

The Missing Voice: Women in *Madaris* (Religious Seminaries) of Pakistan

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Madrassa is an Arabic word that literally translates to place of study. *Madaris* (plural of *madrassa*) exist across the world and encompass a spectrum from Sunday school-type programs for children to institutes of Islamic higher learning (undergraduate and post graduate). My research focuses on female students' experiences within *madaris* of higher education in Pakistan.

Since 2001, Western mass media and policy documents have often used the word *madrassa* in Pakistan as a synonym for training camps for terrorists (The 9/11 Commission). Scholars are divided into two camps with some supporting claims of *madaris*' links with militancy (Singer 2001) while others refute such claims (Cockcroft, Andersson, Milne, Khalid, Ansari, Khan, and Chaudhry 2009). More recently, there is an increasing body of literature examining the complexities that exist within *madaris* and the role they play in the Pakistani society (Bano 2012). *Madaris* are gender segregated, and the current literature has predominantly focused on the experiences of children or male students within that space (Hefner and Zaman 2007; Moosa 2015).

Not every woman who attends a *madrassa* of higher education comes from a conservative Islamic background, nor have they necessarily attended childhood schooling in *madaris*. In my research, I will focus on women who received K-12 or K-16 education under a secular curriculum in Pakistan and then chose to pursue higher education within a *madrassa*. I aim to understand why they chose to switch from secular to religious education, how their *madrassa* experience informs their perspective about their role in Pakistani society, and how their perceived role may have shifted.

I will conduct in depth interviews with female students and alumni in Karachi, across the two largest *madaris* for women. I will also interview students who are engaged in *madrassa* curriculum through a Pakistan based, women-only online institute called Zaynab Academy.

I bring together three different fields of theory to understand concepts of knowledge and choice. I draw on decolonial feminist theory and Islamic philosophers to understand models of education and agency within Islamic tradition. First, Saba Mahmood (2005) provides

a critique of Western feminist theory. In her study of the women's mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood has argued that concepts of agency and human subject are parochialized and therefore the ability to affect change and enact agency are culturally specific and unfixed. Second, Walter Dignolo (2000) critiques the modernity agenda propagated by Western education models and provides us with a decolonial understanding of what education and knowledge means in different traditions and cultures. Third, Al-Ghazali and Ibn-Rushd (who are quoted in Masoodi 2007; Moosa 2005; and Wohlman & Burrell 2009) have debated about the sources of knowledge within an Islamic context in terms of revelation, reason and sense perception, and the pedagogical structures most apt for promoting knowledge for self-realisation. These three distinct theoretical perspectives come together in my research to frame explorations of the purposes of higher education for the *madaris*' female students and the implications their *madrassa* education has for their life after schooling.

Female *madrassa* students complicate the common narrative of religious Muslim women passively subjected to an ideology. My research aims to explore the complexities within a student community often viewed as a homogenous group of Muslim men aspiring to Salafi trends. This research will also examine broader questions of which aspects of knowledge are important for students when choosing their academic path. Learnings from my research will have implications for educators and policy makers not just in the Pakistani context but within any community aiming to harmonise both secular and religious aspirations for education (Hadad, Senzai and Smith 2009).

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