Women’s Authority in Patriarchal Social Movements: The Case of Female Salafi Preachers

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Abstract

How do women gain authority in the public sphere, especially in contexts where patriarchal norms are prevalent? This paper examines the authority of female preachers in the Islamist Salafi movement. I argue that despite the movement’s restrictive gender ideology, Salafi women have gained authority to preach because their preaching helps the movement reach new audiences and offer persuasive arguments in support of patriarchy. I show evidence for this claim using automated text analysis of 21,000 texts by 172 men and 43 women on the Salafi-oriented website saaid.net. I also examine who reacts when these writings are publicized by the official saaid.net Twitter feed. The findings illustrate how movements that aggressively enforce traditional gender roles for participants can nevertheless permit and promote female authority for pragmatic political reasons.

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1 Introduction

How do women gain authority in the public sphere? Scholars have focused on understanding how women gain access to political office (Htun and Jones, 2002; Lawless and Fox, 2005; Krook, 2010; Bush, 2011; Karpowitz, Monson and Preece, 2017), especially when patriarchal attitudes remain prevalent in society (Bhavnani, 2009; Bush and Gao, 2017). But political power is not just about holding political office, and political scientists have also turned attention to other ways women enter public politics, such as activism in social movements, religion, and civil society (Clark and Schwedler, 2003; Ben Shitrit, 2016).

In this study, I document how conservative Muslim women are gaining authority as religious preachers, called dā‘iyāt in Arabic, in a conservative social movement called Salafi Islam. This religious authority is not explicitly political. These women are not seeking political office and would likely discourage other women from doing so. Still, their involvement in the Salafi movement has important political causes and consequences.

A surprising aspect of the phenomenon I describe is that female preachers are gaining religious authority among a group that is deeply suspicious of women’s authority for doctrinal and social reasons. Religious authority in both historical and contemporary Islam has generally been held by men. There are notable exceptions to this trend (Abou-Bakr, 2003; Kalmbach, 2008; Hassan, 2011; Bano and Kalmbach, 2012; Künkler and Fazaeli, 2012; Frede, 2014; Garipova, 2017), but by and large, men have occupied roles as religious authorities in the Muslim world. Women have rarely held similar authority even when it is permissible under Islamic law (Kloos and Künkler, 2016). The Salafi movement in particular has a gender ideology that appears to leave little space for women’s authority. For example, Salafis seek to avoid almost all contact between men and women outside of family relationships for fear of committing the sin of gender mixing (Wagemakers, 2016).1 It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the scholarly literature on Salafism has been largely concerned with men (Lauzière, 2016; Meijer, 2009; Lacroix, 2011; Mouline, 2015; Thurston, 2016).2

Yet, despite the Salafi movement’s explicit opposition to women’s authority, women’s words comprise a

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1For a history of the concern about gender mixing among Salafis in Egypt, see Rock-Singer (2016).
2For example, two of the most important recent works on Salafism, Meijer (2009) and Lauzière (2016) have no discussion of female Salafis, and to my examination, there are no women listed in the index of either. The appendix titled “Biographies of Salafi Thinkers and Leaders” in Meijer (2009, 430-447) contains biographies of fourteen men and no women.
remarkable amount of Salafi religious and political discourse. Data from a census of Muslim preachers on
the Internet shows that approximately 2.5 percent of Muslim preachers are women, but on the Salafi website
I examine in this paper, 20 percent of the authors are women. This is not the only place where female
religious authority is on the rise in Islam (Kocamaner, 2014; Bano and Kalmback, 2012), but it is perhaps
one of the more puzzling places for men to cede authority to women.

These female Salafi preachers have drawn the attention of several scholars who conclude that their
preaching is limited to female audiences (Le Renard, 2012; Al-Rasheed, 2013). My argument and evidence
contradict this claim. I argue that female Salafi preachers are helpful to the Salafi movement because they
can draw in new audiences, both male and female, and can make persuasive arguments supporting patriarchy
that male clerics cannot. Salafi men are pragmatic enough to set aside some of their concerns about women’s
religious authority in order to attract more followers and harness the persuasiveness of women’s arguments.
The story of how these women are gaining authority is the political story of a social movement jockeying
for increased influence in the modern information age.

I develop and test this argument by examining the writings of 215 preachers — 172 men and 43 women
— on the Salafi-oriented website saaid.net, along with data from the social media platform Twitter showing
who reacts to their preaching. I find that women’s writing differs from that of men, but not always as
predicted by prior research. I show that women support their arguments differently than men, in ways that
make them particularly credible defenders of Salafism. For example, a male preacher is more likely to
oppose Western conceptions of women’s rights by citing the Quran and hadith, while a female preacher is
more likely to make an argument of the form “I am a woman, and I don’t want the West’s so-called ‘rights.’”
This helps explain why I find that female preachers reach new, mixed-gender audiences on Twitter. They
offer a defense of Salafi patriarchy that men cannot.

Together, these findings suggest that patriarchal social movements may empower women when it fur-
thers the movement’s political goals. My conclusion that political pragmatism can encourage change in
conservative movements corroborates past scholarship (Bush and Gao, 2017; El-Ghobashy, 2005). Activists
seeking to increase women’s participation in the public sphere in societies where patriarchal attitudes are
prevalent should focus on creating political incentives to do so. However, my findings also remind us that

3The Internet census of Muslim clerics comes from Nielsen (2017) and the data for calculating that 2.5 percent of online Muslim
preachers are women is available at http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PG4A7K.
women in positions of authority can work to perpetuate patriarchy rather than fight it. Thus, it is an open question whether the increased prominence of female Salafi preachers will expand women’s rights in Muslim communities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer this question, so for the remainder of the paper I focus on explaining why female Salafi preachers are gaining authority.

2 Female Religious Authority in Conservative Religious Movements

Women in the Arab Muslim world have long been disempowered relative to men (Ahmed, 1992; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Masoud, Jamal and Nugent, 2016, 1557-1561). Scholars have debated whether Islam is responsible for the status of women in these countries or if the blame is more appropriately laid at the feet of other forces (Sharabi, 1992; Landes, 1998; Fish, 2002; Donno and Russett, 2004; Ross, 2008). In this debate, scholars have written about the potential for liberal women’s activism to overturn patriarchal societal norms in Muslim-majority societies, either focusing on these movements where they have occurred or lamenting their absence where they have not (Mernissi, 1991; Majid, 1998; Arat, 2000; Saliba, 2000; Weiss, 2003; Badran, 2005). However, scholars have paid less attention to the activism of conservative women supporting patriarchal systems. Most who have are interested in the question of why women would support a vision of society that outsiders might find inimical to their interests (Blaydes and Linzer, 2008). In the words of Ozorak (1996, 17), “many religions are patriarchal in their beliefs, sacred images, language, and practices. Why do women disproportionately invest in an institution that systematically devalues them?”

The emerging picture from this literature is that conservative female activists are not duped about the movements they support. They exhibit as much agency as liberal female activists. Kandiyoti’s (1988) concept of a “patriarchal bargain” is useful for understanding these patriarchal women activists. In exchange for upholding the overarching patriarchal system, women are allowed to create their own spheres of influence, but this in turn gives them incentives to perpetuate the system.

Examples of conservative women’s activism come from a diverse set of cases, including outside of an Islamic tradition. For example, Ulrich (2017, xiii) highlights the agency of Mormon women in 1870’s Utah who defended their faith’s practice of “plural marriage,” a form of polygamy, by agitating for extension of voting rights to women. She asks “how could women simultaneously support a national campaign for political and economic rights while defending marital practices that to most people seemed relentlessly
patriarchal?” Ulrich’s answer is Mormon women used the political confrontation between the Mormon community and the United States government to “strengthen their position within their own community” (xiv). Mormon women’s “support for their brethren was sincere, but it was also strategic. They knew when and how to ask for the things they wanted, and they wanted the right to vote” (xiv).

Returning to female religious authority in the Muslim world, Saba Mahmood’s 2005 work on pious women in the da’wa movement in Egypt also contradicts the idea that “women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan” (1). Instead, the Egyptian women Mahmood studies have created new spaces for themselves, “altering the historically male-centered character of mosques [and] Islamic pedagogy” (2). Yet these women do support religious patriarchy. “At the same time, women’s religious participation within such public arenas of Islamic pedagogy is critically structured by, and serves to uphold, a discursive tradition that regards subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal.” Just like the Mormon pioneer women described by Ulrich (2017), Mahmood’s interlocuters are empowered agents, choosing to support patriarchy.

The same respect for the agency of conservative women makes Lihi Ben Shitrit (2016, 5) critical of focusing on the question of why women support conservative movements. In her words, this obsession in the literature “takes for granted that there is something strange or puzzling about this support — that it is an anomaly or a peculiarity that requires explanation” (5). Instead, Ben Shitrit urges scholars to focus on the means through which women act to support their conservative movements. Ben Shitrit (2016, 4) states the puzzle succinctly: “how do [female] activists in patriarchal religious-political movements with clear notions about male and female different private and public roles, manage to expand spaces for political activism in ways that seem to transgress their movements’ gender ideology?” This article begins to answer these questions for the online female preachers of the Salafi movement in Islam.

**Top-down movement strategies can create space for women’s authority**

There are two general arguments about how space for women’s activism and authority expands in patriarchal social movements. The first type of argument emphasizes movement strategies that permit women to participate in activism. In these arguments, movements have most of the agency, and women are slotted into activist roles as movement leaders see fit. The second type of argument emphasizes the individual strate-
gies women use to carve out space as activists in movements that remain inherently skeptical of women’s activism. These arguments are not mutually exclusive, but most research tends to emphasize one or the other.

There are a few reasons why patriarchal movements might increase the space for women’s activism. Conservative religious groups appear to face a dilemma when societal changes place the group’s gender ideology out of the mainstream. Moderating attracts new members who prefer religious groups that match societal norms but alienates old members who view moderation as inconsistent with eternal truth claims (Iannaccone and Miles, 1990, 1246). In an attempt to better match changing gender norms in society, the men leading these movements may allow women increased authority to convince new members that the movement is not overly patriarchal. However, by circumscribing the authority of these women and selecting women who will advocate for continued patriarchy, the movement can seek to avoid alienating older members by fundamentally contradicting core ideological claims about the proper roles of women.

This argument finds some support in accounts of the changing views about women’s authority in Islamist groups. El-Ghobashy (2005, 374, 382) argues that political pragmatism as moderated the views of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood on a number of issues, including the scope of women’s rightful authority. Instead of the conservative views on women’s empowerment espoused by the Brotherhood’s old guard, the new leaders of the Brotherhood “have devoted much space in their arguments on women’s citizenship rights to refuting obstinate views and reinterpreting Quranic injunctions that specify men’s tutelage over women” (382). The logic is one of pure pragmatism. One spokesman for the updated views of the Brotherhood writes, “limiting the Muslim woman’s right to participate in elections weakens the winning chances of Islamist candidates” (al Wa’i (2001), 253, cited by El-Ghobashy (2005), 382). In addition to domestic electoral incentives, Islamist groups competing as parties in elections also face pressure from the international community to appear inclusive to women (Bush, 2011).

If women are primarily visible in conservative movements at the behest of men, then perhaps they are constrained to simply repeat what men say or to act out roles that men have scripted for them. Madawi Al-Rasheed writes that female Salafi preachers can be “trusted to endorse official messages and never question rulings on women” from their male counterparts (258). Al-Rasheed finds that gender segregation of Salafi audiences is strict. “Female preachers enter the public sphere only as women preaching to other women, thus
creating a parallel yet structurally inferior space for women in order to preserve overall male dominance” (248). In her view, female Salafi preachers are not religiously innovative, but instead seek to faithfully transmit the messages of their male counterparts to women. “Religious activist women can only hope to play an auxiliary role enforcing the rulings of religious men. Women aspire to extend men’s control in areas where they cannot reach” (247-248).

In this account, female Salafi preachers have no responsibility, and probably no right, to speak authoritatively to a male or mixed-gender audience. Instead, female preachers speak solely to women, urging them to comply with rulings issued by male clerics on a wide range of so-called women’s issues. As Al-Rasheed puts it, “their words are meant to be consumed by women only” (248).

**Women can carve out space of authority from the bottom up**

Other scholars acknowledge that patriarchal movements may be manipulating women for the movement’s benefit, but they emphasize women’s agency to create spaces of activism and authority.

Agency-focused explanations often emphasize the importance of women’s rhetoric justifying their authority and activism. Ben Shitrit (2016) offers a compelling account of how female activists in patriarchal movements create rhetorical “frames of exception” that “provide women with discursive framing tools to justify and promote forms of political participation that diverge from the gender ideology upheld by the movements” (12). These frames of exception are primarily available to women activists in religious movements with a nationalist flavor, “outwardly focused on a struggle against a foreign rival” (8). A context of nationalist struggle allows space for transgressive activism by women because they can “argue for the temporary prioritization of the nationalist struggle over concerns with gender-role complementarity and female modesty” (12). Exceptional times allow exceptional activism by women because it is both “righteous” and temporary: righteous because the overarching cause of the nationalist struggle justifies the activism, and temporary because the activism is viewed as rightfully limited to the period of nationalist struggle (14). Ben Shitrit contends that women in proselyting movements — those that “seek primarily to spread religiosi ty in their own communities” (8) — cannot frame possible activism as necessary to meet the challenge of exceptional times and are thus less likely to be activists in ways that transgress movement norms.

Ben Shitrit’s notion of “frames of exception” explains much of the variation in the cases she examines in
contemporary Israel-Palestine: ultra-Orthodox Shas, the Islamic Movement, Jewish West Bank settlers, and Hamas. It offers a less satisfying explanation for female Salafi preachers because Salafis are a proselyting movement — precisely the kind that she argues are unlikely to permit women to violate gender norms during exceptional times. If female Salafi preachers were only preaching to women, then this would better match the “piety promotion among other women” that she believes is the likely form of female activism in proselytizing movements (Ben Shitrit, 2016, 10). Certainly, this fits how Salafi women preach in face-to-face settings, but I demonstrate that online, these female preachers are writing to, and reaching, mixed-gender audiences.

New media forms, especially broadcasting technology, can create ambiguous spaces where women can assert a right to preach (Kocamaner, 2014; Roald, 2016). Schulz (2012) studies how radio communication enables female Muslim preachers in Mali to reach wide audiences, despite opposition from traditional male scholars. Information communication technology creates interesting possibilities for circumventing doctrinal prohibitions on gender mixing. Commenting on the courses of study pursued by many young women in Saudi Arabia, Le Renard (2014) notes that “many young women study IT or sciences that in other contexts are studied by a majority of men. Computer-based professions are particularly accessible to women because they can generally be exercised from home or within a space that respects gender segregation” (38). It seems that the Internet creates space for female preachers precisely because digital communication obviates the need for personal contact.

Finally, female preachers may carve out space for themselves by increasing their charisma and scholarly knowledge. An ethnography by Le Renard (2012) suggests that knowledge and charisma are key sources of authority for female preachers (113-115). Le Renard recounts a 2009 lecture by Ruqayyah al-Mahārib which “gave the impression that her knowledge of Qurʾān and Sunnah was exhaustive, and that she was deeply touched by what she was telling to the audience” (116). Perhaps movements are unable to rein in these impressively knowledgeable, charismatic women, but this does not necessarily explain why men would endorse women’s preaching.
3 The Internet, Identity Authority, and Female Salafi Preachers

Why would movements with patriarchal ideologies that generally confine the authority of women to domestic spheres let women be religious spokespersons? In the previous section, I explored several possibilities: that movements react to changing gender norms by giving women modest authority, or that women carve out spaces of authority for themselves through rhetorical strategies, charisma, and possibly with the help of new communication technologies. In this section, I offer a theory of why women are permitted to be authorities and spokespersons in conservative, patriarchal social movements that builds on these arguments, but brings in two key elements: the ability of women to reach new audiences and their ability to make particularly credible arguments in favor of patriarchy.

I argue that Salafi permissiveness toward female preachers is a result of structural forces interacting with the sources by which the Salafi movement legitimates itself. I use the term “permissiveness” intentionally to signal that my argument highlights the strategy of the Salafi movement and its interest in using women to play particular roles. I give room for the agency of female religious authorities in the movement, but as I will show, the exercise of female authority by the women appears to be circumscribed.

I define Islamic authority as influence over the religious choices of lay Muslims. This definition makes clear that “the authorities” of “official Islam” in the Middle East (Robbins and Rubin, 2013; Brown, 2017) may not actually be very authoritative if they have little influence over how lay Muslims choose to practice their faith. Conversely, online preachers who have no official position can have a great deal of authority if they are influential. The key to building religious authority is extending and deepening obedience.

Traditionally, establishment clerics in Islam — the ‘ulamā’ — have built their religious authority through scholarship, peer recognition, or association with political authority. The Salafi movement draws instead on popularity and mass participation for legitimacy. Of course Salafis justify their approach with scholarly arguments from Islamic law, but they also tout their large and growing popularity as a sign that they are right.

The advent of the Internet has played decisively in favor of the growth of Salafism. The Internet helps religious actors who construct authority through popularity, media visibility, charisma, and lay engagement — precisely the sources of authority that differentiate many independent Salafi religious authorities from the traditional religious elite in Islam. The Internet is not the only innovation that has upended traditional
Islamic authority. Indeed, scholars have claimed that Islam has been in the throes of a “crisis of authority” over the past century, caused in part by print technology and later, audio cassette tapes (Bulliet, 2002). But the Internet has greater reach than any of these prior technologies, which means that it weighs even more heavily in favor of preachers and clerics who rely on “media authority” (Herbst, 2003; Eickelman and Anderson, 2003; Turner, 2007).

I argue that the Internet has opened space for female religious authority within the Salafi movement. In face-to-face preaching, women preach only to female audiences (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Le Renard, 2012, 116-122). On the Internet, the norms against gender-mixing that prohibit women from preaching to mixed gender audiences are more ambiguous. The messages of female preachers resonate with audiences outside of the traditional base of Salafi support, expanding the base of potential Salafi supporters. If Internet audiences cannot be strictly segregated and if an issue arises where female voices might contribute arguments that male voices cannot, then Salafis have incentives to permit female preachers unprecedented roles in the movement.

The effectiveness of female Salafi preachers on certain issues comes directly from their identities as women. This gives them identity authority that allows them support the movement in ways that men cannot. Women in the Salafi movement can derive authority for their positions simply by being women, provided that their statement is complementary to the positions advocated by male Salafis. This authority is particularly useful for supporting Salafi positions that are criticized for being restrictive to women. These include opposing Western conceptions of women’s rights, access to procedures like abortion, and clothing deemed immodest. Salafi women are more effective advocates than men because “a person who makes proclamations that run contrary to their personal and political interests” (Berinsky, 2015, 2) is more persuasive (see also Calvert, 1985).

There is nothing about identity authority that is inherent to gender; it can derive from any identity that bestows authority and credibility in a particular context. In patriarchal religious movements, women’s identities allow them authority and credibility because women are seen as symbols of the movement’s moral foundation and virtue. This symbolism centers around women’s roles as mothers. For example, Ben Shitrit (2016, 128) highlights the rhetorical construction of “maternal frames” by the activists she studies, as well as women in other settings. Generally, rhetoric that equates women with motherhood results in restrictions on women’s behavior in patriarchal movements, but at times, it also creates space for women activists to
behave in ways that appear to violate the movement’s prevailing gender ideology because of the messages they can deliver.

To summarize, I argue that male Salafis are willing to grant some religious authority to female preachers in order to reach new audiences and to strengthen their arguments by leveraging the identity authority of women. This is a pragmatic choice by male Salafis to permit the exercise of authority that they might otherwise restrict on ideological grounds because it contributes to the material success of the Salafi movement. Such pragmatism is a hallmark of Salafis, who are opposed to religious innovation but “consider technological innovation to be less problematic, especially when it helps to sustain or promote Salafi Islam” (Lauzière, 2016, 11).

4 Evidence from a Salafi-oriented Website

Directly testing my argument that the Internet has opened space for female authorities in the Salafi movement is difficult. The roll-out of the Internet has affected Salafis worldwide, so there is no unexposed part of the Salafi movement that can serve as a control group for comparison. Nor am I able to directly assess the motives of Salafi leaders and preachers through observation or interviews. Instead, I test implications of my argument about how male and female Salafi preachers write, and how audiences respond to their writing.

The logical progression of my tests is this. First, I show that the female preachers write on “men’s topics” as well as “women’s topics,” suggesting they are finding a role beyond simply preaching to women. I then show that men support their arguments with citations to authoritative texts much more than women. Instead, women are likely to support their arguments by leveraging their identities as women. From this, I infer that women are capable of making persuasive arguments that male preachers cannot. Finally, I show that women’s writings are garnering reactions on Twitter from both men and women, and that women’s writings reach audiences that men do not. These three results contradict prior explanations for the presence of female preachers in the Salafi movement, but support my argument that women are permitted to preach because their arguments are uniquely persuasive and draw in new audiences.

My data come from a Salafi-oriented website titled Ṣayd al-Fawâ'id, at the url saaid.net, from the official Twitter feed of this website, and from the Twitter feeds of individuals who interact with the website. Saaid.net is a missionary website promoting Salafism through writing, and occasionally other media. Two
sections of the website provide data for my study. The section titled ʿulamāʾ wa ṭulbat al-ʿilm contains hyperlinks to the works of 172 male Salafi preachers. These include well-known scholars, high-ranking state appointees, and relatively obscure preachers with a range of credentials (45 with a doctorate, 106 listed as “al-shaykh,” 8 listed as “professor/teacher,” 4 listed as “preacher,” and the rest with other or no listed qualifications). A separate section titled multaqā al-dāʿiyyāt lists 43 female preachers, also with a range of credentials (10 with a doctorate, 5 listed as “professor/teacher,” 17 listed as “preacher” or “author”).

I collected all of the texts by the 215 preachers on saaid.net as of January 2016. Documents are almost all in Arabic. I exclude a handful that are in English or French, leaving me with 21,324 documents. Most are under 1,500 words, but some are lengthy monographs. Some authors post new works regularly, though it appears that website administrators control the actual posting.

Who reads these documents? I do not have website user data, but I can see reactions when saaid.net’s official Twitter feed publicizes new postings to its 75,000 followers. Only a minority of Twitter users list their location, but extrapolating from those who do suggests that 80 percent of those who interact with saaid.net’s Twitter feed are from Saudi Arabia. This matches data from Alexa web services reporting that the website is extremely popular in Saudi Arabia, and has a significant following in Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, and Algeria.

I analyze these documents using a combination of close reading and statistical text analysis. For statistical analysis, I use routine text analysis pre-processing procedures, adapted for Arabic. I stem each of the documents, using a stemmer based on the “Light 10” stemmer for Arabic (Larkey, Ballesteros and Connell, 2007). Stemming reduces the variety of the texts by combining closely related words with the same morphological stem.

The index for male preachers is http://www.saaid.net/Warathah/index.htm.

Female preachers are listed at http://saaid.net/daeyat/. I have searched extensively for biographical information about these women and have found independent evidence of their preaching from other sources in all but a few cases. These female preachers are not “sock puppets” created by the men running saaid.net.

My stemmer removes prefixes and suffixes but does not attempt to remove infixes (common in Arabic but not in English) and does not recover the triliteral root of each Arabic word. Thus, “a book” (“kitāb”), “the book” (“al-kitāb”), and “her book” (“kitābuhā”), are all stemmed to be “book” (“kitāb”), but the plural “books” (“kutub”) is not. Arabic speakers will recognize that this is less than ideal, but Arabic stemming technology is far less developed than English-language stemming.
Female preachers are not limited to “women’s issues”

I examine the topics of men’s and women’s writing using a structural topic model (Roberts et al., 2014; Roberts, Stewart and Airoldi, 2016; Lucas et al., 2015). I omit most methodological details here and instead focus on the intuition of the procedure and the findings. Intuitively, a topic model assumes that text is generated from latent topics which are not directly observed in text, but which generate connections between words. Based on the assumed text generation process, the model predicts which words in a collection of text were generated from each possible topic, providing a topic classification for each word. After estimating the model, I infer the general content of each topic by examining the most frequently occurring and exclusive (unique to a topic) words associated with each topic. “Topics” estimated by the model may not necessarily seem topical to humans because non-thematic elements like grammar and idiomatic phrases can generate correlations between words. Nevertheless, in many cases, topics identified by a topic model can aid human comprehension of a corpus.

A structural topic model incorporates information about documents into its estimation of topics. For this analysis, I include the gender of the author — male or female — as a predictor of topic prevalence. This allows the model to estimate whether each topic is equally prevalent across genders or used more by one gender.

To estimate a topic model, I must specify the number of topics. There is no single best number of topics, for the same reason that there is no correct answer to the question “how many topics are in this paper?” Estimating more topics will result in more fine-grained distinctions while estimating fewer gives broader topics. Here, I present results with 10 topics because I find the model results insightful, but other models could also be useful.

Figure 1 shows the results of a 10-topic structural topic model with preacher gender as a predictor of topic use. The y-axis shows each topic, represented by the top eight words associated with the topic7 to allow the reader to see the words informing each topic label. The topics are ordered based on the difference in topic prevalence between women and men. The x-axis shows the estimated average prevalence of each topic in writings by women (black discs) and men (white discs). These are proportions and can be interpreted directly; the first topic accounts for approximately 30 percent of words in women’s writing and 15 percent

7Top words are those that jointly maximize frequency and exclusivity (Bischof and Airoldi, 2012).
of words in men’s. Lines extending from each disc show 95 percent confidence intervals, but many of the
topic proportions are so precisely estimated that the range is obscured by the disc itself.

| Topic                        | Predicted topic proportion |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Teaching: proselytize, youth, education, family, responsibility, role, thoughts | ○ 0.1 0.2 0.3 ● |
| 2. Westernization: country, West, politics, civilization, Arab, history, culture, Iraq | ○ ● |
| 3. Women: her husband, house, women, woman, girl, women, she said, men | ○ ● |
| 4. Doctrine: land, punishment, Surah, the prophets, mankind, faith, creation, that | ○ ● |
| 5. Jurisprudence: to permit, Shafi'i, sell, Zakat, posess, permission, forbidden, condition | ● ○ |
| 6. Monotheism: apostasy, jihad, interest, apostate, kill, polytheism, fighting, apostates | ● ○ |
| 7. Salawat: peace be upon him, Allah, the prophet, peace, the Companions, Bakr, Umar | ● ○ |
| 8. Hadith: about, Sahih, father, Hurayra, son, narrated, weak, chain of narration | ● ○ |
| 9. Worship: Ramadan, their God, fasting, night, complacency, prayer, sins, month | ● ○ |
| 10. Heterodoxy: Kalam, sheikh, innovation, the Salaf, meaning, Taymiyya, the Imams, say | ● ○ |

**Figure 1: Cleric gender predicts topic frequency**

Estimated topic proportions for female and male Salafi preachers in the saaid.net corpus. Topics are ranked by the difference in proportions between women and men. Topics 1-3 are more prevalent in women’s writing, topic 4 is equally prevalent, and topics 5-10 are more prevalent in men’s writing.

These ten topics provide a high-level picture of themes in the writing of Salafi preachers. Eight of these topics are about the substance of authors’ writing and two are about writing form. Among the substantive topics, three — Teaching, Westernization, and Women — are considered “women’s issues” by Salafis. The topic I label doctrine captures the text of the Quran when it is quoted, along with abstract themes in Islamic cosmology. Worship contains legal rulings and guidelines for how Muslims should worship, while jurisprudence contains legal rulings and guidelines for a variety of other topics in Islamic law. The heterodoxy topic captures debates about orthodoxy and heterodoxy between Salafis and their critics. And the monotheism topic contains discussions about the Islamic concept of monotheism (tawhid) and whether it can be used to
Two topics — hadith and salawat — are about the form of preachers’ writing rather than the content. The hadith topic contains the set phrases with which authors introduce a hadith and establish its authenticity. Salawat captures the set phrases called salawāt that Muslims often recite when mentioning Muhammad (ṣalā allāhu ʿalayhi wa salam, “blessings and peace be upon him”) or his companions (raḍī allāh ʿanhu, “may Allah be pleased with him”). The next section explains why the fact that men use these topics far more than women is remarkable.

Among the eight substantive topics uncovered by the model, three are more prevalent in women’s writing than men’s: teaching, Westernization, and women. This corroborates prior scholarship showing that women focus on “women’s issues,” and adds detail on the proportion of writing devoted to each of these topics: almost 30 percent to teaching, and almost 20 percent each to Westernization and women. Together, these three topics account for almost 70 percent of words that female preachers write.

However, in contrast to the findings of previous scholars who study female Salafi preaching in face-to-face settings (Le Renard, 2012; Al-Rasheed, 2013), I find that women also write on topics outside of the traditional “women’s issues.” Men are more likely to write about jurisprudence, monotheism, salawat, hadith, worship, and heterodoxy, but women write on these topics as well. Figure 1 shows that about eight percent of women’s writing is on worship and that around three to four percent of women’s writing is devoted to most of the other topics. This suggests that women write on topics other than those specifically viewed as “women’s issues,” which requires that we rethink the role that female preachers play in the Salafi movement.

**Women support arguments differently than men**

Next, I explore differences in how male and female preachers support their arguments. A central tenet of “Salafi methodology” is to look to the Quran and hadith traditions for guidance in all matters, avoiding later interpretations by Muslim jurists. A hadith is a saying attributed to the prophet Muhammad, passed down to the present day through a chain of narration from one person to the next until they were collected and curated into compilations. For Salafis, a belief or practice that can be traced back to this tradition should be followed, while one that cannot should be abandoned. This means that religious arguments about proper Salafi practice often become scholarly arguments about the meaning and merits of a particular hadith. A strong hadith with
an unbroken chain of reliable narrators is favored over a weak hadith of dubious provenance with unreliable narrators.

Set phrases virtually always accompany hadith citations, and these words appear in the hadith and salawat topics uncovered by the topic model in the previous section. The hadith topic contains words that appear in the isnād, or chain of narration that accompanies each hadith, as well as names of the compilers of authoritative hadith collections. The salawat topic contains words of blessing on the prophet and his companions that are invoked every time they are cited. The topic model shows that hadith and salawat account for almost 20% of words written by Salafi men but less than 4% of words by women. This suggests that women make different kinds of persuasive arguments than men.

To confirm that the hadith citation gap between male and female preachers is not an artifact of the topic model, I show in Table 1 that male preachers use eleven phrases related to the use of Quran and hadith far more frequently than women.

| Term                  | % of documents using term | % of all words |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------|
|                       | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| allāh                 | 95% | 85%   | 3.0%| 1.6%  |
| ṣalā allāh            | 67% | 32%   | 0.50| 0.21  |
| radī allāh            | 50% | 20%   | 0.18| 0.10  |
| ḥadīth                | 64% | 39%   | 0.30| 0.14  |
| qāl/yaqūl (al-)rasūl   | 30% | 10%   | 0.047| 0.026 |
| Ibn Taymiyya          | 23% | 3.4%  | 0.030| 0.006 |
| al-Bukhari            | 41% | 10%   | 0.098| 0.030 |
| al-Bayhaqi            | 17% | 0.72% | 0.013| 0.001 |
| Abu Hurayra           | 29% | 3.6%  | 0.048| 0.008 |
| al-Tabarani           | 16% | 1.2%  | 0.014| 0.002 |
| Abu Dawud             | 29% | 3.6%  | 0.043| 0.006 |

Table 1: Frequency of hadith-related phrases in men’s and women’s writing

This table shows, for each phrase listed, the percentage of men’s and women’s documents that contain the phrase (left two columns) and the percentage of men’s and women’s words that are devoted to the phrase (right two columns). All differences between men and women are statistically significant at the 0.05 percent level.

The first three terms in Table 1 all relate to the use of honorifics when referring to Muhammad or other figures from Islamic history whose statements are considered authoritative. The first result is that the word allāh accounts for fully three percent of words written by men, but women use the word only half as much. Of course, there are many contexts in which the word allāh can be used, so I consider two specific phrases:
the honorific for the prophet, șalā allāh(u ‘alayhi wa salam), and the honorific for other notables, raḍī allāh (‘anhu). These phrases are also used far less frequently by women. The phrase șalā allāh appears less than half as many times in women’s writing, either when I calculate the percentage of documents that use the term (67% for men versus 32% for women) or in the percentage of men’s and women’s words (0.5% for men and 0.2% for women). The phrase raḍī allāh has similar differences in men’s and women’s usage.

Women are also far less likely to use the word ḥadīth, the phrases “the prophet said” (qāl/yaqūl al-rasūl) and “the prophet says” (yaqūl al-rasūl), or to reference some of the famous compilers of the hadith tradition: al-Bukhari, al-Bayhaqi, Abu Hurayra, al-Tabarani, Ibn Taymiyya, and Abu Dawud. The most popular of these hadith compilations is Sahih al-Bukhari (2008) which was completed in about 846 CE, contains approximately 7,000 reported sayings of Muhammad, and is one of six major hadith collections in Sunni Islam. Documents by male preachers cite al-Bukhari 40 percent of the time, compared to only 10 percent in the writings of women. The other hadith collections are cited less, but the difference between men’s and women’s citation rates is even more stark: men cite these other hadith collections approximately 10 times more frequently than women.

My next tests show that the hadith citation gap between Salafi men and women is not due to confounding factors such as document topic or the author’s scholarly training. It may be that writing on certain topics typically involves fewer hadith citations, and that these topics are disproportionately favored by women. To test this, I identify the main substantive topic of each document. Then, I collect all documents with the same main topic, divide them by author gender, and calculate the rate of citation to eight prominent hadith collections: al-Bukhari, Ibn Taymiyya, al-Bayhaqi, Abu Hurayra, al-Tabarani, Abu Dawud, Sahih Muslim, and al-Tarmidhi. Figure 2 displays the results graphically. Topics are plotted separately for men (white discs) and women (black discs), with the size of the disc indicating the proportion of documents by men or women respectively associated with each main topic. Topics are plotted on the x-axis according to the difference in topic proportions for women and men as estimated by the structural topic model above. Thus, topics listed to the right of zero in the figure are more prevalent in women’s writing, while topics to the left of zero are more prevalent in men’s writing. The y-axis indicates the percentage of documents about each main topic that make at least one reference to one of the eight hadith compilations just listed.

The results show that hadith citations vary quite strongly with topics, but that this does not account for
the difference in hadith citation rates by men and women. Figure 2 shows a persistent gap in the number of hadith citations by men and women, regardless of topic. This can be seen by examining the consistent size of the citation gap for any single topic, or by examining the roughly parallel slopes of the best fit lines for men and women. On average, men are twice as likely to cite a hadith compilation as women, regardless of whether the topic tends to have many hadith citations or few. The constant size of the gap is interesting because it reveals that at least some women are willing and able to use hadith citations, but use them far less often than men, even when the subject calls for them.

Two more alternative arguments deserve attention: that men and women write in different genres, and that women may have less scholarly training for deploying hadith to support arguments. Conditioning on these factors requires a more complex statistical approach, so I estimate a series of regressions predicting
hadith use in each document as a function of the author’s gender, controlling for the main topic, scholarly credentials, and a proxy measure for genre.

I represent the main topic of each document as a categorical variable. I collect information on the scholarly credentials of each author from the saaid.net website. If the gap in hadith use is due to the relatively poor training of female Salafi preachers, then I expect the gap to disappear when I limit the sample to authors with PhDs in the Islamic sciences. I also include an interaction between the indicator for author gender and the indicator for whether an author has a PhD to test whether PhDs matter for one gender more than the other.

Measuring document genre is more difficult. I do not want to inadvertently include citation frequency in my coding of genre because then genre would be mechanically correlated with the outcome variable. Instead, I use document length as a proxy for genre. Women’s documents are generally shorter than men’s: only 10 percent of women’s documents are over 1,172 words, while 37 percent of men’s documents are longer than this threshold. Comparing documents of similar length makes it more likely that I am comparing citation rates in documents that are otherwise comparable styles of writing.

I present four statistical models in Table 2. In all four models, the outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether a document cites at least one of the major hadith compilers (as in Figure 2). I estimate this outcome using a linear probability model for ease of interpretation, but logistic regression gives similar results. The first model predicts the probability of citing at least one hadith compiler as a function of author gender with no additional covariates. The second model includes the covariates linearly. The third and fourth models subset the data to account for possible non-linearities in the covariates, akin to a matching approach. The sample in model three is restricted to documents shorter than 1,172 words by authors with PhDs on topics preferred by women, while model four is the same but for topics preferred by men.

The results in Table 2 show that women consistently cite the hadith tradition less frequently than men, even when accounting for each document length, topic, and the credentials of authors. Model one shows that 50% of documents by men cite at least one hadith compiler, compared to only 11% of documents by women. Models two through four show that this gap is not fully explained by differences men’s and women’s preferred topics, document lengths, or scholarly training.

According to model 2, a document with the main topic of Doctrine will contain a citation to one of the
Outcome: Binary variable indicating whether a document cites at least one of the prominent hadith compilers.

|                      | (1) No covariates | (2) All covariates | (3) Subsample: Topics preferred by women | (4) Subsample: Topics preferred by men |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Intercept            | 0.50*             | 0.47*              | 0.19*                                  | 0.57*                                  |
|                      | 0.004             | 0.01               | 0.008                                  | 0.014                                  |
| Female Preacher      | -0.39*            | -0.21*             | -0.16*                                 | -0.21*                                 |
|                      | 0.009             | 0.01               | 0.013                                  | 0.075                                  |
| Has PhD              |                   |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.057*            | yes                |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.007             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Female × Has Phd     | -0.008            |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.017             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Main Topic: Worship  |                   |                    |                                        | ✓                                      |
|                      | 0.2*              |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.012             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Main Topic: Jurisprudence |            |                    |                                        | ✓                                      |
|                      | 0.25*             |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.016             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Main Topic: Heterodoxy |               |                    |                                        | ✓                                      |
|                      | 0.15*             |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.013             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Main Topic: Monotheism |                |                    |                                        | ✓                                      |
|                      | 0.058*            |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.016             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Main Topic: Teaching |                   |                    |                                        | ✓                                      |
|                      | -0.25*            |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.011             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Main Topic: Westernization |        |                    |                                        | ✓                                      |
|                      | -0.3*             |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.013             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Main Topic: Women    |                   |                    |                                        | ✓                                      |
|                      | -0.09*            |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.013             |                    |                                        |                                        |
| Document length      |                   |                    |                                        |                                        |
|                      | 0.003*            | < 1,172 words      |                                        | < 1,172 words                          |
|                      | 0.0001            |                    |                                        |                                        |
| N documents          | 21,324            | 21,324             | 2,489                                  | 1,259                                  |
| N documents by women | 3,470             | 3,470              | 1,063                                  | 45                                     |
| N documents by men   | 17,854            | 17,854             | 1,426                                  | 1,214                                  |
| R²                   | 0.08              | 0.26               | 0.06                                   | 0.01                                   |
| Sample               | All documents     | All documents      | Documents on women, teaching, or westernization shorter than 1,172 words by authors with a PhD. | Documents on worship, jurisprudence, heterodoxy, or monotheism shorter than 1,172 words by authors with a PhD. |

Table 2: Regression models showing that men cite hadith compilers more than women.

Four linear probability models showing that men cite hadith compilers more than women. Model 1 is estimated on the full data set of documents and includes no covariates. Model 2 is estimated on the full data set and includes covariates with “Doctrine” as the baseline main topic. Model 3 is estimated on the subset of documents that are shorter than 1,172 words, on topics favored by women, and by an author with a PhD. Model 3 is estimated on the subset of documents that are shorter than 1,172 words, on topics favored by men, and by an author with a PhD. * indicates \( p < 0.05 \).
major hadith compilers 44% of the time, but a similar document by a woman will contain such a citation only 26% of the time. The other covariates in model two predict citations to hadith compilers. When the author of a document has a PhD, the probability that their documents will cite hadith compilers is 5 percentage points higher for both men and women. As shown in Figure 2, topics favored by men are associated with more hadith citation while topics favored by women are associated with fewer citations. And as expected, longer documents are more likely to cite hadith compilers. Still, conditioning on these factors does not eliminate the citation gap between men and women.

Models three and four subset the data to documents by authors with PhDs, all in the length-range that women seem to prefer (less than 1,172 words). If any set of women are able to cite hadith, it should be those with PhD’s in the Islamic sciences. The gap still remains in this subset, whether I look at documents on topics favored by women (model 3) or favored by men (model 4).

**Women support arguments by invoking their identities as women**

If women are less likely than men to support their arguments through manipulation of authoritative text, then how do they try to persuade readers? My hypothesis is that women assert authority through their gender identity — they write “as women.”

Statistical text analysis methods are not very helpful for identifying instances of women using identity authority because the phrasing that invokes identity authority is far more variable than the phrasing that invokes citations to hadith. In fact, identity authority can be present without clear textual cues in case where a woman simply asserts claims that gain added force simply because a woman is writing them.

I cannot automatically detect women’s use of identity authority in all of the documents, so instead I describe several women’s documents in detail. The first document is titled “An Amiable and Urgent Call” (*nada‘ wadd ‘ajil*). In it, by female preacher Dr. Jawahir bint ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Shaykh. The document is a little over 400 words and has the apparent intent of encouraging jihadists to lay down their weapons. This is immediately striking: the document is about jihad, falls well outside of so-called “women’s issues,” and is addressed to an audience of men.

If a male preacher were to write such a piece, it would likely be concerned with evidence (*dalil*) showing

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8. [http://saaid.net/daeyat/jawaher/15.htm](http://saaid.net/daeyat/jawaher/15.htm)
that the jihadist position is incorrect. Instead, al al-Shaykh takes a motherly tone: “We are all like mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers to you.” The text then turns to persuading jihadists that they are on the wrong path, not by appeal to legal evidence but appeal to emotion. “The most painful in the short- and long-term: that you have made the countries of the Muslims into the fields of jihad, even the holiest of their holy sites, and made those closest to you your victims.”

Another use of identity authority occurs in a document by Hind ʿUmar, titled “Sally al-Faransiyyya…in the Forum of the Saudi Women.” This document provides commentary on a comment made at a Saudi women’s forum by a woman named Sally al-Faransiyyya who reportedly spoke out against some attendees who were calling for attention to issues of women’s rights in Saudi Arabia. She starts off by suggesting that those calling for rights are misguided: “I don’t know if the Saudi women are fools? Or if they have been deceived. They talk of stolen rights?” She then gets personal. “I am a Muslim woman, of Tunisian origin, with a French name Sally, and an Arabic name Sayyida.” She describes how she gained French citizenship because of her husband, but then left it all behind.

But in spite of all the open horizons in front of us to live as citizens in France, obtaining all of the rights that any French citizen has, I left all that and moved to Saudi Arabia!! It was not because I couldn’t find opportunities for work, or for the financial benefits,… but it was simply that we decided to live in Saudi Arabia because it was better for our daughters. Yes, it was better for our daughters.

Hind ʿUmar then comments at length on the foolishness of fixating on whether women can drive when Saudi Arabia provides so much for women in other respects. She concludes, “Praise God three times that I was born in a country that governs by God’s law in the details of women’s issues.” The overall intention of the article is clear: Saudi women should be grateful for what they have no matter how restrictive Saudi society is to women. ʿUmar’s support for this claim is based on identity. Sally al-Faransiyya, and by extension Hind ʿUmar, are women who have seen the so-called rights offered by the West and, as women, they can definitively say that they are not good.

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9https://saaid.net/daeyat/hindamer/16.htm, accessed 3/13/2017.
5 Who Are Female Preachers Reaching?

Women’s preaching helps the Salafi movement reach new audiences online. To show this, I examine reactions to the writings on saaid.net. The website does not report any statistics on who accesses particular documents, so I cannot comprehensively measure who is reading them. However, saaid.net has an official twitter account that regularly publicizes new documents to approximately 75,000 followers. I examine how Twitter users react.

I collected the 3,247 tweets from the saaid.net Twitter account posted between November 7, 2014 to October 5, 2017. Of these, 283 linked to a female preacher’s writing and 1,629 linked to a male preacher’s writing. Twitter allows people to react to a tweet by “retweeting” it, which places the tweet in the feed of the retweeter. I collected the 16,870 retweets for these tweets, by 5,345 unique users. I used self-reported user names and user handles to guess the gender of each retweeter. Some users give whimsical, inscrutable names, but I and an Arab research assistant were able to guess the gender of 4,588 of them with high confidence.

Previous scholarship argues that “in most communities, women [preachers] are confined to female audiences not because political or legal factors prevent them from reaching out to men, but because believers by and large still prefer male religious authorities” (Kloos and Künkler, 2016, 488). This is not true for the female Salafi preachers on saaid.net. I find that twitter posts linking to documents by female preachers are retweeted by an average of 8.5 people, of whom only 26% are women. The fact that over 70% of the people retweeting female preachers are men is in striking contrast to the exclusively female audiences documented by Le Renard (2012) when some of these same women preach in face-to-face settings. This suggests that in the relative anonymity of the Internet, some Muslim men appear quite interested in reacting to what women have to say.

Although men are the majority consumers of women’s writing, women on Twitter do prefer the writing of women. A tweet from the saaid.net website publicizing writing by a female preacher will get 26% of its retweets from women, while a tweet publicizing writing by a male preacher *on the same topic* will get only 12% of its retweets from women. I find no evidence that women’s preference for the writing of female preachers is because they use fewer citations to hadith. Statistical tests show that the percentage of women retweeting a document is unrelated to whether that document has hadith citations. Women readers are more
interested in women’s writings, regardless of topic or scholarly tone.

The Twitter data show that female preachers are reaching new audiences. To see this, I divide the retweeters into two groups: those that retweeted at least one post linking to a male preacher’s documents, and those that only retweeted documents of female preachers. The first group is 29% female, while the second is 58% female, suggesting that these female preachers are extending the audience for Salafism among women especially.

The people who retweet women’s documents are less likely to ever retweet anything else from saaid.net than people who retweet men’s documents. To see this, I compare frequent retweeters — those with three or more retweets — to infrequent retweeters with less than three retweets. Only three percent of the people who retweet exclusively women’s documents are frequent retweeters. In comparison, eleven percent of the people who exclusively retweet men’s documents are frequent retweeters and 77 percent of people who retweet both men’s and women’s documents are frequent retweeters. Looking at the counts from which these percentages are calculated, there is community of saaid.net twitter followers about 400 strong (65% male) that will frequently retweet regardless of preacher gender. There is another community of about 500 people (77% male) who will frequently retweet, but only for male preachers. But there are only 17 people (57% female) who frequently retweet exclusively for female preachers. Female preachers are getting retweets from people who otherwise are unlikely react to tweets from the saaid.net account.

Another way to see that female preachers reach new audiences is to see whether they are retweeted by more people who are not regular followers of the saaid.net twitter feed. Twitter reports which accounts follow saaid.net, meaning that they regularly see saaid.net tweets in their personal Twitter feed. Thirty-nine percent of people who exclusively retweeted posts linking to female preachers were followers of saaid.net, while forty-seven percent of people who retweeted at least one post linking to a male preacher were followers. This suggests that tweets publicizing women’s preaching get more reaction outside of saaid.net’s follower network than tweets publicizing men’s writing.

Together, these findings paint a picture of how lay Muslims on the Internet are interacting with the writings posted on saaid.net. In line with the existing literature, I find that female preachers are more popular with female audiences than male preachers. However, it is not the case that women are primarily reaching women in the saaid.net twitter network. The majority of retweets of women’s preaching are by
men. Female preachers expand the reach of saaid.net, and the new people they reach are disproportionately women, and disproportionately people who otherwise do not interact with material from saaid.net.

6 Conclusion

Why might patriarchal gender movements choose to promote female authorities when the movement’s prevailing gender ideology appears to strictly limit female authority? I argue that women can be particularly effective at influencing target audiences for social movements because they can reach new audiences and can deliver particular messages that men cannot. Specifically, women draw on their identities as women to deliver messages supporting the patriarchal ideology of the movement they are supporting. These messages are more credible and powerful when delivered by women because they are in apparent opposition to women’s self-interest.

I provide evidence for this argument by examining the writings of female Salafi preachers in comparison with their male counterparts. Salafism is a conservative movement within Islam that has a patriarchal gender ideology that is unfriendly to women’s religious authority. Yet examining a prominent Salafi website, saaid.net, I find that female preachers are present in large numbers, constituting fully 20 percent of the preachers listed by name for website readers. To understand this apparent puzzle, I collect roughly 21,000 documents written by the preachers on this website, along with data from Twitter about how website readers react when these documents are publicized by the official saaid.net twitter feed.

The data from saaid.net allow me to reach a number of conclusions about why Salafis are promoting women as religious authorities. I show that women are not as constrained to speak on particular topics as previously supposed. It is true that women tend to write about so-called “women’s issues” — teaching children, managing family conflicts, and fighting the pressures of Westernization. But I find women who also write about topics that have traditionally been the purview of men, with mixed gender audiences as their target.

I show that women support their arguments in different ways than men. The literature on Salafism would suggest that Salafis support their arguments by citing the Prophetic hadith tradition. I show that male Salafi preachers cite hadith at relatively high rates, as expected, but female Salafi preachers are far less likely to cite hadith, even when writing on the same topics, and even when they have substantial graduate training
in the field of hadith. Women instead support their arguments with explicit and implicit claims of identity authority. I show examples of female preachers invoking their roles as mothers and women to make points, rather than invoking textual authority. I argue that this identity authority makes women useful spokespersons for the movement. Men simply cannot make arguments that begin with the phrase, “as a woman, I think . . . .”

Using Twitter data, I explore the audiences that female Salafi preachers are reaching. While prior research unanimously asserts that female Salafi preachers are serving exclusively female audiences, I find that the majority of Twitter users who react to women’s writing by retweeting it are men. This suggests that male Salafi Muslims on the Internet are more interested in writing by female religious authorities than the strictly gender-segregated audiences of face-to-face Salafi preaching would suggest.

These findings raise important questions about the future of Salafism. If female Salafi preachers are gaining prominence and reaching mixed gender audiences, what is the quality of the resulting authority? Is an expanded role for women in online preaching a harbinger of expanded roles for women in other facets of the Salafi movement? Or will men retain control of women’s preaching, harnessing it to reach new audiences when it suits their interests and clamping down if it threatens the movement’s gender ideology? Will the increasing authority of female preachers lead to changes in women’s rights in the Muslim world? Time will tell, but my research suggests that the Internet will help these women as they seek greater religious authority.
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