INTRODUCTION:
ISLAMIC AUTHORITY AND THE STUDY OF FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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Women in many parts of the Islamic world publicly speak for Islam as preachers, teachers, and interpreters of religious texts. Though men have held a near-monopoly over public religious leadership for much of Islamic history, over the past thirty years the ranks of Muslim women active as religious leaders have swelled to include individuals from almost all parts of the globe, including the Middle East; North, East, West, and South Africa; Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia; Europe; and North America.

The emergence, re-emergence, and expansion of female religious leadership in a wide variety of Muslim communities is significant for a number of reasons. The activities of female leaders represent a major shift in structures of Islamic authority, as they have curtailed male domination of religious leadership and core religious spaces such as the mosque and madrasahs, and have increased female attendance at public prayers and mosque lessons. The religious authority of these women is often limited due to gendered restrictions or longstanding traditions, but many play a significant role in the social and religious lives of their communities regardless. Finally, growth of female religious leadership is inherently linked to larger social, religious, and political changes that have impacted Muslim communities since the early twentieth century. To understand fully these larger trends, these women, their roles, and their impact on society and religion must be taken into consideration. Conversely, the activities of these leaders offer scholars a lens through which to view the nature of change in Muslim social and religious practices.

Detailed, nuanced, and comparative examination of the ideas and practices of many of these women is absent from contemporary scholarship; the main focus of scholarship to date has been on those seeking to overturn restrictions on the social and religious activities of women, to the detriment of detailed examination of women active in other, often more conservative, environments. Even though the dress
and lifestyle choices of Muslim women are frequently seen as barometers of the social and religious attitudes of a given community, the role that conservative female Islamic leaders play in the religious and social leadership of many communities has not been fully unpacked by scholars, the media, or policy makers.

This volume rests on belief that the increasing ability of Muslim women to exercise Islamic authority deserves scholarly attention, and that it is crucial to look equally at the full range of women active as religious leaders, from those who are striving to radically change Islamic gender norms, to those who have gained places as teachers in the oldest, most influential, and most conservative of Islamic religious institutions. It advances the study of Islam and Muslim women by placing detailed case studies of a wide spectrum of female Islamic leadership into a framework that highlights larger themes connecting these varied contexts. It unites authors normally divided by disciplinary, linguistic, and regional barriers, including individuals from Islamic Studies, Women’s Studies, Development Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, and Religious Studies, who work in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Chinese, Bosnian, Indonesian, Russian, Dutch, Swedish, German, and English, and focus on the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Bridging disciplines—and in particular uniting ethnographic and textual approaches—is a crucial part of capturing the full scope and significance of contemporary female Islamic leadership. In order to maintain this diversity and maximize the connections between contributions, we avoided dividing the chapters according to factors such as geographic area or whether the Muslim community was of majority or minority status.¹

The central focus of the volume is analyzing the dynamics governing the construction and exercise of female Islamic authority in mosque and madrasah space. Each chapter provides a richly contextualized case study of the religious authority of women who lead prayer or interpret Islamic texts, paying particular attention to the spaces—both physical and virtual—in which this leadership takes place. We focus

¹ The conference participants writing about Europe were particularly adamant that they remain united with those discussing Muslim communities in the geographic East and South. Seemingly simple distinctions are more complex in practice: while the vast majority of European Muslim communities are minorities, not all are diasporic or recent in origin; also, not all Muslim communities in the East—for instance, in India—live in Muslim-majority state contexts.