Female 'Ulama in West Yorkshire

How and to what extent do they engage with Muslim communities?

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Abstract

Religious authority and leadership have always been central to Islam. Discussions about who is entitled to be regarded as a religious authority have been ongoing since the years following the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. The 'Ulama have often been charged with guiding Muslim communities through offering guidance on religious matters. Historically, women have participated in these debates and have made significant contributions to the Islamic intellectual tradition. However, in more recent times their visibility as authoritative leaders has dropped. This study analyses the authority of female 'Ulama in West Yorkshire by looking at their interactions with Muslims. The findings of this research are the result of in-depth interviews that touch upon the perception of female scholars by Muslim communities as well as their reflections on being *Alimahs*. Through exploring the experiences of female scholars, this research endeavours to highlight the factors affecting religious authority among women.

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Introduction

Background

The *'Ulama*, Muslim scholars, have often been a topic of discussion within academia and especially within British Muslim studies, because of their authoritative position and role within Muslim communities. Moreover, the recruitment of *madrasa*[1] graduates from Pakistan into extremist groups that have been accused of the September 11 2001 events, has only intensified this interest in the leadership of Muslims. An emerging trend can be observed in the study of 'Ulama training and Islamic education. Extensive research has been conducted about Islamic educational institutions, particularly the *darul uloom*[2], as well as its graduates. Some notable studies have been undertaken by: Zaman (2002); Birt (2005); Lewis (2006) and Scott-Baumann & Chreuvallil-Contractor (2015). While there are a plethora of sources discussing the male graduates of Darul Ulooms across Britain, the presence of women in these institutions has largely been ignored. Much attention has also been given to the post-graduation activities of males in positions such as *Imam* or chaplain (Gilliat-Ray & Ali, 2013). Additionally, scholars such as Birt and Geaves (2008) have written at length about the nature of contemporary Islamic scholars and what is expected of their religious leadership. Islamic education in Britain is predominantly *Deobandi* and *Barelwi* in nature, reflecting the settlement of South Asian groups in industrial towns and cities beginning in the 1960s onwards (Gilliat-Ray, 2012). *Deobandi* refers to a revivalist movement that began in South Asian; the *darul uloom* also originated from here. *Barelwi* is also a movement within Sunni Islam, it places emphasis on maintaining a personal relationship with God.

Masooda Bano has pointed out that there is a "growing number of women" enrolling in female seminaries since their establishment in the 1970s (2017, p. 3). To see a significant rise of interest in accessing authoritative Islamic knowledge among Muslim women over a limited period of time prompts questions about their activities after the completion of their studies. Furthermore, we may ask why such women are absent from research discussions.

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[1] Islamic education institutions
[2] Literally means 'House of Knowledge' but refers to Islamic education istitutions

Studies have often focused on Muslim women as subjects of male leadership and very little has been made available about the contemporary female scholar in Britain. Where female scholarship in Islam has been evaluated, it is frequently reductionist. Bano (2017) highlights that there is a misconception that women are motivated to participate in the Islamic scholarly tradition for their personal spiritual development. While this is true for some people, it is just one factor and this generalisation does not account for the variety of incentives that push women to pursue Islamic education. In addition to this, it is evident that women graduating from seminaries in Britain have studied the same curriculum as their male counterparts and are therefore sufficiently qualified to provide religious leadership. However, the absence of an institutionalised position, like that of the Imam, that is available for men but not women, has resulted in a general negation of the role and contribution of the *Alimah* (female scholar) in the study of Muslim communities. Furthermore, it should be noted that the women entering seminaries are not interested in producing a feminist reading of the classical texts (Bano, 2017) as might be assumed. Rather, they acknowledge the importance of earlier scholarly contributions. Also, they are not detached from modern life in Britain, with many being employed and attending higher education. From this it can be deduced that such women are negotiating a hybridised identity as contemporary, active members of British society who are traditionally trained in the Islamic sciences and able to offer leadership. It is for these reasons that this study aims to highlight the often-forgotten involvement of the Alimah in Muslim communities. After interacting with such women on numerous occasions, it is clear that they can potentially have a positive impact on their communities, especially younger generations of female scholars, even without the institutional support of mosques. Moreover, this research highlights the responses of Muslim communities and male scholars to female 'Ulama and how these affect the ways in which they are perceived.

Research aim, questions and structure

The aim of this research is to examine how and to what extent female 'Ulama engage with Muslim communities in West Yorkshire. Migration patterns suggest that there is a sizable population of Muslims in this area.

In chapter one I will analyse the current literature surrounding the above topics, namely the establishment of religious authority in Islam and how this has translated to the British context. Moreover, here I will outline the few studies that have focused on women in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Following this, chapter two describes and evaluates the processes of qualitative fieldwork. The issues of conducting research with Muslim communities are discussed along with the methods adopted to ensure that the data gathered is adequately detailed. The student interviewed, Maryam, was not attending Islamic education at the time of interview but intended to return within the next few months. Nevertheless, Maryam's responses offered insight into the realities of undertaking such an intensive course of study. Through carrying out semi-structured interviews with female scholars and women who have experienced Islamic education, the activities, motivations and perceptions of female 'Ulama are identified. Participant observation was also employed to gain a richer understanding of the Alimahs' interaction with other Muslims Additionally, access issues have prompted a serious reflection on the methodologies and politics of researching marginalised communities, and this is discussed at the end of chapter two. Next, chapter three consists of two parts. The first part analyses the findings of the study. A number of themes have been highlighted, including the effects of community perceptions on the authority of female 'Ulama. The second part of chapter three consists of a discussion about the significance and implications of the findings. Finally, chapter five will convey the conclusions that can be drawn from this study.

To summaries, I posit that Muslim women are pursuing a classical Islamic education and apply it to the context of their modern lives. However, there is a lack of research on female scholars in the British context. Considering the female scholar's knowledge of the religion and their appreciation of contemporary issues, I argued that they are fully equipped to be authorities in their own right, without the need of male support. Why then, has literature commonly referred to women's authority in relation to males'? A qualitative approach has been taken to assess whether the Alimah's title is perceived with the same authority as male 'Ulama. Thus, this study examines the community's reaction to Alimahs' religious authority. The research questions driving this project are:

1. What motivates females to pursue Islamic education?
2. How do students of Islamic education perceive their future engagement with the Muslim community to be?
3. What activities do female scholars perform within the Muslim community?
4. How do Alimahs perceive their religious authority?

Finally, this research purports that while in theory Alimahs are authoritative figures, in practice they wield an informal authority because of a lack of community recognition, and to some extent, support from male 'Ulama. Furthermore, this study concludes that Alimahs' authority is associated with her outward appearance and actions that are ultimately judged by the Muslim community's standards for 'pious' women.

Literature Review

Since the earliest days if Islam, knowledge has been central to the religion. This section outlines the information available about the topic at hand. There was a plethora of research about the establishment of the Deobandi madrasa and the authority of male scholars. However, there was a paucity of research on the role and experiences of female scholars, with the exception of a few seminal studies. I will review the academic literature and history of Islamic religious knowledge and Islamic education from its origins in India to its current form in Britain. The today significant Deoband style Islamic education emerged from two streams of Islamic education present in India around the 17th and 18th centuries. I will then give an overview of male religious authority and leadership to contrast this with women in the field. Giving a brief overview of the history of women's involvement in Islamic authority will explain the neglect of women in contemporary Islamic leadership. Key words such as authority, leadership and involvement will be considered to situate my research within the wider literature.

The Origins of Islamic Religious Training: India

In its beginning stages, Islamic education consisted of the Prophet Muhammad teaching his Companions about the revelation he had received. This method of direct learning from teacher to student is still evident in contemporary Islamic education and most illustrated in the madrasa system. To fully appreciate the experiences of female 'Ulama it is necessary to briefly look at the establishment of madrasas. As stated, the current madrasa tradition in its South Asian context originated from two streams. One is the Firangi Mahall school which formed in the 17th century and was known for its tolerant outlook. This school established the *Darse Nizami[3]* curriculum that was subsequently adopted by other madrasas. An alternative tradition emerged through a period of reform that began in the 18th century and has been linked to Shah Walliullah. His major contribution was translating the Qur'an into the Persian language, allowing the masses access to it. He taught students from various

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[3] Common Islamic studies curriculum

fields of Islamic knowledge and aimed to present Islam in a rational light, thereby diversifying madrasa networks.

Scholasticism is central to the global madrasa network. Ebrahim Moosa's (2015) documentation of the history of madrasas and its contemporary image highlights the great importance placed upon 'tradition' within seminaries. Tradition here refers to the legacy of the knowledge that has been passed down to generations of students who have been given *ijaza*, authorisation, to transmit it further. The knowledge of prominent scholars is continuously disseminated. Moreover, it is argued that this scholarly communication along with the standardisation of the curriculum has resulted in a stronger and more coherent traditionalism in South Asian Muslims compared to others. Students in the subcontinent are exposed to the writings of 'Ulama from varying regions and periods resulting in a robust education. Internal debates have defined the different approaches to Islamic education. One approach defines the aim of madrasa education as the mastery of Islamic sciences; therefore it follows that students must also be versed in the ancillary disciplines such as Arabic language and grammar, logic and philosophy. However, some have taken issue with the teaching of Greek philosophy and assert that scripture must be the focus of madrasa education. Such individuals adopt the view that philosophy has corrupted Islam; consequently, it is possible that the shift to scripturalism that is seen in madrasas today is a direct result of this belief. Debates such as these draw attention to the internal conversations that are still happening in madrasa networks and how they are attempting to stay relevant in the modern world. This idea raises the question as to how *Alimiyyah[4]* programmes are using Islamic education to prepare students for a position of leadership.

The Darse Nizami curriculum has been a staple of the South Asian madrasa since its inception, thus it is not surprising that any attempt at reform has been met with hesitation. Reforming the curriculum has been an ongoing topic of contention. Pro-reformers note the "redundant and at times impenetrable" (ibid, p. 133) nature of the syllabus. Failure to engage critically with disciplines, they argue, results in unprepared graduates who cannot

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[4] Islamic education programmes

meet the needs of changing society. In a time where the expectations of Muslim faith leaders are increasing, the prospect of ill-prepared 'Ulama is concerning. On the other hand, those who reject change in the curriculum claim that its essence connects students to a long-standing tradition and enhances their education, again noting the prestige of the agreed syllabus. Moreover, Muhammad Qasim Zaman (2002) purports that resistance to reform comes from a fear of compromising the authority with which the studied texts are perceived. Hence, graduates' authority stems from the respected lineages of knowledge that accompany the curriculum.

While the arguments opposing reform are understandable, we must also consider the context in which the Darse Nizami originated. The madrasa curriculum was a reaction against Western influences at a time when British colonialism was threatening the culture of Islam in India. Nevertheless, reformers argue that such colonial conditions are no longer present, therefore the study of English and other modern subjects should be essential for the holistic education of madrasa students. Furthermore, Moosa (2015, p. 134) concludes that while the longevity of the Nizami syllabus may be viewed as an indicator of its efficiency, it may also be a weakness that prevents the madrasa network from coming up to date with modern education. At the end of the 19th century, Sayyid Ahmad Khan established the Aligarh Muslim University in Aligarh, India to address this issue. He endeavoured to challenge Muslim orthodoxy in India. Subsequently, it became apparent that two groups of educated Muslims were emerging, traditionalists and modernists. To bridge this gap a small group of scholars led by the notable spiritual master Mawlana Muhammad Mongheri founded the *Nadwatul 'Ulama* (the Association of Scholars). This reform movement sought to train religious scholars in the modern subjects to enable them to respond to the social and political changes occurring in colonial India. While their success was questionable, Moosa acknowledges that they were instrumental in sparking discussions about the suitability of the Nizami curriculum.

Among the discussions of reform that dominated 19th Century Islamic scholarship, a new institution emerged. A Darul Uloom was established in Deoband, a small town north of

Delhi. Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi and Rashid Ahmed Gangohi founded the seminary in 1987 to fuse intellectual learning with spiritual experience, reflecting their theological training and Sufi practices. Its ethos was the integration of personal and student life, hence there was a focus on *tarbiyat* (character development), to nurture the theological and domestic lives of students (Gilliat-Ray, 2010, p. 85). The Deobandi movement favoured the Hanafi *madhab* (school of law), and as Gilliat-Ray notes, *taqlid* (conformity) is central to this school and therefore students were limited in their practice of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) (ibid, p. 86). While this ensured a uniform approach to scholarship, the movement was called into question for its apparent excessive emphasis on the scholarly tradition and, by implication, the 'Ulama. More recently, Masooda Bano (2017) has also echoed this sentiment. She argues that the socio-economic advancements evident in early Islamic history that were brought about by intellectual reasoning have been in decline since the abandonment of ijtihad.

The 'Ulama: Religious Leadership and Authority in Britain

The migration of South Asian Muslims facilitated the introduction of Deobandi-style Islamic education in Britain. This has been most evident in northern England in areas such as Bury, Blackburn and West Yorkshire because of the Indian Gujrati Muslims who have settled there. Throughout a period of mosque-building in the 1970s, Muslims looked to Deoband for leadership. Their familiarity with orthodox Deobandi practices was instrumental in "protecting and preserving" (Gilliat-Ray, 2010, p. 87) Muslim identity. The most notable of these institutions was Darul Uloom Al-Arabiyyah Al-Islamiyyah in Bury, usually referred to as the Bury Darul Uloom. Opening in 1975, it was the first Islamic seminary in the UK and set the precedent for establishing seventeen further Darul Ulooms. Deobandi institutions have been responsible for the production of a new generation of British-born religious leaders. Zaman mentions the work of Mawlana Wahid al-din Khan (2002, p. 181) to argue that contemporary 'Ulama are making subtle changes, whether they are recognised as reforms or not. Some 'Ulama reject reform themselves but are in a perpetuating process of redefining their role, views and resources. It is generally agreed that teaching students the traditional laws is essential, hence the classical textbooks remain untouched; however, adjustments can be put forward, to some extent, through commentaries. This literary

medium was used extensively in Islamic scholarship throughout the middle ages to comment upon classical texts. It was in these documents that 'Ulama offered new interpretations. Thus, it is evident that while the traditional texts of the Deobandi have survived its transition into British society, they can be interpreted in alternative ways.

Academic literature's exclusive focus on the Imam as the epitome of Islamic leadership is problematic and does not reflect the diversity of Muslim leaders, and moreover, completely excludes women from this research area. The destinations of madrasa graduates have been a topic of discussion among academics (Lewis 2006; Gilliat-Ray & Ali 2013). Here it is important to clarify the different terminologies associated with Muslim faith leadership roles. An *Imam* is someone who leads prayer. *Alim* (masculine form) or *Alimah* (feminine form) are South Asian terms used to refer to a learned individual who has undergone a formal Islamic education. There are no prescribed qualifications needed to be an Imam, however mosques generally employ Alims to act as Imams. Although becoming Imams of mosques has been the traditional destination of male madrasa students, younger generations of graduates prefer to seek employment elsewhere, the idea of being subject to a mosque committee who have usually favoured foreign Imams does not appeal to young scholars (Lewis, 2006, p. 274). Additionally, as females cannot occupy this position (this is discussed in more detail below) their mainstream destination has been teaching in the seminary or supplementary madrasas. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not have a formalised hierarchy of religious authority. Instead, authority must be constructed according to the place and time; because of this, Islamic leaders must answer to the community's expectations. Generally, Muslim communities in modern Britain expect some level of pastoral care from their faith leaders in order to resonate with the challenges faced by younger generations. Faith leaders are seen to be embodiments of the religion and community; hence their actions must appear to reflect this (Barentsen, 2017, p. 269). The personification of religious qualities is even more so expected of female scholars, particularly pertaining to their dress and demeanour. They are held to a higher standard of outward piety if they are to be viewed as authorities. The informal, community-based work that Alimahs generally perform does not afford them the recognition that male scholars receive (Ismah, 2016). Some Alimahs, albeit very few, have adopted chaplaincy roles and are

now being seen, both within academia and the Muslim community, as having a professional religious role and are receiving the acknowledgment that they did not get from their own communities (Gilliat-Ray & Ali, 2013).

Alimahs: Female Religious Authority and Leadership

After reflecting on the literature about religious training and the 'Ulama in Islam, it is apparent that women are largely absent from these discussions. Yet, since the establishment of female seminaries in the 1970s, an increasing number of women have pursued Islamic education across the world (Bano, 2017). It should be noted that Bano's research has focused on the Syrian context, and given that South Asian migration to Britain occurred throughout the 1960s, Islamic education for women in Britain most likely developed much later than this. Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) have stated that Islamic leadership has never been confined to mosque spaces, demonstrating that there is a lack of attention around the role of female 'Ulama in both academic scholarship and Muslim societies. While men have dominated religious leadership, there is a long-standing history of female scholarship within Islam. I argue that the nature of female leadership has been re-imagined throughout Muslim history depending upon the social and political climate of the time. Moreover, it is context specific, again reflecting the attitudes of particular cultures. For example, debates concerning doctrinal principles were not common during the time of the Prophet. However, they commenced in the post-Prophetic era and theological arguments were used to legitimise ruling power suggesting that there was a clear connection between theology and political agenda (Aslan, 2013). The ethical foundations of the Muslim community began deteriorating as religion was used as a tool to further political ambitions.

To understand the role of female 'Ulama in contemporary Muslim societies, it is necessary to note the legacy of previous female scholars and the socio-political changes that affected their position. Generally, Islam faced a crisis of legitimacy following the death of the Prophet Muhammad and the emergence of misrepresentations of his teachings (ibid). Throughout the *sirah* (biography of the Prophet), there is no evidence indicating that he disadvantaged

women, however the patriarchy of pre-Islamic society returned and after the 9th century their involvement in decision-making processes was limited. Aslan, Hermansen and Medeni's (2013) edited collection offers useful insights into the varying status of female scholarship throughout the course of Islamic history. Aslan (2016. P. 36) posits that in the immediate years after the Prophet, women were still exercising agency and leadership. Two prominent figures that are cited, are Fatima and Aisha, the daughter and wife of the Prophet. Fatima openly opposed the theological arguments of Abu Bakr, a close friend of the Prophet Muhammad and the first Caliph of the Muslims, suggesting that women were empowered to voice their grievances. Moreover, Aisha was a legal expert narrating approximately 2210 *hadith*, traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and would often correct male *sahabah* (companions) for seemingly misogynistic views. While women during this period were heavily involved in theology, it is acknowledged that the authority of these two examples was partly due to their close relation to the Prophet Muhammad.

During the Byzantine and Persian Empires theology was used to justify the exclusion of females from religious discourse. Women who had led troops and were knowledgeable scholars were now confined to the domestic sphere. Very little religious education was made available to them, perhaps to further limit their claim to authority. This agenda was legitimised through hadith which Aslan states contradicts the God-given rights of women (2013, p. 38). Abu Hanifa, founder of the Hanafi school of *fiqh*[5], differentiated between the *deen* (religion) and *shari'ah* (law); the deen is fixed and the shari'ah is fluid. However, this has not been the case as the canonisation of the shari'ah that occurred in the 8th and 9th centuries is still evident, with few changes being made. Consequently, today's concept of shari'ah is far removed from the Prophet's; where he mentioned praying, charity and fasting, theologians have created a rigid legal system. Women's return to the scholarly tradition has proved difficult throughout this process as further arguments were used to attribute demeaning characteristics to women. Aslan argues that these were internalised by Muslim women and led to a "self-despising femininity" (ibid, p. 42) in Islam, as opposed to earlier outspoken women. Therefore, throughout this period it was not common for females

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[5] *Fiqh* refers to jurisprudence and is described as the human understanding of Islamic laws

to study Islam beyond its basic principles that were deemed necessary for them. Some women from elite families in the Abbasid Empire (750 CE) received a fuller Islamic education under their fathers, male relatives or private tutors. However, even learned women were deterred from interpreting the religion and generally functioned as transmitters.

On the other hand, while their participation was weakened, it was not completely extinguished. Zainab Alwani (2013) examines the contribution of women to the Islamic sciences and also affirms the earlier arguments of the role and status of women being affected by a variety of external factors. We have already discussed Aisha's extensive knowledge of the hadith, but Alwani offers some further examples of women's contributions to different fields of the Islamic sciences. Within hadith scholarship, where women were once prominent contributors, there has been a significant decrease in the number of women involved in this field when compared to earlier generations. Similarly, in fiqh studies women played an essential part as legal experts. Examples include a female mufti who documented Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's teachings and Fatima al-Samarqandiyya, a Hanafi *mufti*[6] whose rulings were co-signed by her father and husband (ibid, p. 54). There are many examples of women exercising agency and becoming authorities in their respective fields, but in more recent times there is a paucity of female voices in Islamic scholarship including hadith and Sunni fiqh. This has had dire repercussions on women's rights in areas such as marriage, divorce and finance, where they seem to be disadvantaged. Contemporary female scholars in Britain are attempting to reclaim this space by challenging gender bias through asserting their authority in previously male-dominated spheres using their religious knowledge. Maria Jaschock's (2012) work on female *Ahong* in China offers some interesting insights into the potential role of female 'Ulama in Britain. Her research found that the growing need of the Chinese Muslim community to preserve Islam necessitated the evolution of female leadership. In turn their authority increased as they were perceived to be preservers of the religion.

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[6] A legal expert

However, it seems that in the British case, female scholars are less visible and usually attain an informal authoritative position as an 'expert' or 'role model'. Most likely, as the earlier discussion posited, Alimahs are expected to fulfil both roles. Alimahs therefore have a deep understanding of theology and are qualified to attend to the social and religious needs of their communities. Masooda Bano's research on female Islamic education movements has also highlighted that female scholars are professional women who are fully integrated into modern life (2017, p. 21). She further states that such women are not interested in a feminist reinterpretation of the authoritative sources of Islam, rather they have a deep-rooted respect for previous scholarly exegeses. With this in mind, we may ask why there is little research documenting these women's experiences and activities. There is very little written about Alimahs in Britain and the ways in which they navigate and challenge the informal authority that is attributed to them. Building on these ideas, this research explores how madrasa education has prepared Alimahs for their engagements with Muslim communities. Moreover, it analyses the support systems, or lack thereof, for female scholars and how this translates into the informal spaces they occupy.

Methodological Frameworks

Introduction

This section will outline the methods and methodology of this study. Firstly, the theoretical frameworks that underpin this research are discussed. Following this, the methods of data collection and analysis are examined along with the challenges of conducting qualitative research with Muslim communities. Finally, the relevant ethical considerations are covered. Some reflections on the research process are mentioned throughout this chapter.

Methodology

Epistemology and Theory

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge that is embedded in the methodology (Crotty, 1998). This means that it inevitably informs the theoretical perspective of the study, while ontology is related to the nature of being. In this case a relativist ontology has been adopted to acknowledge the unique experiences of each participant. Furthermore, this view stresses the need to view experiences in relation to their contexts. For example, participants' experiences of culture have informed their perception within Muslim communities; therefore, to contextualise their responses, a participant profile has been provided at the end of this section. Additionally, an interpretivist epistemology was adopted to extract meaning from participants' stories. With this, a constructivist grounded theory approach was taken. Grounded theory originated from the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a method of constructing theory to explain phenomena. It utilises an inductive approach that involves collecting data and drawing conclusions from it. While scholars from various disciplines have adopted grounded theory, three distinct variations have become apparent; Glaserian, or realist-positivist, Straussian, or post-positivist, and constructivist-interpretivist (Weed, 2017). Although researchers from each of these variations hold different ontological and epistemological outlooks, according to Weed they agree on eight common elements of grounded theory (2009). Overall, they agree that theorising must begin from inductive data followed by a process of close analysis through coding methods

(Charmaz, 2008). The premise of grounded theory stipulates that researchers must enter the setting without any preconceptions; this implies that the researcher should not look at prior theory and knowledge from the discipline. However, many qualitative scholars have taken issue with this as it is not realistic, hence the emergence of variations, and instead they have opted to interpret Glaser and Strauss as suggesting that this is a sensitising (Charmaz, 2008, p. 472) exercise. Rather than drawing conclusions from existing theories, the researcher uses them to become familiar with the relevant concepts. Weed summarises the aim of grounded theory as developing higher understanding "that is grounded in the data collected rather than predetermined by existing theories" (2017, p. 151).

Constructivist grounded theory was developed by Kathy Charmaz (2008) from Strauss and Corbin's reconstruction of traditional grounded theory (1990). It rejects the idea of objective reality and emphasises the subjectivity of experiences in line with my chosen ontology and epistemology. Thus, the researcher is charged with constructing meaning from the data. As a result, the researcher can never be an objective observer as their subjectivity will always accompany their interpretations. The importance of clarifying one's positionality is discussed later (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). A relativist ontological view was taken throughout this study and informed the methods of data collection that were used. Each participant's experience is taken to be unique and therefore cannot be generalised. It is especially impossible to generalise topics that feature a high level of personal sentiment such as religious education. However, many experiences can be shared, so overlaps can appear in participants' stories. This study employs constructivist grounded theory by interpreting participants' responses as part of a narrative that must be contextualised within the existing debates of Muslim women's authority. While existing arguments were discussed in the previous chapter, this study did not set out to prove or disprove them. Instead this project's purpose was to observe how the authority of female 'Ulama manifested in West Yorkshire, again, highlighting the relativist nature of Muslim experiences. We will now discuss the data collection and analysis process.

<u>Reflections on researching Muslims</u>

Researchers face various obstacles when conducting research with Muslim communities. Bolognani concludes this is because of the frustration of "their prolonged position in the limelight" since 2001 (2007, p. 280). The interest in Muslims since 9/11 has caused an atmosphere of suspicion among Muslim communities, which has only been heightened due to the covert tactics of journalists. This has had considerable effects of social science researchers who have often been perceived as being ingenuine by Muslim communities (ibid, p. 281). Accessing Muslim spaces and recruiting participants has become a political balancing act forcing researchers to negotiate multiple identities while in the field. Such issues have even been presented to 'insider' researchers. While I use the term 'insider', I acknowledge that the insider/outsider binary is simplistic and goes beyond having a similar background to participants. Zubair, Martin and Victor (2012) have suggested that 'insiders' may actually face more scrutiny from participants if they are perceived as misrepresenting their shared backgrounds. Narayan (1993) also affirms this, she argues that although the researcher comes from the same ethnic or religious background as the participants, subtle difference like class or school of thought can create more distance between them.

Bolognani's study of Pakistani Muslims in West Yorkshire was particularly useful in gaining insight into the challenges of accessing this community. Her notion of the research being a reciprocal relationship (2007, p. 282) between the researcher and participants was pertinent to the recruitment process. She observed that adopting this thought process removed the issues of power in data collection. So, while participants are giving up their experiences, and essentially a part of themselves, researchers should offer something back to them. For my participants it was not always appropriate to ask outright what I could do for them. Instead, during observations I offered to assist in any activities I could. Generally, I made an active effort to make the interview experience as convenient as possible, this included travelling to homes, university campuses and workplaces. Access is discussed in greater detail in the discussion chapter.

Methods

Introduction

The focus of this study is the activity and perception of female scholars with regard to Islamic education and community engagement. To create a holistic image of participants' experiences it is essential to understand the reasoning behind pursuing formal Islamic education. Therefore, the intended sample was going to consist of both women who had experiences of Islamic studies, as well as established female 'Ulama who have graduated from such a programme, with the total number of six. However, the final sample only consisted of one female who had experience of Islamic studies, as well as three established female graduates.

A further criterion to note was the location where their studies are, or were, taking place. Dewsbury, a minster town of West Yorkshire, has come to be known for its prominent Muslim population. It is home to a reputable Darul Uloom that also functions as the European headquarters of the *Tablighi Jamaat* group. Moreover, the city of Bradford offers a variety of Islamic education courses, some formal and others in the form of 'micro-madrasas' that operate part time. Additionally, Huddersfield was selected for its central location, meaning many women travel to the other locations from there to pursue Islamic education. Later in the recruitment process the research location was expanded to 'Northern England' to encompass more areas, however the participants mentioned are from the original three locations. Multiple methods of data collection have been used to gain as much insight into female 'Ulama's engagement with Muslim communities as possible in this short time. This study has combined interviews with participant observation to contextualise the activities of Muslim women scholars in West Yorkshire. These methods were selected firstly for their reliability in eliciting detailed data and also for their ability to foster a positive and interactive relationship with participants. Fieldwork was carried out in mid-July.

The following will discuss the interview process and then highlight the key considerations taken for conducting participant observation.

Method 1: Semi-Structured Interviews

Most interviews were face-to-face with participants, while one was conducted over the phone due to this participants' lack of availability. This participant originally requested to write her responses through text messages, however I encouraged her to conduct the interview over mobile phone. King and Horrocks (2012, p. 35) argue that interviews enable the researcher to explore the views of the participant, therefore text messages would have been highly impersonal and would have limited her responses. However, while conducting the interview over the phone was more personal, it lacked the same depth provided by in-person encounters. Nevertheless, using an interview was especially useful in examining how the female scholars perceived the title of 'Alimah' and their religious authority in Muslim communities. Using an interview assumes the respondent will supply relevant and enough information. However, such conventions are not always shared. Charles Briggs has termed these conventions as "native meta-communicative repertoires" (1986, p. 3-4) and has stressed that being unaware of them may hinder interpretation. To avoid interpretive mistakes, he suggested spending time immersed in the community of study and interaction with participants outside of the research setting. However, where time restrictions do not allow this, as was the case for this project, Briggs' notion of "indexical modes of signification" (ibid, p. 42) is useful. He proposes that paying attention to the verbal changes and non-verbal communications provides context to statements, hence enabling analysis. While I was familiar with common Arabic and Urdu phrases, emphasis and hand gestures have been recorded in interview transcripts (see Appendix 3).

This study intended to interview six women (three from each group), however because of difficulties of accessing participants, only one student was interviewed. However, for me it was more pertinent to recruit Alimahs as their experiences were key to my overall research aims. However, the student involved did highlight the differences between the idea of becoming an Alimah and the reality of practice. Hence, a total of four semi-structured

interviews were conducted. These addressed the research questions in a manner that did not hinder participants' responses, as they often used stories or anecdotes to better illustrate their answers. This process was also aided using an interview schedule (see Appendix 2) which outlined the themes arising, and lacking, from the literature as well as some questions to prompt discussion. Although the interviews were semi-structured, participants were encouraged to think of them as informal conversations where they could voice their opinions. As a result, participants were comfortable enough to respond in detail; many were even enthusiastic in opening discussions about the authority of female scholars in their communities. Initially, interviews were recorded on both a recording device and mobile phone, to ensure a secondary back-up should one be faulty. However, after the first participant, it was apparent that she was wary of the recorder. Subsequently, after informing the participant, I covered the recorder with a piece of paper so that it was out of sight. While this may seem trivial, the presence of a physical recording device had a real effect on my first participant, and so this practice was repeated in the following interviews.

Method 2: Participant Observation

Additionally, through participant observation, an ethnographic account of the participants' activities was produced. Bechhofer and Paterson (2000, p. 93) refer to the "participant-as-observer" as an overt role, and Bailey (2007) has stated that this must be considered when planning observations. I opted for an overt approach given the suspicion of researchers that was mentioned above. Distinction has been made between being a 'participant as observer' and 'observer as participant' (Gold, 1969 in ibid, p. 80). The former was adopted throughout my observations as I shadowed Alimahs, meaning I interacted with those present when it was appropriate, rather than being a consumer of their services. Moreover, in the field the ethnographer witnesses the "mundane" (Denscombe, 2003, p. 68) lives of individuals resulting in detailed description. Participant observation was carried out with two of the three Alimahs. It was not possible to observe the third Alimah due to time restrictions. Although I intended to be involved in activities, such as helping with paperwork, it was not always appropriate and so in those instances I became a "complete observer" (Bailey, 2007, p. 80). This project has used a third way between "idiographic", or descriptive, and "nomothetic", or theory based, ethnography (Woods, 1979, p. 268) to offer more than just a

descriptive account of female 'Ulama's engagement in West Yorkshire. Additionally, this study provides evaluation about why this is the case. Adopting a multi-method approach allowed for triangulation, thus increasing the validity of the data sets. Berg and Lune have described triangulation as utilising "multiple lines of action" (2012, p. 6) to ensure that results are reliable. A more detailed discussion about validity is given later in this section.

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

A purposive sampling method was used to ensure that participants were relevant to the criteria of the study. "Snowball sampling" (Denscombe, 2003, p. 16) was used in which participants act as gatekeepers. At the start of the fieldwork it became evident that people who did not fit the criteria, and therefore could not participate, were also instrumental in acting as gatekeepers. I started by contacting Alimahs that I knew personally and then went on to contact several women, and men, who were familiar with the Alimah communities in their respective locations, who then 'spread the word'. I also liaised with university Islamic societies (ISOC) in West Yorkshire to share the call for participants on their Facebook pages. Additionally, I used social media to recruit potential participants. Twitter was useful in generally raising awareness of my proposed research while Facebook was used to message particular Islamic education providers in the research locations. Facebook proved to be more convenient in contacting institutions directly, as opposed to their official email addresses or 'contact us' pages which usually resulted in no response. On reflection it seems that most participants became aware of the research through WhatsApp groups, again because of gatekeepers sharing it. Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert (2008) state that the researcher's relationship with gatekeepers is paramount, as they control the researcher's access to participants. They are often the first point of contact (ibid, p. 544) in the field; this proved true as most of my participants reported hearing about the project from others. To uphold these relationships with those who were outside of the study criteria, I kept them updated and informed them if people they had referred had contacted me; names were not mentioned to avoid compromising confidentiality. The next section discusses my positionality and relation to the field of study.

Positionality

As a female Muslim who has lived in West Yorkshire, and often interacted with female scholars, my positionality must be explicit to avoid bias. The term 'positionality' encompasses the values and experiences of the researcher which may manifest in the study and analysis. While Denscombe (2003, p. 268) points out that the researcher's identity and values are unavoidably part of analysis, it must be highlighted that these are attitudes of the researcher and have not resulted from the data itself. Regarding this project, several steps were taken to ensure that the data collected maintained its validity. Firstly, as a Muslim woman interested in this area, I reflected on my pre-existing perceptions of female 'Ulama in Islam. I 'bracketed out' my own assumptions, hence taking a constructivist grounded approach, before entering the field so as to not compromise the authenticity of observations. Tufford and Newman have defined the purpose of bracketing out as:

> "to mitigate the potential deleterious preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project." (2010, p. 81)

Therefore, my assumptions of the authority of female Muslim scholars were ignored in order to see what manifested during fieldwork. Also, thorough background reading about female scholars, and more widely about the nature of Islamic leadership and authority, was carried out. Using this method of validation has several benefits, namely offering a balanced argument in which to frame the findings and identify areas that were pursued further during the data collection process.

Validity is also vulnerable through the researcher's interaction with participants. Julian Simon suggested that the researcher's gestures and tone influence the responses of participants (1969). This would render the data unreliable as it is not reflexive of reality. To avoid this, I was aware of such factors and actively sought to build positive relationships with my participants. Contact prior to the interview as well as ensuring that participants felt comfortable to share their thoughts were central to this effort. Simon additionally implied that participants often respond in ways they deem as pleasing to the researcher. However, through the triangulation of method mentioned earlier, the two sets of data have been compared. Furthermore, I was conscious of the way in which I asked questions, opting for

more open questions as well as allowing participants to interpret them in their own way. For example, in Zainab's interview she asked 'What do you mean by religious leadership?' to which I responded 'How do you think about it? Maybe you'd like to call it something else' (see Appendix 3). Instances such as these occurred quite regularly throughout all interviews. During these incidents, I refrained from imposing my own views onto the participants. I will now outline the methods of analysis.

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves the researcher producing data through the interpretation of their findings (Denscombe, 2003, p. 268). The researcher's awareness of their positionality is vital during this stage as their values and beliefs can have significant effects on what is seen within the data. This study utilised a thematic analysis, with its areas of interest originating from participants' responses. After transcribing interviews and typing up fieldnotes, the two sources of data were coded and categorised. Coding is a process that begins with the examination of raw data and drawing out recurring themes and patterns from it. Some of these themes correlated to the categories that were taken from the literature and some were taken directly from the findings. This was repeated multiple times to extract as much data as possible for analysis. Lastly, Bryman (2016) posits that interpretation must be added. This consisted of identifying how the findings have enhanced or contradicted debates about the topic. The following section addresses the ethical standards that have been applied throughout this study.

Ethics

Given the involvement of people in this project, several ethical implications have been considered. Ethical guidelines for this study have been taken from the Cardiff School of History, Archaeology and Religion 'Procedures of Ethical Approval[7]. Before commencing the project, ethical approval was sought from the appropriate supervisors and the schools' Research Ethics Committee, which included completing an ethical approval form. Obtaining

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[7] Accessed on 1/11/2018. via: https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/history-archaeology-religion/research/research-ethics

informed consent from each participant was an essential part of conducting ethical research and was completed early in the research process. However, in order for participants to make an informed decision, they are entitled to know: What the research is about, including the researcher's role and that the collected information is to be used as part of a master's thesis. Furthermore, potential participants must be informed of what their involvement in the study will comprise of and how their data is stored and accessed. To ensure the above was made available to participants, an information sheet was provided that also reminded individuals of their right to withdraw at any time without providing their reasoning for doing so (see Appendix 1). After receiving the information sheet, a period of a few days was allocated for people to make a decision. During this time, they were free to ask any further questions.

After securing verbal, or digital, affirmation that the person agreed to take part, this was followed up with a printed, or printable, consent form that was subsequently signed by both the participant and I (see Appendix 1). Two consent forms were signed, one for the research file and the other for the participants' records. Throughout this study, confidentiality was upheld, and participants' information was not distributed to third parties. However, they were made aware that this may be necessary should they disclose something that could endanger themselves or others. Confidentiality was also present during the write up of this data, this was achieved by refraining from including any identifying information about participants in the written thesis. All participants were given a pseudonym with which to be referred to in the analysis.

This study has anonymised participants' identities by providing pseudonyms. Guenther states that naming is "an act of power" (2009, p. 412); this implies that by anonymising the researcher is giving up a portion of their authority. Furthermore, Guenther (2009) uses her own research with feminist activists to argue that anonymity denies people the right to be who they are and own what they are saying. However, given the difficulties associated with recruiting Muslim women, being explicitly named may cause them to be hesitant to take part. Consequently, the promise of anonymisation offered a form of protection and enabled

the participants to openly address topics that have thus far been confined to Muslim spheres. Moreover, institutions have been addressed by their locations so as to not identify particular organisations or any persons associated with them.

While the use of pseudonyms has provided a guise for participants, caution must be taken not to write too freely about their responses. As Guenther (2009) has alluded to, pseudonyms not only offer protection for participants, they have at times given researchers the opportunity to be overly truthful. This causes problems when participants do not agree with what has been written or feel that it misrepresents them. For example, in the case of this research, several participants requested to have access to its findings, which would include their own responses; being aware of this I have endeavoured to present an accurate account of my interactions with participants.

Participant Profiles

The following gives some background information about each of the participants, including their age and location. From here on, participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms. Some notes have been provided to contextualise the different experiences of each woman.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Alimah/Student?	Location	Notes
Zainab	30	British Pakistani	Alimah	Bradford	- Attended boarding school - Works at a sports charity organisation
Laila	22	British Pakistani	Alimah	Dewsbury	- Attended evening madrasa - Undertaking higher education
Maryam	25	British Pakistani	Student	Huddersfield (Studies in Bradford)	- Attended a part time class 3 days a week

					- Going back to Alimah class after a 3-year break
Tahirah	29	British Gujrati	Alimah	Huddersfield (Studied and lived in Dewsbury)	- Attended evening madrasa - Married with 4-year-old daughter - Phone interview

Although this project was open to Alimahs and students from all ethnicities, those who were willing to participate happened to be from South Asian backgrounds, with the majority being British Pakistani. While the Muslim community in Northern England, and Britain generally is diverse, a report by the Muslim Council of Britain (2015)[8] suggests that 38% of Britain's Muslim population is of Pakistani descent, hence making them the largest ethnic group of Muslims in Britain. Moreover, the institution of Islamic education being examined, the Darul Uloom and its extensions, are very much a reflection of their South Asian origins, hence it is not surprising that most graduates are from such ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, only two participants, Tahirah (Alimah) and Maryam (student), were mothers, therefore their experiences offer insight into how marital and parental responsibilities affect their engagements. Both mothers took 'time off' following the birth of their children; Maryam studied at home during this time but had plans to return to her class, while Tahirah was preparing to begin a madrasa teaching position at the time of the interview.

Accessing Female 'Ulama

Background

Recruiting participants for this study was met with several challenges and resulted in a lack of data for analysis. In 2005 Gilliat-Ray authored a paper documenting her experiences of not gaining access to Darul Ulooms and highlighted that "this lack of access in itself

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[8] https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf [Accessed on 29/08/19]

constitutes a form of 'data'" (2005, p. 10). Therefore, while the responses collected are valuable and are telling of the status of female 'Ulama in Muslim communities, the lack of response is also interesting. This section furthers the discussion briefly touched upon earlier about conducting research with Muslims. Here I will focus on the issues of accessing Alimahs that were encountered throughout this research. Furthermore, some predictions as to why this was the case and what this may suggest about future research engagements involving female 'Ulama are made.

Approaches to access

To gain access to potential participants, various approaches were taken, although none of them guaranteed successful access to the field. Initially, I contacted Alimahs whom I knew in a personal manner to request interviews. While this looked promising, it became apparent that circumstantial factors, such as the interview period clashing with *Ramadhan, Eid* and *Hajj*, prevented most of these women from agreeing to take part. On reflection, this is perhaps why it was considerably more difficult to recruit married women and mothers, given their increased responsibilities. However, I believed these Alimahs, that I had known from personal interactions, would be valuable gatekeepers who could vouch for both me and my research. They were familiar with scholarly networks and could potentially allow me access to students and graduates. Although many Alimahs shared my proposed research with their classmates and teachers, take up was minimal. Moreover, there was a reluctance to give out other women's phone numbers, hence I encouraged gatekeepers to share my contact details, however few responses were received. I also employed the help on non-Alimah gatekeepers, and even males who were prominent in the scholarly community. These people were in fact indispensable in gaining access to areas of the Alimah network. Nevertheless, problems arose again when the scholars themselves showed little interest in participating in the study. Even after establishing communication with different Alimahs through these gatekeepers, I was met with vague responses that did not seem promising. I will discuss the various responses to recruitment later. When it was evident that my use of gatekeepers was no longer effective, a more direct approach was taken. I began by contacting Islamic education institutions and providers directly through their official email addresses and contact numbers, but this proved futile as I rarely received responses. I then

turned to their Facebook groups as these appeared to be more active; here I had, albeit little, some success in conversing with a few organisations. During these interactions, I introduced myself and the proposed research, and was continuously told that they would be happy to share this with their networks. Although I pushed to be given access to current students or graduates of these institutions, there was again a hesitance to divulge these details, and the request was usually ignored.

Saying 'no'?

My entry into the Alimah community was obstructed by a number of factors. It was clear that people did not want to explicitly say 'no' to participating, instead they provided several excuses as to why they could not. Although some of these reasons were genuine, most were obviously a polite decline of the invitation. What Gilliat-Ray termed the "'delayed gratification' strategy" (2005, p. 21), was also adopted by some Alimahs. This was perhaps the most time consuming, and frustrating, response because it offered no clear confirmation of whether the individual would take part. I was told that people 'can't make any promises' or would inform me 'when I have time'. The ambiguity of such responses removed control from the researcher to enquire further about their availability and the power to take up initiative was moved to the individual. This occurred numerous times and recruitment reached a 'dead end' causing the research location to be expanded. By increasing the area of focus, the participation rates of Alimahs were not expected to change, instead the aim was to reach out to the minority that would be willing to take part. Even still, this was unsuccessful, and interest remained nominal. A pattern appears to have emerged implying that Alimahs in northern England are reluctant to take part in social research. However, this is a simplistic generalisation that requires closer examination.

Predictions

At first look it appears that the data collection process simply conflicted with the circumstantial events mentioned earlier. However, upon closer consideration the rejections supplied point to an alternative understanding of 'giving voice' in social research. The

following discusses the possible reasons for a lack of access to Alimahs and the theoretical assumptions therein.

The notion of giving voice has been attributed to feminist theorists. It posits that giving voice to women's practices and experiences is a source of their empowerment which also represents a cessation of their suppression under dominant patriarchal cultures (Davis 1999 in McHugh 2014, p. 16). Initially, I found this to be a fitting paradigm from which to research Alimahs. Given academic literature's lack of focus on them, I intended to give a voice to women in Islamic education; however, it became evident that this view was problematic and did not acknowledge the issues associated with social science researchers 'giving voice' to others. Coddington (2017) argues that this idea is highly influenced by the colonial roots of the subject. The notion that the researcher must liberate those whose voices have been oppressed ignores the agency of individuals and places authority and authenticity within the researcher. Furthermore, voice does not necessarily equal empowerment as Ashby has suggested, the practice of giving voice may "reinforce the very system of oppression that it seeks to redress" (2011). In the case of this study, endeavouring to give voice to female 'Ulama because of the dearth of information surrounding their activities could be perceived as counter-productive.

Ashby further argues that regardless of the researcher's interaction with potential participants, the act of giving voice carries numerous assumptions with it. Firstly, it presumes that those being studied have no voice, again denying their agency to narrate their own experiences. There is a contradiction between wanting to bring attention to these women and limiting their ability to express their views on their own terms. Here I propose that the researcher's account of their interaction with participants can never truly be an accurate record. This is not to say that the research process is meaningless, rather it provides a useful insight into the thoughts of participants. Yet the very procedure of interpreting responses is skewed by the researcher's own experiences. This is another critique of giving voice, it implies that there is an authentic voice which the researcher can discover.

Final thoughts on access

The arguments of 'giving voice' are pertinent to issues of (non)access. Where individuals feel that they do not need to be given a voice, there is no incentive for them to participate and the research seems irrelevant. Returning to Coddington's (2017) thoughts on colonial influences and research, it is likely that Alimahs, and Muslim women in general, do not require emancipatory action through academic means. Additionally, it is telling that participants cited the deeply personal nature of their Islamic education as this corresponds to the perceived unnecessary interference of researchers. The identity of researchers is central to their ability to access the field. Even when the researcher shares a number of identity factors with the community of study and is an 'insider', as was the case for this project, the 'researcher' label still outweighs these. Therefore, the approached Alimahs may have viewed this study as pointless as they do not feel the need to be acknowledged in this way. However, this is also a reason for the dearth of literature around female Islamic leadership. To summarise this section about the issues of accessing participants, I argue that being labelled as a 'researcher' and the colonial connotations that accompany it can prevent access.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology and methods that have guided this research. Information about the research process has been given and evaluated in relation to conducting qualitative research with Muslims. Moreover, some reflections on my experiences carrying out this study have been provided to further demonstrate the importance of taking into account the role of the researcher and their position. In summary, this was a qualitative study using an ethnographic approach through semi structured interviews and participant observations.

Research Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter outlines the key findings from the interviews and observations conducted and goes on to discuss their significance. A thematic approach has been taken; therefore, each theme is explored through the responses of the participants. After conversing with Alimahs and a student it is evident that their experiences are indicative of the necessity to open wider discussions about female leadership and authority in Muslim communities. I refrain from using 'in Islam' as all the participants in this research were obstinate in their view that it is not the religion that prevents women from occupying authoritative positions but is the community. The cultural constructs of Muslim societies have influenced the way Islam has been interpreted across different geographical locations and ages. The South Asian Muslim community's migration to Britain from various homelands has only heightened the incessant desire to preserve their cultural roots (Moosa, 2015). Hence, there is an emphasis on cultural forms of Islam, rather than developing a 'British' version of the faith, although many have argued that this is beginning to emerge with later generations who were raised in Britain (Lewis, 2008). By sacralising such cultural norms and values as 'Islamic' they are easily justifiable and internalised by populations, causing them to be rarely questioned. This study found that South Asian cultural ideals are still being transplanted to the British context by being presented as 'Islamic'. This has considerably disadvantaged the authority of Alimahs in their communities; however, it is also noted that this mentality is dying out with the new generations.

There were several similarities between the participants' responses concerning their post-graduation activities and the perception of Alimahs in Muslim communities. In contrast, a juxtaposition was seen between the assumptions and ambitions of students and the realities faced by female scholars. The centrality of Islamic education to discussions about authority cannot be overstated. The course of study that is undertaken is essential in confirming that the individual is qualified to offer religious leadership and advice. However, a person's qualifications may be called into question when they do not meet the

community's standard. Furthermore, the activities of female 'Ulama recorded in this project are revealing of the barriers they face when trying to offer services to their localities. These themes are discussed below to illustrate the often-overlooked role of Alimahs in Muslim communities and the struggles they face to be acknowledged as Islamic authorities.

What do Alimahs do?

Activities

This study set out to identify how female scholars interact with Muslim communities through examining their activities. Participants detailed their activities during interviews while Zainab and Laila were also observed. A description of the Alimahs' activities is provided. Moreover, as Maryam was still a student, her ambitions and the perception of her future role are mentioned. This outline of Alimahs' activities is used to give context to their responses and experiences in the following sections.

Firstly, Zainab is the Chief Executive Officer of a sports organisation aimed at providing sports sessions for Muslim women in an appropriate environment. The sports organisation will be referred to as 'Islamic Sports' to maintain confidentiality. While Zainab is not actively involved in what would be considered the 'traditional' activities of Alimahs, she is instrumental in the running of Islamic Sports which ultimately serves the Muslim community. Her experiences of employment allow her to facilitate the delivery of these services to Muslim women. Zainab also does a great deal of outreach work to encourage Islamic organisations, such as supplementary madrasas and Islamic schools, to take up their sports packages. Her Alimah training allows her to approach these institutions and expound the benefits of exercise from a theological perspective. She explained that:

> "you're maintaining a body that Allah has given you … when you hear the description of the Prophet (pbuh), he didn't have a protruding belly … he was fit and healthy." (Zainab)

Upon observing Zainab, it became evident that even though her position as an Alimah was not relevant to this role, she still faced similar challenges to the other female 'Ulama. Islamic Sports has not received support from the community, particularly the women it is aimed at. This was reflected in a conversation I had with Zainab during her observation:

> "Zainab stated that it is often the case that madrasas do not take up Islamic Sports' services because they do not want to be viewed as going "too far from what we do"" (Observation, 17 July 2019, see Appendix 3)

Here she is referring to the *maktab* (supplementary madrasa) syllabus which is focused on Qur'an recitation. Consequently, she related that her activities in Islamic Sports have included organising interactive activities for children, to teach them about areas that she feels are missing in maktab. She said:

> "when we'd ask them (the children attending sporting activities) stuff like how do you know it's Eid? (They would answer) *[mimicking]* 'my mum tells me'" (Zainab)

This shows that female scholars are not deterred by the lack of support they receive and instead work within the networks that they can access. Moreover, Zainab's activities highlight the dedication of female 'Ulama for establishing initiatives to increase Muslim women's awareness of issues they believe are of importance.

Secondly, Laila is a very active individual. She works two part-time jobs while completing her master's degree. In her interview, she detailed the different ways she offered religious leadership and advice. This was not in a professional capacity, yet she was always ready to address people's concerns as was seen while observing her:

"she spent some time replying to the 'Alimah group chat'. She told me about some of the questions that were being asked and showed me how she (and other Alimahs) went about confirming their answers" (Observation, 19 July 2019, see Appendix 3)

It is acknowledged that my presence, and questions in the previous interview, prompted Laila to show me this. However, it remains significant in demonstrating female 'Ulama's willingness to offer their services. Furthermore, she explained that she is prepared to answer people's questions about Islam wherever she is. She mentioned *taleem*, an Islamic

gathering for women that is conducted on Sundays and is hosted in different homes, as a place where she openly invites people to ask questions. Aside from working part-time and advising women on Islamic issues, Laila also teaches a convert the basic principles of Islam as well as *salah* (ritual prayer) and Qur'an.

Additionally, teaching was a common activity for Tahirah and Maryam. Tahirah was preparing to start a new teaching role in a maktab. However, before the birth of her daughter she taught children in her home. The effect of parental responsibilities is noteworthy as it changes the activities of Alimahs. Maryam was also a teacher and talked about the relationship she tries to build with her students so that she can advise them through difficult phases.

More than teaching

The activities of participants were reflective of the position of female 'Ulama in the different locations. This study found that the services offered by Alimahs are usually informal. Due to the nuances of their interactions, they are often less observable and subtle than those provided by male scholars who are usually associated with a mosque. This is a possible reason for the dearth of literature around contemporary female scholars in Islam; researchers can rarely access Alimahs and when access has been successful it is difficult to determine what constitutes leadership in these informal spaces. While the activities that participants described appeared to involve some element of leadership qualities, the Alimahs were hesitant to refer to themselves as leaders or authorities. Maryam, a student beginning her final year of Islamic education, stated that she is "not out there to be a leader". Here we may interrogate the notion of leadership and how its definition must be flexible in different contexts. Consequently, given the subtlety of female 'Ulama's activities, it would be unfair to compare them in relation to that of males, as this would result in a misrepresentation of how Alimahs are contributing to Muslim communities. The informal nature of their activities has been necessitated by the lack of formalised positions available for female scholars, hence in most cases they have not been able to establish their authority. However, there are exceptions to this. Firstly, teaching positions in seminaries or

supplementary madrasas grant Alimahs some authority as they are associated with widely acknowledged religious institutions. Also, experienced female 'Ulama are acknowledged as being legitimate authorities:

> "you get the senior teachers or the senior 'Ulama that have taught complex *maslas* (problems) … due to their experience of life, and different situations, … they can offer themselves, they can put themselves in that position where people can approach them" (Zainab)

As Zainab explains, experience is key to being viewed as authoritative, therefore the 'senior' Alimahs are well known throughout their localities. However, Zainab later added that "there would only be a handful of those" implying that reaching this level is not common.

Throughout interviews it became clear that teaching was a common destination for graduates. Only two participants, Zainab and Laila, were pursuing alternative career or education options; although they still acknowledged the importance of Islamic education. For some participants teaching was synonymous with being an Alimah. This was reflected in Tahirah's interview as she was unsure of her suitability because she had not taught in an institution. She used the terms 'Alimah' and *'Apa'* interchangeably. *Apa* is an Urdu word literally meaning older sister, however it is commonly used to refer to female teachers. By using the two terms synonymously, she equated the role of Alimahs to that of teachers, again reinforcing this focus of passing on knowledge. This is embedded in students throughout their education, Maryam's teacher explained to her that "it's an ongoing cycle … and it's just *sadaqah jariyah*" (ongoing charity), this has influenced her desire to establish her own Islamic studies course. Zainab further reiterated that this was a "norm"; however, one may comment upon the possible limitations placed upon graduates due to this fixation on teaching. The purpose of this argument is not to diminish the role of the teaching profession, since the number of women attending Islamic education is increasing (Bano, 2017, p. 3), female teachers are indeed a necessity. Nevertheless, I question the notion that an Alimah's authority is restricted to teaching; her leadership qualities, even if informal, are equally as valid outside of these institutions and should be acknowledged as such.

Experiences in Islamic Education

"I learned a lot, I experienced a lot, you feel a lot emotionally as well, it's a

spiritual journey" (Laila)

This section focuses on experiences of Islamic education to examine how such programmes influence participants' engagements with communities. Firstly, a brief outline of the format of education that each participant attended is given. Next, the motivations for women pursuing Islamic education are explored. Finally, the suitability of Islamic education in regards to preparing students to be Alimahs is discussed.

Formats

Participants had varied experiences of Islamic education which shaped how they viewed their claim to authority and the extent to which they were actively involved in the scholarly community. Zainab attended a boarding school, completing her Islamic studies alongside her secondary education. As a result, she became an Alimah at seventeen, a considerably young age compared to the other participants. Moreover, she was exposed to the *suhabh* of the school. This literally means fellowship or companionship, but here it is referring to the Islamic environment provided by the school which regulated all areas of Zainab's life as a student. Both Laila and Tahirah completed their Islamic education in a seminary, attending evening classes. During this time, Tahirah was also attending further education and was conducting volunteer work. Laila simultaneously finished her secular education, from secondary to higher, throughout the *Alimiyyah* (Islamic studies programme). Finally, Maryam was returning to her part-time Alimah course which operated three days per week with classes lasting four hours. While studying she has been teaching in supplementary madrasas where she has delivered Qur'an and basic Islamic studies lessons to teenage girls. Additionally, she added that she made an active effort to advise her students about practicing Islam and any problems they faced as young Muslims.

Motivation

Islamic education is a long-standing and prestigious tradition across the Muslim world. It offers graduates comprehensive knowledge of all aspects of the religion as well as affording them ijazah (permission) to teach and guide other Muslims. The course of study is immensely rigorous and requires a great deal of dedication, and sometimes sacrifice, to complete; hence, it is not entered into lightly. The Alimahs that were interviewed confirmed the arguments of Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) as there were diverse motivations behind their decisions to pursue Islamic education. Personal spiritual development has been the dominant argument in relation to women's participant in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Male scholars have often stated that women's education is essential for the *tarbiyyah* (nurturing) and good character of their children (Joly, 1984 cited in ibid, p. 118). Again, there is an emphasis on teaching, but this notion also seems to place women's activities primarily in the domestic space; a fuller account of the attitudes of male scholars towards Alimahs is given later.

Alternative reasons were also reported. Some participants did not choose to undertake Alimah studies; Zainab mentioned that it was a "tradition" in her family, so she naturally did it too. Because of this, she had mixed feelings about her experiences. While she came to appreciate the "gem" she had acquired, this feeling only developed after completing her studies. Moreover, it was not the Islamic education itself that was perceived negatively but was the boarding school format in which she lived. Nonetheless, after reflection she suggested that her negative experiences influenced her decision to move away from the scholarly tradition as she "didn't feel connected to it that way". Tahirah also reported that her parents "pushed" her to attend seminary, however, like Zainab, she grew to acknowledge the value of the education her parents provided her with. On the other hand, Maryam's experience of entering Islamic education was a completely personal choice.

> "… when you start questioning yourself like why are you here? What's the purpose of life? And you keep questioning it and then I just led me to learning more about Islam … And I loved it" (Maryam)

From Maryam's response it can be deduced that some women are seeking to better understand and engage critically with their religion. This can be viewed as developing personal spirituality, but I argue that it involves much more than that. To engage critically with Islam is not just to improve one's own observance of the religion, although this is expected, but also to fully understand its theology and have the ability to derive meaning from it. The participants' reflections indicate that this is the end goal of Islamic education, not only to adhere to its teachings, but to utilise the knowledge.

Although it may not be considered when deciding to pursue Islamic education, this feeling may manifest during or after the course of study; Laila exemplifies this in her experiences. She began her Alimah studies due to circumstantial factors. She explained that she could not continue attending *maktab* (supplementary madrasa) when she reached puberty as only male teachers were available. Consequently, her teacher recommended that she enter the *Alimiyyah* to continue her religious education

> "I still had in my head that I was going to do one other year of *maktab* (supplementary madrasa), so all my basic *masla/masa'il* (rulings/topics) were done, like *Bihishti Zewar*[9] … and then I was done (with *maktab*)" (Laila)

She had no intention of progressing into an Alimah, but the course appealed to her and even developed her ambitions. She purported that she "was very empowered" throughout her studies and this led her to continue. Her story emphasises the nuances that make studying Islam so personal. Therefore, we cannot generalise the motivations of women studying Islam.

Are madrasas preparing Alimahs for leadership?

When asked if they felt sufficiently equipped to be religious leaders after leaving Islamic education, participants had a number of observations. Most agreed that the knowledge they had studied was wide-ranging and encompassed all areas of life. However, Zainab

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[9] 'Heavenly Ornaments' – Written by Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanvi. Originally in Urdu but now widely translated, it includes topics such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *akhlaq* (manners) and is intended to be studied by women.

argued that "the knowledge that you gain is not complete … I mean there's so much more you can learn". She stated that the scenarios that students are taught are clear-cut but real-life situations are not. For this reason, she explained, students are not ready to go out into the community and provide rulings immediately after completing the *Alimiyyah*. Contrastingly, the other Alimahs were confident in their knowledge of Islam. Laila suggested that after studying in the seminary for eight years, graduates are adequately prepared to answer questions and offer guidance, but most lack confidence as their knowledge is not recognised as authoritative. Later sections discuss the role of the community in this insecurity. Overall, she believed that "the madrasa itself can't do anything more for us".

As Maryam was still a student, she could not comment upon how prepared she felt, but she offered insights into the measures that *Alimiyyah* courses are taking to ensure that upon leaving, students know what to expect.

> "… in our last year, we have to get one hundred questions from the community, questions that are frequently asked, then we have to do our research and answer them questions as coursework" (Maryam)

The importance of experiencing the process of providing rulings and advice is pivotal and was also reiterated by Zainab. Her experience is unique given her age at the time and her limited interactions outside of the boarding school. Without these interactions it is difficult to develop the skills to engage with people from different backgrounds. Zainab asserted that in boarding school "you're not taught about leadership" therefore, even if students have the knowledge, they lack the skills to utilise it. However, the young age of students leaving boarding school is also acknowledged as a factor for this. Maryam further added that her teachers provide workshops detailing methods of communicating with different people. While Zainab implies that the intensive workload of the boarding school, both madrasa and secular education daily, leaves little room for character development, Islamic boarding schools have been praised for their *suhbah* as it enhances students' practice. Due to spending less time there, students attending evening madrasa can miss out on this environment. Additionally, their interactions outside of madrasa may influence them, in both positive and negative ways. Though, another interpretation of *suhbah* is that it refers

to the embodiment of personal spirituality. I posit that this is evident within the teachers of seminaries and part-time Alimah courses. All participants highlighted the deep respect they had for their own teachers and looked upon them as examples to follow. So, while students are being exposed to the example of their teachers, they are still able to develop the necessary leadership skills that come from other settings.

To conclude this section, Alimahs have a diverse range of experiences in Islamic education that shape their future activities. Moreover, the motivations behind studying Islam are multi-faceted, although personal spiritual development appears to underpin most of these. Female scholars maintain that, for the most part, madrasa education is holistic in its instruction of Islamic knowledge. However, there is a difference between seminary-trained scholars and young Alimahs leaving boarding school in feeling prepared. A discussion of the institutional differences of Islamic education providers is warranted and a possible area of study for the future.

Responses to female leadership

Introduction

Female leadership in contemporary Islam has almost exclusively been targeted at other females due to notions of *haya* (modesty). Female scholars are not expected to interact with males outside of their immediate family unless necessary, and the same applies for male scholars' engagements with women. Therefore, the need for female 'Ulama to advise on women's issues is clear. However, there are a lack of standardised leadership positions for female scholars, which was acknowledged by participants. Still, most did not see this as a problem, it was simply viewed as a difference in the nature of men's and women's roles as scholars.

> "Women don't rule, they don't have that power, because there's certain qualities that we don't possess. It's not debilitating in any way, or even disempowering or anything. It's just, that's our place and so I think there's always going to be those kinds of limitations" (Zainab)

While the absence of such positions did not deter Alimahs from offering informal leadership, Aslan's (2003) argument of the internalisation of negative femininity by Muslim women may be relevant here. He suggests that patriarchal agendas of the "post-Prophetic dynasties" (p. 41) were legitimated through *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) that appeared to be restricting women to the domestic sphere. As discussed earlier, the use of theological 'proof' implies that women cannot question these notions, hence women become insecure in their roles and internalise their "place", as Zainab stated. Although Aslan assumes that now is the time for the Muslim woman to "free herself from these limitations" (ibid, p. 42), it is evident that Alimahs have not received the support required to achieve this. The next sections review the different responses Alimahs have received from their communities as well their own reflections on their status as female scholars of Islam.

i. Patriarchy versus Modesty

> *"the Muslim community thinks that male scholars are slightly higher than women … there's* purdah *(veiling) for a woman … and they fail to see that it's an issue of modesty, not about men being better" (Maryam)*

When examining the leadership of female 'Ulama it is important to note that the Alimahs studied were generally not interested in being acknowledged as leaders for personal status. Maryam was content with staying "lowkey" and similarly, Zainab stated that if the desired result is achieved then the person associated with the project is secondary. The Alimahs only expressed frustration with their insufficient visibility when it hindered their opportunities to exercise their knowledge for the benefit of the community. The following explores the theme of patriarchy, both overt and subtle, that was mentioned by some participants. Also, an examination of the concept of *haya* (modesty) is undertaken to explore how female 'Ulama work within these contexts.

Laila talked at length about the dominance of males and their influence in Dewsbury. It is worth giving some attention to her thoughts as this area is known to have an established scholarly community, including a considerable number of females. Still, the small scale of this research cannot be taken as a holistic representation of male 'Ulama's attitudes towards female scholars in Britain. She related that there was an absence of female representation within her local *shari'ah* council (Islamic court). Consequently, men were disproportionately favoured, and women were often provided with biased rulings. Laila attributed this to the format of the court itself, suggesting it is not an inviting place for women.

> "there's two men sat on this side, there's two men sat on that side and (if) I'm sat in the middle, a woman can almost feel like she can speak to me very openly … she wouldn't be able to do that with four men in one room and with her husband giving his side of the story. You almost feel quite intimidated … so that's why I saw that as a **need**" (Laila)

Although she took the initiative to put herself forward for this role, Laila was ultimately turned down. It was assumed that she would be overly sympathetic to women attending the shari'ah council and would deliver rulings on this basis rather than her theological training. From this we may deduce that Alimahs are actively trying to offer their services but are not being supported in doing so. Moreover, the unique leadership they can bring is being devalued as emotional. Participants cited their ability to relate to community members on a woman's level as an asset to their role as religious leaders, however a proportion of male 'Ulama, of which those in Dewsbury were particularly mentioned, did not share this sentiment. As indicated from the shari'ah council's reasoning for refusing Laila's contribution, Alimahs are ultimately women and are therefore not exempt from the narratives that have been propagated since the ages following the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. There is a perception that women's emotions cloud their judgement, making them unsuitable to occupy authoritative positions for which a level of objectivity is necessary. Although she was met with negative responses, Laila vehemently pointed out that this was the result of the "social constructs of the Pakistani community" and reiterated the idea that Islam as a religion does not place these restrictions upon women. Her use of specialist language here is reflective of her experiences in secular higher education. Her

exposure to ideas outside her community's norms has influenced her outlook on the participation of women in all areas of the Islamic intellectual tradition, she went on to say that "Islamic law **definitely** needs a place for women."

The issue of building authority in male dominated spaces is not unique to British Alimahs, we may look to other contexts to explore how female authority has been constructed and maintained. However, the experiences of British Alimahs in West Yorkshire cannot be separated from the South Asian community frameworks in which they operate. Nor Ismah (2016) has how female 'Ulama have established community-based authority in Indonesia where males have previously dominated Islamic leadership. She argues that female and male 'Ulama must work collaboratively to combat gender inequality, yet this will only be possible with "a supportive and affirmative response from male leaders" (p. 504). This has not always been given to Alimahs, especially in communities where remnants of cultural patriarchy are still present. Laila alluded to this lack of support in her interview. She posited that there was an obligation for female scholars to be consulted on issues concerning Muslim women as cultural influences were impinging upon women's Islamic rights. She stated that the "Pakistani community does not like divorced women" to illustrate that although she had advanced knowledge in this area, because she "voiced very strong opinions" which conflicted with the norms of her society, she was not viewed as suitable. Ismah, however, suggests that acknowledging the voices of adequately trained female scholars in religious matters "shows the value of justice and equality that Islam teaches" (2016, p. 494). Thus, there is a contradiction between the authority that Islamic law has afforded female 'Ulama and the practice of some organisations.

Male dominance in Islamic leadership has not only excluded female scholars from participating in Islamic law but has also affected their engagements with the lay community. This is discussed further later, but it is useful to examine how male 'Ulama's responses to Alimahs have swayed the rest of the community. All participants stated that the community has often preferred the authority of male scholars. Given that they are not bound by contested notions of haya, it is not surprising that they are more visible and therefore may

appear to be more accessible. Moreover, positions connected to institutions, for example the Imam's association with the mosque, are standardised and carry authenticity with them, hence males have not been tasked with building their authority. This is not to say that male 'Ulama do not face difficulties of their own, there is a growing demand for the expansion of their activities to address the generational gap of second and third British-born Muslims (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Nevertheless, their authority is still recognised, and they are looked upon as leaders, as opposed to Alimahs whose leadership must be established. However, even still Laila stated that male scholars' voices carry more authority than that of women.

> "… if you went back to family and said 'I spoke to an Alimah about it' they'd just laugh in your face" (Laila)

Laila's statement highlights a naivety among the community regarding the qualifications of Alimahs, but it is noteworthy that there have been cases of male 'Ulama furthering this thought. This leads one to question how Alimahs can be acknowledged by the lay community when their fellow male scholars refuse to recognise their authority.

In addition to this, participants quoted modesty as a reason for female scholars being less visible than male 'Ulama. This concept is taken from the authentic sources of Islam, the Qur'an and hadith, but as Jawad Syed argues, its interpretations are still "subject to the forces of context, history and ideology" (2010, p. 155). A detailed discussion about how patriarchal ideas have influenced contemporary interpretations of modesty can be found in Barlas (2002), however this study utilises the participants' notions of modesty as they are relevant to their experiences. Zainab argued that the way in which women manifest modesty is a personal matter. She used the example of female preachers and authors to suggest that some women do not "have that reservation" about being in the public space. Yet, there was a consensus among the participants that haya refers to a woman's dress, speech and actions. Consequently, there was a common understanding that because of this, female scholars cannot always take up the same spaces as males. Nonetheless, participants stated that they still have the capacity to influence change in their communities through their engagements with women and children. For example, the sports organisation that

Zainab works with aims to facilitate sports activities for Muslim women by providing the appropriate accommodations for them. She explained:

> "we're able to apply all the Islamic rulings, especially to do with free mixing and clothing. And it's an appropriate facility, especially for the ladies … we are quite focused on female participation" (Zainab)

Returning to the earlier statement about Alimahs' informal activities, this research suggests that female scholars endeavour to provide services for women and young girls that cannot be provided by male 'Ulama. This is either because males are unfamiliar with women's issues or are unable to address them. Maryam stated that female scholars must be role models for young girls as male leadership does not offer them suitable guidance. She said, "for a girl to learn from another girl it's more … you relate to each other". Here the importance of gender-specific leadership is emphasised as well as Alimahs' life experiences as a means of offering leadership. After examining ideas about patriarchy and modesty in scholarly communities it has become apparent that the authority of Alimahs would benefit from the support of established male scholars and institutions. However, even without this, they are operating in their communities and are willing to develop facilities for women. Nevertheless, the remaining South Asian ideals of what constitutes authority has left Alimahs unacknowledged, this is further discussed in the following section.

ii. Community Perception

> *"regardless of how many degrees you've got, regardless of how many years of experience you've got, the (South) Asian community will not take a woman's word for it"*
> *(Zainab)*

This statement encompasses the current view of the Muslim community' attitude towards female scholar. The perception of the community is pivotal to the authority of female scholars. In order to be authorities, their qualification and suitability must be recognised. As

discussed earlier. Female 'Ulama have focused their efforts on Muslim women. This would suggest that they do have a sense of authority over other women, but this is not extended to all Alimahs. Female to female leadership was seen as a necessity by the participants because of their ability to understand women's experiences, as Maryam said, "women are there for other women". Hence, the Alimahs' appreciation of sensitive topics coupled with their comprehensive Islamic knowledge makes them most qualified to advise and relate to Muslim women. Most participants agreed with this and reported that they would often approach their own teachers regarding their problems. However, from interviews it seems that this is not the case for the rest of the community. The following discusses how the community, specifically females, have responded to the presence of Alimahs and their perceptions of female 'Ulama's authority.

While there are areas of the community that value Alimahs and their contributions to the pastoral care of women through offering advice, others have failed to acknowledge the authenticity of their training. As female scholars are usually not appointed to recognised religious positions that transmit authority to them, they have sought alternative occupations to utilise their training. A very small number of Alimahs have taken up chaplaincy positions as it provides them with the professional religious role and acknowledgement that their own communities do not notice (Gilliat-Ray and Ali 2013, p. 53). Nevertheless, most Alimahs have remained without professional religious recognition and are instead informally providing their services to the community. This has consisted of being available for giving advice and answering '*maslas'* (problems). However, even in these endeavours, they have been secondary to male authority. All participants reflected on the community's refusal to view them as equal to male scholars. As mentioned above, only Alimahs who have been actively involved in the community for longer periods of time are recognised as possessing knowledge equivalent to that of males. Moreover, cultural influences are again central to the community's perception of Alimahs and inform the standards they expect of them.

Holding the title of 'Ulama carries with it a number of expectations, for both males and females. It is reasonable to assume that those who have undertaken the prestigious *Darse Nizami* syllabus are looked upon in high regard and are expected to embody piety. Nonetheless, this study has found that there are additional expectations placed upon Alimahs. Their actions and appearance are closely scrutinised by the community and these are equated with their abilities as scholars of the religion. Although participants stated that a great amount of responsibility is associated with acquiring knowledge, Zainab also referred to the "stigma" that accompanies this title. Returning to the notion of modesty mentioned earlier, Alimahs are to exemplify the highest level of decency. There appears to be a disconnection between the Islamic concept of modesty and what the Muslim community perceives to be appropriate behaviour for female 'Ulama, within this an emphasis on clothing has been noted, namely the *abaya* (long dress) and *hijab* (headscarf). This has become a burden on young female scholars whose qualifications are being discredited because of their dress choices. Participants reported that people "almost forget you're human" and therefore have set an unrealistic standard for female scholars to live up to. Laila recalled her teacher addressing the attendees of her graduation ceremony saying:

> "I know you're looking up to these girls … but you need to realise they're very young … yes, they have the knowledge. Yes, they know right from wrong. But don't we all? (Laila)

Though this statement alludes to the fact that such standards are applicable to all Muslims, the significance of outward appearance for female scholars is significant. Their dress choices are used to gage how authentic their knowledge is. Laila, for example, wore the *hijab* with jeans and a loose fitting, knee length dress; but as this is not the conventional clothing attributed to Alimahs, people did not believe that she had completed an Islamic education. Zainab also affirmed this idea, she stated that even when individuals were aware that she was a qualified Alimah they "disapprove … because I don't wear a black *abaya* and black head scarf". Although the clothing they adopt is common among Muslim women, they are looked down upon as they do not "look like" Alimahs. Moreover, Maryam asserted that by wearing the *niqab* (face veil) she was afforded authority among the community even though she was still a student. When asked whether she felt she was perceived as a religious

authority she replied, "yeah because of my *niqab*". From this it may be deduced that the community sets the standard by which authority is determined; hence, if Alimahs do not abide by these expectations they risk being denied recognition as authoritative leaders.

iii. Self-perception

"how can a woman be a leader … if other women are constantly doubting her?" (Laila)

The response of the community has had significant ramifications on Alimahs' self-perception and confidence in their authority. The double standard set by the Muslim community has left Alimahs confused as to whether they are viewed as authorities or not. On one hand their qualifications are not being recognised as authentic, yet on the other hand they are being held to higher standard than the rest of the community. Even when adhering to these expectations, an Alimah's word is perceived to be inferior. Laila sarcastically articulated her frustration with this:

"so it's okay for your daughter to do it because she's not an Alimah? We're both Muslims, we believe the same things … it's not alright for me to do it?" (Laila)

Alimahs must navigate the constructs that have been instilled in the community. Though their knowledge is helpful in negotiating their right to be in these spaces, the acceptance of the community is still needed.

Participants were asked how they felt about having the title 'Alimah'. Maryam suggested that it insinuates an accomplishment. However, as a student she is yet to experience the response of the community as a fully qualified scholar, thus her response shows a level of innocence. Alternatively, the negative reception by Muslim women has caused Alimahs to question their own abilities. Zainab posited that "they don't take you seriously" if the Alimah is not well-known throughout the community. Again, the significance of experience is stressed, prompting one to question how female 'Ulama can gain experience if they are not being accepted initially. Laila narrated an anecdote in which a woman sought advice from her only to then "verify" with an Imam. She stated that incidents such as these make "you feel really low about yourself" and can even lead female scholars to question their own training and knowledge. Laila also purported that she only openly discloses that she is an

Alimah to people within her own age group. Female scholars are more recognised, and their training appreciated among younger generations of Muslims, most likely because of their disregard for the social constructs that were transplanted from parents' and grandparents' homelands.

Once more, Aslan's 'self-despising femininity' (2003) is evident; though in this case it is female scholars who are insecure about their role because of the lack of support from the lay female community. During Tahirah's interview she stated that she is not "really qualified" even after completing the relevant training. Where Cheruvallil-Contractor argued that Muslim women are doubly marginalised by secular and patriarchal narratives (2012, p. 156), I posit that the female Muslim scholar is subjected to a third marginalisation by her own community.

Discussion

The following builds on the previous section by analysing the implications and significance of the findings. Here I will discuss what these findings indicate about female 'Ulama's engagements with Muslim communities as well as the factors affecting this.

Engagement with Muslim community

Initially, this project set out to examine the role of female scholars in Muslim communities through identifying their activities. However, after analysis it became evident that the debates surrounding the authority and leadership qualities of female 'Ulama have affected these engagements. Hence, these notions became central to the research and were commonly discussed in interviews.

The Muslim community was found to be integral in shaping the activities of female 'Ulama. More specifically, Alimahs felt that the South Asian Muslim communities of West Yorkshire did not acknowledge their qualifications and this hindered their opportunities to offer leadership. It was noted that this is more so the case among older generations who are still holding onto the patriarchal norms of their homelands. Consequently, not only do Alimahs go unnoticed, but those who have been vocal in their desire to bring about positive change

for their communities have been disregarded and labelled as too empathetic to women. On the other hand, older and more experienced female 'Ulama were known throughout localities and were viewed as being equal to male scholars. From this it became clear that experience is pivotal to being perceived as a religious authority. Some Islamic education providers have recognised this and are integrating 'work experience' with students' education, as was seen from Maryam's interview. This practice is helpful and ought to be adopted by more institutions to prepare graduating Alimahs for the reality of their role.

Moreover, Alimahs who have sought employment or education outside of scholarly networks are able to bring with them fresh outlooks that could be beneficial for their communities, especially for women. Yet, when attempting to carry out these initiatives, Alimahs have not been supported in doing so. The responses of some male 'Ulama to the activities, or even presence, of female scholars has informed how they are viewed by the community. It was found that Muslim women usually regard the authority of male 'Ulama as superior to that of Alimahs. As a result, female scholars have adopted an informal leadership role for those who acknowledge them. As participants stated, they are only able to offer their services when people trust them to provide authentic guidance. This informal position gives them the 'right' to advise on everyday spiritual and practical issues, however their involvement in Islamic law has been restricted. This has been an ongoing conversation since the demise of the Prophet Muhammad and female scholars are still negotiating their presence in these male dominated spaces.

Ismah's (2016) work on building community-based authority among Indonesian female scholars offers insight into the potential role that Alimahs could fulfil within the British Muslim community. She stated that "empathy as a woman" (p. 499) is significant for responding to women's issues. Although this was also echoed by the participants, female community members are still looking to male 'Ulama for religious rulings, even when this means transcending the barriers of *haya*. The community's construct of what religious authorities ought to look like places a great deal of pressure on Alimahs. Female scholars are still subjected to the community's strenuous standards of modesty, even when they are not given the recognition that is needed for them to engage effectively. These have included adhering to the accepted modes of dress that are mentioned above to show a commitment

to piety. There seems to be a contradiction between the conditions the community has specified for Alimahs if they are to be acknowledged, and the reality of this not happening. Therefore, Alimahs are not able to build relationships with the female community as they are not regarded as religious authorities. What is perceived as a lack of activity on the Alimahs' part, is in reality the Muslim community's refusal to accept and recognise their willingness to contribute and benefit their societies. Given the opportunity, Alimahs are ready to offer their services. Overall, Alimahs are not hopeful of change taking place any times soon and are instead carving out their own spaces within circles that do recognised the authenticity of their qualifications. As Laila voiced, "if they're not going to let me do rulings who cares? I want to help people."

Conclusion

At the outset of this research I expected to find more factors that affected the community engagement of Alimahs. However, as mentioned, my access to the network of female 'Ulama has proved unexpectedly difficult. Due to this, the notion of access has become a part of the thesis, almost as a sub-theme, that needed to be addressed in all stages of the study. I purport that access is a major component in the study of female 'Ulama and that any research in this area will be faced with navigating these issues.

> "Refusing is an acknowledgement that … there are some problems that the academy has not earned the right to engage with in particular ways" (Peters 2004 in Coddington 2017, p. 319)

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of female 'Ulama with a specific focus on West Yorkshire. With reference to their activities and interactions with Muslims, this research posits that various factors affect Alimahs' ability to be actively involved in their localities. Most importantly, this study emphasises the ongoing debates around the authority of female Muslim scholars in spaces that have traditionally been dominated by males. Moreover, it has analysed how experiences of Islamic education in Britain may influence the ways in which Alimahs relate to scholarly networks.

It is concluded that patriarchal understandings of Islamic knowledge and authority are restricting female 'Ulama in their ability to become recognised leaders. Yet, Alimahs are finding ways to negotiate their position and place among the West Yorkshire Muslim community in the best way possible. I argue that though this patriarchy may not be overt, it is still present. Female 'Ulama in West Yorkshire are less visible than their fellow male scholars. They adopt an informal approach to leadership as pursuing formal avenues, that are outside of teaching, has usually presented challenges. Hence, Alimahs have been limited in utilising their comprehensive religious training to contribute to Islamic law. This raises vital questions about the absence of females in interpretive processes. There is a common understanding that men and women face different problems, therefore the spiritual guidance they require may also differ. Having the capacity to appreciate women's dilemmas and societal responsibilities is central to helping them appropriately. It is for this reason that I suggest that female 'Ulama must be consulted on issues pertaining to Muslim women. Moreover, the role that has been ascribed to the female scholar and that primarily situates her as a teacher and 'mother of tomorrow' needs to be redefined to acknowledge her intellectual training and potential.

Though this study focused on three areas; Bradford, Dewsbury and Huddersfield, there was little difference across these locations. The only notable difference was the volume of scholars in each area; it was suggested that there are less Alimahs in Huddersfield and so they are less prominent. Instead, the institution in which Islamic education was undertaken

is more influential on female scholars' engagements. Furthermore, this project has discussed the various motivations for women enrolling in Islamic education. Similar to Bano's findings (2017), it was found that female 'Ulama in Britain are not interested in developing feminist readings of Islam, perhaps because they have been preoccupied with building their authority as traditional scholars. However, they are aware of the patriarchal structures that exist in Muslim communities and are attempting to challenge them using theological means. As Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor have stated, Alimahs' "knowledge of and adherence to Islamic principles are their strongest allies" (2015, p. 120) when confronting misconceptions about their suitability as scholars. Additionally, while the enhancement of personal religiosity is a key factor, motivation is multi-faceted and fluid, it may develop over time and is affected by the personal ambitions of Alimahs. The activities of female 'Ulama are diverse. It is not always easy to identify their activities as leadership roles. Nevertheless, when they have been acknowledged as authorities, they have been able to advise and make positive changes for these people. Moreover, they are dedicated to fulfilling the needs of Muslim communities, specifically of women and young Muslims, in areas that are currently lacking.

This project has further conveyed the issues of accessing and conducting qualitative research with Muslims. It has purported that the dearth of literature around female scholars of Islam stems from a lack of access to the field. Also, this study questions the notions of 'giving voice' as an emancipatory action of the researcher. Instead, it offers the view that female scholars are not interested in being recognised as religious authorities among academic researchers as they are still negotiating their authority within their own communities. Finally, this research has made some contributions to the debates surrounding female authority and leadership in Islam. Nevertheless, the influence of cultural practices in these debates cannot be overstated when examining how Alimahs feel they are received by their communities.

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Appendix 1

Consent Form

Cardiff University
School of History, Archaeology and Religion

CONSENT FORM FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT ON
How and to what extent do female Ulama engage with the Muslim community in West
Yorkshire?

Name of Researcher: Seherish Abrar

Please initial box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet
for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, to ask
questions and have had any questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time,
without giving any reason.

3. I agree to take part in the study.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Name of Person taking consent   Date   Signature

Participant Information Sheet

Cardiff University

School of History, Archaeology and Religion

INFORMATION SHEET FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT ON

How and to what extent do female Ulama engage with the Muslim community in West Yorkshire?

This information sheet invites you to participate in a research study. To help you decide whether or not you wish to take part, you may find it helpful to know what the research aims to achieve and what it will involve. I would be grateful if you would read the information below carefully. Please do not hesitate to ask if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

What is the purpose of the study?

o   This project aims to answer questions in regard to the motivation behind female Muslims pursuing Islamic education, their interaction with Muslim communities and how they view their position as a scholar of Islam.

Why have I been chosen?

o   You have been invited to participate in this study because you are either currently studying Islamic education or are already a scholar.

What do I have to do?

o   I would like for you to take part in an interview. I will talk to you about your views and experiences of your time in Islamic education/your activities in the community. The interview will be recorded using a Dictaphone so that I have a record of what was said.
o   I will be observing your activities throughout the day. I will make written notes regarding my observations and experiences. This requires nothing from you.

What will happen to the information about me that you gather?

o   With your permission, the recordings of the Dictaphone interviews will be written up into what is called a 'transcript'. This will allow me to read what you have said again. The original recording and the transcript will only be available to you, and myself.
o   Written notes made during observations will be typed up as Microsoft Word files, which will again only be available to me.
o   When I create the transcript, and make written notes following observations, I will change the names of yourself and everyone you mention. Nothing in the written outputs of the project will identify who you are.
o   If you wish, I will give you a copy of the transcript of your interview so that you can be sure that what I have written is accurate and that no-one in it can be identified by others.

o   The original recording, transcript, and written notes will be kept securely in a locked filing cabinet in Cardiff University. The data I gather will be held in password protected files and kept securely in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act.
o   As a participant in the project, you can give as much or as little information as you wish.
o   An analysis of the information we gather for the project will form part of our report at the end of the study and will be published in academic journals. If you request, I will be pleased to let you know where the results of the research have been published.

Do I have to take part?

o   No, your participation is completely voluntary.
o   You are free to withdraw at any point and you do not need to give a reason for doing so

Who are the researchers and who is funding the project?

o   The supervisor of this research is Dr Mansur Ali and it is funded by the Jameel Scholarship.

Who has reviewed the research?

o   The project has been reviewed by the Cardiff School of History, Archaeology and Religion 'Research Ethics Committee'.

Contact information

o   If you would like more information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact us:

   Seherish Abrar, abrars@cardiff.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

Appendix 2

Interview Schedule

Profile	1. How old are you?
	2. Where did you complete your Islamic education? \Where are you studying Islam?
	3. Are you currently undertaking any other employment/education (secular)?
Female religious leadership	4. In your opinion, how can females offer Islamic leadership?
	5. Is there anything that can prevent females from offering leadership to Muslim communities?
	6. Do you feel that female scholars are visible in Muslim communities?
	7. What are your thoughts on the role of female scholars in Muslim communities?
Experiences in Islamic education	8. What motivated you to pursue Islamic education?
	9. What are your thoughts on current madrasa education in regards to preparing students to be scholars in Muslim communities?
	a. Is there anything missing from madrasa education that you feel would help women provide religious leadership?
Engagement with Muslim communities	10. How do you interact with your local Muslim community?
	11. Do you offer any services to the community?
	12. Please described how you offer religious leadership to your community?
	13. Students = How do you expect to use your Islamic training after you graduate?
Perceptions	14. How do you feel about the title 'Alimah'?
	a. What do you think this title entails?
	b. Do you use any other terms to refer to yourself?
	15. Do you feel that you are viewed as a religious authority in your community?
	16. Do you think you are seen as having the same authority as male scholars?

Appendix 3

Extract from Laila's interview transcript

I11:	What about a kind of informal leadership within Muslim communities?
P11:	Informal in the sense where do you mean that they're there for like, counselling sessions? Or like help? Like that?
I12:	How would you see it?
P12:	So I'd say informally yeah, they are, you can be. So you can offer counselling sessions, you can offer help support in like marriage. But again, it would be informal so I don't really see that as women like … she's not taking leadership role. When you take a leadership role, it has to be seen as everybody that you're already a leader, and you've taken that role. This (informal leadership) would be like on a friend level. So I would be able to give advice, Islamically, according to the *shari'ah*, to people that would need it, but it wouldn't be like, confirmed. And I think whoever you would give it to would then still go to a male, like an *Imam* and still go and confirm everything I've said, I feel as if it's not authorised enough.
I13:	So … the female voice is less authoritative than the male's?
P13:	Yeah, compared to a man, like it's not authorised. If I was to say something to you like, if you need help on something, let's just say for example, of *khula* (divorce), this is a real life … It's a very common thing within my community, right? So I once gave advice to a lady saying that, you know, if you want *khula*, you've got to give your *haq mehr* (mandatory payment from groom) back, and then your *khula* you go through *shari'ah* law and it'll be done. She didn't believe what I said … so she went and go checked. But to me that was well I've just done 8 years you know … I know.
I14:	So it's not a case this is this is the reality … that women have less authority, or they don't know as much. It's a perception? Because the syllabus is the same.
P14:	It's a perception. Yeah, of course, like, the knowledge that I had and the knowledge that you know, a male had studied, the *Alimyyah* course, was exactly the same, you know, we get taught exactly the same syllabus, exactly the same books and in the same manner, but, my word wasn't taken, despite of, you know, all my qualifications of what I had learned. I had a **certificate to prove it**. But she, you know, she didn't take my word for it. And then that's when as I think I realised, regardless of how many degrees you've got, regardless of how many years of experience you've got, the Asian community will not take a woman's word for it.
I15:	Do you think it's an Asian thing, or a Muslim thing?
P15:	I think it's more of a Pakistani thing. I'm not so sure … I'm not very familiar with the Gujarati community, but with the Pakistani community they won't take a woman's word. It's like, they almost need that authorization from a man. It's like *[mimicking]* 'you've said it, I semi-believe you but I'll just go confirm it'. So it's like how can a woman be a leader, if you're constantly, even if other women are constantly doubting her. So it's like, nobody's going to take your word though are they? Even with like, just something so small as given advice. You know, like, what the Quran says about, you know, if your husband isn't treating you well, and stuff, she didn't take my word for it. Regardless, I had like books open, I was showing her you know, like, these are the verses, these are the *hadith*. You know like I'm

	giving her proof. Like, I had everything here. She was like nodding to me and saying, 'Yeah yeah, I believe what you say' but then I followed up with it a couple of weeks after she was like, 'Oh yeah I just had to confirm, my family wanted me to confirm' like, you were confirming with a person that had the same exact same qualifications as me. But you still felt the need to then confirm.
I16:	So why then do women go to *Alimahs* instead of going directly to am *Imam* of a mosque or an *Alim*?
P16:	I just feel as if they get a feel of it, they get a feel of the situation. So they know deep down what I'm probably saying or what another *Alimah* is saying is probably very similar to what an *Imam* will say, they just want to feel the water. And I also feel as if like females, like, feel more empathy. So if somebody was telling me *[mimicking]* 'Or my husband does this, my husband does that,' you know, you sympathise with them. But a male, if you sort of tell them that they don't always emphasise with your situation they'll always just tell you facts. Whereas I feel as if more women just want that empathy sometimes they just want an ear to listen, and then they want the Islamic response to it. But again, like when it came to the final decision, it was still they had to contact an *Imam*. And then I think that's also got to do with female empowerment. Females don't trust other females, you know, if they did, if they trusted them, we wouldn't have this issue. You know, because my society, my community is so male dominated, if you said like, if you went back to family and said, 'I spoke to an *Alimah* about it' they'd just laughing your face because an *Alimah's* word isn't considered to be authoritative enough. For the final choice she would have to go to *shari'ah* council and that is like, men sat around the table, there's no women. Yeah, because I've got like a *shari'ah* council right next to, the mosque that is local to me, like two seconds away, literally, only has a table of men.
I17:	Is it … there's not allowed to be women there or women cannot occupy that space?
P17:	No there's not allowed to be women. I tried speaking to them and telling them you know I've got this many qualifications and I'd be more than happy to you know fulfil a role there … and they were just like no.
I18:	But is it an Islamic thing or just them saying they don't want women there?
P18:	It wouldn't be an Islamic thing because Islamically there's nothing wrong.
I19:	Ok so it's nothing within the religion, the religion is not preventing them from occupying it?
P19:	No, no **of course not**. It's men themselves, it's almost like gender roles come into it. The social construct of the Pakistani community. *[sarcastically]* Women need to sit at home and men will make all the rules for you and you just have to say 'yeah'. So I think in one sense maybe they thought that I would … not assert authority but it doesn't fit them. They feel as if I will give too many women a voice then. Like so many women would become too opinionated then, they wouldn't be under the foot of a man, do you get what I'm trying to say? So, if for example, this (the setting) was a *shari'ah* council, there's 2 men sat on this side, 2 men sat on that side and I'm sat in the middle, a woman can almost feel like she can speak to me very openly … she wouldn't be able to do that with 4 men in one room and with her husband giving his side of the story. You almost feel quite like intimidated cuz you don't know how they're gonna take it. So that's why I saw that as like a need, which is why then I put myself forward. I got my dad to speak to the *Imam* and stuff, the *Imam* taught me ever since I was 4, it wasn't as if he didn't know who I was, he was there at my (*Alimiyyah*) graduation and they thought about it long

	and hard, they had meetings about it. They just thought I wouldn't fit it … no woman would fit it. They said 'you can come and **teach** we just don't need a woman **there**'. So I said ok I've tried. It was like a 4-week process, it wasn't like they just said no, they thought about it. But the bottom line was the fact that it would give too many women a voice.
I20:	Did they say that directly?
P20:	No he explained it to me. Cuz the *Imam* knows me really well, he said … he felt as though 'if I was to let you come on to it and let women come on to it' he goes 'you'd feel just so much empathy for them and you'd just agree to what they were saying, and women feel as if then they come and say anything'.
I21:	So they said you would just think emotionally instead of thinking about the actual *shari'ah*, is that right?
P21:	Yeah.
I22:	What do you think about that?
P22:	Basically, another thing what they said was even when a couple comes to the *shari'ah* law, their first point of action is to try to make them like put them together. The first … even if they see to you that they want a *khula* there's three meetings, in three of the meetings, you have to say get back together. But I voiced very strong opinions in the sense where if she is in an abusive marriage or an abusive relationship, I would say get out of that relationship. You know, I made that very clear. I would not say 'no, you need to stay with him.' That's what they would say.
I23:	Is that an Islamic thing?
P23:	It's not an Islamic thing no, it's … it's how they run. Basically the Pakistani community does not like divorced women, they don't like divorced women and they don't like women remarrying with kids from other marriages. So, they feel as if that's what would have happened if I was to then voice my opinions because I made it very clear. Yeah, I said I've read it and I've prayed it nowhere in the Qur'an does it say a woman has to say with a man beater or an abuser or if she's not happy, it says it in the Qur'an, if a woman isn't happy with a marriage, she can go. There's so many so *sahabahs* (companions) that had storeys Zainab didn't want to stay with Zaid, Zainab was a princess Zaid was a slave. She went to the prophet and she said, look, I want a divorce and he said to her, yeah, that's, that's fine. You're your *khula* back and your divorce is done. You know he never once said to her Who? What? Why? When? He said to her, you want a divorce? That's your right. You give your *mehr* back and your *khula*'s done. He didn't question it, where as in the *shari'ah* court they start questioning it, they say to them why? It's almost like an interrogation … *[mocking]* 'Are you seeing another man?'
I24:	Really?
P24:	Yeah yeah yeah … you know if you see the set of questions you'd be shocked.

Observation notes

Participant: Zainab

Location(s): Islamic Sports

Date/Time: 17/07/19 12:30 – 15:30

Zainab is the Chief Executive Officer at Islamic Sports, she is responsible for the running of the organisation. While she does not interact directly with Muslims, she fulfils a necessary role that enables this service to be offered to the Muslim community.

Today, she has been attending to emails in which she liaises with local schools and supplementary madrasas to facilitate sports programmes. While replying to one such email, Zainab echoed her interview response and reflected on the lack of support from within the Muslim community, especially from established organisations or personnel. Zainab stated that it is often the case that madrasa do not take up Islamic Sports' services because they do not want to be viewed as going "too far from what we do"

Participant: Laila

Location(s): Dewsbury

Date/Time: 19/07/19 8:45 – 18:30

I met Laila at Dewsbury train station, where she picked me up on her way to work. We arrived at her workplace, a tutoring agency, at approximately 9:00 am. Throughout the day, there was nothing that overtly pointed to her training as an Alimah, neither did she deliver any form of religious leadership.

However, after her last tutor session, at about 3:30 pm, she was joined by a colleague whom she was teaching Qur'an recitation and basic Islamic rulings to. She proceeded to assess her colleague on the previously covered topics. Throughout this time, Laila also used her religious training to offer guidance to her colleague on certain issues. This session lasted for about one hour and a half.

Following this, we returned to Laila's family home. Here she spent some time replying to the 'Alimah group chat' (refer to interview). She told me about some of the questions that were being asked and showed me how she (and others Alimahs) went about confirming their answers. For one such question about paying *zakat* (compulsory charity) for gold jewellery she referred to a book, written in Arabic with her own notes scribed in the margins, and looked up a *masla* (point/case). She then confirmed in the group chat that the answer given was valid.

Laila dropped me off at the train station at 6:30 pm, where the observation ended.