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# Female voices in Islamic spiritual care: Tensions and achievements

**Abstract:** With the aim of contributing to current debates on the role of Muslim female spiritual caregivers, this paper aims to explore the current state of the voices of Muslim female caregivers in Islamic spiritual care, in order to contribute to a better understanding of their role. The purpose is to identify ways that enable them to collectively improve an egalitarian vision of Islamic spiritual care, and to provide the potential to strengthen in a holistic manner the commitment of the practitioners of Islamic spiritual care to the well-being of the community, and to social justice and social change.

## Introduction

Islamic spiritual care currently provides positive space for Muslim female leadership in many settings, including a public setting and in a co-educational context (Khoja-Moolji 2011; Gilliat-Ray, Ali, & Pattison 2013). Nevertheless, gender disparity still continues to be one of the central categories of analysis in Islamic spiritual care practice. In addition, as an academic and professional discipline, Islamic spiritual care does not adequately reflect the voices of Muslim female spiritual caregivers along with other marginal voices within the community, which is evident from the lack of the research to support and develop the role of Muslim female spiritual caregivers in their profession.

As a helping profession, Islamic spiritual care helps the sick find the sacred and holy by exploring meaning and purpose to life using traditional Islamic resources and social sciences. Effective Islamic spiritual care helps the person integrate his/her physical, mental, spiritual and social dimensions. The benefit of such a service can protect the client from feeling isolated and give the person a sense of companionship. Furthermore, Muslim spiritual caregivers play significant roles as public spokespersons, religious service facilitators, advisors, counselors, advocates, teachers, and administrators to address the spiritual and mental issues that Muslims face in various settings. Thus, the theoretical and practical issues that Muslims face on a daily basis create and hold space for the voices of Muslim female spiritual caregivers. However, we need to address barriers that prevent the establishment of an egalitarian space for Muslim female spiritual caregivers.

Why is it important to talk about the perspectives of Muslim female spiritual caregivers? Is there a need? My answer to this question is a resounding “Yes!”, because there is a need to open up academic and professional spaces for the voices of Muslim female spiritual caregivers in order to identify the structural issues and factors that impact and inform their practice on a daily basis. Further, my reflection on the voices of Muslim female spiritual caregivers comes from my own personal and professional reflexivity on women’s issues for more than ten years.

Islamic spiritual care, as with all spiritual care practices, demands that the practitioner practice reflexivity; this implies that we must acknowledge that “all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced and that it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed” (Mann/Kelley 1997, 392). Through my practice of reflexivity, I intend to provide critical reflections on the challenges faced by Muslim female spiritual caregivers with the intention of creating a new praxis: to develop new awareness, knowledge and collective action.

This paper has two goals: first, to identify issues that Muslim female spiritual caregivers face in their practice of Islamic spiritual care; and second, to provide a tool for bringing these issues to light. I try to draw a roadmap to show how it is possible to transform Islamic spiritual care practices in order to bring Muslim female spiritual caregivers to the centre of the production and reproduction of Islamic spiritual care. Such a claim may sound ambitious in its intent and scope. Nevertheless, I realize that there is fertile ground to engage female issues in Islamic spiritual care, which strikingly remains behind in multidisciplinary discussions and explorations of spiritual care research. Also, the everyday challenges that Muslim female spiritual caregivers face make it essential to address issues of power, authority, and ethics as we still live and function within a male-dominated paradigm that still strongly shapes and guides our lives. Therefore, androcentric bias in society affects and limits the representation of Muslim female spiritual caregivers in Islamic spiritual care practice.

This paper provides a context for the issue by highlighting personal accounts, and it discusses gender disparity in Islamic spiritual care by pointing out the various accomplishments, tensions, and development of the voices of Muslim female spiritual caregivers in the practice of Islamic spiritual care. I particularly examine patriarchal approaches to Islamic spiritual care and argue that such approaches create various tensions and stresses for Muslim female spiritual caregivers. I also discuss some challenging and practical issues for Muslim female spiritual caregivers by presenting the dilemma of leading mixed-gender congregational prayers and reciting the Qur’an in public in the context of Islamic spiritual care. Finally, I discuss egalitarian steps to solve these challenges for

Muslim female spiritual care givers. The goal is to create a space for the accomplishments and developments of female voices in the Islamic spiritual care profession.

## The context of the issue

The main task of Muslim spiritual caregivers is to respond to and address human crises and existential questions, especially of those who are on a quest to find out why they suffer (Isgandarova 2008; Isgandarova/O'Connor 2012). Islamic spiritual care aims to help them understand and address emotional and spiritual aspects of their suffering, their sense of estrangement and isolation, and to facilitate healing by bringing clarity to polarities and contradictions in order to allow them to regain their health. Islamic spiritual care practice supports a client in the direction of liberation from evil, or the destructive forces of trauma, and the re-establishment of personal communication with the Creator and the self. It is the process of contributing to human development and spiritual maturity through helping people achieve the moment of enlightenment. This process is achieved by reviewing a living human document and capturing the moment of truth by providing different lenses to see it (VanKatwyk 2008). The duty of the Muslim spiritual caregiver is to help the client see their problem differently and transcend it through creative imagination or theological reflection. In addition, they need to facilitate relief as the Prophet Muhammad instructed Muadh b. Jabal before appointing him as his representative in Yemen: “make life easy for people and not difficult and give people good news and not difficult news”.

Although research in the area of gender disparity and challenges of Muslim female spiritual caregivers lags behind, the struggles of Muslim female spiritual caregivers can be understood from a gendered discourse in Islamic feminist Muslim literature. Such a discourse emerged in the early 1990's and is grounded in re-readings of the Qur'an and other fundamental sources of Islam (Badran 1999).

Muslim feminist scholarship takes a critical approach to the ways of patriarchal Muslim and non-Muslim societies where power and social inequalities distort a healthy image of gender, and where females have limited access to opportunities and do not have enough space to excel in their profession. Such writings emphasize the importance of moving beyond the traditional methodological approach to Islamic texts. Instead of feeling comfortable with their 'knowledge' of the sources of the misogynistic practices against women, these writings pioneer and implement new methodologies to reveal the misogynistic interpretations and 'restore' the egalitarian messages of the Qur'an. By doing so, they do not limit themselves to religious or theological sources only, they also use the hu-

manities and social sciences, and apply post-structuralist principles of intertextuality (using references within the structure of the Qur'an) and intratextuality to the Qur'an (applying secondary references to understand the Qur'an) (Mernissi 1987; Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002; Barazangi 2006; Shaikh 1997; Bakhtiar 2011; Ali 2006; Chaudhry 2013).

Being inspired by Islamic feminism scholarship and activism in Islamic spiritual care practice, many authors such as Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Mansur Ali and Stephen Pattison (2013), Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2011), Sajida Jalalzai (2016), etc. draw attention to the dynamics of gender in the work of Muslim spiritual caregivers. For example, in her meticulous research, Khoja-Moolji (2011) points out that although Islamic spiritual care now offers women more opportunities than in the past, challenges within the field still exist. Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Mansur Ali, and Stephen Pattison (2013) also highlight gender disparity in Islamic spiritual care in the United Kingdom. Their research particularly reflects the controversies in the debates on Muslim females leading the Friday or holiday prayers, reciting the Qur'an in public and other existing gender tensions and lack of voices of Muslim spiritual caregivers in the Islamic spiritual care profession. They conclude that the traditional Islamic organizations limit women's capacity to emerge as leaders and reach society. Whereas the active leadership of Muslim female spiritual care givers in multifaith prayer services still challenge beliefs in the community that the "ideal Muslim female" should not be visible in "male" public spaces, especially in leading mixed congregations in the prayer, for many traditional Islamic organizations, a woman should stay within her domestic private space or at least in "female" public space.

An in-depth reflection on the challenges within the Islamic spiritual care profession demonstrates that one of the challenges for Muslim female spiritual caregivers is the misinterpretation of the "ideal Muslim female" image in many Muslim communities that prevent many Muslim female spiritual caregivers, especially those who work for religious organizations, from taking more leadership roles in this area of care. For example, Sajida Jalalzai quotes from Dr. Nevin Reda from Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto, who once expressed her frustration that "the imam told his congregation that females were forbidden from speaking to men without the permission of their husband or father" (Jalalzai 2016, 239). This observation suggests that the sense of alienation for some Muslim women is real, as some Muslim women have virtually no voice within their own mosques.

Furthermore, research also indicates that the gender disparity has become especially visible since the active presence of Muslim females in spiritual care in the 2000's. For example, by reflecting on her journey in Islamic spiritual care, Mary Lahaj (2011, 174), a Muslim woman chaplain in the UK, states that

the main motivation in pursuing a career in this profession was her “long desire to connect deeply with individuals [...]”, her comfort in “standing before an audience giving a speech [...]”, practicing Islam in her “every day work,” and “the deep listening and compassionate response [...] to visit the sick, comfort families, and be present with those grieving, suffering a loss, or experiencing dying or death,” etc. In order to do so, she concludes that she needed to possess “a softer heart and deeper love of God and His Creation [...]” (Lahaj 2011, 174). Although Lahaj had also been encouraged by two male imams to pursue chaplaincy training, she acknowledges that she “spent a lot of time” claiming a leadership title other than “imam” to which Muslims could relate in Islamic spiritual care. Also, despite the fact that she was confident that her “authority as a staff member at the hospital sufficed,” she indeed faced uncomfortable questions such as “Who are you? What is a chaplain? Can a woman do it?” (Lahaj 2011, 175). Lahaj probably did not respond to these questions in a more assertive manner because she preferred to accept a non-agitating role in these arguments. Her passive stance might also be explained by her perspective that an imam is the best resource in some crisis situations because of their role as a “traditional authority figure with expert knowledge of the religion”. She also believes that “imams with legitimacy, education, and status in the community can bring more comfort to Muslims and strengthen their faith” (Lahaj 2011, 177).

Similarly, Doha Hamza (2009), a Muslim female chaplain at Stanford Hospital and Clinics and Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital, also reported that her presence as a chaplain evoked surprise among some Muslims. Hamza (2009) explains it with the fact that the Muslim community is not fully familiar with the spiritual care profession, as it is a new and evolving field since historically, spiritual care was provided within one’s family. Nevertheless, she is confident in her role as a female chaplain because of the joy spiritual caregivers bring to the lives of the patients, “but also a big part of it is the profound lessons one learns about his or her own life” (Hamza 2009, 145). Hamza calls the spiritual care profession “the blessing” of her life as it “has taught” her a lot of the reality of life, the fragility of life, the preciousness and sacredness of life, the importance of sound relationships with others, humbleness, and appreciation of the traditional notion of visiting the sick. Also, as a Muslim female chaplain she plays an active role in tackling Islamophobia by providing a good example of “a different face of Islam [...] on a very deep level, a humane and intimate level” (Hamza 2009, 144).

In my professional experience, although my authority in ethical issues was accepted initially, I also had to explain the role of spiritual care to my fellow Muslims who asked questions about the role of Muslim women as a spiritual and religious leader and advisor. I also had to explain my reasoning to non-Mus-

lim staff who asked me to replace the imam to read the *khutba* (sermons) or lead the Friday prayers in one institutional setting which, like Lahaj, I had to reject. My refusal did not imply that I endorse the claims that Muslim female spiritual caregivers should not lead the mixed-gender prayers; rather, I support the idea that Islamic spiritual care must go beyond theological and religious arguments and should take into consideration the lived experience of the diverse and vulnerable populations in institutional settings. This implies that as a spiritual caregiver, the goal is to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of clients by going beyond prayer and reading the Qur'an.

## The challenging aspects of Islamic spiritual care

As mentioned earlier, Islamic spiritual care should not be limited to reading the Qur'an and leading the prayers only. However, these two functions of Islamic spiritual care among the others present the most challenged aspects to Muslim female spiritual caregivers. Therefore, based on the examples from the literature of Islamic spiritual care and my personal experience, this section explores two theological controversies that create tensions/challenges for Muslim female spiritual caregivers in Islamic spiritual care practice.

### *Who Should Lead the Prayer in Islamic Spiritual Care?*

The Islamic traditions not only play an important role in shaping the experiences of Muslim female spiritual caregivers' daily lives but also their practice. Muslim female spiritual caregivers who choose to lead both male and female Muslims in Islamic rituals might be seen as challenging traditional or cultural ideas about female behavior and appearance in the Islamic tradition (although this may also vary from culture to culture). For example, if a Muslim female spiritual caregiver is asked to perform the functions of imam, i. e., lead the Friday prayer, what would be her response? The answer to this question depends on that Muslim female spiritual caregiver's theological and gender understanding. However, these perspectives also redefine their identity in Islamic spiritual care within different contexts, including economic, political, cultural and ethnicity factors that shape the experiences of Muslim female spiritual caregivers. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in situations when Muslim female spiritual caregivers are requested to lead the congregational or funeral prayer and read the Qur'an loudly and in melody in a mixed gender audience, tension arises and many Muslim female spiritual caregivers choose either to challenge the dominant view on who should do

these “priestly” tasks, or embrace a “conservative approach” as they do not want “to be used” against the traditional understanding of Islam. Many still believe that with respect to worship, following the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad is important (Mattson 2005), despite considering who “legitimizes” and “interprets” these footsteps.

Furthermore, Muslim religious authority is still considered of “[...]the office of the imam, who is also expected to perform multiple, distinct functions for the community” (Mattson 2005, 260). These functions include leading prayers, delivering Friday sermons, drafting marriage contracts, adjudicating divorces, organizing youth and adult education, governing prayer spaces, distributing charitable donations, and representing the Muslim community in larger communal settings. A majority of Muslim scholars still believe that women can only lead their own households or female-only congregations in prayer. For example, a prominent Muslim scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi points out that:

[...]the currently extant juristic schools agree that it is not permissible for women to lead men in the obligatory Prayer, though some scholars voice the opinion that the woman who is well-versed in the Qur’an may lead the members of her family, including men, in Prayer on the basis that there is no room for stirring instincts in this case (Qaradawi 2005, <https://islamonline.net/archive>).

In brief, a misogynistic approach to women’s religious and spiritual leadership is a major factor limiting women’s opportunities as spiritual caregivers and further hampers the full exercise of their abilities as spiritual caregivers. Therefore, many Muslims do not welcome women’s reading the Qur’an and leading prayers outside of their home, particularly in organizations and groups where men are present.

The consequences of this approach resulted in various responses among Muslim female spiritual caregivers who still find themselves behind “curtains.” For example, some prefer a more conservative approach by maintaining certain norms about the relational and contextual requirements of prayer leadership in an attempt to follow the Prophetic tradition and endorse inactive involvement in the profession, rather than as a leader and advisor (Jalalzai 2016; Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013; Khoja-Moolji 2011). Conversely, some Muslim female spiritual caregivers support performing the functions of imams in institutional settings and argue that the term “imam” holds potential for Muslim female spiritual caregivers, even though it contains controversial interpretations within the Muslim community. These women bring forth examples from Islamic history that suggest that in the past, some Muslim women also assumed the leadership role, including in prayer and other forms of devotion and meditation and teaching the tra-

dition, especially in the Sufi traditions around the Muslim world (Ahmed 1992; Stowasser 1999; Hill 2014; Frede and Hill 2014; Hill 2010; Hill 2014).

The Qur'an does not specifically mention whether women can lead men and women in the Friday prayer, conduct memorial or funeral services, visit the sick, etc. The traditions of the Prophet Muhammad also inspired some Muslim women to be leaders in prayer.<sup>1</sup> The hadith of Umm Waraqa especially has gained wide popularity to explore the Sunna with respect to women's role in spiritual care.<sup>2</sup> In addition to following the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition, according to the majority of schools of thought, i.e., Shafi, Hanafi, and Hanbali, with the excep-

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1 A detailed version of this hadith literature is as follows: The hadith of 'A'ishah and Umm Salamah (may Allah be pleased with them). 'Abdur-Raziq (5086), Ad-Daraqutni (1/404) and Al-Bayhaqi (3/131) reported from the narration of Abu Hazim Maysarah ibn Habib from Ra'itah Al-Hanafiyah from 'A'ishah that she led women in Prayer and stood among them in an obligatory Prayer. Moreover, Ibn Abi Shaybah (2/89) reported from the chain of narrators of Ibn Abi Layla from 'Ata' that 'A'ishah used to say the Adhan, the Iqamah, and lead women in Prayer while standing among them in the same row. Al-Hakim also reported the same hadith from the chain of narrators of Layth Ibn Abi Sulaim from 'Ata', and the wording of the hadith mentioned here is Al-Hakim's. Furthermore, Ash-Shafi'i (315), Ibn Abi Shaybah (88/2) and 'Abdur-Raziq (5082) reported from two chains of narrators that report the narration of 'Ammar Ad-Dahni in which he stated that a woman from his tribe named Hujayrah narrated that Umm Salamah used to lead women in Prayer while standing among them in the same row. The wording of 'Abdur-Raziq for the same hadith is as follows: "Umm Salamah led us (women) in the 'Asr Prayer and stood among us (in the same row)." In addition, Al-Hafiz said in Ad-Dirayah (1/169), "Muhammad ibn Al-Husain reported from the narration of Ibrahim An-Nakh'i that 'A'ishah used to lead women in Prayer during the month of Ramadan while standing among them in the same row. Further, 'Abdur-Raziq reported (5083) from the narration of Ibrahim ibn Muhammad from Dawud ibn Al-Husain from 'Ikrimah from Ibn 'Abbas that the latter said, "A woman can lead women in Prayer while standing between them."

2 The hadith is reported that Umm Waraqah, the daughter of Nawfal reported, "When the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) proceeded for Badr I said to him, 'Messenger of Allah allow me to accompany you in the battle. I shall act as a nurse for your patients and maybe Allah will bestow martyrdom upon me.' He replied, 'stay at your home and Allah the Exalted will bestow martyrdom upon you.' She read the Quran and sought permission from the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) to have a mu'adhdhin in her house. He therefore permitted her to do so. She announced that her slave and slave girl would be free after her death so one night they strangled her with a sheet of cloth until she died and ran away. The next day 'Umar announced that anyone who has knowledge of them or has seen them should bring them to him. (After they were caught) 'Umar ordered that they be crucified and this was the first crucifixion at Madinah." From Umm Waraqah, the daughter of Abdullah bin al-Harith, "the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) used to visit her at her house. He appointed a mu'adhdhin to call Adhan for her and he commanded her to lead the inmates of her house in prayer." Abdurrahman said, "I saw that her mu'adhdhin was an old man." [Abu Dawud (Eng. Trans. #591 & 592)].



tion of the Malikis, and very recently, the Ithna Asharis from the Shi'a school of thought, women can be *imam* (leader) of a *jama'ah* (congregation), i.e. the optional *tarawih* prayers during Ramadhan – if the congregants are females only. Therefore, it was not unusual for Muslim female spiritual caregivers to lead the congregational prayers. Also, the practice of women's recitation of the Qur'an varies from culture to culture. For example, the recitation of the Qur'an by females in public, especially in front of a mixed audience, is not welcomed in an Arab or Persian context (Safi 2013). Nevertheless, unlike the leading of Friday prayers by women, some Muslim cultures accept women's recitation of the Qur'an in public. For example, despite the patriarchal constructs of the female's role in society, the South Asian culture allows females to recite the Qur'an in public.

Nevertheless, many Muslim female spiritual caregivers started to follow the new insight provided by some Muslim female scholars such as Amina Wadud, Nevin Reda El-Tahry, etc., to develop the ability to reread the Islamic tradition in a prudent and thoughtful manner. They are encouraged by these female scholars and activists who lead the congregational prayers. For example, in a mixed audience since 1995, a woman-led prayer which occurred in Johannesburg in South Africa still inspires many Muslim females who deliver either *adhan* (call for prayer), *khutbah* (a sermon) or lead the mixed audience in prayer: Shamima Sheikh (1960 – 1998) in South Africa, Amina Wadud, Lubna Nadvi, Zaytun Suleyman, Fatima Seedat, Fatima Hendricks, and Dr. Mariam Seedat in United States, Maryam Mirza, Yasmin Shadeer, Raheel Raza, Pamela Taylor, and Nevin Reda in Canada have successfully led mixed congregations in Friday or Eid prayers. In this context, the March 18, 2005 woman-led prayer in New York City was a ground breaking event. As Juliane Hammer points out:

The imam was a woman, who also delivered the khutbah; the congregation she addressed and led in prayer was not separated by gender; and the adhan (call to prayer) was pronounced by a woman. It is in these three departures from established ritual practice that the March 18 prayer became an embodied performance of gender justice in the eyes of its organizers and participants. They symbolically challenged the exclusively male privilege of leading Muslims in ritual prayers and at the same time blurred the lines of gender segregation in ritual prayers (Hammer 2012, 15).

Following their footsteps, some Muslim female spiritual caregivers, especially those who provide spiritual care in multi-faith settings, take radical revolutionary steps by reciting the Qur'an loudly in a mixed gender audience. For example, Tahera Ahmed, one of the chaplains at Northwestern University, publicly recited the Qur'an at the National Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) conference titled "Beyond the Ceiling: Ground-breaking Voices of American Muslim

Women,” where Muslim Public Affairs Council in U.S. and the White House recognized over 80 American Muslim Women in the fields of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), business development, government, communications and entrepreneurship in April 2014. Recently, Sherin Khankan and Saliha Marie Fetteh, Muslim female imams in Denmark, also declared that along with providing spiritual care and counselling to Muslims, other aspects of the Islamic tradition such as announcing the *adhan* (call to the prayer), delivering the *khutbah* and reciting the Qur’an in public, are also an important part of what they do.

These cases, as Khoja-Moolji suggests, are “a *symbolic or representational* issue” for many Muslim female leaders, including Muslim female spiritual caregivers because of the scope of their impact on women’s religious leadership in many areas of life, including the spiritual and religious domains “that were previously not available to them” (Khoja-Moolji 2011, 6).

## Recommendations for an egalitarian Islamic spiritual care practice

Despite the geographical differences (i.e. the US context versus South African or Canadian contexts), the leadership role in prayers and reciting the Qur’an in Islamic spiritual care still constitute a significant source of power and a sacred duty that provide Muslim spiritual caregivers with unique opportunities to express and perform their religious authority and also educate clients about a range of religious and practical issues in Islamic spiritual care practice. Taking away this important role from Muslim female spiritual caregivers means losing a significant source of power and authority in Islamic spiritual care.

Therefore, at the heart of our discussion is our inquiry of power and how knowledge is built in the Islamic spiritual care profession. Furthermore, we question structural and historical arrangements that inhibit and disadvantage Muslim females more than males in the Muslim community. Such a critical approach to the Islamic spiritual care practice aims to shed light on the form and function of power and hierarchy across a range of spiritual and religious care duties to others, and then seeks to give voices to women who may feel displaced by gender disparity.

From this angle of thought, the patriarchal approach to Islamic spiritual care reduces the potential professional development of Muslim female spiritual caregivers. Although Muslim female spiritual caregivers are committed to advocating for the spiritual and emotional welfare of their clients and to advocating for jus-

tice for people, very often they find themselves marginalized because they hold a “minority” status in the Islamic spiritual care profession. Therefore, a critical theological framework of the majority of Muslim feminist and egalitarian female scholars are resources for Muslim spiritual caregivers to see the interconnectedness of gender, religion, and spirituality.

Second, the female presence in the field of Islamic spiritual care by no way challenges religious and spiritual authority of Muslim leaders. This is mainly explained with the Muslim community views of Muslim spiritual caregivers simply as facilitators of discussion of existential, relational, mental, physical, as well as religious issues and performers of rituals in various institutions. Jalalzai (2016) quotes from Mattson who acknowledges the Islamic spiritual care profession seeks to “decenter[s] the figure of the imam, and to open up new leadership opportunities for women [...]” (238). Such an attempt to deconstruct patriarchal narratives in Islamic spiritual care starts with the training of Muslim female spiritual caregivers. The availability of educational programs and demand for them mean that the Islamic spiritual care profession is the field that many Muslim women pursue because they want to help those in crisis. In addition, in the religious and spiritual leadership realm, Islamic spiritual care is the only profession that “helps to forge new paths for Muslim women [...]” (Jalalzai 2016, 177) and offers “women innovative opportunities to exercise religious knowledge and leadership” (Jalalzai 2016, 243). Perhaps, this is the main motivation of Muslim leadership and spiritual care and counselling programs at Hartford Seminary, Emmanuel College and the Bayan Claremont that open new avenues for Muslim females to pursue careers in Islamic spiritual care. However, the task to make Muslim female spiritual caregivers confident in this growing and evolving field of Islamic spiritual care is not that easy. For example, there are criticisms against the aforementioned programs, some interpret their support of the profession of female Muslim chaplaincy as saying it “challenges prevailing stances on the exclusivity of male ritual leadership, and instead reinforces underlying gender constructions and norms” (Jalalzai 2016, 244). It is indeed the reality, as Jihad Turk from Bayan Claremont points out, that Bayan’s long-term goals of Islamic spiritual care education is to tackle “some of these issues [related to women and authority], and do it in a way that does not alienate the institution [from Muslim communities]...That is a long term policy [...] but part of our vision” (Jalalzai, 2016: 242).

Furthermore, many Muslim female spiritual caregivers bring ideas, principles, and tenets to the inquiry process to contribute their perspectives within Islamic spiritual care. As a perspective, Olesen quotes from Eichler (1986), stating they focus on these important aspects of feminist and egalitarian inquiry (a) “[the work] problematizes women’s diverse situations as well as the gendered in-

stitutions and material and historical structures that frame those;” (b) “It refers the examination of that problematic to theoretical, policy, or action frameworks to realize social justice for women (and men) in specific contexts”; and (c) “It generates new ideas to produce knowledge about oppressive situations for women, for action or further research” (Olesen 2005, 236).

In general, the egalitarian approach in Islamic spiritual care requires addressing various inequalities in the practice, encourages the application of historical and social context to understand why the voices of females are heard less in society, and rereading the principle of modesty within the Islamic tradition. This approach has been inspired by the Qur’an, which teaches the fundamental equality of women and men regardless of their race, ethnicity, economic and political status. Therefore, contextualizing, rereading and reinterpreting the Islamic tradition in the context of Islamic spiritual care is an important endeavour of Muslim female spiritual caregivers. Such an approach challenges the Qur’an’s patriarchal exegesis of conservative males by emphasizing the idea that only God knows the true meaning of the Qur’an and doubts the authenticity of the male-dominated Islamic classical tradition that very often neglects to deal with the oppression of females in Muslim societies.

## Conclusion

Discussions of the role of Muslim female spiritual caregivers in Islamic spiritual care extend debates concerning the role of females as Muslim leaders in the context of the still male-dominated field of Islamic spiritual care. We witness the challenges of Muslim female spiritual caregivers and how they are ready to give up or accept some sources of authority and power in Islamic spiritual care by adjusting their own theological position. Therefore, women and gender issues should constitute one of the central categories of analysis in Islamic spiritual care. Inequality in Islamic spiritual care arises when female spiritual caregivers who choose to work in this field do not have the power to perform traditional Islamic spiritual care practices in public spaces. For example, one of the needs emerges from the controversies in the debates of females leading the Friday or holiday prayers in Islamic spiritual care in different institutional settings.

Thus, in order to prevent inequality in Islamic spiritual care practice, there is a need to open up academic and professional spaces for the voices of Muslim female spiritual caregivers. This will help to address the structural issues and forces that impact and inform Islamic spiritual care as a profession. Without addressing the issue of existing gender tensions in the Islamic spiritual care profes-

sion, Muslim female spiritual caregivers will have no access or only limited access to opportunities in the Islamic spiritual care profession.

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