trying to do, showing people that their perceptions might be off color and that having off color perceptions can be harmful to other people."[61]

Using academia, she seeks to craft an argument founded in fact to dispel misinformation between groups. The scholar understands the depth of being a translative figure, and states: "it's important that we have people that can translate that into meaningful advice and guidance. Intelligible, actionable and practical information."[62] The scholar sought to engage her

[58] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[59] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[60] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[61] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[62] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

intersectional identity when fulfilling faith-based gender justice in Islam. To her, utilized her position as a mediator between two communities to connect and promote knowledge surrounding women in Islam.

Another scholar engaged her intersectional identity in interfaith dialouge. The scholar grew up in a multicultural society, born in Sri Lanka and grew up in Zambia run by German nuns, where she was one of the few Muslims present.[63] Her multicultural identity was continued to be engaged post September 11th, 2001. Experiencing Islamophobia even through even the most minute of moments such as buying a gallon of milk from the grocery store, she realized the importance of interfaith dialouge to alter perceptions of Islam, and in particular women in Islam.[64] The scholar utilizes interfaith conversation in order to dispel innacurrate stereotypes, such as one experience where she was approached by another woman who exclaimed how excited she was that women like her were recently allowed to drive.[65] Her mediative identity is employed when analyzing Qur'anic texts, such as verse 4:34.[66] Her ability to understand multiple different perspectives to this highly examined texts, and she describes how she perceives and alternate readings of the verse, stating:

> "When it comes to 4:34, people read the different translations. Some will say beat lightly, and the fact that it even says beat lightly, the two words don't go together. There are other translations that say distance yourself, to me that makes perfect sense, but other scholars will say that is not the prevalent interpretation. I'm thinking that makes complete sense to me."[67]

[63] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[64] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[65] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.
[66] See appendix.
[67] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

The scholar's ability to dialouge with numerous faiths and cultures exhibits her ability to understand multiple means of interpretation, thus bringing a mediative presence to faith-based gender justice in Islam. She furthers this notion through her interfaith dialouge with students as well. She states: "We want them to be able to be proud of being an American Muslim in a shelter with Christians and Jews as well."[68] Because her multicultural past and experiences working in interfaith dialouge, she perceives herself as a mediator of different Qur'anic interpretations and across different faiths and cultures. Due to her experiences in highly diverse backgrounds, the scholar enacts faith-based gender justice in Islam by connecting communities of differing beliefs and lived experiences.

Based on the three subthemes of inner and outer community, visibility, and mediation each of the four American scholars could be classified into each of these categories, and their past experiences ultimately lead them to either fit into a style of norm-conforming faith-based gender justice, such as the Jordanian scholars, or a non-confirming style such as some of the American scholars. Out of the four interviews, three of them can be categorized as non-norm-conforming interpretations, while one of them aligns more with the Jordanian style of normative interpretation. This can be considered for various reasons, based on the understanding of visibility and inner and outer community. The American scholar who aligned herself with more normative interpretations grounded herself in a more fiqh-based education and style of interpretation, and further articulated how she chose to be less visible towards the outer American community. Trained in Syria, this scholar depicts influences from a more fiqh-based style of interpretation, choosing to enact faith-based gender justice through the "RBG method". Through this avenue, she quietly releases interpretations surrounding gender, speaking to an

[68] Interviewee. In conversation with the author. 2021.

audience of her own community. Furthermore, she believes that gender justice must be a process from within, and that those who are actively speaking to the public are not speaking to the "inner community" of American Muslims. To be visible, this author conceptualizes, is to detach oneself from the Islamic tradition and from the Muslim community.

On an opposing side, the other three American Islamic scholars exemplified a non-norm-conforming style of faith-based gender justice. As evidenced through the subthemes of inner and outer community, visibility, and mediation, each of the three scholars exhibited styles of interpretation unlike the Jordanian scholars and the one American scholar. Firstly, these scholars find themselves on the "outside" of the community, because of the method of practice and what they believe in. Such is the case with the scholar choosing to work at Harvard Divinity School, who sought to make a place for herself because she did not see anyone like her in positions of authority. Likewise, the scholar at the local seminary also sought to maintain a visible image through interfaith conversation to the public, and because of the way others were perceiving her. Additionally, the scholar who taught classes felt ostracized within the Muslim community as her choice to support highly visible scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas separated her from what was considered the "inner Muslim community". Moreover, commenting on social hierarchies the scholar also noticed the ways in which the inner community perpetuated hierarchies both within and outside of the community, illustrating that to believe in a more non-conforming style of faith-based gender justice is to promote a style of gender justice unreflective of the true Muslim community. This sentiment was evident with the scholar's observation on the role men play in perpetuating constructions of belief of the inner community.

Finally, the concept of mediation provides great insight to the three scholars of non-conforming faith-based gender justice. What I observed was that the scholars I found who

considered themselves as mediators between the Muslim community and the secular community trended towards non fiqh-based styles of interpretation. Rationales why this may arise can be attributed to the neccessity for these three individuals to connect both secular Western and Islamic conceptualizations of feminism, understanding and translating each version to the other community. In order to mediate between communities, there must be the ability to embrace and articulate both styles of faith-based gender justice. This is evidenced through all four of the scholars' desire to understand gender justice in Islam through Qur'anic texts, but the three scholars who identified themselves as mediators' embracement of other scholars that adopted non-normative styles of interpretation as well. Further, their choice to work with the outer community, both secular and to those of other faiths also illustrates their ability to appreciate non-normative styles of faith-based gender justice in Islam.

Connecting each of these three subcategories, there was the overarching theme of authority, and how one's approach to understanding gender in the Qur'an either challenged or supported existing structures of authority. What separated three of the American scholars from feeling accepted to the inner Muslim community was their support of other scholars or practices themselves of scholars who are deemed as threatening to the authority of the current structures and conceptions of gender relations in Islam. Furthermore, what brought the one American scholar in closer alignment with the Jordanian scholars and within the inner Muslim community was her support to work within existing structures of gender relations. Continuing on, authority was also employed with conceptions of visibility. Again referring to the single American scholar, she founded authority by completing her faith-based gender justice in a manner only visible to the inside Muslim community. What isolated the other scholars from insider status and of authority is their choice to enact work that is highly visible to the both levels of outsider

community, promoting a version of faith-based gender justice not aligned with current structures of authority. Lastly, the scholars who found themselves in mediation between the inner and outer communities also found themselves mediating through the two methods of enacting faith-based gender justice in Islam. These three scholars sought to understand both styles of interpretation and seek to mediate the two structures to find a coexistence between the two structures of authority. In addition to this, they also sought to mediate between outside secular and non-Muslim structures of gender authority as well.

While there are many other possible explanations as to why female Islamic scholars adopt the style of faith-based gender justice that they do, the first step is to identify trends and similarities to understand whether or not potential rationales represent broader phenomena or isolated incidents. Through interviews conducted in both Jordan and America, I found that religious training and conceptualization of self greatly influence the method of faith-based gender justice one employs. As exemplified with the Jordanian scholars, each of them found continuity across various topics to articulate a unified style of norm-conforming faith based gender justice. In contrast, out of the four American scholars, one adopted a similarly normative style of gender justice as the Jordanian scholars, while the other three adopted a non-normative style of faith-based gender justice. The resulting implication from this observation contributes to the conversation of pluralism in Islamic feminism, as with this study there can be a greater appreciation of the pluralism in understanding of faith-based gender justice in Islam. Also these interviews illustrated key points surrounding authority structures in faith-based gender justice, such as those who perpetuate and those who seek to change them, in addition to the ways in which the hierarchy is perpetuated.

Conclusion

"Awakening to faith is not a one-time event, but a continuously unfolding reality. The journey of faith is not a race, but a marathon of love that each person walks at a different pace."

A. Helwa

The conceptualization and explanation of two avenues of faith-based gender justice in Islam was evidenced through a regional comparative analysis of Jordan and the United States. This thesis sought to identify differing styles of Qur'anic interpretation, but also regional trends and potential rationale as to why these may occur. In this examination, there was the comparison between the ways in which female Islamic scholars enact faith-based gender justice in Jordan and within the United States. Through conducting ten interviews total, six in Jordan and four in the United States, there became an understanding of two styles of interpretation. The first style is one of a normative method of interpretation, and the second is a non-normative method of interpretation. The binary in styles exhibits the diversity within faith-based gender justice in Islam and further illustrates structures of authority within the field. Authority structures are created and perpetuated by the normative styles of faith-based gender justice, while the non-normative styles of faith-based gender justice seek to alter existing structures of gender authority.

To first understand the implications of these two styles of faith-based gender justice, there must be the conceptualization of what these styles are and how they differ from one another. Norm-normative styles of interpretation were closely linked with the Jordanian female Islamic scholars and can be considered a perpetuation of existing religious and gender structures. This style of interpretation attracts women who believe that to interpret the Qur'an is enough in fulfilling their duty as a practicing Muslim woman. Further, they see themselves as perpetuating the legacy of learning and teaching in Islam, and spreading knowledge is therefore spreading

empowerment. Non-normative faith-based gender justice uses gender justice to articulate and alter structural change within Islam and their contemporary setting. Examples of this style of work include Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, in addition to some of the American Islamic scholars I interviewed. This method is employed to challenge and to critique through a faith-based and gendered perspective.

These two styles illustrated to me a binary in thought, and almost perfectly split along geographical lines. While at first surprising to me, after further consideration this did not present itself as much of an abnormality as originally considered. When I had first conceptualized this project, it was inspired by the realization that the interviews I had conducted while in Jordan had not aligned with the readings and learning I had been doing in my classes. Ultimately, this project continued that understanding. Despite the almost total regional binary between the Jordanian and American female Islamic scholars, there was one scholar who found herself overlapping between the two groups. Regarding the Jordanian scholars, there was unification on the concept of justice rather than equality for faith-based gender justice. Reiterating this concept, these scholars believed that gender justice comes as a result of both men and women upholding their gendered requirements. These are employed as a spouse, family member, and public individual. Moreover, if each gender is performing their part, equality will thus be created as a result of equal diligence to Islam by each of the genders. Justice rather than equality aligns itself with the normative style of interpretation as it perpetuates previously existing constructs of both gender and religion. On an opposing side, three out of the four interviews conducted with the American scholars exhibited a non-normative style of faith-based gender justice.

Notably, despite these differences, there was one American scholar who towed the geographical and theoretical binaries, providing as an intersectional point of analysis for regional

faith-based gender justice. This scholar aligned herself more towards the theoretical alignment of the Jordanian scholars, while in the geographical location of the American scholars. Such influences can be attributed to her regional education in Syria where she completed her education in her young adult years. Furthermore, when she moved to America, there could have been the potential to adapt to the more American and non-normative style of faith-based gender justice, however she found herself within the "inner community" of American Muslims, reinforcing a belief more catered towards justice rather than equality rather than non-normative gender justice. This scholar's identification more towards the Jordanian style of gender justice also contributes to the conversation of which individuals are allowed into the inner community, and to the forms of internal discourse Muslim women are having surrounding faith-based gender justice in the both the regional and national conversations. Moreover, these conversations also illustrate the ways in which authority is granted to those who choose to enact certain styles of faith-based gender justice.

Be as this may, while there is now the establishment of a binary of belief in faith-based gender justice in Islam, there must also be the consideration of why Muslim women choose on a personal level to follow the interpretive beliefs that they do. Furthermore, this could also predict to the future of conversations held between believers of gender justice in an Islamic context. If there is the understanding of how an individual approaches the Qur'an, and further why they did, there can be the greater conceptualization of the numerous and diverse paths that lead to the ultimate shared goal of faith-based gender justice in Islam. Such similarities and differences can be further analyzed to in the subthemes of justice rather than equality, inner and outer community, visibility, and mediation. First, the main rationale for the separation of belief is one's personal approach to Islam. The women in Jordan found themselves perpetuating a

tradition of Islam and the tradition of interpreting and learning. This tradition was centered on the concept that women enact faith-based gender justice by continuing this tradition, and that the interpretation of the text is enough to be a practicing Muslim and to fulfill gender justice. Opposingly, the majority of the American scholars believed that faith-based gender justice in enacted through the employing of the interpretive legacy to inject their voice into the tradition, thus maintaining the legacy but adding to the depth of truths.

There is once again the presence of the theme of visibility. What differentiated the one American scholar from her counterparts was her belief that gender justice should not be a highly visible project. Furthermore, what aligned this one scholar and illustrated a binary between the Jordanian and American scholars was also difference in opinion on how visible the individual should be in the interpretive legacy. Not only does this conceptualization of the Self affect the ways in which women seek to enact faith-based gender justice in Islam, but also draws attention to the way in which the individual interacts with the broader and structural entities of both feminism and Islamic feminism. Authority can also be illustrated here as the more visible one's faith-based gender justice, the more threating and antagonistic they presented themselves towards current existing structures of gender authority.

The responses from each of the Jordanian and American interviews illustrated first a regional and then intra-communal differences in how faith-based gender justice in Islam is employed. This project identified that there is diversity in faith-based gender justice, in addition to pointing to where and what these differences are founded in. Resulting from this identification and analysis is the realization that within faith-based gender justice there can be multiple avenues taken to arrive at the end point of gender justice for Muslim women. Moreover, there also arose a conversation on the "preferred" or "correct" way to enact faith-based gender justice. What these

conversations leave is a further description of why there are differently valued styles of faith-based gender justice, and the effects this leaves for the Muslim community. Concludingly, not only are these different styles valued differently, there becomes entire hierarchies of power because of them. Three main questions remain at the end of this analysis. The first is who has the authority to critique the ways in which women find self-actualization? If the goal is to enact gender justice in an Islamic context, why is there such a divide on the methods in which women choose to employ? Lastly, how does this affect the way in which we perceive the "Other" in the greater field of Islamic feminism? With these questions asked, there is the understanding that gender justice, even within the Islamic context, is not a universal form of self-actualization. The goal of this project seeks to begin the connection between the manners in which an individual enacts faith-based gender justice in Islam, and further how she perceives herself in the broader structural context.

This thesis seeks to be the beginning of a conversation and a further analysis of the ways in which women articulate faith-based gender justice in Islam. Additionally, it also seeks to identify the presence and impacts of authority in faith-based gender justice. In order to further this analysis, I propose a few suggestions for further study. While this project puts forth a strong step forward in this field of analysis, time is always the constraint of the fullest of intentions. For these reasons I suggest a number of different avenues for further examination. The first point of further analysis would be to continue and broaden the number of interviews conducted. For the interviews in Jordan, I would speak with more Jordanian scholars, and further question them on their past experiences. These questions would attempt to understand if the three subthemes of inner and outer community, visibility, and mediation within the American scholars' interviews could also be present in the Jordanian faith-based gender justice dialouge as well. Moreover,

asking these scholars about their choices to study at specific institutions or in a specific method would also seek to continue the explanation of the social context in which women interpret and enact faith-based gender justice. Additionally, to expand this conceptualization, this regional comparison can extend to a more global examination, looking towards other countries with both Muslim majorities and minorities.

In addition to extending the sphere of personal analysis, in order to more robustly understand a woman's relationship with faith-based gender justice, there must be further questions asked about the relationship and influences that would shape one's style of interpretation to answer the question of why there are divergences in faith-based gender justice in Islam. The next step in this study would be to look to structural influences that shape faith-based gender justice. This would be studied by the analysis of structural pluralism within a State. Structural pluralism can be defined by the diversity in political structure, social culture, religious structure, and geographical location. By analyzing the ways in which regime type, such as democracy or monarchy, influence the levels of pluralism in faith-based gender justice, there would also be the further explanation of whether or not political structure influences the style of faith-based gender justice. Further, there would also be the study of social and religious pluralism within each state, in order to deduce whether or not higher levels of both social and religious pluralism affects norm-conforming or non-norm-conforming gender justice. Examining the diversity in social and religious structure, such as the number of religious institutions of varying faiths, or ethnic groups. Through this understanding there would be conceptualization of whether diversity in social and religious culture would influence the way women interpret faith-based gender justice. In addition to religious diversity, there would also be the examination of the religious structure in the State, and the ways in which Muslim women interact with these

structures, such as attendance in mosques or study circles. This would further assist in describing the paths that Muslim women take in to enact faith-based gender justice, such as scholarly interpretation or chaplaincy.

Lastly, in addition to expanding the comparative study to more countries than Jordan and the United States, there would also be an analysis of how geographical location may influence the ways in which women enact faith-based gender justice in Islam. This portion of future study would seek to answer if geographical location, such as region of the world and if neighboring countries hold any persuasion over the way faith-based gender justice is perceived. For example, if a neighboring country is a democracy, would that seek to influence more democratic approaches to other surrounding countries in terms of faith-based gender justice? This would shed further light to the geographical portion of the international study, and to understand if geography shapes the conversation of faith-based gender justice. Furthermore, it would also bring into additional consideration the impact of regime type in both the country of study and neighboring countries play in influencing styles of faith-based gender justice.

This thesis sought to compare the ways in which female Islamic scholars from Jordan and the United States enacted faith-based gender justice in Islam. Through a comparison of interviews conducted in both Jordan and the United States, there was the establishment of a binary between the two types of responses. The first was identified as a norm-conforming style of faith-based gender justice, describing a sub-theme of justice rather than equality for Muslim women. Secondly and in regard to the majority of the American scholars, there was the opposing style of non-norm-conforming faith-based gender justice. This style was described through three sub-themes of inner and outer community, visibility, and mediation. In these interviews conducted there was the explanation of how these female Islamic scholars became scholars, and

their introduction to Islam itself. Resultingly, there was the establishment of the ways in which Muslim women personally interact with faith-based gender justice in Islam. Based on this project, I suggested avenues for future study, examining the potential reasons and influences on a structural level as to why women choose to either interpret in a norm-conforming style or a non-conforming style. Ultimately, this will contribute to the greater field of Islamic feminism, and to the understanding that Islamic feminism, and feminism in its broadest context. Furthermore, this project also adds to the conversation of the diversity of feminism, and the numerous ways in which gender self-actualization occurs and their relations to each other. Lastly, there is an examination of how authority is granted to those who follow a path of normative faith-based gender justice and how the alternative paths of non-normative faith-based gender justice interact.

Appendix

Interview Transcriptions:

Jordanian Scholar 1:

Hadith Al-Ansar

- Mohammed praying to women and saying that people must give mercy on them because they are obliging and following what he said about wearing the hijab and the jilbab
- It was a form of a eulogy

The hijab and the jilbab are a duty within Islam

- Hamaar (headcover) and the whole hijab
- Niqab is not a duty according to many interpretations of the Qur'an

Surah Al-Nur Ayat 31

- Was told by Mohammed as a way to protect women
- Explains how to wear the hamaar around the hair and head
- Also explains how women should also wear the jilbab, although women can wear what they want underneath like jeans, blouses etc.
- Also says that women are technically not allowed to wear makeup
- Also explains who can see women without hijab and jilbab
- And then also explains the limits to the covering of the body and how to appear to the public
- Very important that NO ONE except the husband can see any sort of private parts such as chest until the genitals (except for a doctor)
- Also perfume not allowed when women sit with men to enhance themselves

- There are also exceptions with wearing the hijab (girls before they get their period and elderly women) Surah Al-Nur Ayat 60

The niqab also wasn't created by Islam, it existed in the Al-Jazeera period

- Therefore it was merely a cultural thing adapted into Islam and then was embedded into it within the within the culture throughout the Qur'an

Al Ahzab

- Telling about how to conduct yourself in a Muslim home
- You can take food offered to you but do not go exploring around and keep your gaze around the house, and that you can only cast your gaze around where your host puts you
- Also must separate women and men so both can talk freely because women don't really talk unless addressed when there are men around
- And also doing this would prevent corruption in the marriage and family with cross gendered relations

Islam is about the wisdom of justice and how justice is better than equality and how justice can be applied to the relationship between men and women

Jordanian Scholar 2:

Islam is based on 3 beliefs and believers are based in them

1. Creed
2. Abadat: practicing and praying
3. Morals

Islam is a combination of all three, but none of the above are the same thing, and it is everything not one or the other However people have shifted into believing that these are blurred in some ways, and why has that shifted over time?

- The ideal practicing period was in Mohammed's time
- Up until the fourth Khalifa people practiced proper Islam, and then during the time period of the Muslims conquests cultures began to mix and then the practices of Islam are now meshed with the traditions of Islam that they were spread to
- Additionally some people entered Islam, but they didn't truly believe, so there were mixed results in how people newly practiced Islam
- Additionally some of the translations of the Qur'an and from Arabic to the other religions and that was where a lot of misinterpretations and misconceptions occurred
- Ex: in orthodox Judaism there are rules about when women are on their period that they need to stay away from people and not cook or be around men etc., but Mohammed said it wasn't something they could control so then they could continue their normal lives even on their periods
- It was then interpreted that this rule came from Islam not Judaism and then that's where the misconception and misunderstanding has occurred
- Also the 2nd Khalifa said that could be a cultural Muslim and continue to practice the Bible or the Torah if they didn't truly believe in the Qur'an so therefore there were many practices in the name of Islam that don't exist now

Modern example of this is through social media

- People put thoughts and their minds on the Qur'an on something that is not correct such as Ali Juma from Egypt

- Another example Ali Alkilbani from Saudi Arabia saying that cross gendered relations are haram when they are permitted and halal
- What they are doing is using their mind and not the Qur'an and the Sunnah to explain and justify things which is against Islam
- You as a human are not supposed to be able to explain what is already written, because that would mean putting their minds at the same level of God which is not possible. You are allowed to read and interpret what is not said in the Qur'an because that means there are gaps to be filled but cannot use your own mind to change what is being written in the text. So if it says one thing you cannot say it is wrong and that you shouldn't do it and also your mind shouldn't even be able to fully comprehend it

Jordanian Scholar 3:

- She said there are financial rights for women within marriage and the family within the Qur'an and the Sunnah for men and women, and that a lot of this came from Islam because before it there wasn't much in the ways of women's rights
- It is stated that kids should be treated equally and that both boys and girls should have the same access to all of these things such as education etc.
- In Islam there are specific rights given to women and children that the men have to provide for them
- If the male family members or husbands don't abide to this than the government takes care of them
- If there is no husband, whether he died or they are divorced, and there are adult male sons, they are tasked with taking care of the mother and women children in the family

In Islam there are basic provisions that are supposed to be in marriage for the women

- Food (and it has to be good), and drink
- Clothes
- Shelter
- Education guaranteed to a bachelor's degree

In Islam women are only supposed to spend their own money (either through work, inheritance, or dowry) for themselves

- Only if the family is in a form of financial debt can they take from her own money, but they must return it to her once they go back to good financial standings
- Or if the woman genuinely agrees of her own accord to give money to anyone else, and then they can spend it

In addition marriage is about how the man can continue to provide for the woman in the same way her family did

- Therefore if she comes from a wealthy family she should be provided with the same luxuries as before, the same level of shelter, food, and clothes and spending, so if she had maids before she is entitled maids in her marriage
- Also if she comes from a family that does not breastfeed she must be provided someone that will breastfeed the children for her
- Dowries are supposed to match the wealth of the woman, so they will be granted the same kind of life before marriage
    - This also comes when the woman is married, if she does not get the dowry than she does not have to stay with him
    - If the husband and wife divorce or the husband dies, she also receives her dowry

    - The man cannot spend her dowry unless in dire financial need, and then it must be replaced

-there is also a time that women are designated to marry

- before Islam there were a lot of child marriages but at 15 with both father's consent and then she has until 18 to back out on her own accord

- 18 is the minimum age to actually get married

Women also have the right to work

- There is no specific line saying that women have the right to work since there are lines saying that women and men are equal, so it implies that women also have the right to work as well as education
- Guild lines for women to work 1. The family needs the money 2. The woman wants to be independent and respect, but they should have that regardless anyways
- Although women have the right to work the men in the family or the husband is required to take care and watch out for the women in their lives for their entire lives

In the Qur'an there is justice but no equality, because justice includes equality, but equality does not include justice

- Example for men when 18 have to go and work and fend for themselves
- If equal then women would have to do that as well
- Given the context one when the Qur'an was created, that would leave women in a very vulnerable situation
- So instead Islam prefers to stick with justice so then women in contemporary times can work but also are protected financially
- Works within the culture

- Overall equality is applying the justice to each other

Inheritance in Qur'an Al-Nisa

- Men get double the inheritance-why?
- Going back to the duty that men have to do justice to their wives and therfore take care of the financials and is supposed to spend the money on the wife, so he needs double the amount as the women who only spends it on herself
- Women also get inheritance but only to herself so she can spend it safely and how she pleases
- These are also requirements so if they wanted to give women more they could

Why doesn't the justice that is spoken about in the Qur'an not always exist?

- Because people do not practice Islam the right way
- People also have a weakness in their believing, so therefore they don't care about the results of their actions because don't believe in Allah so do what they want
- Also politics doesn't practice the way of Shariah completely in Jordan and this area of the Middle East so there is a difference in laws and people don't go through the same procedures
- Therefore the actions that people do that are against what is stated in the Qur'an as far as equal rights etc. is an *injustice* to Islam
- This is also how the negative stereotypes occurred towards Muslims

Jordanian Scholar 4:

Jordanian scholar 4 works as the Vice President at the School of Shariah

Women and men *are* equal in Islam

- It is the traditions of the Arab world, not the religion, there are many things that are considered norms of the Qur'an
- It states that every man and women have human rights

Changes for women in Islam over time

- Two phases: before the 4th Khalifa and after the 4th Khalifa
- In the creation of Islam there was a large increase of women's rights, such as the rights to education, to keep their dowry and their inheritance, to stop female infanticide, the right to work
- After the fourth Khalifa essentially reversed because there was the reduction in thinking about Islam and there was a movement about thinking from culture etc. Because the right of education was taken away women could not do anything or say anything because they could only take from what the man was saying because they didn't know how to critically think
- This was also around the Ottoman era too, and these ideas were furthered not during the Islamic period

Jordanian Scholar 5:

The laws of Islam have not changed over time because what is said in the Qur'an is the word of God and cannot be changed. Additionally it was what God said is what was best decided for humans and humans don't have the ability or right to change them.

- The changes that have occurred in the practices are because the traditions have changed not was what is said in Islam

- This was not necessarily meant to defy Islam it was adapted in some cases to make life easier
- Modern example is that in Jordan the dowry can now be split up in two parts to make it more affordable such as when they are married or when they are divorced
- Still matching what was said in Islam is that any changes to the dowry must have the consent of the woman in order for it to change

The changes in traditions have also been documented over time in the Shariah courts

- Such as there are 2 witnesses for men and 2 witnesses and 1 woman to show that any agreement can is consented and it a true agreement
- Because the changes in the traditions and how this has all been written down in the Shariah courts there can be no more cutting corners or cheating
- Ex: it is documented that women must receive all of their dowry

How Shariah court works

- It stems from the laws of the Qur'an and the Sunnah
- Deals specifically with family issues, such as the dowry, inheritance, children within a divorced relationship, fair treatment of the woman from the husband and other domestic issues
- Nothing has really changed in how the laws have changed recently because there has also been an increase in secular law
- What has changed in Shariah law is that when Mohammed was alive women used to come to him with their domestic troubles and he would help them, and the government would provide for him what the husband or family was not

- Now you go to the Shariah court with your issues and then the judge decides if and what to do
- Except now the judge can only award money no longer food or clothes. It is still the same in structure minus small logistical changes

The reason why Shariah has evolved in modern times to only cover the family is that there are now a number of different types of courts such as the secular court which covers finances, housing and municipalities. The other court is the international court which covers IR politics and economics

"We are so happy with our lives, clothes, money and achievements. When we go to heaven we will live well. We spread peace and happiness to everyone with Islamic life. We are an unrestricted people"-Jordanian scholar 5

Jordanian Scholar 6:

There is a difference between Islam and practice

Women and Marriage in Islam

- Women cannot get married without approval
- In the hadith there are two types of marriage, the virgin marriage and if you have already been divorced
- A women's approval is when she is silent and does not object

See hadith 4845 sahih buhari for story about marriage

Rules between men and women in marriage

- There are two things in marriage: haquq and wajihibet, which means rights and duty
- And the Qur'an states that women have equal rights in relation to men

The husband's duty in marriage

- required to treat here in a good way
- Men can only take from women financially etc. unless they consent to it
- They are required to treat women with respect and grace even during a time of an argument or in general. The goal is to look past what the man dislikes about the woman and that there is always good in a person

Money within marriage

- In marriage, the man is in charge of the financials, but this is within reason. The spending must go to food, clothes, and shelter
- According to the Surah Al-Talaq, it explains how to treat women in divorce and marriage
- It states that there must be the equal provisions of the woman and to treat them and their kids well
- Additionally it says that the man must spend according to his financial situation on both the woman and their kids. So if they are a wealthy family than the man must let the woman live in wealth and likewise.

Mohammed's last speech on Hajj

- He chose to speak about women for a large chunk of his speech
- Again brings up the necessity of justice for women
- Also speaking about honesty towards women and the necessity to give back to them
- Additionally it is known that Mohammed practiced what he preached and never hit any of his wives or maids

Fatima Bintu Qais

- She had been divorced previously and had two men that were looking to marry her, looking for guidance Fatima Bintu Qais went to the Prophet Muhammed for guidance
- These two men were called Muawiyah and Abu Jaham
- When she asked the Prophet who she should marry he gave her a response she did not expect
- He said to marry neither of the men because Abu Jaham was known to hit women so she would be unsafe there, Muawiyah was a poor and homeless man that could not provide for her so she should not marry him either
- Therefore she should marry a third man named Osama bin Zayad who was known to treat women fairly and then could also provide for her

Differences between practice and religion can come down to two reasons

1. Many people don't truly understand Islam for various reasons such as it's not taught in school that much anymore, so they don't understand the full information and therefore the right information. Therefore they don't really understand the rules of marriage etc.
2. Also due to the lack of understanding of religion and how it is easy to not follow it closely there is a weakened strength of believing. When there is a lesser belief in judgement day people care less about their actions because they don't think that they will ever have consequences. If they don't care about God then they don't care about others and this is why people have been mistreated in the name of Islam.

US Scholar 1:

CR: Why did you choose to study in the institutions you did? Was there a draw to stay in the United States or go abroad?

US Scholar 1: “I’ve been in a lot of places. Which ones do you want to hear about? I could really talk about being at Harvard Divinity School. At the time I went to Harvard Divinity School there weren’t really many Americans and American women in leadership roles that I could visibly see and relate to. I was very much thinking about how do I create a niche for what I wanted to do, which was to create Islamic leadership in the American context. And that’s still what I do a lot of thinking on. What are the different areas of leadership and where my own growth edges to be more effective as a leader/religious leader. Being at Harvard Divinity School and being one of the first Muslims to do the degree that I did, in religious leadership, as a woman in particular.”

CR: Were there just a lot of men in the program or just not a lot of Muslims at HCS?

US Scholar 1: “Neither. There were plenty of men leaders/Muslim leaders that were men that I knew because they could be imams of mosques and prominent scholars are typically men. I could look to women in the academy who had voice in interpreting scripture and ethical decision making from an Islamic standpoint, but there were very little women in the role of community leadership.”

CR: What are your specific areas of interest surrounding women and gender in Islam?

US Scholar 1: “I think the book that I just finished. That took the most substantial effort. That was focused on reinterpreting the Qur’an in a new light”

CR: Where do you anchor your views of gender justice within the Islamic tradition. Where do you ground yourself in everything?

US Scholar 1: “Islamic learning has a really long legacy, and I see myself part of that legacy. I’m part of that legacy I have my own teachers. I have my own scholars that I read that are contemporary or premodern. The other source of information is being in communities of practice and trying to understand the on the ground needs of everyday Muslims in the American context.”

CR: How do you use faith to reach the broader Muslim community and to connect to broader activism?

US Scholar 1: “Most of my activity right now comes from academic writing and then I do a lot of speaking and teaching at institutions really around the country and sometimes internationally. It’s mainly in that realm of teaching and speaking.”

CR: Do you see yourself continuing on the legacy of teaching and inspiring others?

US Scholar 1: “I think so. I enjoy that”

CR: Who do you hope to inspire with your work? Does it have to be the Muslim community, or can it be individuals like me? Who do you hope to bring in with your work?

CI: “Both. They’re just in the same ways that yoga and meditation have become mainstreamed in that context that their practices are valuable to health and connection and well-being. There are teachings within Islam as well and I think the next step for me would be translating some of that to a wider public audience. Yoga has been extracted from Hindu philosophy and meditation from Buddhist philosophy and their near eastern spiritualities. There’s a similar risk of having to extract so much that it becomes devoid of whatever take out of Islam. I want to do it in a way that is not extracting Islam from the foundations of spiritual context. There has to be some sort of translation for the American public to understand the spirituality. I’m not sure what aspects might translate well for a wider audience or public. Right now, when the wider public thinks of Islam they have extremely negative stereotypes in general. That’s a real hurdle to overcome.”

CR: Do you find yourself a translator in a literal and metaphorical way, such as literally through the texts and to outside communities. Do you feel both the literal and metaphorical presence there?

US Scholar 1: “Yea I think that’s present at both levels there. It’s also helping people open up to see their own biases and where those biases might be harming others or limiting themselves. When it comes to prejudice, that’s part of what I’m trying to do, showing people that their perceptions might be off color and that having off color perceptions can be harmful to other people.”

CR: How would see yourself as a translator and interpreter to the Muslim community?

US Scholar 1: “Because I have an academic study and an academic background I can see the diversity of viewpoints about any particular issue. If people haven’t formally studied a particular concept, they have only one angel that they’re looking at it from. Part of the academic training is that it can open up other vantage points, which can be particularly helpful because in the Muslim context there are so many different cultures and ways of being Muslim. Some people only know the school of thought or philosophy or teachings of one kind of way or only ones that are prevalent to their own specific context. If you have an academic viewpoint, you have a wider perspective in intellectual debates in particular, and practices. Part of the academic training is to be able to express complex ideas in a way that people can understand and apply them. Because the issues we face are very complex, it’s important that we have people that can translate that into meaningful advice and guidance. Intelligible, actionable and practical information.”

CR: Why would individuals not wish to speak with me? Are there any underlying themes that have made it hard to connect with individuals for interviews?

US Scholar 1: ”I think people are just stretched and have bandwidth issues. I wouldn’t take it personally. It’s just that there are so many demands on us and that’s all.”

CR: Do you think there is a fear aspect at all?

US Scholar1: “It’s hard to say. I probably know a lot of the individuals you reached out to and I know that a lot of my colleagues are just slammed right now. There is a high demand for the amount of need there is for projects that were trying to work on. That’s all I think.”

US Scholar 2:

CR: Tell me about your introduction to Islam and Islamic scholarship.

US Scholar 2: “I started working with Islamic scholars and learning in high school. That is that moment where I really became a practicing Muslim. During that time and after I have always been surrounded by female role models in scholarship. Women also do not always have the public persona that men do, so there is an element of inner and outer space. There are questions that need to be asked about Islamic scholarship and Islamic feminism like are we looking in the right place?”

CR: Why did you choose to study at the institutions you did? (This can be either directed as a student and/or later as an employee) Was there a draw to stay within the United States or to go abroad?

US Scholar 2: “Well firstly I ground myself as a secular academic Islamic scholar. I am not a religious leader. I center myself around this because of hiring biases and other issues with prejudices around the Muslim community.”

CR: Tell me about your specific areas of interest surrounding gender within Islam/Islamic scholarship?

US Scholar 2: “I think primarily there is this trend of exoticization of female Muslim leadership without actually studying or paying attention to what they are saying. I want to challenge that blind spot about Muslim women scholarship. It is their mind and their ideas that change the discourse. When I studied in Damascus, we were *scholars* not *female scholars.* My focus is through publications on scholarship in Islam.”

CR: What do you think are the most important topics for gender justice within the Qur’an?

US Scholar 2: “If you talk about gender from the beginning of Islam you get boxed in, and you can only talk about gender without talking about the depth of the issues. Everything only becomes about gender studies. I don’t see myself as male or female, but a scholar. I know that I am equal, I don’t care who thinks otherwise. Job wise however it’s different, because of those biases you have to separate yourself as a female scholar.”

CR: Where do you anchor your views of gender justice within the Islamic tradition? (Is it a particular text or teaching, etc.)

US Scholar 2: “Without strong Muslim women role models then there are skewed interpretations. Then there becomes internalized sexism and a loss of the perspective of the scholarly tradition. I see myself using the ‘RBG method’, where I use the system to change laws

and work within it, which will them address biases. I am not trying to overturn it, just making small changes that will address each minute topic one by one. There are multiple avenues of Islamic feminism, the 'RBG method' and then method that rejects all aspects of the Islamic tradition. Amina Wadud is one of those examples. She may be one of the most vocal however does not represent the overwhelming majority. You need to be working with men to find equality, not ignoring them."

CR: Do you think location or appealing to a certain Western perspective?

US Scholar 2: "Yes, I think Amina Wadud's type of work is talking about decolonizing feminism through the colonized perspective. It's a form of white-washed feminism. There needs to be gender justice and equality on Islam's own terms."

CR: Would you ever see yourself connecting with activists of that type?

US Scholar 2: "Well I think it is easy to over represent a population, which is what they do since they engage in a very public and mass audience type venue. The work that I do which is the majority type work is quiet and strategic. Most of that is loud but there is no substance underneath, they are not taken seriously in the Muslim community and they are not practicing Muslims."

CR: Over the last few months I have reached out to numerous other female scholars about this subject but have had very limited replies back. Can you provide any insights on what this means or why this might be happening. Are there concerns about speaking with me?

US Scholar 2: “I would say the time itself is hard and exhausting. There is also an aspect of community, the east coast Muslim community is less established than in the Midwest, so they may be more closed off because they do not feel as confident on presenting on subjects like this. They may be insecure in challenging the status quo for fear of losing a job or not being hired.”

US Scholar 3:

CR: Tell me about your introduction to Islam and Islamic scholarship, and why did you choose to study at the institutions you did?

US Scholar 3: “I’m originally from Sri Lanka, my parents were born there, but I was born in England. A little bit about Sri Lanka, it is a Buddhist country, but my family comes from the 7% of Muslims that live there. I was brought up Muslim, but with the biases of South Asian culture. I came to this country (America) when I got married. My husband is proper Sri Lankan and a Muslim, and we settled down in Connecticut. Initially, while religion was important to me, but it started being very important to me when I had my first child. That’s when I started wearing my headscarf. I was really getting more interested in my faith. All my life I grew up in multicultural societies, like when I went to school in Zambia, and I went to school that was run by a convent with German nuns. I was practically the only Muslim there. Because of that I have always been interested in interfaith dialouge. September 11th, 2001 was a huge moment for me. It was one of

the times where it really woke us up in how we were seen and perceived in the greater community because there is a lot of Islamophobia. About a week after 9/11, a Sikh gentleman was gunned down in another state. When that happened our imam called all of us together and said to any woman that wore the head scarf and said this is a really dangerous time and not to go out of our homes. There was so much fear. A lot of us stayed home. There was a full Islamic school that closed down for 6-9 months because they were so scared of backlash. So a lot of us stayed home. There was one day about a week into my 'house arrest' where I opened the fridge and I saw there was no milk, and I had two young kids and so I decided I am going to get two gallons of milk from Stop & Shop, and everything will be ok. My mother told me to be really careful because there are all these shootings and people are upset and a lot of people don't know who the real criminals are in this, and that if you wear the headscarf and that you might be a target. When I showed up I really felt the guilt by association. I was thinking what are they thinking in their heads, something like 'how dare she go out and do what she wants to do after 9/11' kind of thing. I walk in the door and I'm thinking 'why is milk so far away from the door?' I grab the milk and as I'm walking to the register I see this one out of the corner of my eye and she's staring at my really intensely. And I thought to myself do I really need this milk? I have to walk faster. And as I'm walking faster she's walking towards me and at this point she is right in my face, and I just closed my eyes and thought this was it. She actually gave me a big hug and told me she was actually in the store buying milk for her neighbors, who were Muslim. That was the thing that really woke me up, because she was there because she knew a Muslim personally, and she was going out of her comfort zone for her Muslim neighbor. And her Muslim neighbor had gone out of her comfort zone to connect. That particular incident woke me up because I realized I needed to learn how to dialouge, and how to get to know the "other" and how people

perceive me as the “Other” and how these personal connections can make all the difference. That’s when I started my studies at the Hartford Seminary, because their focus is interfaith dialouge. At that time they were just beginning their Islamic chaplaincy program. And from that it just grew from there. There’s a course called ‘Dialouge With a Difference’ and the goal is to get to know the three Abrahamic faiths. You go to each other’s places of worship and you write reflections. Those kinds of things made me realize how important it is and got me interested in speaking about Islam. These kinds of programs would send you everywhere to speak. We try and mix up the speakers to illustrate different aspect, to show Islam is not monolithic. ”

CR: Tell me about your specific areas of interest surrounding gender within Islam/Islamic scholarship

US Scholar 3: “One time we were giving a series of talks, and this one of the issues that I face in terms of Islamophobia. We were invited by a church in South Glastonbury, and the Reverend is really nice guy. We made this flyer saying Week 1 was going to be on basic Islam and Week 2 is going to be on women in Islam and Week 3 is going to be on hot button topics like jihad and shariah. So we had the flyers out, and the Reverend called me, and he said you know we have these presentations throughout the year, but this is the first time I’m getting calls about the structure of these talks. I was really very weary. The first week was run by a friend of mine and she did an awesome job, although I went into it thinking that there might be some kind of issues, but nothing happened. The next week I gave my talk about women in Islam, and nothing happened, it was perfectly fine. The third week however my husband was giving the talk on jihad and shariah and he started his talk off on a basic recap of everything we had previously covered.

Then as he introduced the topic of jihad, and as he said the word one woman in the audience got up and said ‘You think you own your wife and you won’t even let her speak’ and other well prepared lists of insults. What was really funny was that we were all like who was this person. The pastor of the church had noticed that these were people he hadn’t seen before and that they were scattered around the audience, so it was really an organized thing. The funny part was as my husband was being accused of not letting me speak, the lady next to her says ‘actually his wife spoke last week in the church’. That was a bit of a light moment. I think they actually did them a disservice because they were disrupting, and it was obvious to everyone what they were trying to do. It just shows that some people have been fed misinformation constantly until they believe it. That’s the major frustration. One of my focuses is to continue talking about what we believe. Many people in the community are frustrated because there is so much misinformation about Islam and Muslims.”

CR: Do you see that a lot specifically with women?

US Scholar : “Yes and no. One woman did come up to me about four years ago and said ‘I’m just so happy you can drive now.’ Those kinds of things. I use that as an example of how culture is separate from religion. I follow this rule, where if something is followed by every single Muslim on Earth, then it’s probably an Islamic principle. But if it’s followed by specific people in specific countries then it’s probably cultural. Such is the case with FGM, etc. A lot of people are so innocent in their questions. I went to this nursing home and Fox News is blaring in the face, and that’s their source of information. It’s not a surprise when you think about that. The scary part is there is so much fear.

CR: Do you feel like you focus on certain topics in regard to gender in Islam?

US Scholar 3: “When it comes to 4:34, people read the different translations. Some will say beat lightly, and the fact that it even says beat lightly, the two words don’t go together. There are other translations that say distance yourself, to me that makes perfect sense, but other scholars will say that is not the prevalent interpretation. I’m thinking that makes complete sense to me. One of the things I do is I talk about how there are a million words in English, but nine million in Arabic. Which means that eight million words don’t translate properly. Also, the amount of emotion gets lost in translation. I am fluent in English and learning Arabic and when I think of the English translation and I’m looking to my right and left and the people that speak Arabic are crying. And I’m feeling some emotion, and I’m wishing I could feel that kind of emotion. The language is so layered, and we miss so much. For instance in the Fatiha, and I’m 50 years old and I’ve been praying all my life and saying these prayers multiple times a day. I was at a halaqa a few years ago, and he was talking about the hidnen sarata, and it means guide us gently. The whole aspect of gentleness is completely lost in English. How many more of those things are not fully understood? Coming back to 4:34 the translators each have their own biases and as a woman the distance yourself makes complete sense to me. That’s the translation that makes sense to me. But different people have different takes on it. It could just be a delaying tactic, like in a domestic violence situation. In that situation they’re lashing out because they’re upset about a specific thing. This is if you fear something, then don’t share your bed etc., there is a step process to it. It’s to stop the person from hitting. If you take it like that it could make sense. There are so many different scholars that have addressed it in so many different ways. The

important thing to note about the Qur'an in particular. If there is a group of people together, it takes the masculine plural. But many times within the Qur'an the feminine plural is specifically mentioned as well, which to me means that we as women are mentioned twice. I just like that idea that we're included, and that it specifically mentions women, like men AND women. It's really helpful to read through the Qur'an through different lenses. For example I was giving a talk on death and dying, and I tried to read through the text as if I was dying tomorrow. Reading the text from different perspectives helps us understand it more.

CR: I know you conduct a lot of interfaith conversations, but is there a specific audience you are trying to reach?

US Scholar 3: "It depends. The other week I was invited to talk at a Shabbat service at a synagogue and they asked to talk about race. I tried to bring in a little bit of Qur'an, and recited a verse, and talked a little bit about Malcom X. I spoke about 49:13, a verse often speaking about how we are a nation and tribes to come together. It's commonly recited in interfaith conversations I also talked about Malcom X and his experience going on Haj. He had learned so much about each other. His whole spiel about how everyone slept together and ate together and that's how we understand each other. Then I connected it with how we are doing the same kind of thing in the situation. Then I also teach Sunday School, which is a completely different audience. At the moment we are doing everything online. I'm actually teaching 11th and 12th graders, just before they go to college. Most of that is really discussion about identity and other things, and who are we as American Muslims. It depends on who I'm speaking with. I've noticed that when people come together it makes a difference, the face to face conversations make a

difference. The trust can be hard to emerge but once it's there it's very powerful. It's a very tiny thing but very important.

CR: Do you have a common goal across your audiences?

US Scholar 3: "One of the things we do in the Muslim Coalition of the state is to build bridges and community. That's what I really enjoy. Having our kids experience that, all of those things in community. We want them to be able to be proud of being an American Muslim in a shelter with Christians and Jews as well. That is very powerful. We are trying to get those kinds of interactions. We were having a conversation after the 2016 election and my husband was co-teaching and he said, 'What do you want to do about it?' Some people said write op eds, and someone said we should start a gathering, and they started Youth Hangout, where Christian Jews and Muslims coming together at the mosque on a Sunday. They would have ice breakers and pizza and a Jeopardy game. They were divided in groups with each kid from each religion and they answered the questions as a team. Those kinds of things bring about so much positivity.

US Scholar 4:

CR: Tell me about your introduction to Islam/ Islamic scholarship

US Scholar 4: "I am a convert to Islam, in 1988. My introduction to Islam came through my own students. I was teaching at a community college, teaching English. I was teaching a high intermediate level English class and made up mainly of foreign students. There were eleven students, and out of those students four were Muslim. One of them was from Egypt, two were

from Syria, one was Palestinian from Kuwait. This was in 1987. In this class one of their assignments was to make a presentation, and they got to choose the topic. The two students from Syria were female and cousins, and they wanted to make a presentation on Islam and Syria. I realized during the course of the semester that these four Muslim students, there was a lot of angst, passion, and concern because the first intifada in Palestine had broken out. I always encouraged my students to talk about what matters to them because that will make them want to speak English. I saw how passionate they were and that piqued my own interests. Along with the presentations, the topics the contexts. At the end of one of those presentations, one of the Syrian students gave me a book. She said 'in this short time and in my poor English I don't think I introduced Islam very well'. She gave me this book and I thought, *well, okay, this interesting*, I'm going to read this book. I was very surprised, because I realized I knew very little about Islam. I knew about Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, but I didn't know anything about Islam. I realized that there are so many convergences with Christianity and Judaism than I had imagined. That piqued my interests to want to know more, and that was my introduction to Islam. After that, I began to just read. Students were so happy to bring me a pile of books during the semester, and then another semester and by the summer I had a pile of books from the floor to the bottom of the chair. I read them, and I started talking to Muslims, and it was really an academic interest. I wanted to understand the worldview of some of my students. It colored their experiences with religion and with politics, really their everything. As ours does, as everybody's does. But this was a view where I was not well versed in and seemed exotic at the time. Then I started to realize, there are so many convergences, I started to be interested in the whole idea of why do we in the West view Muslims as the 'Other'. Why do we think they are so different from us? It was an academic interest that became a spiritual and religious interest. After about a year of reading

on my own, I did convert to Islam. A few years later, I stumbled upon a master's degree, I already had one master's degree in teaching English as a second language and language acquisition. I decided to get an academic degree in the study of Islam and Christian/Muslim relations at a local seminary. I morphed from academic interest, to belief and devotion, back to academic interests, and wanting to study Islam from an academic perspective in a Christian seminary, but with Islamic studies faculty, some of whom were Muslim. It's an interesting way in to understanding Islam. In that process I became interested in the questions of Islamic feminism. After I attained that degree, I had already had a whole career in language teaching and had been dean at a community college. I was a college administrator but had decided I wanted to go into Islamic scholarship, and I started to pursue a PhD from the University of Exeter in the UK, in Arab and Islamic Studies. My focus was the thought of Edward Said and a particular aspect of Said's thought. That was what I did my dissertation on. My particular interest had to do with a term that Said uses repeatedly in his many, 23, books, called secular criticism. I was really interested in what did Said mean because his use of the word secular was not being normally used. It was more of an idiosyncratic use. I started to realize as I tried to understand that he's a professor of literature at Columbia, but a lot of his books are about the Palestinian issue. He's not a Middle East studies scholar, but he's a Palestinian American. I became interested in who he was and what he was doing with all of this. I realized long story short that this term secular criticism was Said's term for continuing every authority, every structure of authority, every religious system, every so called secular system, every system of oppresion for the liberation of the human race. I realized his project on Palestine was also something that was much bigger than it appeared to be. It had to do with this idea that we must always be able within religion and outside of religion to criticize and to critique and to question. That actually fits in quite well with

my questions of women in Islam, and what is the relationship between the scriptural tradition and the understanding of women and men, the whole issue of gender, became very interesting to me. While it's not my only interest, it's a major interest, and at the local seminary I had a wonderful course on Islamic feminism, I forget the details, but it was women and the Qur'an and taught by a great instructor. She was a tremendous scholar of Islamic feminism, but as a non-Muslim she found herself critiqued and criticized by many Muslim women, because she was in this field of Islamic women's issues, but they were telling her she wasn't Muslim and an outsider. That can be very hurtful, when you devote yourself for years to work in scholarship, on a topic, and then you are told you are an outsider, and you don't have the authority to speak. Before I became Muslim I was outside looking in, but after I became Muslim I am still outside looking in because of my background and my belief in secular criticism. Even within a faith tradition, because I think that scriptures are meant to be understood by human beings, and those can only be understood by applying the places and circumstances in which they find themselves. Otherwise any religious scripture becomes anachronistic and has no meaning. There are so many circumstances where if you apply the text literally you're at a loss for applying it to your own circumstances. And yet if it is a universal message, there must be a way to understand it in a reasonable way. That is not to say that human rationality is first in understanding. I believe the author of the text does have a voice and does have a message. There's actually a message from the author there, but there is also my ability to understand that it is mediated by my own experience, my knowledge base, and what I bring to this text, whether it is the newspaper or the Qur'an.

CR: What lead you to be at the institutions you were?

US Scholar 4: “First I was a faculty member in a community college system. I really liked being faculty, and really didn’t want to be an administrator, but somehow I got roped into it and recruited for it. Then I went to being a department chair, which I had five years of experience doing that. Then I came to being the dean of academic affairs. That’s another part of my life aside from my scholarship in Islam. As I was in the position it was pretty late in my life that I decided to do something in Islamic scholarship or contemporary Islamic studies. Here I was, the dean of a college, also a student coming into a field very late in my life, already having a whole career. When I got my PhD, as I was finishing the dissertation, an opening for another college position as Vice President of academic and student affairs at America’s first Muslim liberal arts college, Zaytuna college in California. I was saying to myself, ok, I’m trying to get out of this field and into scholarship, but Allah has put this in front of me and I was being recruited to help them, because they needed someone with experience in academic and in accreditation manners and setting up a college and setting up departments. They weren’t even sure what the titles and positions should be, it was very new. I knew I could make a contribution, even though it was not in the direction I really wanted to go in. I wrote my dissertation so I could be a scholar but instead I was being pulled in this direction as an administrator yet again, but in an Islamic environment, for a very important project. I think it’s very important that Muslims have their own colleges and universities. As well as they should go to non-Muslim colleges and universities. Just as the Catholics and the Baptists have established their own hospitals and colleges, Muslims need to establish their own institutions in the West. This is a really exciting direction and important one, so I decided to contribute to that. I got to teach there, but I was teaching freshmen seminar and rhetoric, not Islamic subjects, because there were scholars there

far more qualified than I to teach fiqh and Islamic history and Arabic grammar. That was what brought me there. At the local seminary, I am teaching part time. I teach mainly Islamic spirituality and women and gender in Islam. This coming fall semester I will also be teaching a course on women. I'm combining my interests in womens' issues with my interests in participation of the field of spiritual development.

CR: Tell me about your specific areas of interest within gender and Islamic scholarship. Are there specific topics that you find interesting within gender and Islam?

I: "Let me try to prioritize. I think given that everything in Islam and Islamic studies starts with the Qur'an. I think that for example what interested me was Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud's work on women, the category women in Islam. You have to start with how does the Qur'an portray women, and that's why I think Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud did the most important work in that area. Barlas in particular took Wadud's work and studied it in minute detail in her book. "Believing Women in the Qur'an: Unreading Patriarchal interpretations", to me is really important because she gets down to looking at and saying, the classical exegetes were men, and were men of their time. But let us look at what the Qur'an is saying and what the possible interpretations can be and not be based on that this text has to make sense and have continuity and cannot have internal contradictions. Therefore, how do we understand that? The other issues that is very important to me for practical reasons is how a very spiritual base question develops into our understanding and stances on many other things. For example, one of those things that are very important to me are the interpretations of 4:34. The verse that many throughout history that many men and women have interpreted to allow a man to beat his wife. All of the work that

Kecia Ali and Sheikh Hamza Yousef have done. He is a traditional scholar of Islam, and very knowledgeable about Arabic, and is able to show how that verse does not mean that at all. You can listen to his lectures on YouTube as well as some things he's written. Those interpretations of Qur'anic verses, along with the issue of hadith. For me, Fatima Hernissi was one of the scholars that in the 80's and early 90's that opened the questions of how do we understand the hadith. I think that her book, "The Veil and the Male Elite", is an exploration of the hadith around the treatment and the separation of women and men and where it all came from. I think it's extremely important for anyone studying Islam to understand. I find that when I taught the women and gender in Islam course at the local seminary I had some traditionalist men in the class, and then also very progressive Christian and Muslim women in the class. There was such a dichotomy and class, and it was really actually difficult for the traditionalist men in the class. They were very well versed in Islam, but they were so threatened by my lecture that they would interrupt me constantly to ask questions. All I was doing was unpacking Barlas, and we couldn't get through almost any lecture without interruption. It's very threatening yet very important to continue to push forward with presenting the other side that many Muslim men and women have never encountered before. They have had that steady diet of the same patriarchal interpretations. I'm not asking them to believe anything, but to examine it critically as scholars do. Then you tell me where they're going wrong if you can. I encourage students to tell me what is wrong with this line of thinking. It's just so shocking to some of those men who have never read any of this. I think it's important work, but not pleasant. As I have come to understand traditionalists of Islam, they all say that if you haven't studied in the traditional manner, sitting at the feet of traditional scholars, and you don't have a complete understanding of the Arabic language, then you have nothing to say. I think that's a fallacious argument. You have some limitations and have to be

humble sometimes when someone with superior traditional knowledge confronts you on things you do not know. The Qur'an is very clear that God has given us rationality, and the ability to think through that Islam is not an irrational belief system. If that is true then there needs to be a way for us to come to terms with that. Barlas and Wadud and Ahmed are all practicing Muslims. Barlas has been very clear, she is a believer in Islam, and has done her own independent research, which doesn't mean she's perfect, there's a few places where I can see why there is some criticism. But they've done this work, and when we think of the future of Islam and the world that we're in, and in age when a lot of people believe truth is unavailable, people who try do believe and try to stay within any belief system, I think the critical work is so important, as well as to not just be rejected because of who they are or where they come from. Or because they do or don't wear hijab. This is another instance to me where it's very frustrating the way they judge a person's belief based on what they're wearing or not wearing.

CR: Would you say that rationality is one of the most important topics or foundational topics for you in gender roles?

US Scholar 4: "It is, it absolutely is. I think a lot about the Mutazzawi, these were the rationalists in Islam, saying that God created the Qur'an which is different than the traditional Sunni and Shia Muslim view that the Qur'an is uncreated, and coterminous with Allah. The Mutazawites had a problem with that because there's Allah and the Qur'an, both of which are eternal, setting a partner with Allah, they say the speech of Allah is the Qur'an and that it is a created thing. This is because they are very logical and very rational. I am of that nature, but the majority Sunni view is that in about the 10th century became that the Qur'an was the Sunnah and that the

tradition ijma, the consensus of the scholars, and that is it. This rationalist school is not relevant to us. And I say to my husband I am a Mutazawa, and I am of their school. My husband is more of a traditionalist and we joke because he says I am the super rationalist. They were never considered outside of Islam. This is the masses, they found it very easy to just go with the Qur'an and hadith and this is the standard example of the Prophet, these are the two sources of scripture and that's all we need to know. That's what you expect from the common people. I'm not surprised that this kind of view "won out". It's what is simplest and clear and don't have to think too much about it. It's just believing what's been done before and not getting into the weeds and challenging what's been done before, and that only Western women bring this up.

CR: Who is your intended audience in this type of work? Who are you trying to reach?

US Scholar 4: "Outside of my academic work, with the Muslim Coalition of the state, I chair this body called the speakers bureau. We provide speakers on any topic related to Islam and Muslims. I am also a speaker. We go to schools, civic organizations, libraries. Whenever I'm in that role, I am an interpreter to primarily a non-Muslim audience. I am always very careful about that because it's important to explain to people that I am one person and I have a particular background and I am coming with traditional knowledge as well as other knowledge influences and that Islam is and has always been extremely broad. Just getting people to understand that, and that any given Muslim can tell you from what they know what Islam is or what it teaches or what the beliefs are. It's a narrow slice. This is true of people of all religions. They're going to come with a different take on belief or practice. When people look at that however, they always want to see Muslims as one thing. That's a major challenge in educating the non-Muslim

population. With Muslims, there are other challenges, and one of them is always to own your own limitations of knowledge and experience, and the whole inner and outer sentiment. The main thing is that I find in a classroom in a course on Islam, is the academic enterprise of opening worlds, allowing students to see with their own eyes and read and expose them to as much as you can. Even of conflicting or differing positions. They can then go and pursue their own interests. That is the main role of the faculty person. To allow them the space to explore even when they have more knowledge then I do in a particular subject, but they don't know about all these other topics. There's always something, and as long as your exposing them to enough difference, you're exposing them to something new and there can be so much gained from that. That is my goal as an educator, to at least to provide the ground for students to discover new ground.

CR: I am having a harder time securing interviews than originally thought, do you have any thoughts on why this may be?

US Scholar 4: "I don't know what to say. I wouldn't expect that female academics, and Muslim academics would all shy away just because you're not Muslim. Most of them work in non-Muslim environments, teaching in universities and colleges. Although it is true when I think of my Muslim academic friends who are in leadership positions, I guess there is a fear of what is going to be done and said, and how that will reverberate on them. I really was surprised to be honest, when I had the reaction from my class last semester from the traditionalist men that I had. They really made it extremely uncomfortable and unpleasant, almost mercifully sad to say, COVID intervened and shut down an in person class that had become really fraught and tense.

Then we had to go online and it sort of shut down some of the in class and in person unpleasantness and challenge from those men. It continued with one in particular but it was more private, in that way it was better for the class because people's time wasn't taken up. All of it shocked me, because to them I am a covered Muslim woman, who is a believer in Islam. Yes, I'm a convert but I am not some wild eyed Western secularist trying to foist non-Islamic views on anyone. I am asking them to read Islamic views they have not read before. Specifically about these issues with women and gender. I'm thinking that these instances happened with men, and it creates a huge controversy, and I think many Islamic women probably know what these topics can generate as far as attacks on them. It could just be fear. Fear of the community and even if they said they didn't want their identity known that somehow it would be figured out. There could just be paranoia, I have encountered people who think that anyone could be a CIA agent, even you a student at Trinity. There are so many conspiracy theories on both sides, all political, that could be part of your problem."

Qur'an verses:

Surah Al-Nur Aya 31

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts) and to now show off their adornment except only that which is apparent (like both eyes for necessity to see the way, or outer palms of hands or one eye or dress like veil, gloves head-cover, apron, etc.), and to draw the veil all over *Juyubihinna* (i.e. their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms) and not to reveal their adornment except to their

husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's fathers, or their sons, or their husband's sons, or their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their (Muslim) women (i.e. their sisters in Islam), or the (female) slaves whom their right hand possesses, or old male servants who lack vigor, or small children who have no sense of feminine sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you all, O believers, that you may be successful.

Surah Al Nisa Aya 34

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient (to Allah and to their husbands), and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard (e.g. their chastity, their husband's property). As to those women on whose part you see ill conduct admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly, if it is useful); but if they obey you, seek not against them means (of annoyance). Surely, Allah is Ever Most High, Most Great.

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