

CIS Research Division Repository

Emergence and Expansion of Female Islamic Movements

Masooda Bano

English

Public Lecture | December 05, 2012

Research Division (RD)

College of Islamic Studies | Hamad Bin Khalifa University

Doha, Qatar

Emergence and Expansion of Female Islamic Movements: Evidence from Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria

Female piety movements in the Muslim societies have recently drawn increasing scholarly interest. A number of key works have been already published as a consequence of this interest on the subject. **Dr Masooda Bano's** book "Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority" which was co-edited with Hilary Kalmbach (University of Sussex) is among the important contributions to the field. This was the topic around which **Dr Bano's** third talk at Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies was centered. Her presentation had a particular reference to the field works she did on female Islamic education movements in Pakistan, Nigeria (Kano State) and Syria for her upcoming book project.

The origin of **Dr Bano's** interest in Muslim female educational movements is quite unusual. It goes back to a surprising observation - the conspicuous presence of female *madrasas* in Pakistan - she made while doing a field work for her earlier book project "The Rational Believer". This phenomenon was very unexpected even for her although she was born and grew up in Pakistan: - "...but even for me it was big news. Because somehow I never noticed the female *madrasas* are there. We always thought madrasas are "very male"." - she mentioned.

What captured her attention was not only the presence of female *madrasas*, but also their rapid expansion. According to Dr Bano, if in pre-1970s female *madrasa* were non-existent in Pakistan (she gave specific examples of Multan and Lahore), today they constitute a fourth of total *madrasas*. Ever since she came across this remarkable phenomenon, Dr Bano has been treating the subject scholarly and her academic engagement with it has gone beyond the case of Pakistan.

Her research In Pakistan has looked at two main trends in regards to the female educational - piety movements. The first trend includes madrasas that are functioning similar to boarding schools. In those madrasas, the female students study 4 to 5 years to receive formal education and eventually get certificates. *Jamia Hafsa* in Islamabad which has around 3000 students is an example of such madrasas. Dr Bano stated that female madrasas are not

associated with a specific movement or trend in Pakistan. Almost all madrasa traditions existing in the country (e.g. *Jamaat-e-Islami; Deoband, Ahl al-Hadith, Barelvi* and *Shia*) have similar female learning institutes.

The second trend she has identified in Pakistan is educational movements that are not madrasa-based. For this category she has particularly studied Islamic study circles that are led by a preacher Dr. Farhat Hashmi for the last 15 years. According to Dr Bano, one of the characteristic elements of these study circles which distinguishes them from female madrasas is that they target mainly “the elite class women”. She stated that the students of such study circles usually meet in posh hotels on weekly basis to follow certain “Islamic texts or sermons”.

In Northern Nigeria she has looked at the case of *Islamiyya* schools in the State of Kano. *Islamiyya* schools usually begin with providing basic Islamic education including the recitation and the memorization of the Qur’an, and then move to *sira, hadith*, and other Islamic principles and texts.

The women attend these schools on daily basis to study “*with a proper scholar often female scholars, at times male scholar, both are fine*”. Dr Bano has observed that the schools are open evenings and sometimes night times. She also shared a number of her findings from her fieldwork in Syria especially the one she did during the month of Ramadan. Less was talked about the Syrian case which according to her differs significantly from the cases of Pakistan and Nigeria and require a different treatment.

By studying these cases, Dr. Bano aims to answer the question of why and how these movements emerged and what implications they have for various social groups within the communities they exist. One of the interesting findings she shared with the audience is about the role of the male Muslims in the creation of new female spaces of piety and learning. For her, in majority of the cases she has analyzed, contrary to the common expectations, it is not the result of a female protest or resistance towards male scholarship that led the emergence of those spaces. Dr. Bano’s interviews demonstrate that the female spaces are rather deliberately designed by male initiations (usually by the *ulema* themselves) with the fear of “losing women entirely” against the “temptations of secular sphere”. But this is not the full account of the story from her perspective, since it doesn’t provide an

explanation for the “supply side”: what makes parents to send their children to those learning institutes?

Her study provides two answers to this question. The first one in some way endorses already existing ‘functionalist’ explanations which look at socio-economic reasons that shape the emergence and expansion of female piety movements. According to this explanation, girls who join madrasas or other similar learning circles are doing that mostly due to the unemployment. Dr. Bano argues that in those societies available economic opportunities do not develop parallel to the increasing level of education: more girls are getting educated but jobs are not being created to provide employment for them. As a result, for parents, *madrasas* become “the way of keeping the girl productively employed” till they get married. If there will be an opportunity for better employment or higher education, according to Dr. Bano, female population of madrasas may significantly shrink.

But how do we understand the study circles or piety movements that attract high-income women from different professional backgrounds? For Dr. Bano, this is where functionalist explanations based on socio-economic reasons become inadequate and a need for a more complicated argument arises. The interviews she made had shown that the women who are attracted to such movements or groups are usually “very convinced of Islam...in its very traditional sort of conception”. Unlike their feminist counterparts, they don’t problematize “traditional conceptions” of the issues like inheritance and polygamy in Islam. Her evidences suggest that these women are not seeking to do away with such conceptions through the arguments of outmodedness or contextual irrelevance. They rather accept them as they are and then attempt to provide some logical explanations. They also develop their own critique of western liberal notions of feminism. This aspect of the project interests Dr. Bano most as it has a potential of providing alternatives to the popular notions of female empowerment.

At the level of implications, Dr Bano argues that emergence of such educational-piety movements have contested the traditional spaces of feminism in the Muslim world which had been long dominated by secular groups. “The space is getting tensed” – she says. The Islamic female movements now challenge the members of western-secular kind of groups for not representing “genuine needs of the society”, or for being the agents of economic exploitation etc. In Dr. Bano’s view, such an engagement may be beneficial for the society in long term. However what her study shows is that the two groups rarely talk to each other in

a constructive manner and this usually results with deep polarization between the religious and secular groups particularly in the cases of Pakistan and Nigeria. Interestingly, her findings suggest that the lack of healthy dialogue between the two is not caused by Islamic female groups. It is the rigidity of feminists that leads to that more as they “find it too difficult to engage with this Islamic position on women rights”, argues Dr Bano. She concluded by stating that the scholarship needs to keep observing how the relation further develops between the two traditions which seem to function very much in isolation for the time being.