

AMSS 41st ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Religious Dimensions of Democratization
Processes in Muslim-Majority Nations”

Cosponsored By:
Yale Divinity School

&

Council on Middle East Studies - The MacMillan Center
Yale University, New Haven, CT

Saturday, September 29, 2012

FINAL PAPER

“Morocco’s State-Sponsored Women Religious Guides (*murshidat*)
and Scholars (*‘alimat*): Re-conceptualizing Female Religious
Authority and Activism in Contemporary Morocco”

By: Meriem El Haitami

(Ph.D. Candidate, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco)
Fulbright Research Scholar (Joint Supervision Program)
2012-2014, Binghamton SUNY

Introduction

The recent political upheavals in the Arab world were marked by women’s significant presence in struggling for democracy alongside men. Muslim women activists in Morocco have particularly gained legitimacy in the context of the Arab spring, which has brought the Justice and Development conservative political party into power. This has contributed to a shift from the elite liberal state feminism to a more legitimate religious activism. This introduces new spaces for contention, taking into consideration that following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, Morocco has taken a series of measures to absorb the growing momentum of political Islam. One such measure has been to restructure the religious field, by means of reforming and controlling the dynamics of religion in Morocco; this was primarily marked by a significant entry and deployment of women in the religious field as religious leaders and scholars. These state-trained female religious authorities offer spiritual counseling and religious instruction to different social segments. Therefore, they redefine parameters of religious authority and define a new model of activism which aims at cultivating collective pious conduct within the society and thus contribute to a comprehensive social reform.

Therefore, this paper explores the intricate dynamics and religious expressions of women within the religious sphere in Morocco and in the light of the current social and political

changes and within the framework of the global struggle for democracy, gender equality and human rights. I examine how these women construct authority as religious leaders, and the impact they have on their audience(s) and on the wider community, and how they endorse the authority of the state to control the dynamics of religion in Morocco and curb voices of individuals or groups that operate outside of official Islam. I argue that despite the fact that these female religious authorities are viewed as instruments of state propaganda, they are gaining wider legitimacy and are contributing greatly to the social welfare of their communities, which makes their 'official' entry into the religious domain a serious step toward democracy and positive change.

Contextualizing Female Islamic Activism in Morocco

The recent political upheavals in the Arab world have led to dramatic changes due to the great discontent of people with their authoritarian regimes. In the Middle East and North Africa, massive populations have chosen Islamic parties as a substitute for the old corrupt systems. Although Morocco managed to survive the Arab spring, it could not entirely avoid its turmoil. A number of angry protests took place in major cities and were led by the February 20 Movement which demanded the right to social equality and democracy and showed discontent with prevailing corruption. King Mohammed VI swiftly responded by drafting a modified constitution, which garnered popular support. The new constitution promised more democracy and protection of human rights. As a consequence, the moderate Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) accomplished an overwhelming victory in the November 2011 parliamentary elections. In an interview with the Jakarta post, Moroccan Ambassador to Indonesia Mohamed Majdi said, "The new constitution enshrines the democratic values of the separation of powers, independent judiciary, freedom of expression, freedom of thought and respect for minorities."¹ He also added that, "The new constitution also allows for greater political representation of women, enhanced good governance, accountability, respect for human rights and morality in public life."²

This revolutionary change in Morocco was marked by women's significant presence in struggling for democracy alongside men, especially amongst conservative political groups. For the first time in the history of Morocco, a veiled political figure, Bassima Hakkaoui, takes

¹ - Anjaiah Veeramalla, "Morocco moves on despite Arab Spring, eurozone crisis", The Jakarta Post, Jakarta, July 30 2012, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/07/30/morocco-moves-despite-arab-spring-eurozone-crisis.html>

² - Ibid.

over the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development. Although the modified Moroccan constitution recognizes gender equality and equal political representation for women, Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane's ministerial cabinet included only one female minister. This caused unease amongst the secular-liberal activists who viewed this as a decline in women's rights.

In an interview with Iman El-Yaacoubi, a member of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), she said that the party "democratically elects its ministers," she also said that "the women of the party participate in these procedures and the appointment of one female minister from our ranks was a democratic choice made by all the members of the party, regardless of gender." She added that "For years our party has had the most female representation in parliament which shows the explicit trust the party has in women, but choosing the ministers has to take into account the ministries the party won and not their gender."³

Undoubtedly, the Islamist movement in Morocco recognizes women as equal political actors, this includes groups which operate within the political system like the political party of *al-Adala Wa Tanmiya* (PJD) and others which operate outside of it like *al-Adl wa al-Ihsan* (Justice and Charity) Islamist group, yet both groups advocate gender equality and social justice within an Islamic paradigm, which allows women greater opportunities for political participation and leadership. As a group which creates an independent religious space to redefine politics, *al-Adl Wa al-Ihsan* considers women to be the cornerstone of any desired change or reform. Nadia Yassine exhibits the integral role women play within the group, she is not only the spokesperson of the group before Western media, she also founded and directs the women's section which attempts to revive the active role of women in society based on Islamic teachings and suggest re-readings of Islamic texts to counter misogynistic voices. Similarly, the PJD aims at fostering the image of a modern and democratic country based on an Islamic ideal. This is reinforced through women's increased participation in politics not only as active members, but also as parliament representatives, seeking to reflect the image of a modern and moderate Islamic party.

But as a response to the growing momentum of political Islam, in its most recent and unprecedented measures, the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs has endorsed women's

³ - Estito Imad, "Female Minister in Morocco's New Government: One Too Many?", January 23, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/3562>.

presence and authority in the religious sphere through the training of female religious preachers (*murshidat*) and scholars (*'alimat*). Since 2003, women started to participate in the Hasaniyya⁴ Ramadan lecture series; they have been assigned significant responsibility within the supreme religious council as well as local councils, and their responsibilities include offering spiritual counseling and religious instruction to different social segments. This shift toward an 'official' participation of women within the religious sphere was prompted by the May 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca. The tragic magnitude of the event urged Moroccan authorities to reconsider the state's religious policy. This primarily included adopting Sufism as the official discourse of Morocco to monitor the transmission of the religious discourse in mosques and other institutions, and thus shift toward a more moderate religious expression. This was primarily reinforced through the appointment of Ahmad Taoufiq, who is affiliated with the Boudchichi Sufi order, as the minister of Islamic affairs. This is also enhanced by the royal support to *zawiyas*, with the aim of reviving their historical role and embracing the spiritual component of Moroccan Islam. The terrorist attacks of September 2001 in the United States and May 2003 in Casablanca coincided with the increase of images of religiosity within the society; this demand was primarily absorbed by non-official institutions such as Islamist movements and the Salafi stream which has found its way into Morocco through TV channels and unstructured preaching within mosques and private spheres. Hence, reviving the Sufi tradition in Morocco was incumbent in the midst of these changes. In an interview with al-Jazeera, the former minister of culture, Ben Salem Himmich, asserted that Sufism in Morocco goes beyond a relationship of opposition with the Salafi stream: "it is a religious heritage which Morocco takes pride in and strives to protect. It can be positively utilized to reinforce universal values such as tolerance and openness, values which are inherent to Moroccan Islam."⁵ In addition to reviving the religious and social role of Sufi groups, the restructuring of the religious scene nurtures further ideological motives. It is viewed as a means to restrict non-official Islam by reshaping the religious identity of Morocco. Sufi brotherhoods are currently taking the responsibility of reshaping religious ideologies in accordance with official Islam. This was primarily reinforced through engaging intellectuals, academicians, and political leaders to reinforce official ideology and legitimize the Moroccan regime.

⁴ - The Hasaniyya lectures are a series of lectures presided by King Mohammed VI every Ramadan in his royal palace, and are attended by high ranking officials and religious authorities from all over the world.

⁵ - Bekkali Mostafa, « as-Siyasah Tughazilu Tasawwuf bi al-Maghreb », Rabat, Morocco, 29 August 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/6edf8710-d4e6-45b2-a42a-d9444426c9b9>

Like his predecessors, King Mohammed VI bears the title of *ameer al-mu'mineen* (the Commander of the Faithful), he is also a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, which underscores the status of Islam as the official religion of Morocco; the annual renewal of allegiance also endorses his legitimacy as both the spiritual and political leader of Morocco. With the advent of king Mohammed VI in 1999, “a new era of reform had begun”⁶ as Marvine Howe observes, “the new king appeared determined to correct the cruel abuses of a despotic state and lead the country firmly on the path to a modern democracy,”⁷ she says. A number of reforms and initiatives, which mainly included recognizing women’s issues and honoring their demands, were introduced. This included revising the family law in favor of women to achieve an egalitarian family model and rethink gender dynamics at both the social and political levels. The project of ‘the national action plan for integrating women in development’ has engaged the Moroccan socio-political scene all through 1999, and was officially presented in 2000. It placed great importance on major issues, such as education, health, economic as well as socio-political empowerment for women. That being said, there was pressure on the government to hold back the project, for it was seen as disruptive to the family institution, and threatening to the fundamentals of religion. Official scholars requested that the project should be revised in accordance with Islamic law; they claimed exclusive authority to interpret sacred texts. Mass marches took place in 12 March 2000; a million people, mainly Islamists, protested in Casablanca against the project, whereas 30000 people manifested in Rabat in support of it. The Rabat marches were organized by women activists and political parties⁸. This paved the way for the introduction of the revised family code ‘*moudawana*’ in 2004, which sought to reconcile Morocco’s adherence to the Maliki school of jurisprudence to secular standards of women’s rights, this engendered reconsiderations of sacred texts to empower women and counter discriminatory cultural tendencies. This was further complimented with the inclusion of women religious guides and scholars whose vital role lies in reaching out to women in underprivileged and marginalized areas of the country.

The State-Sponsored Women Religious Guides (*murshidat*) and Scholars (*alimat*): Promoting Gender Equality and Moderate Islam

⁶ - Howe Marvine, «Morocco : The Islamist Awakening and other Challenges », (Oxford University Press, 2005), p.3

⁷ - Ibid.

⁸ - Daoud Zakya, *Le plan d'intégration de la femme : Une affaire révélatrice, un débat virtuel*, (http://aan.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/volumes/1999/Documents/chro_plan-integr-femme.pdf), pp. 9-10.

The emerging phenomenon of women religious guides in Morocco has been subject of great attention by both Moroccan and foreign media. The BBC News reported that the *murshidat* “are the first women ever in any Muslim country that can perform the functions of a male Imam in a mosque.”⁹In her article for the Telegraph¹⁰, Sally Williams refers to the training as a revolution that is under way. One of her respondents refers to the training as “a rare experiment in the Muslim world”. Similarly, another respondent believes that “the Mourchidat are a liberating force for women and an inhibitor for radicalism”. The minister of Islamic Affairs, Ahmad Taoufiq, whom Williams interviewed, seems to have high hopes for the *murshidat*, “Their role can go far beyond what is expected - far beyond what the Imams in the mosques are expected to do.” Taoufiq hopes to increase the number of places for women at the seminary to 150, the same as imams, says Williams. Similarly, the Time Magazine describes the state-sponsored religious training of female preachers as unique in Islam. It describes Morocco’s war on terrorism as ‘gentle’, referring to the *murshidat*’s active contribution to counter terrorist threats.¹¹ According to the Agence Marocaine de Presse (MAP), Roz al-Yousef newspaper states that the concept of women religious guides started in Morocco and is an unprecedented experience which aims at restructuring the religious sphere as well as the role of the mosque. The newspaper considers this to be an important step toward religious tolerance and gender equality. The newspaper also states that promoting new roles for women is indeed positive progress.¹²

The integration and deployment of women religious guides and scholars has been integral as it not only presents Morocco as a model country in endorsing gender equality, but also reinforces and restructures the role that women have always fulfilled in mosques and other academic and religious institutions, it has further allowed them to operate at different levels, in order to access the different categories of the society with emphasis placed on women and youth, as well as carrying through a social dimension to their religious mission.

⁹ - Hamilton Richard, “Islam’s pioneering women preachers”, BBC News, Rabat, Morocco, 25 February 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6392531.stm>>

¹⁰ - Williams Sally, “Mourchidat - Morocco’s female Muslim clerics”, The Telegraph, 26 April 2008, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3672924/Mourchidat-Moroccos-female-Muslim-clerics.html>>

¹¹ - McGirk Tim, “Morocco’s Gentle War on Terror”, Time Magazine World, 06 August 2008, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1829931-2,00.html>>

¹² - Agence Marocaine de Press (MAP), “Fikrat al-Murshidat Diniyat Intalaqat min al-Maghreb”, 22 January 2010, <<http://www.maghress.com/map/3567>>

In an interview with the Telegraph, Dr Rajaa Naji El Mekkaoui, a Professor of law at the Université Mohamed V in Rabat and one of the designers of the *murshidat* program said that “Before the Mourchidat, women had no one to answer their questions”. “They will try to find the answers in other areas, from fundamentalist Imams - and this is a big risk to society,” she added.¹³

The program graduates 50 *murshidat* and 150 *imams*¹⁴ every year, these titles they are given correspond to the services they offer. Before their admission into the program, candidates take exams which assess their knowledge on Islamic sciences and their memorization of the Qur’an, save that men are required to memorize the whole of the Qur’an, whereas women only half of it. The candidates are also required to be under 46 years of age, and must be holders of a bachelor’s degree. The program extends over the period of 12 months. Students are trained by senior scholars from the supreme religious council, as well as academics appointed by the king. They take courses on a wide range of disciplines such as Islamic sciences, Arabic language, sociology, economics, law and history, as well as the art of preaching and public speaking. The *murshidat* work upon a contract and receive the monthly salary of 5,000 DH (\$580), and arrangements are usually made for them to work in locations close to their families.

The *murshidat* or religious guides have the advantage of accessing women, especially in underprivileged and deprived areas of the country. The government’s primary purpose is to curb extremism through offering religious counseling to women, so they can be a voice of tolerant and moderate Islam within their families and surroundings. The *murshidat*’s primary space for their activity is the mosque, their audience is most of the time mothers who have questions about marital issues and parenting, or young women who seek counseling about different aspects of religion, or elderly women who seek social interaction through their regular attendance to these classes. The work of the *murshidat* goes beyond the walls of the mosque, to function in other institutions such as schools, prisons and hospitals,

¹³ - Williams Sally, “Mourchidat - Morocco's female Muslim clerics”, The Telegraph, 26 April 2008, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3672924/Mourchidat-Moroccos-female-Muslim-clerics.html>>

¹⁴ - In the context of Morocco, the term *imam* is defined as one who leads daily and Friday prayers in the mosque. State-trained *imams* fulfill further tasks such as taking charge of different mosques to monitor the religious discourse delivered in these mosques, and holding counseling programs within the communities surrounding the mosques. The term *murshida* (singular form of *murshidat*) translate to religious guide. The *murshidat* work mainly but not only with women; they offer religious counseling in mosque and other institutions. They are also responsible for coordinating and overseeing the different activities taking place in other mosques.

and thus redefine parameters of religious authority and shift from predominantly private forms of religiosity to a legitimated public expression which disrupts the commonly held assumptions about male official religious authority as more legitimate.

In addition to the *murshidat* and *imam* training program, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs published a handbook¹⁵ which aims to promote moderate religious values by means of overseeing the religious discourse to ensure uniformity in religious practice across the country; this defines the religious identity of Morocco and thus determines the framework within which the religious discourse should operate. According to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs' website¹⁶, the handbook comprises practical directives which guide the *imams*, preachers and religious functionaries toward preserving the religious identity of Morocco, which is based on three constituents: The Ash'ari creed and the Maliki school of Jurisprudence which promotes moderate understanding of religion and is adaptable to people's changing realities, in addition to Sufism which has always been a defining element of Morocco's religious identity. By prioritizing the spiritual aspect of Islam, Morocco defines its religious identity, this is further endorsed by the king's status as the commander of the believers, which goes hand in hand with his political authority, serving as a means to protect the religious identity of Morocco and underscore the status of Islam as the official religion and thus guarantee its practice. To foster this congruous organism, the *imam* or religious guide ought to conform to this vision, in order to allow 'a theory of integration', in which religion becomes an expression of social realities.¹⁷ To further endorse the message presented in this handbook, Mohammed VI Qur'an station and Assadissa television station were launched to promote the state's vision with regards to the dissemination of the religious discourse.

The endeavor to endorse women's roles within the religious sphere was further enhanced through attaching great importance to the role of women scholars (*'alimat*). The woman scholar has been assigned significant responsibility within the supreme religious council as well as local councils, "Our great interest in the affairs of women, their causes and rights, as well as their crucial role within the family and the society emanates from the values of our religion", said King Mohammed VI¹⁸. Local councils have opened their doors to 36 women

¹⁵ - Ministry of Islamic Affairs, *Dalil al-Imam, w al-Khatib w al-Wa'idh*, (Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Morocco, 2006)

¹⁶ - <<http://www.habous.gov.ma/2012-01-27-14-38-38/215-85.html>>

¹⁷ - Ministry of Islamic Affairs, *Dalil al-Imam, w al-Khatib w al-Wa'idh*, p. 27.

¹⁸ - Al-Maghribiya, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.almaghribia.ma/paper/printArticle.asp?id=90807>>

scholars for the first time after independence. Ahmad Taoufiq mentioned that the choice of these scholars took a year and was based on a number of criteria; these women were primarily expected to be recognized learned scholars, who have a balanced understanding of the goals and purposes of Islamic law and work to reconcile religious teachings with contemporary needs and the changing demands of the age.¹⁹ Mohammed Yatim, the deputy of *at-Tawhid w al-Islah* movement said: “religious illiteracy is even more serious, and the task of social reform, teaching and enjoining good and forbidding evil is not a male province, especially that these women are better placed to communicate to other women”, Yatim sees that women’s current role within the religious field restores the glorious history of women in legal scholarship.²⁰

The year 2009 marked the first meeting of women scholars (*‘alimat*) and religious guides (*murshidat*), this conference which assembled 74 women scholars and 200 women preachers²¹ consolidates the integral role that is granted to women in legal scholarship, a domain that has been male-dominated over the generations. Through his message, which was conveyed by Ahmed Taoufiq in this event, the king urged the scholars and religious guides to help eradicate backwardness and enlighten minds and hearts and curb invalid beliefs and extremist tendencies. He articulated his wish for the emergence of an example of a woman scholar and jurist, who upholds to her religious heritage, yet takes into account the changes of the age; an enlightened example who contributes to maintaining spiritual security within the society, and who contributes to a balanced Islamic revival, within the framework of the Maliki School of Jurisprudence, and under the great leadership (of the king), that is based on mutual allegiance²². The majority of participants stressed women’s paramount role in understanding people’s realities and thus contributing to social reform.²³ The supreme council issued the first issue of *‘Ata’* magazine, which included a report on the meeting and summaries of the seminars, and devoted the issue to women’s contribution to the religious field. The women scholars’ tasks in religious councils primarily comprise overseeing the women’s section; they coordinate counseling programs as well as social and charity activities,

¹⁹ - Oughanim Habiba, “Nisa’ al-Majalis”, Attajdid, 11 October 2005,

<<http://www.maghress.com/attajdid/20104>>

²⁰ - Ibid.

²¹ - Debbar Abou Chouaib, “al-‘Ahil al-Maghribi Yad’u al-Wa’idhat ad-Diniyat ila Muharabat at-Tatarruf w al-Inghilaq, Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 20 July 2009,

<<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=528254&issueno=11192>>

²² - El Gherfaoui Aziza, « Amir al-Muminin Yad’u al-Mu’attirat ad-Diniyat ila Muharabat al-Iqsa’ wa Tatarruf w al-Inghilaq”, al-Maghribiya, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.almaghribia.ma/paper/printArticle.asp?id=90789>>

²³ - Ibid.

illiteracy classes and Qur'an classes in mosques. Through these activities, they endeavor to rectify the creed of their audiences by means of instilling moderate Islamic values which conform to the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition and thus steer clear from extremist tendencies, as well as preaching to women matters of their religion in accordance with the Maliki School of Jurisprudence to preserve the Moroccan identity and spread spiritual values. The work of the woman scholar extends to social activities which contribute to the community and establish social balance through a number of activities which include counseling programs for women in prisons as well as visits to hospitals, orphanages and nursing homes".²⁴ They are also responsible for mentoring and offering training to female preachers (*wa'idhat*)²⁵, to improve their performance in the domain of religious counseling.

Besides, since 2003, women started to present lectures before the king. As an unprecedented measure, the king invited for the first time a woman, Dr. Rajaa Naji el-Mekkaoui, to deliver a religious lecture in his presence at the royal palace. The event was attended by members of the government and high-ranking officials and scholars from all over the world. This event was widely broadcast on TV and newspapers. The *Hasaniyya* lectures series have undoubtedly been distinguished, under the reign of King Mohammed VI, by the participation of women, an unprecedented event in the history of these lectures series. Many of these women are not jurists as one may expect, rather they are scholars hailing from different disciplines. Women scholars kept taking part in this event in the following years. What assembles these women is their work toward a revival of *ijtihad* (re-reading religious texts) to develop modern interpretations of Islamic law while keeping faithful to the text. Dr. Raja Mekkaoui, who is a member of the supreme council and the first woman to give a lecture before the king in the Ramadan lecture series, stated that the '*alimat* and *murshidat* do not need to have a traditional religious education in order to legitimate their authority, for a number of women with vastly disparate academic backgrounds, worked on religious issues and acquired this attribute, so women become too responsible for social and religious reform²⁶. The entry and deployment of women within the religious sphere does, however,

²⁴ - <<http://majlissfida.alafdal.net/t8-topic#10>>

²⁵ - *Wa'idhat* are female preachers who voluntarily give talks in mosques in affiliation with local religious councils.

²⁶ - Debbar Abou Chouaib, "al-'Ahil al-Maghribi Yad'u al-Wa'idhat ad-Diniyat ila Muharabat at-Tatarruf w al-Inghilaq, Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=528254&issueno=11192>>

question the impact these female religious authorities have on the wider community and the extent to which they contribute to the empowerment of Moroccan women?

Female Religious Authority in Contemporary Morocco: Promises and Limitations

The Danish Institute for International Studies' most recent report on Islamic women's activism in the Arab world presents the criticism related to the *murshidat* training program, this primarily included the argument that the *murshidat* program does not really represent something new as there were always mosque preachers (*wa'idhat*) who until the present day fulfill their preaching tasks in affiliation with local mosques and local religious councils.²⁷ This, as a consequence, renders the program a non-genuine effort which imposes the state's interpretation of 'Moroccan Islam' and legitimizes the authority of the king as the commander of the faithful, the author adds.²⁸ This training program is also viewed as a means to polish Morocco's image before Western media, and reflect the image of a modern and democratic country which endorses women's participation in all spheres. So, having the *murshidat* as women representatives of the state gives credit to Morocco and portrays the king as an advocate of gender equality. "Morocco is a country which has succeeded in fighting against terrorism; which has a 'spiritual security' and which has succeeded in establishing moderation and to keep moderation (*wasatiyya*) – in order to appear in front of international audience as being open to the dialogue of civilizations and as having fought against terrorism," a *murshida* stated.²⁹ According to the same report, Asma Lamrabet, a Moroccan physician and coordinator of a group in charge of revising the religious texts from a feminist perspective, said that "Women are the alibis of modern discourse... the *Moudawana*, the *murshidat*... These (reforms) are used to say that one is (a) democrat. But this is mostly façade, 'state feminism'".³⁰ For many Moroccans, this training program also serves as a means to restrict people's freedom and curb voices of individuals or groups that operate outside of official Islam. According to a *murshida*, "The state/ministry wanted to marginalize the Islamists; they wanted to occupy the space of the Islamists. If you say that you are a *murshida*, everything is open to you (youth clubs, prisons etc.) – places, which are not accessible to the Islamists. So

²⁷ - Pruzan-Jørgensen Julie Elisabeth, "Islamic Women's Activism in the Arab World: Potentials and Challenges for External Actors", (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2012), p. 53.

²⁸ -Ibid.

²⁹ - Pruzan-Jørgensen Julie Elisabeth, "Islamic Women's Activism in the Arab World: Potentials and Challenges for External Actors", p. 54.

³⁰ - Ibid.

they seek proximity/closeness with (the) people via the *murshidat* – and, at the same time, a distancing from the Islamists.”³¹

Similarly, Nadia Yassine, who believes that her movement’s relevance does not only lie in teaching women how to practice their faith but suggests a comprehensive sociopolitical reform within an Islamic paradigm, also believes that the *murshidat* program is but a measure to curb the voice of the Islamist movement. According to the Telegraph, Maryem Yafont, the head of the Justice and Charity's women's section, argues that the Justice and Charity movement has long had women acting as informal *murshidat*, “We've been carrying out a program of education and training for women in Morocco for more than 20 years in mosques. We believe this [mourchidat] initiative by the ministry was in response to our activities in the mosques and an attempt, in other words, to cut off our movement's work.”³² Surprisingly enough, the first group of the *murshidat* to graduate comprised a number of candidates who are affiliated with the PJD and the Justice and Charity and whose current work requires that they commit to the state’s policy in relation to religious affairs. According to the Telegraph, this points out the double purpose the *murshidat* serve for a king wanting to keep both the West and a rapidly growing Islamic movement happy.³³

However, despite the limitations which question these female religious authorities’ legitimacy, they hold the potential of contributing to the social welfare of their communities. No doubt, women have for long been active in the domain of religion both in private and public spaces and within informal and more official structures. Therefore, the novelty of the phenomenon of integrating women within the religious sphere does not separate women’s engagement with religion from its socio-historical context, rather it helps identify new ways for women to (re)position themselves, express their religiosity and redefine religious authority. The integration and deployment of women religious guides and scholars has been integral as it not only presents Morocco as a model country in endorsing gender equality, but also reinforces and restructures the role that women have always fulfilled in mosques and other academic and religious institutions, it has further allowed them to operate at different levels, in order to access the different categories of the society with emphasis placed on

³¹ - Ibid.

³² - Williams Sally, “Mourchidat - Morocco's female Muslim clerics”, The Telegraph, 26 April 2008, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3672924/Mourchidat-Moroccos-female-Muslim-clerics.html>>

³³ -Ibid.

women and youth, as well as carrying through a social dimension to their religious mission. This suggests shifts in social order; women claim agency and reshuffle public and religious spaces and negotiate the dynamics of social structures. Through their participation in the religious domain, they define a new model of activism which aims at cultivating collective pious conduct within the society, as opposed to Western and secular perceptions of female religiosity as a form of docility and subjection to traditional structures. 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. There is, however, a general agreement amongst the women scholars and religious guides that religion should not be perceived as obstacle to women's rights. Rather, they articulate the importance of reviving Islamic thought and reconsidering religious texts in order to promote new roles for women. They disapprove of rejecting the established tradition of Islamic thought, they believe in using the same traditional tools to contribute to and enrich the scholarly tradition of Islam. They believe that religious discourse in its primary form (the Qur'an) was addressed to both men and women at an equal level, which entails responsibility for women to receive the divine message by means of studying and understanding. The women scholars and religious guides are, hence, redefining Islamic authority and gaining legitimacy. They have succeeded in attracting a broad following across different social classes, as opposed to women's rights groups who have limited outreach. Although these have had an influential impact on the socio-political changes in Morocco which notably included battles to reform family laws; female religious authorities, however, seem to be having a more influential role in promoting the rights of Muslim women. They proved more accepted by the masses because they represent the voice of the moderate Moroccan Islam and have easier access to different settings because of their official status, unlike women activists who operate within Islamist movements, they are usually faced with limitations because of their non-official status and thus have limited outreach. For a lot of women, attending activities organized by these female religious authorities offers them space for social interaction. A number of them are regular students of literacy classes which, for them, is important so they can learn to read the Qur'an and get the basic tasks of their life fulfilled. They also attend the talks given by the *murshidat* regularly, which is not only an opportunity to learn about the different aspects of their religion, but also ask the questions they may have about their religious and social life. These classes offer them an interactive atmosphere to share their ideas and concerns within a social context, especially that they have a chance to interact with a female scholar whom

they can ask the most intimate questions. Therefore, within this space, the practice of religion becomes institutionalized and engages the attendees into a collective moral conduct encouraged by Islamic teachings, which articulates the impact of female religious authorities on the wider community and paves the way for a comprehensive social reform.

Conclusion

The increased participation of Moroccan women in the religious domain represents a significant shift in structures of religious authority; they are appropriating core religious spaces such as mosques, *medersas* and religious councils and are attracting a broad female following. The women religious guides (*murshidat*) and scholars (*'alimat*) are, however, faced with limitations which question their legitimacy before the longstanding male-dominated religious tradition. They have, yet, contributed greatly to the social welfare of their communities, which makes their 'official' entry into the religious domain a serious step toward democracy and positive change. Besides, the program is still in its early stages, so there is great hope that the role of these female authorities will inspire further reform and allow greater opportunities in the domain of legal scholarship.

Bibliography:

Books:

Howe Marvine, *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and other Challenges*, (Oxford University Press, 2005)

Ministry of Islamic Affairs, *Dalil al-Imam, w al-Khatib w al-Wa'idh*, (Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Morocco, 2006)

Pruzan-Jørgensen Julie Elisabeth, *Islamic Women's Activism in the Arab World: Potentials and Challenges for External Actors*, (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2012)

Magazine/Newspaper Articles:

Agence Marocaine de Press (MAP), "Fikrat al-Murshidat Diniyat Intalaqat min al-Maghreb", 22 January 2010, <<http://www.maghress.com/map/3567> >

Al-Maghribiya, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.almaghribia.ma/paper/printArticle.asp?id=90807>>

Anjaiah Veeramalla, “Morocco moves on despite Arab Spring, eurozone crisis”, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta, July 30 2012, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/07/30/morocco-moves-despite-arab-spring-eurozone-crisis.html>

Bekkali Mostafa, « as-Siyasah Tughazilu Tasawwuf bi al-Maghreb », Rabat, Morocco, 29 August 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/6edf8710-d4e6-45b2-a42a-d9444426c9b9>

Debbar Abou Chouaib, “al-‘Ahil al-Maghribi Yad’u al-Wa’idhat ad-Diniyat ila Muharabat at-Tatarruf w al-Inghilaq, Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=528254&issueno=11192>>

Daoud Zakya, *Le plan d'intégration de la femme : Une affaire révélatrice, un débat virtuel*, (http://aan.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/volumes/1999/Documents/chro_plan-integr-femme.pdf), pp. 9-10.

El Gherfaoui Aziza, « Amir al-Muminin Yad’u al-Mu’attirat ad-Diniyat ila Muharabat al-Iqsa’ wa Tatarruf w al-Inghilaq”, al-Maghribiya, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.almaghribia.ma/paper/printArticle.asp?id=90789>>

Estito Imad, “Female Minister in Morocco’s New Government: One Too Many?”, January 23, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/3562>.

Hamilton Richard, “Islam's pioneering women preachers”, BBC News, Rabat, Morocco, 25 February 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6392531.stm>>

<http://majlissfida.alafdal.net/t8-topic#10>

McGirk Tim, “Morocco’s Gentle War on Terror”, Time Magazine World, 06 August 2008, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1829931-2,00.html>>

Oughanim Habiba, “Nisa’ al-Majalis”, Attajdid, 11 October 2005, <<http://www.maghress.com/attajdid/20104>>

Williams Sally, “Mourchidat - Morocco's female Muslim clerics”, The Telegraph, 26 April 2008, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3672924/Mourchidat-Moroccos-female-Muslim-clerics.html>>