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Examining "Empowerment": Insights into the Murshidat Program in Morocco

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Abstract

Following the 2003 terror attacks in Casablanca, the Moroccan government issued a series of reforms, including the introduction of the new program in Rabat that would train *murshidat*, women religious guides who would then go on to work in mosques and other public spaces all across the country. The intention of this program, the state claimed, was to 1) promote a moderate Islam and 2) empower women. In this research, I have consulted existing literature and conducted interviews with scholars and activists in the realm of women's rights to explore various sides of this question: How does the work of the murshidat relate to women's empowerment? Considering contexts of the Islamic feminist movement and the restrictions involved in state feminist efforts, I have attempted to place the murshidat in this broader scheme of women's empowerment efforts in Morocco. My work reveals that the murshidat program does not, in many important ways, reflect the aims and ideals of independent Islamic feminists. The murshidat program may, however, be read as serving a vision of empowerment that grants greater visibility to women in Moroccan Islam, among other probable benefits.

Key Terms: Empowerment, Islamic feminism, State feminism, Visibility, Agency

Acknowledgements

The outbreak of COVID-19 situates this independent study, like those of my peers, in a unique situation. My in-person fieldwork that I had planned could not be conducted as I'd hoped, and my experience of Rabat ended far too soon. That said, as I write this ISP from the comfort of my home, I am grateful for the safety I have here in Baltimore and for all of the support I continue to receive from my new friends in Morocco and across the U.S. All of this, I know, is a great privilege.

Despite the abrupt and premature ending to my (first) chapter in Morocco, I am amazed by how much I gained from the time I did have there. I must thank my parents first. Thank you, Shawns, for supporting this experience, for inspiring me to be curious about the world, and, always, for the love you give me even when I am far away.

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I would like to thank Salim Hmimnat, my adviser for this project, for your insight, generosity, and responsiveness. Thank you, too, to all of the other scholars with whom I was so lucky to speak—in Rabat and at a distance. I am so grateful to have experienced your generosity and your wisdom.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Following the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003 which claimed 45 lives and left many wounded, the Moroccan government responded by implementing a series of reforms. Among these changes included the new role of the *murshidat*, the first state-trained female religious guides in the Islamic world. The first class of murshidat graduated in May 2006, and about 50 new murshidat have continued to be trained each year. Upon their entry into work, the murshidat offer advice to women—about spiritual matters and Quranic teachings, but also about sex, marital issues, women's health, and "what to do if your husband beats you" (Williams, 2008). The shared womanhood of the murshidat and those they serve hugely shapes the nature of these conversations: "The Mourchidat is above all a woman, a mother, a sister. Her role within the family is very sacred. She has influence in her environment" (PBS, 2015).

The monarchy's intention with creating this new state-sponsored training program and work was twofold. First, this program and all of the reforms introduced following the 2003 attacks were intended to promote a "moderate Islam," the kind that Morocco has long prided itself to have in comparison to other countries in the broader region (Wainscott, 2017, p.157). Second, the murshidat program was said to be an effort for "women's empowerment."

In this research, I seek to explore this second aim of the murshidat program. How does the role of the murshidat "empower women?" How does this work relate to the broader context of women's empowerment efforts in Morocco? What principles of feminism does the murshidat program reflect and promote? A popular western media source, *Elle*, wrote a feature on the murshidat program: "Murshidat are experts in Islamic law and tradition, who are equipped with the power—and a deep knowledge of the Quran—that allows them to promote and defend women's rights" (Abend, 2019). I wondered to what extent this is an accurate representation of

the murshidat. Are they promoting women's rights? With what sort of "power" are they equipped? The murshidat represent a new form of leadership, to be sure. I entered this research, however, with suspicion. I was suspicious of the "empowering" nature of what this new representation represents, as these women are also civil servants working for the Ministry of Religious Affairs, a male-dominated government body that places restrictions on what the murshidat say and do in their work.

Methodology

I received the School for International Training Institutional Review Board approval for this research. My research is primarily based upon an extensive review of existing literature, primarily surrounding Islamic feminism, state feminism, and, most directly, the role of the murshidat. I was unable to conduct my intended fieldwork interviewing with murshidat due to my having had to evacuate Morocco because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though this was a disappointment, I located several quality sources that feature other scholars' own fieldwork with murshidat and related actors, and I drew upon those sources using my own anthropological interpretation. I was also very grateful to have had numerous online interactions—phone calls, video chats, and email exchanges—with scholars and experts in related fields of study. After gaining proper consent from those with whom I spoke, I oscillated between those perspectives and other existing literature to form my own interpretations of how the murshidat fit into the field of women's empowerment in Morocco.

Theoretical Framework

My first aim is to present the existing field of women's empowerment in Morocco—including the various views on what empowerment means and the various efforts toward such empowerment. I will then consider, based on my own developed understanding of empowerment and the Moroccan context, how the murshidat fits into those broader questions of empowerment.

Who are the Murshidat?

Before their admission to the twelve-month murshidat program based in Morocco's capital city, Rabat, candidates undergo a series of exams that test their knowledge of the Qur'an. While students entering the parallel men's program are required to memorize the entirety of the Qur'an, the women entering the murshidat program are required only to memorize half (El Haitami, 2016, p.228). Once admitted, all students take courses in Islamic sciences, standard Arabic language, sociology, economics, law, history, and the arts of preaching and public speaking.

The men and women students learn together, to some extent. One murshida shared about this experience in an interview: "Men and women learn side by side, but only men will be able to lead prayers. Does she mind? 'No, because it is from our religion,' Haddad replies. 'We are not shocked or belittled by this.' How do the men treat you? 'There is distance, manners in our relationship'" (Williams, 2008). This difference in experience of the men and women who undergo this training becomes perhaps even more stark in their work that follows their graduation—it is this women's work that will be the focus of my research.

Following their graduation, the murshidat are sent to various posts throughout the country, often corresponding to where their family lives. Dr. Mohammed al-Zahrawi, Moroccan researcher, says that "the Murshidat have engaged broad segments of women, especially in the villages" (Al-Ashraf, 2016). Their work extends across the entire country. Much of this work takes place in mosques, often in the form of classes addressing specific disciplines relating to literacy and Qur'anic recitation (El Haitami, 2016, p.229).

However, the reach of their work extends far beyond the walls of the mosque—both physically and topically. "…The work of the *murshidat* goes beyond the walls of the mosque, to function in other institutions and thus redefine the parameters of religious authority" (El Haitami, 2016, p.230). The murshidat also conduct their teachings in mosques and other public spaces such as schools, prisons, orphanages, nursing homes, and hospitals. In the content of their teachings and advice, too, there is a broad range that extends beyond explicitly religious matters. Their usual students are "young women who seek counseling about different aspects of religion," but also "elderly women who seek social interaction" and "mothers who have questions about marital issues and parenting" (El Haitami, 2016, p.229). El Haitami continues: "These meetings also serve as "counseling sessions where women discuss their social and psychological needs…" (El Haitami, 2016, p.229). The murshidat speak directly to women's most sensitive concerns and questions—about how to be a good Muslim, yes, but also, more broadly, how to be a mother, a wife, and a woman.

Defining "Empowerment"

I must acknowledge the complicated context that exists in framing and discussing the need to "empower" Muslim women. It is this context, in fact, that initially drew me to an interest

in the work of the murshidat. It is also a context that must be acknowledged in relation to my own positionality as a researcher of this topic.

There is a long global history of white, Western actors attempting to "save" Muslim women. Lila Abu-Lughod best problematizes this trend in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* She raises the question, for example, of if "humanitarianism is the new face of colonialism" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p.175). There are explicit examples of the links between colonizers' political aims and efforts to empower women of the colonized society. Marnia Lazreg, Abu-Lughod points out for example, describes how "French colonialism enlisted women to its cause in Algeria…these [Algerian] girls are made to invoke the shift of a share of this world, a world where freedom reigns under Christian skies" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p.33).

The links between colonialist ideologies and women's empowerment efforts, too, exist in the modern day. Abu Lughod writes eloquently and powerfully (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p.47):

> When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation? What presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her? Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority…We should be wary of taking on the mantles of those late nineteenth-century Christian missionary women who devoted their lives to saving their Muslim sisters.

This problematic context is one that directly implicates me in my research. I am a white American woman who is interested in pursuing some form of international human rights work in my career. This research project of trying to understand local Moroccan empowerment efforts is one I believe to be worthwhile, but it must also be acknowledged that I am of an identity that relates me personally to certain broader structures and histories that have, in certain contexts, oppressed the very community of people about whom I speak.

This sort of critique of foreign intervention for women's empowerment efforts has not turned me away from this research; in fact, it has been the driving force behind my interest and

also my self-reflection throughout this process. This troubled history led me to the interest in looking at how Moroccan women are working to "empower" themselves, using the structures and values of Islam rather than working despite them toward some Western vision of empowerment. I aspire for my work to reach "beyond the rhetoric of salvation," as Abu-Lughod labels certain efforts, and to have this problematic context in mind as I make my own interpretations of the murshidat program.

The word "empowerment" necessitates certain questions to be asked. What kind of power is to be granted? Is it the power to be economically independent? Does true "empowerment" refer to a woman who lives without male control over her? Does it prioritize personal or systemic power? In an empowered society, do women have the *same* as men have? Do men and women operate in the same way in the society? It is this multitude of questions—of answers—that characterizes the complexity of the field of women's empowerment in Morocco.

Two "Extremes": Islamists and Liberal Feminists

In the field of opinions and efforts regarding the position and empowerment of women in Morocco, there are two extreme ends of an ideological spectrum that are imperative to discuss. On one end of the spectrum is the Islamist position, which "demands a legislative system more rigidly based on *shari'a* and, in regard to women's position in that society, allows for no role for women in that legislative system and "prioritizes Islam and gender complementarity" (Eddouada, 2010, p.III-IV).

Though worldwide, many people understand the Islamist position to be necessarily and entirely misogynistic, there are some more nuanced characteristics than this that one must point out. Professor Souad Eddouada points to such an example found in the conservative Islamist

political party, Parti de la justice et du Développement (PJD). In the view of PJD deputy Bassima Hakkaoui, "the concept of justice is broader than that of mere equality, which is limited to the goal of securing uniform treatment, and as such implies greater rights for women. She believes that justice is a way of avoiding a confusion of gender roles and thus of recognizing the value of a woman's role as wife and mother" (Eddouada, 2010, p.VII).

Moreover, Ilyass Bouzghaia, Researcher at the Centre d'Etudes Feminines en Islam in Rabat, pointed out that in his view "there is extremism on the right *and* the left" (personal interview, January 2020). In this, Bouzghaia alludes to the other end of the ideological spectrum that he frames as opposite to the Islamist one. For these purposes, I will refer to this end of the ideological spectrum as "liberal feminism," the term used by Professor Eddouada to refer to those organizations and actors that "try to institute equality between the sexes" (Eddouada, 2010, p.I)."Liberal Moroccan feminists," Eddouada writes, "had always based their demands… on universal principles of gender equality and human rights. This approach, which was rigorously secular and universalist, significantly contributed to linking the notion of women's rights in public opinion with the abandonment of Muslim culture and its replacement by a supposedly egalitarian Western one" (Eddouada, 2010, II).

I will now outline some of the criticisms that have surrounded this liberal feminism in Morocco—grievances particularly of those who likely also view it as an "extreme" ideology and activism. In our discussion of the liberal feminists, Bouzghaia made the connection to an even broader context: "Globalization is sometimes equal to westernization…individualism is rising." Bouzghaia continued, "[There is a] hegemonic model of Western feminism," and, he explained, many people feel that "it tries to destroy the family" (personal interview, January 2020).

People also refer to liberal feminism as "secular" or "universalist." Moroccan liberal feminists have at times collaborated with other movements internationally. More broadly, though, too, liberal feminism uses language of universal human rights and equality that ties them, ideologically, to other movements around the globe. These influences, both real and perceived, have incited certain negative reactions, fears, and concerns in Morocco. Evidently, the response to liberal feminism has included a broad concern that it seems to threaten tradition and disrespect Muslim faith. In some of the most negative reactions to liberal feminism, it is sometimes referred to as "colonial feminism" (Rddad, 2018, pp.20-22).

Liberal feminists outside of Morocco have expressed direct and strong disapproval of the Islamist position. (The international actors are important to discuss, as one can safely assume they are part of the context in which Moroccan liberal feminists are operating.) Saba Mahmood outlines the "challenges Islamist movements pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part" (Mahmood, 2005, p.1):

> The suspicion with which many feminists tended to view Islamist movements only intensified in the after math of the September 11, 2001, attacks launched against the United States, and the immense groundswell of anti-Islamic sentiment that has followed since. If supporters of the Islamist movement were disliked before for their social conservatism and their rejection of liberal values (key among them "women's freedom"), their now almost taken-for-granted association with terrorism has served to further reaffirm their status as agents of a dangerous reality.

` It is this sort of context, it seems, that may elucidate the ways that Moroccan liberal feminists have aligned themselves ideologically with secular discourse and efforts, especially as liberal feminism in the West has become even increasingly opposed to what has been named as their Islamist opposite. Bouzghaia even described this tension in Morocco as a sort of "crisis of values" (personal interview, January 2020). These two groups—the Islamists and the liberal feminists— and their historical disagreement set the stage for a entirely new perspective to

emerge regarding women's empowerment in Morocco—a "third way."

The "Third Way": An Alternative to Islamist and Secular Approaches

The third position that has emerged in Morocco appears as somewhat of a compromise between the Islamist and liberal feminist positions on women's empowerment. Meriem El Haitami writes: "…It is commonly held that advocating women's rights is a battle led by secular and liberal groups, not by women who work from within a religious paradigm." She continues, "…Religion should not be perceived as an obstacle to women's rights" (El Haitami, 2016, p.233). It is this idea that has shaped the "third" approach, which is to use the religion of Islam that is central to Moroccan society to advocate women's rights. This approach is based partly upon this simple idea, as it was explained by Professor Souad Eddouada: "The Qur'an is really silent about gender. Human beings are reading things into it" (Eddouada lecture, April 2020).

In the discussion of this "third way," it is imperative to outline the Centre d'Etudes Feminines en Islam, founded in 2008 the state's Mohammadia League (*Al-Rabita al-Mohammadiyya)*. This research center brought together "'liberal' theologians who were members of state bodies" under the directorship of Dr. Asma Lamrabet, a public intellectual who had already written much on the rights of Muslim women. Eddouada outlines their approach well (Eddouada, 2010, p.VIII):

> Challenging the models of 'globalized feminism in the western style,' Asma Lamrabet and her Islamic feminism study group made a case for a 'third way,' associating the ideals of Islam and the egalitarian spirit of universal human rights in an effort to reconcile faith and modernity. She thus occupied a space left vacant by liberal feminists, whose lack of genuine religious commitment had exposed them to the accusation of cultural alienation or even apostasy.

Lamrabet and her team's approach stand that women must promote an "innovative reformist discourse" to "counterbalance both the colonial ideology and the traditionalist Islamic discourse," as I've outlined in the previous section (Rddad, 2018, p.21). The Center "departs from religious, Islamist perspective" (personal interview with Bouzghaia, January 2020). They also label their model a "decolonial feminism," as it rejects implications of "copy-paste what's well and good in the West to here…we [do not] submit to that, [because] not every society has the same values so you can't bring the solutions from one society to another" (personal interview with Bouzghaia, January 2020). Moreover, "[for Lamrabet] it's not Islam that is oppressive to women, but rather its '*different interpretations and legal rulings* founded by interpretative ideologies many centuries ago'" (Rddad, 2018, p.22). Thus, the Center works to re-interpret the Qur'an to highlight tolerant values within Islam, in contrast to liberal feminist efforts that some see as working totally outside of the realities of Morocco as a Muslim society.

I was lucky enough to visit the Center twice to speak with Ilyass Bouzghaia directly about his and the other researchers' process and aims. They promote a kind of Islam that is "open to the advancement of human knowledge" and considers the "transformation of social realities" (personal interview with Bouzghaia, January 2020). As interpreters and researchers, they attempt to clarify the difference between the "revelation from God" and "interpretation," both in regard to countering Islamophobia, extremism, and promoting women's empowerment by their own definition (personal interview with Bouzghaia, January 2020). The Center's approach to such interpretation is based upon the idea that the Qur'an contains ethical lessons and values, more so than literal commands of how one must live. "Islam asks us to consider consequences," such that one must "focus more on the ethical than the literal" Bouzghaia said for example (personal interview, March 2020).

While this "third way" may be seen as a position of compromise between the Islamist and liberal feminist positions on women's empowerment, it remains its own position that in fact receives heavy criticism from each of those "two extremes." When Bouzghaia discussed this two-sided backlash, he explained that he thinks it's perhaps better *not* to unify, but rather to keep the diversity in opinion, goals, and agendas: "Perhaps it's better to work separately," Bouzghaia shared (personal interview, January 2020).

Self-Based versus State-Based Feminisms

Within this broad category of the "third way," however, there is a wide range of experiences and approaches. I see the diversity in this to be, in large part, varying depending on backgrounds of involvement with the state versus a lack of involvement. There are those, such as the researchers at the Centre d'Etudes Feminines, who are employed by the state, for example; there are others who produce writings independently. "Islamic feminism" refers to the broader ideology that has primarily shaped the "third way," which includes independent activists and scholars while also having been a major influence on state feminism. State feminism, on the other hand, refers to the ways that the government "adopt[ed] Islamic feminism" for their own needs, in turn creating a new force in the scheme of women's empowerment efforts in Morocco, a force with its own ambitions and restrictions (Eddouada, 2010, p.XIII).

Some scholars describe these two "types of Islam-based feminism [found] in Morocco" as "self-based" and "state-based" (Badri, 2017). Though these two types share certain parts of their ideologies, the contexts in which their members operate are quite different: "While the [state-based category] is widespread and may include feminists from the PJD party or the JB

[Islamist] association, the [self-based category] is rather restricted to a few women and is independent" (Badri, 2017).

There is one public event, discussed often in these contexts, that has lingered in my mind as an example of the divide between self-based and state-based feminism. In March 2018, Dr. Asma Lamrabet announced her resignation from her position as director of the state-run Centre d'Etudes Feminines en Islam. The resignation occurred after a debate on the discrimination against women in Islamic inheritance law. "Regarding her resignation, she writes: "Due to conflicting positions [at the Centre] on the equality of men and woman in Islam, I was forced to hand in my resignation" (Mende, 2018). Lamrabet left the center, ultimately, because her views were more radically feminist than what the state-based feminist center allowed.

Following her resignation, Lamrabet continued speaking and writing on behalf of women's rights, from then on independent from the state. Darhour names the example of the murshidat as an example from the state-based category and, on the other end, names Lamrabet as an example of the self-based Islamic feminist (Darhour, 2019, p.58). Accordingly, Badri names Lamrabet as an example of a self-based Islamic feminist as well (Badri, 2017). Lamrabet's resignation from the state-based research center provides a visible illustration of the very real difference between the intentions and limits of state-based versus self-based feminisms in Morocco.

Self-Based Islamic Feminism

I will now attempt to introduce some of the key approaches and concepts used in Islamic feminism, primarily considering the perspectives those who are not connected to the state. (I will discuss state feminism separately, later on.) These concepts and efforts serve as an imperative

context in which to read the role of the murshidat; with a broad understanding of self-based Islamic feminist efforts, one can then better interpret the sort of "empowerment" that the murshidat is serving.

In her book *Women Claim Islam*, miriam cooke discusses the term "feminism"—which, with it, is accompanied by many negative connotations, confusions, and drawbacks. She explains, however, that she has yet to find a better alternative. In her book, cooke uses the term "feminist" to refer to "women who think and do something about changing expectations for women's social roles and responsibilities" (cooke, 2001, p.viii). Then, more specifically, cooke describes to whom she refers with the term "Islamic feminist" (in a global discussion): "Like their Iranian sisters, Arab women who situate themselves within an overtly religious discourse as 'Islamic feminists'…are objecting to the fact that women have been excluded from the physical and discursive spaces of Islam" (cooke, 2001, p.xii).

These Islamic feminists, cooke continues, are "religiously engaged public intellectuals," (cooke, 2001, p.151) and they declare a double commitment—"to the religious community and to themselves as strong women active on behalf of and with other women without the debilitating fear that pro-women action or writing will run the risk of labeling them traitors to their culture who have sold out to the West" (cooke, 2000, p.59). As Islamic feminists fight for women's full participation in Islam, they are pressured to walk this line carefully.

I am grateful to have had the chance to speak over the phone with one of the most prominent Islamic feminists in Morocco, whom I have previously discussed—Dr. Asma Lamrabet. Lamrabet, a now self-based Islamic feminist, explained the movement's approach; "Feminism is not universal. It's about universal principles, but not models" (personal interview

with Lamrabet, translated from French, April 2020). Such shared principles, she said, include equality, emancipation, and women's rights.

It is in this point that she refers to the "decolonial" aim of the Islamic feminist movement. Lamrabet gave the example of the need to not apply French feminism to the Moroccan context; France values secularism, so its version of feminism would not be embraced or effective in the Moroccan context, which is deeply rooted in Islam. "We need religious argumentation to legitimate our need of equality" (personal interview with Lamrabet, April 2020). cooke echoes the need for Islamic feminism in efforts for empowerment: "Arab women who speak or write as Islamic feminists may be the ones best equipped to … be free and responsible and yet avoid rejection because they are learning how to use religious labels while acting in the secular, political realm" (cooke, 2000, 179) These sorts of explanations illustrate well how Islamic feminism seems clearly the most effective, if not only, way to pursue progress in Morocco.

I will now highlight some of the key concepts from Islam that are used by self-based Islamic feminists. One theme I've seen repeatedly in my reading is that of "indigenous concepts of equity," as woman lawyer and scholar Raja Naji Mekkaoui best named it in a 2010 speech (Eddouada, 2010, p.IX). In this, she refers to the concept of *zauj*, the idea of equality that is part of Islam's founding story of the creation of humanity (Eddouada, 2010, p.IX).

In a similar vein, Eddouada discusses how Zomorod challenged male interpretations that claimed women to be inferior. Zomorod's key interpretation from the Qur'an was this: "Hierarchy between persons is determined, not by biology [or sex/gender], but by piety" (Eddouada, 2010, p.IX). This idea leads us to another key argument of Islamic feminists that underlies claims to women's equality in the Qur'an.

Zomorod explained this Quranic idea: "…*unutha* (femaleness) signifies suppleness, sweetness and fertility while *dhukura* (masculinity) stands for force and power" (Eddouada, 2010, p.IX). While these male-female differences do not fit easily into ideas of equality in a western liberal feminist context, they reflect a notion of women's power and equality that is indigenous to Islam and used by Islamic feminists; this is the notion of complementarity and male/female *difference* as opposed to hierarchy. See this point elaborated here (Eddouada, 2010, p.X):

> [Zomorad] has spoken of Islam's egalitarian spirit while simultaneously rejecting absolute equality between the sexes, to the degree that it is understood in terms of similarity. As Zomorod sees it, equality can only consist of complementarity, as in the Qur'anic verse where it is said that man and woman are like a garment (*libas*), each made for the other. In her view, absolute equality could only mean the renunciation by women of their biological and social roles. In her vision of complementarity, the man is the head of the family and the woman is not meant to contribute to the expenses of the household.

Islamic feminist scholar Asma Barlas offers another way of considering equality in gender through the Qur'an in her book *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. She writes on this topic "in the hope that it will be among those egalitarian and anti-patriarchal readings of Islam that will, in time, come to replace misogynist and patriarchal understanding of it" (Barlas, 2002, p.209). Barlas writes: "[Islam] opposes modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation that represent man as a 'constituting Cartesian subject' and woman as his Other" (Barlas, 2002, p.129). Most significantly, Barlas explains, such notion of equality can be found in the Qur'an's story of humanity's creation (Barlas, 2002, p.130):

> …Not only does the Qur'an not define women and men in terms of binary oppositions, but that it also does not portray women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the tradition of Western/ized patriarchal thought. Unlike the latter, the Qur'an does not even associate sex with gender, or even with a specific division of labor, or with masculine and feminine attributes (e.g., men

with intellect and reason and women with instinct and emotion); rather, since they manifest *the whole*, the Qur'an does not endow humans with a fixed nature.

The Islamic feminist movement is heavily based in (re)interpretations of religious texts, so, naturally, these interpretations are comprised of a diverse range of readings and claims. That said, these readings are all used for shared aims—to improve women's rights and roles in Muslim societies, and to fight for their full participation in their religion.

State Feminism

At face value, the Moroccan government's shift to form its own state feminist efforts emerged from a need to "simultaneously satisfy the demands of feminists and those of the Islamists" (Eddouada, 2010, p.XII). This reading of history generally reflects the understanding of the "third way" as a logical compromise between "two extremes" of the left and right in Morocco. This is true—and it is explained and evidenced well in valuable scholarship from Eddouada (Eddouada, 2010). Morocco's state feminism, however, also comes out of a broader geopolitical context and set of intentions, which I will outline here.

In his 2018 paper, Salim Hmimnat writes of the formation and aims of Morocco's Transnational Religious Policy (MTRP). The primary aims of this agenda, Hmimnat writes, are as follows: to promote Morocco's regional leadership in Africa; to assist other countries' work rehabilitating their own religious establishments; and to build their capacity to prevent extremist ideologies from growing in the region (Hmimnat, 2018, p.1). Put in broad terms, Hmimnat's work defends the claim that Morocco's decisions and policies regarding the promotion of a moderate Islam, including the murshidat program, are grown not only out of a need to form

compromise between internal groups but also to promote Morocco's power and influence internationally.

There has been a long history of what Hmimnat labels as "faith-based diplomacy," citing a regional religious policy enacted in the 1980s to "break Morocco's isolation on the continent" (Hmimnat, 2018, p.7). In reference to the policies relevant to my topic of the murshidat program, Hmimnat labels the post-2003 religious reforms as a "marketing effort" to the international community. In demonstrating a "moderate" Islam, Morocco markets itself with this primary goal, Hmimnat writes: "…to regain the international community's confidence, especially the West, and reassure them of Moroccan Islam's credibility and competitive potential in the global market of symbolic and spiritual identities" (Hmimnat, 2018, p.10). This context (and set of intentions) that Hmimnat elucidates is crucial to point out, as the murshidat program exists to serve that "marketing effort" purpose, at least in part.

In a personal interview via email, Hmimnat discusses the murshidat in this context directly (personal correspondence with Hmimnat, May 2020):

> The Murshidat program comes at the heart of the state-sponsored programs that have been intensively marketed since 2006. In so doing, the Moroccan state has gained a wide visibility at international level setting a soft religious model that speaks the language of tolerance and peace in face of the extremist ideologies. The experience of murshidate contributes also in portraying Morocco as a moderate, open country in which women enjoy equal rights and agency in public sphere.

In a personal interview with Eddouada, she echoed a similar sentiment about the relationship between government policy and religion: "Religion in the country is not just a faith, but a public policy, a homeland security" (personal interview with Eddouada, April 2020). It is precisely this context that first inspired me to explore the role of the murshidat, to consider what complex set of intentions surrounds the program and, frankly, to investigate whether there might be restrictions that limit their so-called "empowerment" work.

The Murshidat Work Within the Patriarchal System

I will now speak more directly about the murshidat program and how it relates to the aims of Islamic feminism and the restrictions of state feminism. The role of these women spiritual guides is complex; though it is part of state-based feminism, most concretely, it does not fit to simply into one label of "empowering" or "restricted." It is my intention here to outline arguments on either side, to paint an accurate picture of the murshidat in the multiple important contexts in which they occupy space.

The murshidat, being part of the larger context of hierarchies of Moroccan government and religion, are not (at least at face value) fighting against the patriarchal system; they are working for and within it. One murshida interviewed by El Haitami speaks to this characteristic of her work: "We do not wish to converge with Muslim feminists who dismiss the established body of Islamic scholarship and make use of hermeneutic tools to re-read scripture. Rather, we wish to build on Islam's orthodox tradition using the same tools as traditional scholars" (El Haitami, 2016, p.237). In this, the murshida claims that the road to empowerment must be *through* the patriarchal systems and traditions that exist, not directly against them.

This does not generally fit with the principles of most self-based Islamic feminists. In cooke's definition of the movement, she writes: "Saying no to those who claim to speak for them, [Islamic feminists] are engaging in public debate about the proper roles and rights of Muslim men and women" (cooke, 2001, p.57). Clearly, the murshidat are not doing this: "Unlike contemporary Muslim feminists, who seek to counter legal and social discrimination by appropriating hermeneutical tools in the study of religious texts, the *murshidat*…seek to cultivate a collective practice of piety that exists within patriarchal structures" (El Haitami, 2016, 234). The murshidat are not, like the Islamic feminists, debating patriarchal systems and ideas. In her

lecture, Eddouada explained: "[the murshidat] cannot speak about anything outside of the guidebook. They need approval from their boss to talk with people; this shows how much control there is of these women in their work… Mosques are completely controlled. This is not a democracy"(lecture by Eddouada, April 2020).

In fact, even in my own experience of working to connect with murshidat in Rabat, I saw the intense restrictions surrounding who may speak to them and what they have the freedom to say. The murshidat are notoriously difficult to reach; when I visited the Regional Religious Council to discuss my wish to speak with murshidat, I went through three or four levels of written and verbal permissions, including many questions regarding what research questions I would be asking the murshidat. El Haitami told me, in an interview, about her own experience. Officially speaking, one must acquire permission from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to conduct research with murshidat. El Haitami explained that "of course you never get it…that would never happen" (personal interview with El Haitami, May 2020).

For her own research, El Haitami was able to establish most contacts through personal connections in her hometown of Fes; for example, she has a friend with sister who is a murshida. Despite that it was easier for her to establish contacts because she is Moroccan and a woman, El Haitami shared, she still encountered major difficulty in her process of permissions and connections. At one point, these restrictions even caused her to have to move her fieldwork from Fes to Rabat (personal interview with El Haitami, May 2020).

In my own visit to the Regional Religious Council, I was struck by the quite elaborate and ornate nature of the building; it reminded me that there is not only symbolic hierarchy, but money and *power* that is woven into that hierarchy. It is under this sort of control as described by

El Haitami, backed by the power and money that comes with that sort of authority, that the murshidat are working.

It is in this controlled environment that skepticism of the "empowering" nature of the murshidat program may be raised. For example, "While Lamrabet finds the idea of female preachers 'interesting,' she's at pains to point out that having women as messengers changes little if the message itself remains essentially 'patriarchal'" (Qantara, 2017). "These preachers don't advance women's cause," Lamrabet says. "Judicial equality, dignity, liberty and emancipation. These are the keys to feminism" (Qantara, 2017).

As a (now) self-based Islamic feminist, Lamrabet explained to me in an interview, *"Je me semble toute libre."* "I feel completely free," Lamrabet said in French, in contrast to the kind of limits placed on empowerment work done within the state system of patriarchy (personal interview with Lamrabet, translated from French, April 2020).

"These Women are Not Imams"

A large part of the discussion of whether or not the murshidat are "empowering women" centers on the fact that they are *not* women working in high positions of leadership in the mosque system; their role is entirely different from the male imams, but it is not always described in such a way: "It is interesting to note that the media, especially the international media, have considered these murshidat as 'female imam'…They were assigned to maintain a masculine religious hierarchy" (my translation from the French version, Lamrabet, 2017, p.132). Lamrabet's point is echoed by Eddouada: "These women are not imams, they cannot lead prayers. These women are social workers" (Eddouada lecture, April 2020). I will discuss this

role more specifically, and how it stands in contrast to the aims of the Islamic feminists I've studied.

Early on in the formation of the murshidat program, the Endowments Ministry requested a fatwa from the High Council affirming the program's validity. "The ensuing legal opinion noted that while women are neither weak nor incapable of leading prayer, Maliki jurisprudence forbids women from leading men in prayer or otherwise performing the traditional functions of imams" (Feuer, 2016, p.30). This is quite explicit; the murshidat are not to work in the traditional functions of male imams; their authority or legitimacy in the mosques is far more limited than that of the imams (or at least their role is *different* than the imams).

In my conversation with Lamrabet, she discussed with me one of the fundamental intentions of the Islamic feminist movement of which she is a part: women must be put in positions of leadership in religious sphere. She writes, too, about the heavy barriers to women achieving this goal: "Indeed, since religious power is intimately linked to political power, leadership and the interpretation of the Sacred Texts remain the privilege of men only. It is out of fear of losing its political power and its prerogatives that Muslim orthodoxy has generally refused women's access to spiritual authority, high religious office and knowledge" (my translation from Lamrabet, 2017, p.133). These high positions are they key, to Lamrabet and her peers, to women's empowerment through Islam.

The murshidat, in contrast to these Islamic feminist goals, work "just to guide the women in the interior of the mosque, to learn the alphabet, the basic things of studying religion" (personal interview with Lamrabet, translated from French, April 2020). Their work is not nearly the same as the work of theologians, for example, who have a doctorate (and far more influence, Lamrabet suggested). El Haitami echoed a similar sentiment in her interview; for her, too, the

murshidat program is of value in its own unique role in the movement, but it holds little potential

for inspiring the needed changes to bring women into the necessary positions of religious and

theological leadership (personal interview with El Haitami, May 2020).

Quotas, Visibility, and Symbolic Empowerment

Though the murshidat do not serve as an example of women who are ascending high

positions in the mosque hierarchy as imams, for example, the role of the murshidat in and of

itself is worth considering. What kind of empowerment *does* it reflect? In what ways is this

empowerment valuable?

Lamrabet offers useful vocabulary for the kind of empowerment murshidat are serving—

"symbolic empowerment": "This [murshidat program] initiative is commendable in its symbolic

valuing of women in the sacred space" (my translation from the French version, Lamrabet, 2017,

p.131). During our interview, Lamrabet noted that "Ten years ago there were no women guides

in the mosques" (personal interview with Lamrabet, April 2020). This is no insignificant feat,

this step within symbolic empowerment.

El Haitami discusses potential drawbacks that may accompany such moves of symbolic

empowerment under Moroccan state programs and policies (El Haitami, 2016, p.238):

> The country has enacted a quota system to overcome the social obstacles that women
> face when entering the political domain. This quota system also aims to establish
> democratic measures with regard to women's political participation. But such a policy
> also raises doubts about women's capacity to fulfill the required duties of these
> offices. Under the quota system, women are given significant positions not because of
> their qualifications but because of their gender. This questions their legitimacy and
> undermines the credibility of any changes they may make to the political scene.

The values and politics underlying a quota system are undeniably related to the series of reforms

in which the murshidat may be contextualized. The murshidat program serves Morocco's intentions for a particular appearance similar to that of quota system; this is evidenced by Hmimnat's discussion of moderate Islam and women's empowerment policies as a "marketing effort," as discussed earlier. It is possible that, as El Haitami suggests in her discussion of the quota system, that the *appearance* of empowering women through the murshidat program may perhaps ultimately serve as a limitation to progress as it suggests greater empowerment than is being enacted in the reality of the program. One must ask, is empowerment that is purely symbolic a *false* empowerment?

Despite the potential limitations to moves toward symbolic empowerment efforts, it should be noted, too, how some scholars discuss the usefulness of this form of empowerment by terms of "visibility" (for example, Wainscott, 2017, and Feuer, 2016). cooke describes the importance of women working through Islamic systems (that have historically marginalized them) to create greater visibility for them (cooke, 2001, p.55). In such discussions, it is suggested that visibility, too, is a principle in line with Islamic feminist efforts, even if other characteristics of the murshidat program are not.

Do the Murshidat Exercise Agency?

The training and employment of the murshidat is a project of Moroccan state feminism, as has been described in previous sections. This raises questions of the ways women are being *put to use* for political aims, a trend that has a troubled history in global politics. Wainscott discusses, for example, the ways that U.S. President George Bush's administration "argued that 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.' The discourse of

'saving Iraqi women' helped legitimate the war, especially after it became clear that no weapons of mass destruction would be found" (Wainscott, 2017, p.137).

At face value, it may seem that connecting this to the Moroccan murshidat context is far-fetched. It is not. Wainscott later points to the fact that Morocco's policies on women's empowerment—or more broadly Morocco's linking of anti-terrorist efforts to efforts of women's empowerment—emerged under the influence of this exact sort of Western rhetoric and pressure. "Morocco became a rhetorical ally of the U.S. War on Terror by 2004, after the Casablanca bombings. For the Moroccan state to attempt a reform to the legal code that governs the rights of women at the very moment that it embraced America's rhetoric about terrorism effectively legitimated Washington's discourse: Morocco seemed to agree that Muslim women (far beyond Iraq) are in need of saving." (Wainscott, 2017, p.137) This trend of Muslim women's rights being put to political use is what deeply concerned Abu-Lughod and sent her to the territory of rights as an anthropologist (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p.173). The same skepticism should be present for us investigating the role of the murshidat, women whose rights (to some extent, at least) are being put to Morocco's political use on both the domestic and international scale.

Wainscott offers a view into the work of the murshidat that frames them quite differently than their role being some sort of social workers, as has been described by numerous others (Wainscott, 2017, p.157):

> The creation of new positions of religious authority not only supports the narrative of Morocco as a moderate country but also gives women responsibilities in the War on Terror. The state expects *mourchidat* not only to bring Moroccan religious policy out of the mosque and into the home but also to police their own communities, identifying 'bad Muslims' and reporting them. The state thus relies on women for its international image and for its domestic policing of the religious sphere.

This is a significant claim. It should perhaps be taken with some uncertainty, as Hmimnat suggests: "I take Wainscott's point and it might reflect parts of the state policy, yet I tend to think

this "securitized" view would be a mere interpretation, unless such a view is built upon official directives (in the form of ministerial circulars), facts and field-based observations" (personal interview with Hmimnat, May 2020). It is important to understand that official state policy regarding the role of the murshidat may not entirely reflect the real lived experiences on the ground.

That said, given that I am unable to conduct fieldwork myself in Morocco at this time, I take Wainscott's point to be considered as reliable scholarship that reflects some level of the reality on-the-ground. In a conversation with miriam cooke, I raised Wainscott's point of murshidat being expected to "identif[y] bad Muslims," and she provided a passionate response. She related this sort of role (if it is true of the murshidat) to some other examples of what she labels "morality policing"; she discussed examples of when ruling elites (of the Islamic state) have used groups of women to make sure the ideology of the organization is widespread and controlled (personal interview with cooke, April 2020). cooke continued, in the most "gruesome" examples, such as the Al-Khansaa brigade in Iraq, women have been "empowered by the Islamic state to keep a careful control of the women inside the Islamic state" (personal interview with cooke, April 2020). What this looks like in practice is that when a woman doesn't cover every piece of her hair, for example, a woman from that "brigade" tells on her (with severe consequences) (personal interview with cooke, April 2020).

From what cooke had interpreted from my description of the murshidat, she responded: "You've got a group of women with an agenda" (personal interview with cooke, April 2020). In these most gruesome examples of women being put to use by the state, these women's total lack of agency reflects, pretty straightforwardly, "the opposite of empowerment," as cooke said (personal interview with cooke, April 2020). cooke did not equate such instances to the

murshidat program, but it is a context I see as necessary to consider as a possibility given Wainscott's point that these women are sent, in part, to monitor a given community's Islam.

That said, however, it is important to not assume a lack of agency being exercised by women who are working for the state; this is an instance in which my own western vision of what "agency" means may perhaps limit my ability to understand other forms of agency, specifically agency in personal piety. Mahmood raises this point well (Mahmood, 2005, p.2):

> People often believe that] women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan, who, if freed from bondage, would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores used to enchain them…[it is] the assumption that there is something intrinsic to women that *should* predispose them to oppose the practices, values, and injunctions that the Islamist movement embodies.

Agency is an essential idea in discussions of feminism in many of its various forms; to assume that Muslim women such as the murshidat are unable to exercise their agency would be a key point *against* their work being truly "empowering" for them and/or women in Morocco more broadly. The sort of belief that Mahmood describes is that in which one assumes their own vision of agency to be what the given Muslim women want or *need* to be exercising. I must not assume that the murshidat, or likewise any women employed by an Islamic state, are not exercising (some form of) agency as they work to defend the Moroccan state's intentions

Mahmood elaborates on this point by introducing forms of agency that fall outside Western liberal feminist definitions. She writes that feminist scholarship has ignored these different modalities of agency, and she outlines such forms in this captivating example. In her work based in Egypt, Mahmood follows the stories of two women, each facing the difficulties of being "single in a society where heterosexual marriage is regarded as a compulsory norm" (Mahmood, 2005, p.168). One woman Mahmood labels a "secular Muslim" and the other she explains is a pious woman of the mosque movement (part of Egypt's Islamic Revival).

Mahmood states that a Western audience would likely assume the secular woman to be "more agentival," but in truth the points that the pious woman demonstrates a greater agency through her practice of the virtue of *sabr*, which roughly means 'to persevere in the face of difficulty without complaint'" (Mahmood, 2005, p.171).

Sabr, a practice of piety, "does not necessarily make one immune to being hurt by others' opinions…[but] allows one to bear and live hardship *correctly* as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation" and as a second consequence, it "fortifies one's ability to deal with social suffering" (Mahmood, 2005, p.172). It is in this point that Mahmood demonstrates how this practice offers the pious woman an alternative form of agency, one attached to her piety within the Islamist mosque movement, rather than *despite* it as a western audience might assume.

Mahmood writes: "What we have here is a notion of human agency, defined in terms of individual responsibility, that is bounded by both an eschatological structure *and* a social one…this account privileges…a conception of individual ethics whereby each person is responsible for her own actions" (Mahmood, 2005, p.173). In this sense, Mahmood claims "women do not need to resist oppression directly, because their agency can be embodied in a practice of personal piety" (El Haitami, 2016, p.234). We must consider that there are potentially other forms of agency that Morocco's murshidat are exercising that extend beyond whatever restrictions are placed on them by the Moroccan government that oversees and controls their work. There is potential for "empowerment" in how murshidat may be exercising these forms of agency which I myself do not see as a non-Muslim and American woman (and one who is doing remote research, at that).

Women's Work Within a Women's World

There is a very private nature to the majority of the work of the murshidat: "When addressing mixed [gender] audiences, the preachers share their interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadiths, but when addressing all-female audiences, they also give advice on private and sometimes intimate, issues such as how to dress in private and public spaces, how to interact with men in those spaces, and how to deal with sexual problems" (Badri, 2017). The privacy—or the separateness—of murshidat's work with other women reminds me of a term used by American anthropologist named Laura Ring—"women's world."

Zenana pictures a community of women in Karachi, Pakistan and the ways that their everyday interactions of borrowing, communicating, and sharing domestic space uphold certain structures of peace despite the violence that exists outside those apartment building walls in Karachi. A professor at my American university introduced me to the relevant term "women's world" to label the distinctive social world of these Karachi women Ring describes and others like it. Societies that are classified as having women's worlds are those in which there is a full social order centered on norms and activities between women, in separation from men.

I thought of the *Zenana* in one of my first moments settling into Rabat when I met my host family at the CCCL Lagza annex. I was greeted by my host mom and the women who live in the house next door to her. Most of the people present in the lobby to represent the "host families" of me and my fellow American students were women. The women of different families spoke to each other in Darija—about what, I did not know. But as I observed their lively chatter and their kisses on each cheek, I imagined them as cousins, neighbors, and friends. It was then that I first began to ruminate on the term "women's world" in the Moroccan context. (This

paragraph was written in an earlier essay of mine, submitted to Professor Belghazi in February

2020).

As my time in Morocco went on, I saw more of this women's world every day—both in

my experiences with women in my host family's home and, in contrast, through observations of

the public lives of men. The notion of a "women's world" is discussed directly by cooke. She

cites ideas of Leila Ahmed; there has been the evolution of two islams, one for women and one

for men (cooke, 2001, p.xii). cooke goes on: "Women, who were generally illiterate, visited the

mosques for private, personal reasons only. They did not attend the Friday congregational

prayer…Women worked out their own understandings of Islam" (cooke, 2001, p.xii).

Given this reality of Moroccan society—its men's and women's worlds and their

distinctness—it is entirely worth considering the ways that the murshidat program places women

to work within that reality to support each other. Hmimnat explains his own insight into the

efficacy of women's work within the women's world (personal interview with Hmimnat, May

2020):

> …According to some interviews I have conducted last year with state religious
> bureaucrats in Morocco, they really appreciate and value the work undertaken by
> murshidat, considering it of importance in the sense they can access places (homes,
> prisons), discuss sensitive issues (of social and sexual nature) and talk to some people
> (teenagers, elders...) Imams cannot easily and always reach.

To elaborate on this point, I would argue that of great importance in the fight for

women's justice includes the real lived experiences of women—including the success of support

for women on-the-ground. "Before the mourchidat, women had no one to answer their

questions,' says Dr Rajaa Naji el Mekkaoui, an expert in family law at the Université Mohamed-

V in Rabat, and one of the architects of the mourchidat programme" (Williams, 2008). Given

that there is a distinct "women's world" within Moroccan society, Moroccan women "often find

it difficult to seek religious guidance from men on intimate things pertaining to their lives from men" (Badri, 2017). Thus, there is a great efficacy of the women such as the murshidat who do their "social work" or support from within the women's world. This was echoed by Lamrabet: "In this way, it's good—women couldn't go to an imam for [these things]" (personal interview with Lamrabet, April 2020). This is something of great value that the murshidat program has contributed to (and within) the women's world.

Perhaps, even, as one murshida explained to El Haitami, we might value the nature of women's unique bonds and ways of interacting as a way of practicing religion that is equally valuable to that of the men's world. "[One murshida] adds that when discussing matters of religion, the female scholar or religious guide should have enough wisdom to combine the 'emotional' discourse that prioritizes inner experiences with a more 'practical' understanding of religious teachings, so that their audiences can develop a balanced understanding of religious practice" (El Haitami, 2016, p.237). The disagreement to this, though, comes from the stance that such perceived differences between men and women's tendencies upholds damaging stereotypes that maintain unjust hierarchies.

In regard to those reinforced stereotypes, there are numerous ideas related to separatism that directly problematize the work of the murshidat (as opposed to more women being raised to higher leadership positions such as those of men). As Fatima Mernissi explains in her own terms, the universe of men corresponds to the public sphere (and world of religion and power), while the universe of women corresponds to the private realm of family and sexuality (Mernissi, 1987, p.138). This is not only, then, two separate worlds, but two separate worlds that uphold oppressive power structures in government and religion. The separatism of women's and men's world is viewed by many feminist activists and scholars, such as El Haitami, as a totally

oppressive force. This public-private dichotomy (of women's and men's worlds) has

"…generated an attitude of segregation, subordination, and mistrust" (El Haitami, 2016, p.236).

Claims to support the unique "nature" of women, for example in regard to the murshidat

program, are sometimes marginalizing. Here is one example (El Haitami, 2016, p.235):

> [Dr. Mostafa Benhamza, president of the local religious council of Oujda stated that] the fact that women have failed to fulfill their religious role within their families has resulted in value crises in families. Benhamza also added that women are 'preachers' by nature, naturally inclined toward talking. So they either engage in religious conversations, which can be rewarding for their families and their society, or they engage in empty conversations, which can negatively affect their families and those around them.

Evidently, discussions of women's distinctiveness from men help to support

discriminatory policies and power structures in Morocco. As cooke puts it best, in my opinion,

she writes: "Some women have experimented with the concept of *harem*, or separate women-

specific space to create the conditions for empowerment, dignity, and justice for women…

Separatism is not an option for those who believe in the possibility of creating the conditions in

which whole individuals can live in whole societies" (cooke, 2001, p.55). Despite that there are

certainly some positive potentials found in the murshidat program, one must be suspicious of

such that appear to draw on so-called "women's sensibilities"; it is clear that such "sensibilities"

can be drawn upon to rationalize keeping women in a subordinate position.

On-The-Ground

Abu-Lughod provides a critique of the Islamic feminist movement: "…There is always a

certain incommensurability between everyday lives and the social imagination of rights, whether

by outsiders, by veterans of women's activism in the region, or by these new cosmopolitan

Islamic feminists" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p.176). In regard to the murshidat, I find this to be a

useful point. Despite the ways that the murshidat program does not run parallel to certain values and aims of the Islamic feminist movement, these murshidat are, without a doubt, helping to support women in certain ways. At the very least, they offer advice, community, and a listening ear to women. Moreover, it has been reported that they are successfully "attracting a broad following across different social classes, as opposed to women's rights groups, which have limited outreach" (El Haitami, 2016, p.233). In this, there is hope; there is some degree of empowerment that this program is certainly serving.

That said, there are serious limitations to my ability to fully answer the question of empowerment in the murshidat program by nature of my research being conducted remotely. In particular, it is difficult to tell how policies (such as "morality policing") and official intentions of the program do or do not actually reflect real lived experiences on-the-ground.

Bargaining With Patriarchy

What I am able to say, however, is this. The role of the murshidat seems more closely influenced by the restrictions of State feminism rather than the ideology of Islamic feminism. It seems fair to say that all individuals engaging in the arena of women's rights in Morocco face different kinds of and levels of pressure. It is in this point that I find Anthony Richmond's theory of the "spectrum of coercion" especially useful.

This theory was introduced to me in a book on refugees from the Greek Civil War. Of Richmond's theory, Danforth and Van Boeschoten write: "Richmond argues that decisions of refugees to leave their homes always involve what he calls a 'spectrum of coercion.' These decisions are made, in other words, in the context of complicated power relations that involve 'varying degrees of autonomy and dependence'" (Danforth and Van Boeschoten, 2012, p.60).

Though in this context the authors discuss the anthropology of refugees, I see it fit here to discuss the pressures faced by the murshidat, as they, too, must be understood by way of "the complex relationships between the constraints and the options involved" in the realm of women's rights and power in an Islamic system (Danforth and Van Boeschoten, 2012, p.60).

The murshidat may be understood as facing coercion by the state's authority—coercion being a continuum rather than two opposite poles—just as even self-based activists in the realm of women's rights, too, face certain degrees of pressure. Scholar El Haitami who works independently from the state, for example, still faces her own self-limitation due to these patriarchal pressures; she must be "very careful" with what information she uses from interviews with murshidat, so as to protect those with whom she works. In regard to her own protection, she explained that because she writes in English and in academic journals, she is able to have a greater degree of freedom in her scholarship and critiques because that work is not accessible to those in Morocco who might be most bothered by her work (personal interview with El Haitami, May 2020). She, too, is clearly subject to certain pressures she must consider in her work.

The degree of coercion that one faces, a murshida in her work for example, is incredibly important in the reading of their work's intentions and effects; and such coercion by the state does not necessarily rule out the murshidat's value in the fight for empowerment at large. Kandiyoti introduces his own theory—that of "patriarchal bargains," the ways women activists are called to strategize in the face of oppression, working in different ways to respond to the "rules of the game" in a given patriarchal context (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.274). Kandiyoti writes that such strategizing ,which may sometimes limit the outcomes from the idealistic version of what an activist might truly want, is necessary in a fight for progress (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.275):

> These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts.

They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression. Moreover, patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between genders.

cooke writes of such strategizing in the more direct context of Islamic feminists, too: These women are "strong individuals who are balancing national, transnational religious, and feminist agendas in an attempt to construct a society hospitable to them" (cooke, 2000, 181). El Haitami echoes a similar sentiment: "[Islamic feminists] construct spaces of negotiation…they work within certain constraints" (personal interview with El Haitami, May 2020). Murshidat, too, are capable of strategizing, of course; the nature of their work within the state's agenda does not denounce their potential to be working toward empowerment by their own definition and through their own chosen bargains.

Potential Advancement of the Murshidat Program

I spoke with Stephanie Bordat, an American NGO activist and Founding Partner at Mobilizing for Rights Associates, an organization dealing with gender-based violence issues in Morocco. Bordat told me she had heard that the Association Anaouat in Chichaoua had begun a sort of partnership with the murshidat in their area (personal interview with Bordat, April 2020). If a woman came to the murshida describing an instance of domestic violence, for example, the murshida would help connect the woman to resources available through the local NGO, rather than the traditional alternative of telling the woman to "be patient with her husband and pray" (personal interview with Bordat, April 2020). Though this is certainly not common and is likely only possible in areas with less close monitoring from the state, it is happening, and I have great hope for this sort of collaboration to expand.

In a similar vein, Hmimnat informed me of an instance in which the murshidat in certain regions have worked with NGOs projects for the prevention of sexually transmitted, family planning, and contraception. Hmimnat was kind enough to share with me a copy of the poster from a presentation he attended in 2019 in Houceima, Morocco.

Another realm in which murshidat and NGOs are partnering is in the space of the mosque itself (especially in big cities). El Haitami shared with me that oftentimes, murshidat invite experts to come speak to their community in the mosque; this includes not only NGO workers, but doctors, lawyers, and numerous others (personal interview with El Haitami, May 2020). This sort of collaboration, she explained, marks an important shift that has occurred also, in which feminist actors realize they must partner with the "grassroots." El Haitami sees the "grassroots" to include the murshidat, who are working most closely with certain women communities (personal interview with El Haitami, May 2020).

Despite the certain limitations put on the murshidat's work, I see great potential in this sort of partnership between murshidat and NGOs. A crucial challenge for all NGO work is to effectively connect with and reach the communities they intend to serve; who better to reach Moroccan women communities than the murshidat? It is precisely this kind of partnership that makes me hopeful that the work of "saving Muslim women" that Abu-Lughod so heavily critiques might possibly grow into something that is more cognizant of local realities of religion, beliefs, and social systems (especially when it is being led by Muslim women themselves). Only under such circumstances is there a potential to bridge the aims of "decolonial" feminisms to ethical and effective humanitarian efforts.

Conclusion

It is my hope that in my discussion, I have provided various key considerations so that one can more accurately and critically judge the so-called "empowering" nature of the murshidat program in Morocco. I believe this discussion holds relevance in a broad swath of contexts— particularly those of state feminist programs across the globe, creative forms of activism and agency, and the multiple agendas and identities that women in a patriarchal society must often hold as they work to advance progress. I am grateful to all of the activists and scholars who have shared their powerful insights with me. Thank you.

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