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Institutionalizing Female Religious Activity: The Case of *Murshidat* in Morocco

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ABSTRACT: *Since king Mohamed VI assumed the throne in 1999, he has initiated several reforms to foster women's status in Morocco. These reforms have granted women access to political, economic, and religious positions. The murshidat program is an articulation of these gender-sensitive reforms within the religious sphere. However, because men are granted exclusive religious leadership in Islamic legal tradition, women's integration within the religious institution might not translate into full-fledged gender equality. In this respect, it is pertinent to inquire into the potentiality of women's integration into a previously male dominated sphere and how the religious institution balances its commitment to promoting the state-mandated gender policy and maintaining its fidelity to Islamic legal tradition. Since the murshidat program is a state-initiated project that reflects the regime's gender-sensitive policy within the religious institution, it is a pertinent case study to conduct this exploratory project. To collect data, I integrated three research instruments: exploratory survey, textual analysis, and interviews. Field work has revealed that despite the constraints that still obstruct the full articulation of gender equality in the religious sphere, murshidat's institutional affiliation has fostered their status and roles within the religious sphere without disrupting the gendered division of roles in Islamic tradition.*

Key words: *case study, gender policy, institutionalizing, murshidat, religious sphere*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Research on women's religious activity offers a glimpse into the different modes of their engagement with the sacred. Within this literature, five perspectives can be identified. First, through a critical analysis of Islamic biographical collections, researchers have uncovered women's past contribution to the transmission of religious knowledge, especially prophetic tradition (Nadwi, 2007; Roded, 1994, pp. 1-89; Sayeed 2013). Whereas this research has highlighted Muslim women's notable scholarly contribution, especially in hadith transmission, it has also uncovered several constrains that obstructed their formation of receptive communities that would preserve these contributions. Second, research has explored women's embodiment of mystic experience (Roded, 1994, pp. 91-113; Schimmel, 1975, pp. 426-435 & 1997; Smith, 2001). Because of the oral basis of Sufi experience and its reliance on vernacular languages, it has provided women with promising venues for spiritual empowerment. Third, research has addressed Muslim women's engagement in *da'wa*, propagation of Islamic knowledge (El Haitami, 2013; Jouili & Amir-Moazimi, 2006; Mahmood, 2005), and its intersection with political activism (Deeb, 2006; El Haitami, 2016; van Doorn-Harder, 2006). Exploring women's engagement in Islamic/ist groups in diverse contexts has provided rich and vibrant insights into the different ways female religious activism takes shape. Fourth, researchers have analyzed women's institutionalized religious activity. Research was conducted in two pioneering countries, namely, Morocco (Eddouada &

Pepicelli, 2010; El Haitami, 2012; Ennaji, 2013; McKenzie, 2020; Rausch, 2012) and Turkey (Hassan, 2011a, 2011b; Maritato, 2015, 2016, 2018; Tütüncü, 2010). This literature has addressed the ways women's religious activity unfolds within a state bureaucracy. It has also uncovered points of intersection between women's unofficial religious activity (within Islamic/ist groups) as well as points of divergence. Fifth and last, researchers have addressed women's intellectual encounter with and negotiation of Islamic tradition (Badran, 2009; Barlas, 2004; Hassan, 2002; Mernissi, 1991; Moghadam, 2002; Wadud, 2006 &1999). Following feminine hermeneutics, Islamic feminists have addressed gender equality and justice from within Islamic foundational texts (the Quran, the Sunnah, and Muslim annals). The emergent intellectual endeavor has engaged gender paradigm to discuss women's status and roles in Islamic legal tradition and Muslim communities.

This article expands on this research and provides additional insights about the specificity of female religious activity. More specifically, this research addresses the impact of women's institutional affiliation on their religious experience as well as the transformations that the religious institution undergoes as a result of the notable feminization of its structures. Through a case study of the murshidat program, this inquiry explores how Morocco's commitment to gender equality and women empowerment fosters women's status and roles within the religious sphere, on one hand, and how women's integration within a previously male-dominated institution furthers Morocco's gender egalitarian policy, on the other hand.

Because of its capacity to accommodate several data collection instruments, perspectives, and data sets, Case Study Research enables the generation of diverse data sets and the reinforcement of the research findings. In this research, I integrated three research instruments. First, I administered an exploratory survey to collect preliminary data on the murshidat program and tap into any promising research venues. Second, I conducted content analysis on two categories of texts. First, I analyzed royal speeches and Sharifian decrees to uncover the king's perspective on integrating women within the religious sphere. Second, I analyzed online sources to explore the content murshidat deliver, the spaces they frequent, the activities they perform, and the audiences they address. This analysis aims to provide insights about the specificity of murshidat's work and the mode of religiosity the official institution is constructing. This double-fold objective should help uncover the official gender-driven policy and murshidat's contribution to its implementation. In addition to the survey and textual analysis, I conducted several interviews to further my exploration of the official policy within the religious sphere and murshidat's positioning within it. I engaged three categories of informants: members of the religious bureaucracy, religious caretakers (imams murshidin, murshidat, and trainees at Mohamed VI Institute), and a researcher who has made several scholarly contributions in the field of gender and Islam.

II.   AMIR AL-MUMININ AND THE WOMAN QUESTION

Constitutionally, the king is both a religious and political leader. Through the institution of *Imarat al-Muminin,* Commandership of the Faithful, the monarch is charged with protecting the religious integrity of the kingdom. As a political leader, the monarch is charged with drawing the strategic policies of the kingdom. In addition to this constitutional legitimacy, the monarch's religio-political authority also draws on historical legitimacy, notably being the thirty-ninth grandson of the messenger (Toufiq, 2022, p. 176). This twofold legitimacy consolidates the king's monopoly in the religious sphere and beyond (see Hamzaoui, 2008). The monarch's prerogative status grants him authority to initiate grand-scale reforms without triggering disputes or protests. For example, the king's invitation of Rajaa Naji Mekkaoui to participate in the Hassania Lecture Series in the Royal Mosque Palace in 2003 did not raise controversy despite having broken an age-long male monopoly of the Lectures. Mekkaoui has explained that since it was a royal invitation, it was not challenged, at least publicly (Aljazeera Arabic, 2008, 32:00). Similarly, because of the monarch's personal supervision of the groundbreaking reform of the Family Law in 2004, there was not a notable dispute despite having brought

significant changes that had caused serious schism in the country few years before (see Salime, 2011). Therefore, because the 'woman question' is a heated battle ground, the monarch's constitutional status as both a political and religious leader enables him to initiate significant gender-sensitive breakthroughs while maintaining relative consensus in the country.

Since assuming the throne in 1999, Mohamed VI has launched a chain of gender-sensitive reforms that have made significant headway towards institutionalizing gender equality in the country, hence presenting himself as "le Roi des femmes" (King of women) (Cavatorta & Dalmasso, 2009, p. 489). Gender-informed policy has become integral to Morocco's aspiration to engage women in the country's developmental project (see Al-Uthmani & al-Musali, 2021). In his speeches on August 20, 1999 and October 10, 2003, the monarch questioned the possibility of advancing the society and attaining prosperity without granting women, who constitute half the society, their Divine-granted rights (Mohamed VI, 2019, Vol. 1, p. 41 & Vol. 2, p. 222). The king's question was in fact a call to women to partake in the developmental project of the new era and a personal commitment to "make advancing women's rights the stepping stone in the building of a democratic and modern society, and fulfil what [Moroccans] aspire to, viz., full citizenship for all Moroccans" (Mohamed VI, 2019, Vol. 3, p. 329).

Constitutionally the king manages both worldly and spiritual affairs. Since the 'woman question' is situated within both spheres, it fittingly falls within the prerogative of the monarch. In mainstream Islamic legal tradition, gender roles are textually defined; thus, transforming women's status and roles require gender-informed reinterpretation of religious texts. On the other hand, promoting gender equality and women empowerment is also a political decision that is made to upend gender discrimination and inequality and facilitate women's smooth integration into different institutions and sectors. Therefore, furthering gender-sensitive reforms in Morocco warrants the monarch's full engagement, both as religious and political leader. However, the king's margin of maneuverability can be constricted by his constitutional obligation to maintain Islamic precepts. In other words, his constitutional duty to maintain religious precepts might limit his capacity to fulfil Morocco's gender-sensitive commitments as they are internationally recognized. In this respect, in his announcement of the *moudawana* reform in 2003, the king said, "as *Amir al-Muminin*, I cannot make licit what God has made illicit and make illicit what God has made licit" (Mohamed VI, 2019, Vol. 2, p. 224). For this reason, promoting gender equality and women empowerment has not been a smooth endeavor, as it is still contingent on preserving Islamic precepts.

III. GENDER DYNAMICS WITHIN THE MOROCCAN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

Moroccan woman has fostered her status in several sectors and institutions (see Al-Uthmani & al-Musali, 2021). As an extension of this intersectoral gender-driven breakthrough, the state initiated a full-scale feminization of the religious institution as part of the restructuring of the religious sphere in the aftermath of the Casablanca Bombings on May 16, 2003. Therefore, integral to the regime's post 4/16 counter-extremism strategy has been the consolidation of women's status in the religious institution. In her article, "Women provide "spiritual security" in Morocco," Samantha Harrington (2013) has linked the integration of women within the religious institution and Morocco's fight against extremism. The article features a photo of two veiled Moroccan women walking past Hassan II mosque and a caption that says, "Morocco has armed itself with a dramatically different weapon against terrorism – the power of Muslim women to quell violence before it happens" (Harrington, 2013, para. 1).

Feminizing the religious institution in the aftermath of the Casablanca events has fostered the religious institution's engagement in the country's gender-sensitive policy. In this respect, the graduation ceremony of the

first murshidat cohort in 2006 was an occasion to showcase women's pivotal role in the post 4/16 religious policy. Gini Reticker, Director of *Class of 2006*,[1] reported:

> Graduation day was a whirlwind. Our crew found themselves caught up in the national and international press frenzy that mobbed the women on their big day, jazzed to report on a story that flew in the face of stereotypes about submissive Muslim women. The 150 men who graduated alongside the women, though photogenic in their white robes and red Fez hats, were meanwhile left on the side-lines. (Wide Angle, 2006, para. 8)

Similarly, the inauguration of Mohamed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat in 2015, which coincided with the hype of the "War on Terror" in Syria and Iraq, did not overlook the pivotal position of women in the Moroccan religious scene. In the group picture of the king during the inauguration event, murshidat occupy the front while their male colleagues are 'sent to the back'.[2] Because royal protocols are meticulously planned, the murshidat's positioning on both sides of the king in the front line[3] is a vocal message that women are at the forefront of the new religious policy, and by extension, in the overall gender-sensitive regal policy. Last but not least, the royal invitation of a girl to recite the Quran during the celebration of *Laylat al-Qadr*, the Blessed Night, on the 26th of Ramadan (April 7, 2023),[4] is another indicator of the regal strategy to bolster females' status in the Moroccan religious scene (SNRTnews, 2023, 55:00-58:30). The graduation ceremony of the first murshidat cohort, the king's group picture with the murshidat during the inauguration of Mohamed VI Institute, and the royal support of females' public recitation of the Quran showcase the gender-sensitive dimension of the new religious policy and women's pivotal contribution to it.

Women's membership within the religious institution has seen notable rise in the past few decades. Their functions can be classified into three broad categories, viz., bureaucrats, caretakers, and scholars. Although bureaucrats do not contribute to the construction of public religiosity, as they are not necessarily trained in religious scholarship, their numerical increase aligns with the full-scale feminization of public administrations in the country.

Table 1: The number of employees within the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs classified by gender

	Total number	Number of women	Number of men
Central administration	934	430 (46%)	504 (54%)
External departments	5228	1642 (31%)	3586 (69%)
Qarawiyyin University	184	67 (36%)	117 (64%)
General Secretariat of the Supreme Religious Council and the Local Religious Councils	478	169 (35%)	309 (65%)

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[1] *Class of 2006* is a film that documented the graduation ceremony of the first murshidat cohort in 2006 at the Local Religious Council of Rabat. The productive team then followed murshida Samira Marzouk as she set off on her early days as a female religious professional (Reticker & Mangin, 2006).

[2] See https://ar.le360.ma/societe/39957/

[3] Positioning women in the front and relegating men to the back clearly contradicts Islamic legal tradition, which stresses on women's invisibility even when performing rituals (Islamweb, 2010).

[4] In Islamic tradition, it is not desirable for a female (adult) to recite the Quran in public (Islamweb, 2009).

Institutions	101	57 (56%)	44 (44%)
Total	6925	2308 (40.8)	4560 (59.2)

Note: *Dalil al-mawarid al-bacharia* [Human resources directory], by Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs (2021).

The second category comprises *mo'atirat*, *wa'idhat,*[5] and *murshidat*. These religious caretakers are tasked with offering literacy classes, giving instruction on the basics of Islamic creed and jurisprudence, and sensitizing women on various issues. Whereas *mo'atirat* and *wa'idhat* are employees of (or volunteers within) the local councils, *murshidat* are employees of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs and have received an intensive training at Mohamed VI Institute in Rabat. In addition, one of murshidat's duties is to mentor *mo'atirat* and *wa'idhat* and supervise their work.

Table 2: The number of imams murshidin and murshidat who graduated up to 2022

	Imams murshidin	Murshidat
The Local Religious Council of Rabat (2005-2014)	1465	516
Mohamed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat (2015-2022)	1145	699
Total	2610	1215

Note: Adapted from *Guide Institut Mohammed VI de Formation des Imams Morchidines et des Morchidates* [Guidebook of Mohamed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat], by Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs (2021).

Scholars, the last category, mainly engage in conducting research, speaking in conferences, issuing *fatwa*, and training other religious caretakers and supervising their work. They also design and evaluate the religious curricula for schools and training institutions.

Table 3: Women scholars in Morocco

Speakers at Hassania Lecture Series (2003-2022)[6]	Members of the Supreme Council of Ulama[7] (up to 2022)	Members of the Local Religious Councils[8] (up to 2022)
17	7	86

Women's entry into the official scholarly networks has been earned thanks to their numerous achievements, both within the religious sphere and beyond it, and the appreciation of the value they would bring to the post 4/16 restructuring of the religious sphere. In this respect, the king says:

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[5] Because they are often volunteers or local contractors, it is difficult to provide exact figures of *mo'atirat* and *wa'idhat*.

[6] Al-Uthmani and al-Musali, 2021, pp. 144-153

[7] Al-Uthmani and al-Musali, 2021, p. 132

[8] Al-Uthmani and al-Musali, 2021, p. 132

[W]e have decided to restructure the Supreme Council of Ulama, which was placed under the direct supervision of our Majesty, to expand the scope of the network of regional religious councils, to reorganize them, and to expand the scope of their tasks and specializations in a way that makes them able to keep up with the path of development and modernization, and along with it fulfil our aspiration to reform and change.

Certain of what Moroccan woman has achieved, by virtue of her scientific training, her active participation in all fields, and her fulfilment of all responsibilities, [and having] qualifications worthy of consideration, capable of making religious councils open to all social and religious affairs, impacting all citizens, male and female alike, we have decided to involve the female religious scholar in these councils in fairness to her, and trusting her positive contribution to them. (Mohamed VI, 2004, para. 4 & 5)

In addition to her notable numerical membership within the scholarly institutions and the religious bureaucracy, there has been an increasing production of scholarly work on women. A prominent example is the work of the Center for Feminine Studies in Islam[9] within the Mohamedia League of *Ulama* (*al-Rabita al-Mohamedia li Ulama' al-Maghreb*). The Center's intellectual project is premised on revisiting women's status and roles in light of the modern gender-driven transformations (Center for Feminine Studies in Islam, 2019).

Despite women's notable numerical increase within the religious institution and the production of gender-sensitive scholarly work, the religious institution's capacity to fully engage in Morocco's gender egalitarian policy is still obstructed by the specificity of the religious institution as it is bound by how women's status and roles are defined in Islamic legal tradition; thus, while it is evident that the religious institution is engaged in the mass feminization of the public sphere in Morocco, its commitment towards preserving the male dominance of religious leadership might obstruct the full-fledged articulation of gender equality and women empowerment within the religious institution. This shortcoming is most evident in banning women from the performance of the most basic religious functions that religious caretakers perform, viz., leading congregation prayer and giving public sermons.

IV. WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP OF PRAYER AND DELIVERING PUBLIC SERMONS

Upon their graduation from Mohamed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat, a male trainee acquires the title *'imam murshid,'* whereas a female trainee acquires the title *'murshida'.* This titular divergence reflects the divergent roles male and female religious functionaries are expected to perform. Therefore, whereas murshidat are *just* guides, *murshidat*, hence confined to preaching and religious guidance, *imams murshidin* are both religious leaders, *imams*, and religious guides, *murshidin;* thus, they can lead congregation prayer and give *khutbas*, public religious sermons.[10] This divergence reflects the perpetual gender gap within the religious sphere, which gives men leadership roles within the religious realm (*imama* and *khataba)* and confines women to less visible, hence peripheral, roles and to women-only gatherings. However, as it will be further discussed below, women's exemption from mosque-based roles (*imama* and *khataba*) has fostered their status within other institutions. In other words, while *imams murshidin* are 'constricted' to mosque-based activities, *murshidat's* work takes place in various spaces and is directed to diverse audiences.

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[9] The Center was inaugurated during a book signing of the Arabic translation of Asma Lamrabet's, the Center's director (2010-2018), influential book *Women in the Quran*: *A reading for liberation*. The event took place during the 16th edition of the International Book Fair in Casablanca.

[10] It is worth noting that there is not a female equivalent of the masculine noun *'imam'* in Arabic language. On the other hand, women in several non-Arab countries have claimed the title '*imama*', female of '*imam*', to designate their embodiment of religious leadership within the Muslim community (see for e.g., Hammer, 2012; Jaschok, 2012; Sherwood, 2016).

Several arguments are given to ban women's leadership of prayer. In 2006, the Supreme Council of Ulama issued a fatwa stating that it is not permissible for women to lead congregation prayer (Yessef, 2012, pp. 106-108).[11] The fatwa rested on the Maliki tradition that stipulates masculinity for the leadership of prayer congregation (Yessef, 2012, p. 107). In addition, a female leading a congregation (either of men or mixed) would alter the nature of prayer (Yessef, 2012, p. 108) since women's prayer is silent whereas men's is loud in three out of the five daily prayers. Banning women's leadership of congregation is also premised on the argument of precedence; thus, as females' leadership of congregation prayer has never taken place in Moroccan history (Yessef, 2012, p. 108), doing so would be an innovation. Last, the fatwa has postulated that granting females the permission to lead (women-only) congregation would prevent them from partaking the mosque with men, hence depriving them of a valuable learning opportunity (Yessef, 2012, p. 107).

When asked about whether they lead *female* congregation in prayer, only 6 out of the 47 murshidat surveyed responded in the affirmative. The affirmative responses may constitute a form of *ijtihad,* as the six murshidat have either borrowed other jurisprudential opinions that allow a woman to lead women-only congregation, or this act has been an individual re-visiting of the Maliki position on this issue. However, it should be noted that this position is not necessarily informed by an emancipatory perspective. Therefore, even when a murshida contradicts an established legal opinion, she does not necessarily put that within the idiom of 'resistance against norms' or an attempt 'to overthrow patriarchy'; instead, it is seen as tapping into the potentialities that the Islamic precept of *ijtihad* offers to female religious caretakers to promote their status within the religious sphere.[12] In other words, it still falls within the boundaries of Islamic legal tradition (for more on this idea, see Mahmood, 2005, pp. 86-91).

Establishing women's religious authority rests on conforming to mainstream orthodoxy as encroaching on the age long male-dominated tradition might disrupt women's smooth integration into the religious institution or force them out of it. In other words, adherence to doctrinal unity and institutional hierarchy are prerequisites for consolidating women's status within the religious institution. In addition, a female religious caretaker is not necessarily motivated to 'challenge' man's authoritative status or to 'usurp' his leadership prerogatives. Therefore, while religious reform requires, among other things, reconsidering women's status within Islamic tradition (including Maliki jurisprudence), groundbreaking transformations within the existing structures is still limited. In this respect, Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006) have argued that "while being sensitive to their own empowerment, [pro-faith women] do not necessarily want to "renew" Islam but rather prefer to stay inside the "consensus" of established orthodoxy" (p. 632). Being state functionaries, murshidat are bound by the doctrinal consensus of the country. Since making inroads into the realm of the disputed, such as leadership of congregation prayer, might disrupt their legitimate incorporation of religious authority and their fulfillment of their primary purposes, viz., cultivating piety and educating the people, the majority of murshidat remain faithful to the Maliki-founded orthodoxy. Probably more importantly, disrupting doctrinal consensus might even lead to losing their job on the basis of failing to fulfil their duty to maintain and promote doctrinal unity and adhere to institutional hierarchy.

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[11] For two different legal perspectives on the issue, see Abou el Fadl (2010) and Al-Qaradawi (2008).

[12] Although murshidat are not 'qualified' to exercise ijtihad, there are several instances when they have exercised it; however, these instances remain within individual application. In this respect, murshidat's leadership of female gatherings in prayer takes place within the private realm, notably the home, and they cannot publicly promote their position as it would be seen as an attempt at disrupting the ideological harmony of the country, especially Morocco's adherence to the Maliki school of law.

Similar to leadership of prayer, giving *khutbas,* especially on Friday noon and the two major Islamic celebrations, is a male prerogative. Therefore, while women can address a mixed audience in several modern institutions, they still cannot climb-up the *minbar* and deliver a *khutba* to a Muslim congregation. In this sense, although Muslim woman's scholarly authority is recognized in Morocco today, within both the religious and secular spheres, she is not allowed to 'encroach' on the male-exclusive monopoly of giving the public religious sermons (for more on this issue, see Hammer, 2012). Since the Friday *khutba* and leadership of prayer are '*ibadat*, rituals, which take place within a sacred space, the mosque, they fall within the realm of the immutable; thus, they have to be performed in their original form.

Despite being a perpetuation of gender inequality, and probably a form of gender discrimination, women's demand of leadership of prayer has not been a priority (Nyhagen, 2019, p. 11) in Muslim Majority countries neither for the civil society nor the decision makers (Borrillo, 2010, p. 28). This is partially due to women's exemption from observing the five obligatory congregation prayer and the dispute a woman performing such role would stir in the community. In addition, women's prayer sections are usually attached to the main mosque where the five daily prayers are performed. Therefore, unlike in several countries, there are no women-only mosques in Morocco. More than that, in Islamic jurisprudence, a woman's prayer at home is more rewarded than her prayer in the mosque (Islamweb, 2010). On the other hand, although overlooking male dominance of leadership of prayer congregation and giving public sermons is a departure from fostering gender equality within the religious sphere, there is a vast terrain for women's leadership potential beyond the traditional roles. In other words, women can still further their status within the religious sphere while adhering to mainstream legal orthodoxy.

V.   MURSHIDAT'S INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION: ACCESS, PROXIMITY, AND VISIBILITY

1.   Access
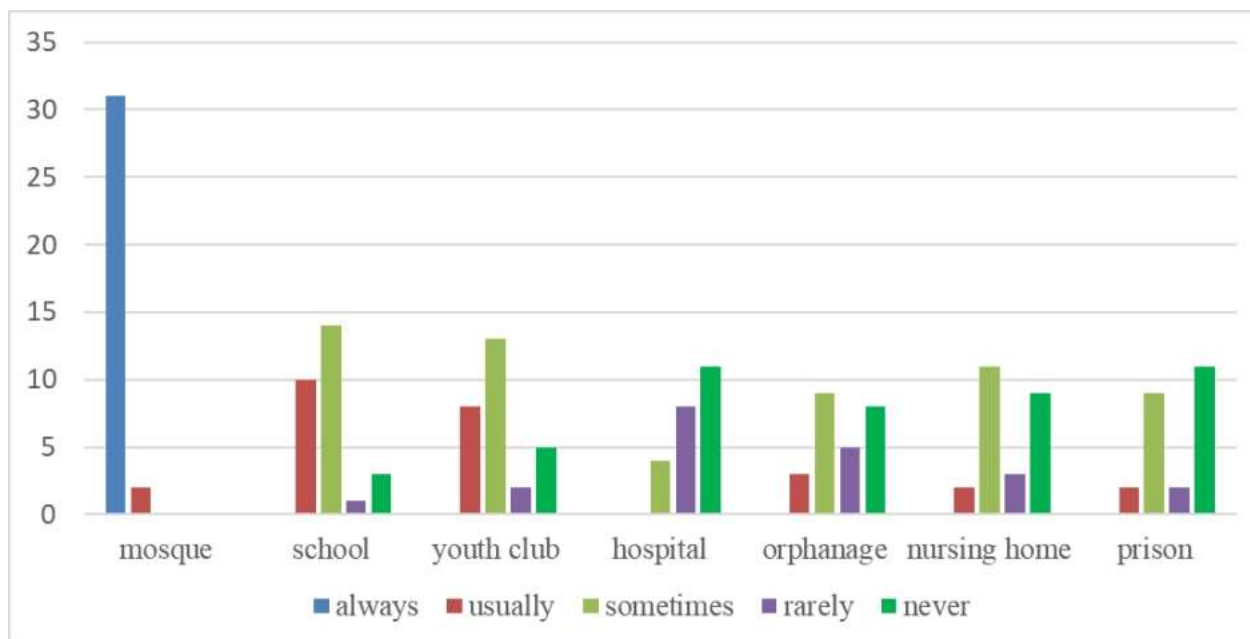

Figure 1: Murshidat's Access to Different Institutions

1.1 Access to the mosque

The post 4/16 religious policy has put the mosque at the epicenter of restructuring the religious sphere in Morocco. Mohamed VI (2019) has stressed that

institutional reform will not be complete without reviving the role of mosques, the beating heart of the spiritual field. Thus, we have decided to take measures that embody our care towards the houses of God as a cornerstone of our religious enlightenment plan. Our goal is to foster its role as a space of worship, God's remembrance, orientation, guidance, and fighting illiteracy. (Vol. 3, p. 280; see also p. 392)

Integral to this revival strategy has been the integration of female caretakers, especially *wa'idhat*, *mu'atirat*, and murshidat. Women's role in this strategy has been important because they can attract diverse age groups and offer diverse activities. In addition to fostering their work within the mosque, murshidat are increasingly opening up to several other institutions, especially those that host children and youths.

Although women's prayer at home is more rewarded than her prayer in the mosque (Islamweb, 2010), women's prayer in the mosque has seen groundswell upsurge in the past few decades (B. Ouafi, personal communication, April 15, 2022). For this reason, mosques have become more accommodative of women's presence by devoting separate spaces to them and tailoring activities to respond to their needs. Prior to the women's integration into the religious institution, religious caretakers used to address both males and females, or only males in case the mosque did not have a women-only section. Because women occupied an enclosed space, male religious caretakers usually disregarded women-specific issues (B. Ouafi, personal communication, April 15, 2022). Employing murshidat, and other female religious caretakers, has positioned women-specific issues and needs at the epicenter of the new religious policy. In this respect, murshidat's role is valuable as they have closed the gap between Moroccan women and the religious caretakers, hence making the mosque a women-friendlier space.

The religious institution has taken several measures to invigorate the role of the mosque. For instance, it has diversified the activities religious caretakers offer therein. In addition to preaching, religious caretakers offer literacy classes, organize contests on memorizing and reciting the Quran, display pre-recorded lessons on TVs, and give hands-on lessons (such as on pilgrimage, praying, ablution, etc.). Another significant service that the mosque provides is literacy classes. Fighting illiteracy, which is a female phenomenon (Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Analphabétisme, n.d.) is both a religious and societal duty (Mohamed VI, 2019, Vol. 1, p. 419; Vol. 2, pp. 229-230). Because of its spiritual weight, the mosque has become vital to this grand-scale project. Several interviewees highlighted women's motivation and commitment to learn how to read and write. Part of this motivation is spiritual as many women join these classes to learn how to read the Quran and learn about their religion (B. Ouafi, personal communication, April 15, 2022). Because of engaging female religious caretakers in this national project, the number of illiterates has dropped from 87% in 1960 to 32% in 2014 (Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Analphabétisme, n.d., para. 1). In addition to its contribution to the national battle against illiteracy, the mosque has become a 'listening center' where women share their stories and vent their struggles. Due to shortage in public social services and counselling centers, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, the mosque is an appealing destination for many women seeking guidance and counselling, especially those belonging to precarious socioeconomic groups to whom religion constitutes a source of comfort and hope. In this respect, Rogers & Durman (2019) have vividly captured the convivial atmosphere that murshidat create to encourage women to open up and freely discuss issues that are relevant to their everyday life. This women-friendly atmosphere was missing before the integration of women within the religious institution; thus, women were deprived of the serene atmosphere of this sacred space (murshida Aqa, personal communication, June 15, 2022). Therefore, in addition to being a site of worship and learning, the mosque is also a space where women socialize and openly discuss issues that are pertinent to them. For El Haitami (2016):

[The mosque] is increasingly becoming a forum for activities led by women themselves, and women are constructing new forms of sociability and new ways of expressing women's interests within official

structures. This reshuffling of sacred and social spaces and the reshuffling of women's roles has offered a platform for people of different social and age categories to engage religion in new ways, which articulates the murshidat's active role within their communities. (p. 87)

1.2 Beyond the mosque

Whereas imams murshidin usually orbit around traditional roles, *imama* and *khataba*, which often take place in the mosque, murshidat's roles are not necessarily mosque-based. Women's exemption from the five obligatory prayers has fostered murshidat's flexibility; thus, they can tap into new activities, reach wider audiences, and access diverse spaces. For this reason, murshidat are more engaged in socially-oriented activities, notwithstanding the limited proportion of these activities in comparison to preaching. Brahim Ouafi highlighted the fact that murshidat are more energetic and motivated than their male colleagues (personal communication, April 15, 2021). Similarly, Mohamed Mesbahi showcased murshidat's initiative-taking and their notable sense of engagement (personal communication, February 24, 2022). Therefore, women's exemption from *imama* and *khataba*, which can be perceived as perpetuation of gender inequality, has in fact opened new venues of activism for murshidat.

Murshidat have opened up to different institutions, public and private, as part of the local councils' post 4/16 outreach strategy. Schools are a favorable host of murshidat's activities. Because children and teenagers are the future of the nation (murshida Aqa, personal communication, June 15, 2021), murshidat devote some of their time to them. Mohamed Mesbahi shed light on how these age groups have become a favorable target of criminal activities, especially drug dealing. He added that the Local Religious Council of Rabat, especially through the active engagement of murshidat, is increasingly invested in reaching out to schools, especially middle and high schools (personal communication, February 24, 2022). Opening up to schools aims to boost students' academic achievement and help them succeed in their studies. Murshidat offer psychological support and enforcement lessons to students, especially before exams. Coming from different educational backgrounds (languages, economics, math, etc.), murshidat can oscillate between giving religious instruction and teaching school subjects. This diversity provides local councils with the necessary profiles to vary their services and widen their audiences. In this context, it is noteworthy that murshidat act as exemplary models for the girls aspiring to become good, well-educated, and successful women as they exemplify both academic attainment and attachment to their identity and religion (B. Ouafi, personal communication, April 15, 2021).

In addition to schools, murshidat's opening up to youth clubs makes their work visible to a category of beneficiaries that is not usually acquainted with the activities of the religious institution. As young girls are still distant from the mosque, reaching out to them has become a top priority for the religious councils to consolidate their bond with the official religious institution, "foster their spiritual education, and help them overcome the pressure of digitalization" (murshida Aqa, personal communication, June 15, 2021). As for the issues they tackle, murshidat mostly focus on students' educational attainment, their roles in the society, their relationship with their family, and their daily struggle in this fast-changing world (murshida Aqa, personal communication, June 15, 2021).

In addition to their work within mosques, schools, and youth clubs, murshidat have opened up to nursing homes, children's homes, and prisons. Despite being occasional, reaching out to these institutions is a notable shift in the role of the religious institution in the country. Before the restructuring of the religious sphere, the institution's 'jurisdiction' was limited to supervising major mosques and managing religious endowments. Thus, it was mostly confined to the religious spaces and roles. In this respect, the religious institution was detached from the socioeconomic dynamics in the society, except when they were addressed within the mosque. As part

of the post 4/16 religious policy, the religious institution has expanded its 'jurisdiction' to cover more ground and foster its presence in the society.

2. Proximity

2.1 Closing distance with women, kids, and youths

Before the restructuring of the religious sphere, the religious institution marginalized several segments of the society (M. Mesbahi, personal communication, February 24, 2022). Its activities were limited within the mosques and religious schools, and they were primarily addressed to male audiences. Therefore, male dominance of the religious institution constrained the religious institution's capacity to reach the female segments of the society. The new religious policy is premised on "proximity to citizens as a means to listen to their concerns, solve their problems, and address their legal (religious) issues (Mohamed VI, 2019, Vol. 3, p. 367; see also p. 279). To achieve this goal, it has taken several measures. For instance, it has increased the number of local religious councils and intensified its presence on different media platforms, both traditional and modern. As women have notable community building capacities and a strong sense of commitment (B. Ouafi, personal communication, April 15, 2021), their integration within the religious institution has been integral to its post 4/16 outreach strategy. This integration aims to foster communication ties between the religious institution and the previously neglected categories: women, youths, and kids.

Women's capacity to access diverse spaces gives them chance to approach large and diverse audiences. Rogers & Durman (2019) have captured two instances of this women-led proximity. In the first scene, murshida Bouchra pays a visit to a family in the rural outskirts of Larache. She sits with a mother and her daughter at a green farmland. The proximity of the murshida to the mother and her daughter creates an intimate atmosphere that reflects the delicateness of the issue they are about to discuss (marrying the girl off while still underage). Being a woman, a wife, and a mother helps Bouchra create an affective bond with her interlocutors, which allows for the discussion of such a delicate and intimate issue (Rogers & Durman, 2019, 20:33-23:10). In the second scene, murshida Karima accompanies students on a field trip from Rabat to Fez to acquaint them with the history of the old city and its spiritual heritage. In an instance of intimate proximity to the participants, she mentioned Fatima al-Fihriya as the founder of *Jami' al-Qarawiyyin,* the religious icon of the spiritual capital of Morocco. This reference carries a message of the role women played as pillars of their communities and by extension the role women, such as herself, play in the modern Morocco (Rogers & Durman, 2019, 44:29). The two examples give a vibrant glimpse into the religious institution's outreach strategy especially to previously disregarded segments of the society.

Women, kids, and youths have become primal target in the post 4/16 religious policy. These three groups have shown increasing demand of religious instructions in the past few decades (B. Ouafi, personal communication, April 15, 2021). In this context, the king has said:

> In the midst of the broad reform of the religious field, we give special importance to the great role of the scholarly woman, and to the variety of services that can enrich her programs, especially in the field of enhancing family life and the world of women, enlightening the minds of girls and nurturing them to love the country and to be proud of its constants and sanctities, with strong clinging to the tolerant values of Islam and its eternal principles. (Mohamed VI, Vol. 3, p. 392)

Murshidat's roles include teaching and supervising women's and kids' memorization of the Quran, monitoring listening sessions with women, and preaching to them (Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 2019, p. 47). In this context, Mustapha Zamhani stressed on the fact that murshidat's strength lies in their capacity to enter homes (personal communication, June 2, 2022). In this private space, murshidat can reach housebound housewives and kids, who are not often regular mosque goers. Also, because of its

emotional and affective atmosphere, the home enables murshidat effect change from within the family and the private space (M. Zamhani, personal communication, June 2, 2022). In addition to offering 'open sessions', murshidat offer individualized counselling, either through face to face meetings or via the phone. This proximity to interlocutors allows murshidat open discussion about intimate issues and answer their queries. Before the official integration of women within the religious sphere, asking male religious caretakers about issues such as cleansing, menstruation, and intimate relationships with husbands, was a cause of embarrassment (M. Mesbahi, personal communication, February 24, 2022), hence perpetuating women's ignorance about several religious matters. Thanks to murshidat, and other female religious caretakers, many women have overcome this embarrassment; thus, asking for guidance on women-specific issues is more convenient today as women can open up and share their queries with more ease and confidence. Murshidat's gender fosters their understanding of women's needs and subsequently offer the best guidance.

Opening up to kids, especially female kids, is a marking strategy of the new religious policy and a vast terrain for female religious caretakers. Between September 2021 and August 2022, the three local councils[13] documented 53 activities that had been addressed to kids, all of which had either been exclusively supervised by murshidat, or in collaboration with members of the religious councils. The Local Council of Khenifra has shown keen interest in providing activities that were aimed for the kids. Their female cell *Zaharat al-Majlis al-Ilmi*, Flowers of the Religious Council, are notably active, especially because they engage various female actors. Besides engaging murshidat, *mu'atirat*, and *wa'idhat*, this cell also engages students in peer-to-peer mentoring to foster their leadership skills at a young age.

Because of their gender, murshidat are more approachable than their male colleagues (B. Ouafi, personal communication, April 15, 2021). They can provide guidance on social, spiritual, religious, and familial matters. Breaking the traditional image of a distant religious authority that is hard to approach from the part of women and young people, murshidat's proximity to the women and their mobility between several institutions have transformed the role of religious authority and the status of the religious institution in the society.
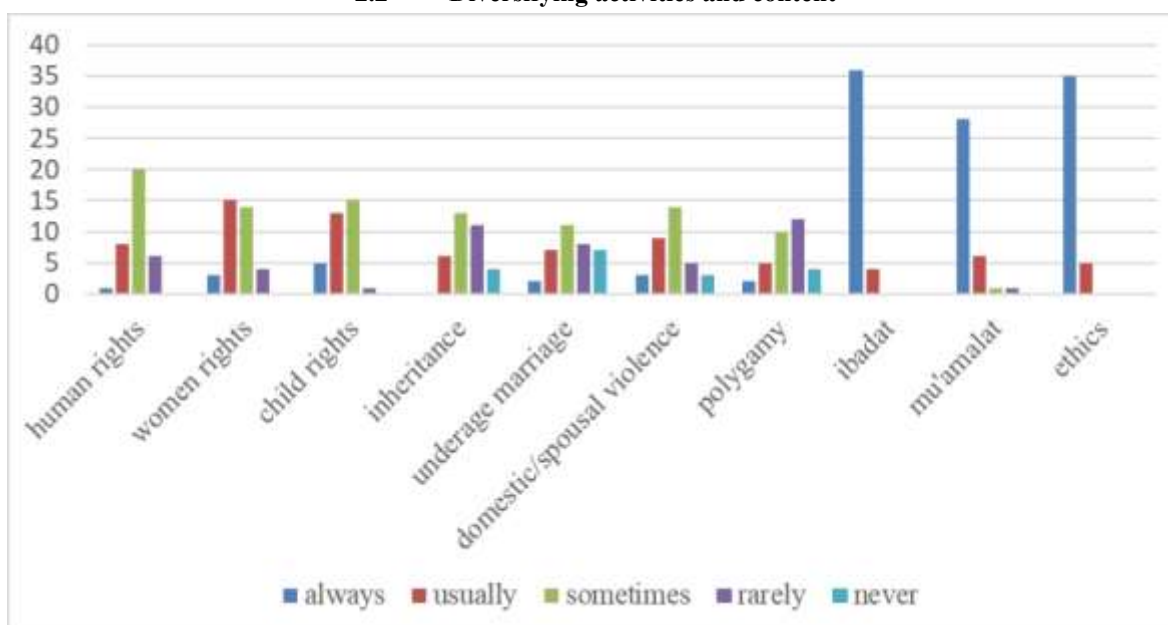
2.2   Diversifying activities and content

Figure 2: Content categories murshidat address

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[13] The Local Council of Ain Chock, the Local Council of Khenifra, and the Local Council of Laayoune

As religious caretakers, murshidat's primal focus is cultivating piety. The word piety, *taqwa*, and its derivatives are mentioned 258 in the Quran (Islamweb, 2012). This concept has five meanings: unity of God, devotion to God only, worship and obedience, fear of God, and staying away from God's disobedience (Islamweb, 2012). Fulfilment of piety rests on correct perception of creed, commitment to performance of rituals, notably individual or communal *dhikr,* remembrance of God, supplication, and disciplined recitation of the Quran (see Mahmood, 2005).

The survey output and the analysis of the YouTube channels of three murshidat[14] has revealed that the new religious policy is piety-driven. Rituals, ethics, and transactions/relations are the dominant content categories that murshidat address. These three categories constitute the practical aspects of Islam. Addressing the first and third categories, rituals and ethics, aim at the cultivation of a piety and ethical formation. Addressing the second category, transactions/relations, aims to organize Muslims' everyday life. As knowledge of these issues is obligatory for every Muslim, man and woman, they are integral to murshidat's work.

To cultivate piety, Muslims are required to strengthen their bond with the Quran and perform their rituals on a regular basis. For this reason, daily recitation of the Quran, *al-wird al-yawmi*, and providing lessons on the Maliki jurisprudence (to perform rituals in the correct way) dominate murshidat's lessons. The three murshidat dedicated significant proportion of their videos to the Quran (Aziza Al-Rital (74%); Laila Habr (43%); Maria Lgzouli (44%)). The three murshidat focus on memorization, recitation, and explanation of the Quran. Reciting and memorizing the Quran are considered '*ibadat*, acts of worship, that are generously rewarded in the hereafter. Memorizing part of the Quran is required to perform prayer, the second pillar of Islam. In addition, it is the primary source of knowledge about faith, worship, and rules of jurisprudence. Piety is also cultivated through the disciplined and correct performance of rituals. To achieve this objective, murshidat put much premium on the Maliki *fiqh*, jurisprudence. Therefore, in junction with Mahmood's (2005) findings on the Mosque Movement, murshidat articulate Islam as a lived tradition rather than an abstract idea. In this respect, the selection of issues is informed by the evaluation of the audience's needs, questions, and requests so that they can address issues that are pertinent to their audiences.

Besides fostering piety, murshidat address issues that are not strictly religious. In this respect, Brahim Ouafi spoke about a revival of a past tradition when the mosque hosted discussions and scientific circles about a variety of issues, such as math, physics, and astronomy (personal communications, January 4, 2022). Tapping into non-religious issues helps expand the scope of knowledge that murshidat tap into and by extension broaden their audiences. In addition, it contributes to the socio-economic welfare of the communities, especially when addressing issues that foster people's knowledge and skills. Borrowing from other fields of knowledge has become very common among religious actors. Most notably, human sciences and human development have become immersed into the religious discourse. Investing religious idiom helps raise people's awareness about issues that are at the intersection of cultivating piety and fostering societal development.[15] For instance, out of the 72 hours murshida Maria Lghzouli uploaded on her YouTube channel, approximately 13 hours addresses personal development. The list of the topics she has tackled includes strategies of taking exams, overcoming anxiety in times of crisis, time management, budgeting, how to spend an exciting holiday, self-confidence and its impact on success, and overcoming failure. Diversifying issues reveals an attempt to tailor religious

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[14] Maria Elghzouli (https://www.youtube.com/@elgzouli_maria), Laila Habr (https://www.youtube.com/@user-ot4nj8nw5w), and Aziza Rital (https://www.youtube.com/@aziza1rital)

[15] In this respect, the state's mobilizing of religious actors in its fight against illiteracy is a potent indicator of how the post 4/16 religious strategy is entangled with the overall societal project of the country (see for e.g., Mohamed VI, Vol. 1, pp. 311-312 & 419-420).

knowledge to the diverse needs of the audiences. The emerging trend of tapping into non-religious activities attests to the blurring of boundaries between the religious spaces and issues, on one hand, and the secular ones, on the other hand. This diversity reflects the religious actors' sensibility to the different dynamics in the country. In this context, "'religious services' should be understood within the wider socio-moral axis of Islam, which covers much more than just praying, fasting and religious ceremonies" (Sunier, et al., 2011, p. 68).

2.3 Context-informed *fiqh*

The religious institution's opening up to different institutions and audiences has triggered notable transformation of its discourse to meet the needs of these audiences (see Rogers & Durman, 2014). For instance, murshida Bouchra receives a call from a superintendent of a middle school's dorms informing her of a student's suicide. Upon her arrival, she encounters a gloomy atmosphere; many girls are crying while others are in shock. Bouchra begins her talk with expressing her heartfelt sadness; then she says, "Allah is my witness that I love each one of you as if you were my sisters. We have lost one of us; she [the girl who committed suicide] loved life" (Rogers & Durman, 2014, 28:45). The meeting includes interventions from students who express their shock and sadness and talk about the circumstances that have caused the incident. Bouchra concludes the meeting with reciting verses from the Quran and prayer.

Throughout the meeting, Bouchra does not bring the *hokm,* religious ruling, of suicide in Islam nor the punishment for the act in Islamic legal tradition (see Islamqa, 2005). This is probably due to the context (educational institution) and audience (teenagers). Bouchra treats the tragic incident as a social/profane matter that has occurred due to real life circumstances rather than lack of faith. In other words, she treats the event as an 'accident' and not a 'sin'. Still, such tragic events can be avoided by turning to spirituality and consolidating one's spiritual fortitude. It is notable that although the school has its own administrative and educational cadre, they have invited an 'outsider' to interfere in such a difficult time. This testifies to the pertinence of spiritual and ethical education in the lives of the youths and showcases the impact of the murshidat's background knowledge and training on their capacity to address such a sensitive issue.

This snapshot provides a glimpse into the delicate circumstances that a murshida may face in her line of work. It also reveals the character traits and skillset that the modern religious professionals need to deal with such events. Addressing such incidents requires informed evaluation of the audience's character traits to tailor religious discourse to their needs. Therefore, unlike traditionalist approach, which is text-oriented, i.e., limited by what religious texts say about a specific issue, a context-informed approach is oriented towards blurring the boundaries between texts and contexts.

The second scene that Rogers & Durman (2014) have captured takes place in the women section at al-Falah Mosque in the Old Town of Rabat (05:35-07:26). Similar to Bouchra's approach to the girl's suicide, Hannane does not address underage marriage from a traditionalist perspective, since she does not bring the *hokm,* religious ruling, of underage marriage in Islamic legal tradition nor does she cite what previous jurists said about it. The exchange between Hannane and her audience reveals that the issue of underage marriage is approached from a societal perspective; thus, underage marriage transcends the permissible/impermissible jurisprudential binary and requires a critical reflection on the future of the minor either as an underage mother that risks getting divorced before reaching adulthood, or an educated and autonomous grownup who can make her own decisions and assume responsibility of her actions. In this sense, underage marriage is approached from a child right perspective (see Al-Aoula, 2018).

Unlike Hannane's approach to underage marriage, a traditionalist views the issue from a permissible/impermissible binary. For instance, in 2008, the Moroccan Wahhabi figurehead Mohamed al-Maghraoui issued a fatwa supporting the marriage of nine-year-old girls. His fatwa was premised on the

prophet's marriage to Aicha at the age of 9. His fatwa stirred controversy and was fiercely denounced by several human rights activists as well as the Supreme Council of Ulama (Sarat, 2006). Because sheikh al-Maghraoui had significant following and impact in the Moroccan religious landscape (see Abou al-Louz, 2013), his fatwa might obstruct Morocco's official strategy to keep girls in schools and minimize child marriages. Conversely, Hannane's exchange with the women is not a jurisprudential discussion of the permissibility of underage marriage or its precedence in the prophet's time; it is akin to a friendly chat about the future of the girl.

The strategy of 'tossing' issues from the realm of the sacred to the realm of the profane allows the religious caretaker to evade 'getting lost' in jurisprudential, often emotional and sensitive, debate, and subsequently missing the real issue all together viz., the future of the child. Therefore, Hannane approached the issue from the perspective of seeking the child's *maslaha,* interest/benefit, which is a key principle in the Maliki school of law (Al-Rouki, 2017).

In both cases, murshidat showcase their increasingly attentiveness to social dynamics, especially those that affect women's status and roles in the society. This shift supports women's positioning within the religious institution and the society at large, and it fittingly aligns with Morocco's post 4/16 religious policy that aims, among other things, to reform religious discourse in light of the changing circumstances. In one of the speeches directed to the Moroccan religious scholars, the king said:

> We continue to emphasize the necessity of integrating religious discourse into the core of the societal project that we are working hard to build in order to achieve the desired human development, meet its challenges, and look forward to the future with confidence, determination, and reassurance. And this requires making the religious discourse that you [religious scholars] direct a form of consciousness raising and guidance that is premised on a *maqasid*-based ijtihad directed towards bringing benefits and warding off harm and taking into account the changes of reality in adherence to the principles of the true Islamic religion and its moderation and tolerance. (Mohamed VI, 2019, Vol. 3, p. 367)

Murshidat's addressing issues from a social perspective, renders their work close to social counselling (Wainscot, 2017, p. 135; see also Borrilo, 2010, p. 25). Because of the proximate relationship with their beneficiaries and the high-context communicative atmosphere they create, murshidat act as social counselors and personal coaches. Their focus on helping women, youths, and kids overcome their problems makes their activities more complex than simply an act of preaching. Bridging the gap between cultivation of piety and social activism fittingly intersects with Morocco's commitment to both modernizing religious practice and maintaining Islamic identity, notwithstanding the difficulty of fulfilling this endeavor. The role murshidat play makes their work broader in scope and more nuanced than that of traditionalists, as whereas the latter are stuck in strict literalism and often disregard the changing reality, murshidat's work is more nuanced; besides being traditionalists when they address issues that pertain to the realm of the immutable, such as issues of faith, rituals, and ethic, they also aspire to engage in social reform to have a positive impact on their audiences.

3. Visibility

Feminizing the religious institution is centered on making the feminine visible. Since boosting women's status in the religious institution is a state-mandated policy, it fittingly intersects with Morocco's broader gender-informed policy. Granting murshidat access to various sites and fostering their proximity to heterogeneous audiences illustrate that female voice is getting more vocal within the religious sphere (see van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

Mosque's sex segregation does not allow murshidat to address mixed audiences, and subsequently foster their authority in the eyes of both men and women. In addition, Islamic jurisprudence highlights the private duties of women and discourages 'unnecessary' public visibility, including women's attendance of the mosque.

This constriction is often founded on the fact that women's physical charm could distract men from fulfilling their religious rituals (Katz, 2014). Conversely, murshidat's work within modern spaces, such as schools and youth clubs, and their increasing use of social media foster their visibility to both genders. Thus, because these spaces are more accommodative of female religious activity, women's increasing public activity within them has undermined traditionalist discursive barriers that previously constrained women's public visibility.

Women's increasing public visibility can a transform people's perception of female religious authority and trigger a reconsideration of women's status and roles in the religious sphere and beyond. Several indicators attest to the increasing female visibility within the religious sphere and the concomitant accommodation of the feminine presence. For instance, murshidat are increasingly using the Internet to widen their audiences. For instance, Leila Habr hosts online talks via YouTube from within her home. She delivers several of her lessons from within this familial atmosphere and in the presence of relatives or friends. This homely atmosphere is open, notwithstanding, as her lessons are accessible to an audience beyond the immediate private space of the home. Thus, the use of the Internet has eased women's integration into the religious sphere and helped them overcome the spatial structures, notably the mosque, by exploiting alternative spaces to further their positioning within the religious sphere. Because of social media, murshidat have managed to subvert several discursive barriers that previously obstructed their public visibility and their reach to a wide audience.

In connection with the above, public recitation of the Quran, which has been a male expertise for much of Muslim history, is increasingly feminized. For instance, Laila Habr has uploaded 23.53 hours of recorded Quran, only 2.37 hours are by male reciters. Women's public recitation of the Quran in public is a recent phenomenon in Muslim societies. Unlike many men, who have built worldwide reputation as eponymous reciters of the Quran, no woman has been able to do likewise. This is partly due to the *karaha*, undesirability, of women's public recitation of the Quran in Islamic legal tradition. For some jurists, since reciting the Quran involves chanting, it might incite *fitna* and arouse men's sexual urges (Islamweb, 2009). However, since woman's public visibility has intensified today, more women and girls are willing to learn the rules of Quran's recitation, participate in national and international Quranic contests, and teach women the rules of correct recitation.[16] In this respect, the king invited a girl, Hajar Lamrabet, to recite the Quran during the celebration of *Laylat al-Qadr*, Destiny Night, on April 7, 2023, at Hassan II Mosque (SNRTnews, 2023, 55:00-58:30). In this celebration, the king handed Hajar Lamrabet Mohamed VI National Prize for the Memorization and Recitation of the Quran. This ceremony was a crystalline celebration of females' excellence in Quran recitation and a regal support of their incremental engagement in this field.

Murshidat's discourse and activities showcase their promotion of a more visible role in full respect of modesty and Islamic values. The discursive construct *fitna* has not restricted murshidat's increasing visibility in different spaces and platforms. Murshida Aqa argued that "several people publicize immorality and mediocrity, why should we refrain from publicizing exemplary behaviors and ethical uprightness?" (personal

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[16] Every year, the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs organize contests (local, regional, national and international) to encourage children and youths to memorize, recite, and understand the Quran (see Mohamed VI, 2005, for more details). These contests have seen significant female participation. For instance, in 2005 Hajar Boussaq won Mohamed VI national contest and in 2009 she won Mohamed VI international competition and received her prize from the king himself. In 2013, Hajar Boussaq won the international contest that was organized in Malaysia and received her prize from the Malayasian Queen. Her achievement has won her international popularity, hence making her an example for many girls. Hajar has created a YouTube channel where she offers educational lessons on Quran recitation (https://www.youtube.com/@hajarboussaq (72.1K subscribers).

communication, June 15, 2021). Murshidat have downplayed the incompatibility between public visibility and modesty (see van Doorn-Harder, 2006). By posting their activities on social media, murshidat are modeling good behavior and promoting 'positive religiosity'. This perspective articulates a different understanding of public visibility, which is promoted as fostering female religiosity and undermining the age-long restrictions on women's engagement in the public sphere as instigator of *fitna*.

Because of the religious institution's outreach strategy, murshidat's work is visible to wide and diverse segments of the society, especially kids and young people. Murshidat's increasing visibility can potentially transform the young generation's attitudes towards women's status and roles within the religious sphere. David Miller's study on children's development of gender stereotypes in science is an interesting backdrop that can showcase the far reaching impact of feminizing the religious sphere. Miller has explored the entanglement of people's perception of gender norms and 'gender reality.' According to him, "If you had asked a young child 50 years ago to draw a picture of a scientist, about 99% of the drawings would be of men. Ask children to do the same drawing today, and close to a third of the pictures would be of women" (Doug, 2018, para. 1 & 2). Miller posits that the result reflects the impact of both women's increasing presence in the scientific field and the increasing visibility of women scientists on the media and popular culture. In this sense, there is strong correlation between mediatizing the feminine presence within the scientific field and the formation of gender perceptions as "[c]hildren are picking up ideas from what they see" (Doug, 2018, para. 9).

Miller's study showcases that changing gender stereotypes is a two-way process since increasing women's visibility transforms people's gender-informed expectations which in turn foster visibility; therefore, integrating more women into the religious sphere should transform people's expectations and subsequently encourage more females to seek more leadership roles within the religious sphere. In this context, children's increasing attendance of murshidat's lessons can transform their expectations and view of female religious activity. In this respect, Mustapha Zamhani reported the notable increase of girls' attendance of Quranic circles, which reflects positive conceptualization of female religious leadership and girls' capacity to fulfil this spiritual duty. He added that several of them had expressed their motivation to engage in religious activity when they grow old (personal communication, June 2, 2022). It is common knowledge that children often aspire to attain professions they hold in high esteem. Thus, as religious activity has become a career to pursue, it has become more accommodative of female's bids for religious leadership.

VI.   CONCLUSION

Murshidat have become key contributors to the implementation of the post 4/16 religious policy. Through their access to diverse institutions, proximity to various segments of the population, and promotion of female religious leadership, they have managed to boost their visibility in the public religious sphere. Because of the king's personal involvement in the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment, and given his status as the head of the religious institution, women's integration into the religious sphere has occurred smoothly, especially because of its coinciding with the post 4/16 security-sensitive atmosphere.

Articulating gender equality, understood as granting women the *same* status and allowing them to perform the *same* roles as their male colleagues, is far-fetched. This is primarily due to the religious institution's commitment to Islamic jurisprudence, which bans women from performing certain roles, such as *imama* and *khataba*. However, murshidat are exploring other venues of activism beyond the traditional roles; thus, they are actively articulating the king's call to religious caretakers to foster their proximity to the community. As the religious caretakers are getting out of their 'comfort zone' (the mosque) and gaining access to diverse institutions and reaching out to diverse segments of the population, they are increasingly tailoring their discourse to respond to the needs of the community, on one hand, and align their discourse with Morocco's

gender-sensitive policy, on the other hand.

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