

Article

The Mosque as an Educational Space: Muslim Women and Religious Authority in 21st-Century Spain

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Abstract: This article presents the results of a fieldwork project from January to April 2017 in Spanish mosques, an on-the-ground investigation using interviews with female Muslim teachers who constitute a sort of women’s movement within Islamic education in Islamic associations and schools across Spain. These women reflect on their zeal for teaching and the desire to receive an education in Islamic studies among Muslim women, students and teachers, who participate in these activities to transmit their knowledge of Islam in Spain. These female teachers form a heterodox group of interconnected educators who have acquired status within their communities, legitimized by their ability to impart Islamic religious knowledge, and who could prove to be potential alternative educational authorities in Spanish Islam. This educational activity by and for women in Spanish mosques, which has been studied by others at the European level could be seen as a revitalization of religious dynamics or as processes of re-Islamization. However, as the interviewees themselves observe, ‘we never stopped believing and practicing’, suggesting that this educational activity should be situated within the framework of the active search for Islamic knowledge in a non-Islamic European context.

Keywords: women; teaching; Islam; Spanish mosques

1. Introduction

This article looks at the dynamics behind education developed by and for women in mosques and Islamic cultural centers in Spain. Building on the definition of ‘ilm, or Islamic knowledge proposed by these women, the study investigates their status and authority with regard to occupying leadership positions in the community that result from the process of acquiring and imparting religious knowledge. The overarching aim of the study is to discover to what point the exercise of teaching confers some type of religious authority upon these women in the eyes of other women and the community in general, and whether it makes them potential educational authorities (Ali 2012) in Spanish Islam or in the context of transnational Islam (Bano and Kalmbach 2011). Maybe these groups of cultivated teachers, Muslim women, and their purpose, tasks and self-imposed responsibility of teaching Islamic knowledge at Spanish mosques could be understood as the role that can assume ‘contemporary Islam actors’ in Europe as a contrast of ‘ordinary Muslim’ (Göle 2017).

The field results presented here are part of a doctoral project done in spring 2017. This phase of the research used a questionnaire that facilitated a conversation of approximately one hour either in Spanish or Arabic, with open questions grouped around six broad topics, in addition to the basic questions required to create a sociodemographic profile of the interviewees. The questionnaire contained questions on the courses, materials and participants, as well as the teachers’ previous education and the schools or other places where they acquired their religious knowledge. The interview also included questions about knowledge transmission and models, both the classic models and current female models that the interviewees might know, as well as possible definitions of the term ‘ilm. Finally,

the participants were invited to comment on their position in the community as teachers and describe their teaching activity.

Researching religious knowledge and its transmission is complicated. Dale Eickelman has observed that historians and sociologists sometimes place more importance on the fixed nature of religious knowledge, paying less attention to how changing modes of transmission affect the knowledge system. An intense debate exists about what knowledge is valid and what is related to faith and authority in Muslim societies. For generations, ulema have been the unquestionable authorities. However, Eickelman, citing Hasan al-Turabi, emphasizes the plurality of valid and legitimate models in knowledge transmission that in many cases support existing practices. For al-Turabi, 'all knowledge is 'divine and religious', and all those who possess knowledge ('ilm) are the equals of those who possess specialist religious knowledge' (Eickelman 2015).

Islam and Muslim communities in Spain are organized within a special legal framework in accordance with the provisions in the Organic Law of Religious Freedom of 1980 and the Constitution of 1978, which establish that the state must cooperate with the religious orders or communities duly inscribed in the Registry of Religious Entities maintained by the Ministry of Justice that have achieved the status of notable arraigo due to the number and scope of their believers and, hence, the religion itself. This was institutionalized in 1992 when the three Cooperation Agreements were signed between the Spanish state and the official representatives of the three minority religions that met the condition of notorio arraigo (the legal status of being well known and 'deeply-rooted' in Spain) at that time: Islam, Evangelical Christianity and Judaism. Thus, the right to religious expression was protected based on the recognition of pluralism and the normalcy of the presence of Islam and other religions in Spain in the twenty-first century (Planet Contreras 2018).

2. Muslim Women in Spain: Location and Sociodemographic Profiles

Although Muslims clearly comprise a minority community in Spain, from a statistical viewpoint, it is difficult to estimate their number, since no public documentation contains data on religious affiliation in the country. As in other European countries, national origin is used as a substitute for other sources for individuals from Muslim majority countries, producing a rather unscientific calculation that connects a person's national origin with their supposed faith.

The Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation's Observatory of Religious Pluralism estimates that there are more than one million Muslims living in Spain, based in part on immigrant Muslims, the majority of whom come from North Africa (<http://www.observatorioreligion.es/>). On the other hand, the 2017 annual sociodemographic report published by the Union of Islamic Communities in Spain (UCIDE) through its branch, the Observatorio Andalusi, estimated that there are 1,919,141 Muslims in the country, including foreigners, nationalized Spaniards and neo-Muslims (<http://observatorio.hispanomuslim.es/>). The following table presents some data on the nationalities with the highest number of legal residents in Spain. The tables contain the highest absolute numbers and the total number of women, Table 1, to provide a framework for the fieldwork study on female teachers in Spain.

Table 1. Total number of foreigners from the selected countries.

Country	Total No.	Women	% Women/Total
Morocco	749,670	328,872	44%
Algeria	60,645	22,893	38%
Pakistan	80,181	22,576	28%
Senegal	63,832	14,190	22%

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Ongoing Population Register, 1 January, 2018. National Institute of Statistics.

Focusing specifically on women immigrants from Morocco and Algeria, Table 2 shows their settlement patterns, which reflect the overall settlement dynamics of migrant groups. Along with

the major cities of Barcelona and Madrid, the Spanish Mediterranean provinces of Almeria, Girona, Tarragona and Alicante have the highest census registration numbers for Moroccan women, while Algerian women tend to settle in Alicante (in the Community of Valencia), which has a direct boat to Oran, the city of Valencia, Barcelona and Castellon.

Table 2. Moroccan and Algerian women by autonomous community.

Autonomous Community	Moroccan Women	Algerian Women
Catalonia	94,424	3133
Andalusia	55,717	1521
Madrid	34,181	808
Community of Valencia	32,681	9279
Murcia	31,997	837
Total	328,872	22,893

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Ongoing Population Register, 1 January, 2018. National Institute of Statistics.

A second sociodemographic group comprises Muslim women with Spanish nationality with family origins in Morocco who either live in Ceuta and Melilla or who emigrated from those cities to other parts of Spain (Salguero Montaño 2018). Finally, a third group is made of up neo-Muslims, women who converted to Islam from another faith. Conversion to Islam is not a uniquely Spanish phenomenon, although it does have some specific characteristics related to Spain's historic past. While some authors have attributed these conversions to a fascination with the exoticism of Islam sparked by journeys to the East or an attraction to the literature, ancient history and archaeology, mysticism or other spiritual concerns (Kepel 1991), in southern Spain, conversion processes have had their own specific dynamics (Planet Contreras 2018). In short, Islam in Spain is quite diverse, a diversity reflected in the fieldwork study on Muslim female teachers.

3. The Fieldwork and a Profile of Female Teachers in Spanish Mosques

The early phase of the fieldwork was based on prior knowledge about the dynamics found in several mosques in the city of Alicante, where a number of women met regularly in groups to recite the Qur'an and learn or perfect their Arabic, both as teachers and students. After a period spent working on the ground in social intervention¹, it became clear that (a) these groups varied in number and composition over time; and (b) there was a resurgence of Islamic spirituality and growing enthusiasm about studying Islam among immigrant women in Alicante, observations that inspired this study. The question then arose: could this voluntary, individual search for religious knowledge in groups organized by educational need and levels, schedule flexibility and commitment be found in Islamic centers and mosques in other places? Given the impossibility of doing a multi-sited ethnography in different Islamic centers, the decision was made to use a questionnaire to discover more about who these women were, the work being done by the teachers, their interests and the specific characteristics of their labor, to then extrapolate from the local to the rest of Spain to the extent possible.

With the invaluable assistance of some of the leaders of the Alicante Islamic Cultural Centre, the first group meetings with some of the educators working at their headquarters were arranged. Through its 'Arab School' program, the Alicante centre teaches Arabic and Islamic education to more than 400 girls and boys, mainly in intensive Saturday classes. The female staff in charge of educating these young people is also partly responsible for educating female Muslim students. The fieldwork began with eight interviews with women in Alicante who, in turn, provided snowball or chain referral

¹ Since 2005, I have coordinated assistance services for the immigrant population and my contact with Muslim women, largely from North Africa, has been constant since then.

contacts² for other interviewees, for a total of 36 interviews. The Alicante ‘sisters’³ maintain close relationships with the women on the governing board of the Valencia Islamic Cultural Centre and its teachers, where new contacts were made on the occasion of the 14th An-Noor Association’s Muslim Women’s Meeting⁴. The Valencia sisters provided additional interviewees and contact information for some neo-Muslim women teaching in Islamic centers across Spain. The final group of interviewees came thanks to the president of an Islamic community in northern Spain and his wife, a convert to Islam and teacher there. In the end, it was possible to interview female teachers from across the country⁵.

An analysis of the data based on geographic origin and the interviews with the women made it natural to divide them into three groups according to the general profile of Spanish Muslims: Muslim immigrant women, Spanish-born Muslims and converts to Islam. Of the 36 interviews done, 18 belonged to the third category of neo-Muslims or women ‘who have returned to or embraced Islam’⁶ By nationality, the 36 interviewees can be disaggregated into seven Algerians, six Moroccans and one each from Syria, Palestine and Tunisia for a total of 16 women from Arab countries and 20 Spanish nationals, of whom three were from Moroccan families in Ceuta or Melilla. In terms of age, most of the women were older than 40, with only three between 30 and 35 years old, three between 35 and 40, 15 between 40 and 45 years old, 10 between 45 and 55 and 5 participants older than 55.

The fieldwork showed that the experience in Alicante was not an isolated, local case, but could be applied to the country as a whole. Immigrant Muslim women, Spanish women born abroad and neo-Muslims form a very heterogeneous group involved in several types of activities related to finding and transmitting knowledge, thus constituting a kind of informal Islamic female pedagogical movement. These educated women with diverse origins and social backgrounds share a common objective to teach their faith that brings them together as teachers imparting Islam at national level in Spanish Islamic centers.

Some of the immigrant educators have higher and university degrees in many fields, from the Islamic sciences to scientific branches like mathematics, biology and chemistry, and social and humanities branches such as translation and interpretation. Other immigrant educators did secondary school studies in their country of origin and learned more about Islam in Spain, attending classes with their teaching colleagues, through online platforms or courses organized by mosques and federated associations. Despite all of their studies, these women define themselves as self-taught and had different initial reasons for going into education. All agree, however, on the search for spirituality and personal curiosity.

The group of neo-Muslim educators includes women who converted to Islam more than 15 or 20 years ago, who are educated and work in knowledge transmission. Many of them have higher university degrees, including doctorates, speak several languages, work or have worked in the liberal professions and form part of the bureaucratic, leadership, social or administrative apparatus of an Islamic centre. Several of the neo-Muslim women have prior experience with Catholicism as teachers at religious schools, catechists and volunteers for church activities. Some of the interviewees in this group do not speak fluent Arabic, although others have a high level, but all have significant knowledge of the doctrinal bases of Islam, as seen in their extensive careers as teachers, as well as in their experience creating materials both

² This qualitative research method consists of contacting initial participants who introduced the researcher to new potential interviewees, who then introduced other prospects via natural social networks.

³ The Arabic term *ujt* is used both in Spanish (*hermana*) and Arabic between the participants to refer to themselves and indicates a certain degree of trust, friendship and affection.

⁴ ‘Asociación de Mujeres Musulmanas an-Nur’ at www.proyectoigual.wordpress.com/2016/03/04/asociacion-de-mujeres-musulmanas-an-nur/, accessed on 4 March 2017.

⁵ Community of Valencia (Alicante, Valencia and Castellon), Murcia, Andalusia (Cordoba, Malaga and Granada), Castile and Leon (Avila), Navarre (Pamplona and Tudela), Basque Country (Bilbao, Vitoria), Aragon (Zaragoza), La Rioja (Logroño), the Balearic Islands (Palma de Mallorca), Madrid and Castile-La Mancha (Guadalajara).

⁶ These expressions are used to self-depict the interviewed women who were born and raised to some extent in the Catholic religion and decided to convert to Islam.

for their own edification and for teaching others. For the most part, the neo-Muslim teachers work in cultural centers organized and frequented by immigrant Muslims.

4. The Concept of ‘ilm, or Islamic Knowledge, among Female Educators

In their book, *Van Bruinessen and Allievi (2013)* analyze how Islamic knowledge is produced and transmitted in the European context. The process does not only involve religious specialists and intellectuals with academic authority or authority figures supported or produced by the organizations, federations and commissions that institutionalize European Islam, but also the transmission and production of Islamic knowledge in which ‘ordinary’ Muslim women and men participate, not always with the support of the first group. According to these authors, the context where Islamic knowledge is produced and reproduced is extremely important in the process of its creation and in the specific ways in which the knowledge emerges. Indeed, even those who reject any source of religious authority other than the Qur’an as the sacred text and the hadiths, or sayings of the Prophet, approach these sources with specific questions about the society in which they live.

The topics currently being debated in the search for answers in the European context reflect the political and social processes affecting the Muslims who live on the continent: How do second- and third-generation Muslim immigrants acquire Islamic knowledge? How do they approach, search for and/or find their professors/role models/moderators and in what spaces? Above all, what type of knowledge are they requesting and acquiring? How does it extend to their lives as Muslims in Europe or European Muslims⁷ or in their ‘Muslimness’ (*Télez Delgado 2011*)? What practices and interpretations are addressed? One clear question underlies all of above: what knowledge, or ‘ilm, and what learning can provide the answer?

This research project tries to answer the final question. The quest to clarify how ‘ilm is understood has brought a variety of definitions to the table, from the individual to the group, from ‘orthodox and codified’ definitions to purely personal ones. In many cases, the response contains a generalized conception of ‘ilm as ‘life knowledge’, without any specifically religious or dogmatic content. As the question seemed difficult for the interviewees to understand, with many of the participants referring to the generic meaning of knowledge as *maarif*, it was rephrased with more detail. After the confusion was cleared up, the responses varied between religious ‘ilm, ‘ilm shari and ‘ilm dini, which was specified as life knowledge⁸.

After analyzing the responses given by the interviewees, it was clear that some corresponded to a more codified, theoretical meaning of ‘ilm, perhaps more in accord with the orthodox definitions found in terminological dictionaries (*Gómez García 2009*), while others described a broader philosophical meaning such as ‘the meaning of life’ or ‘Islam as a whole’, as seen in the following response:

“ilm is everything. It is impossible to live without ‘ilm. As you teach, you learn. Iqra, in Arabic means read, learn, and that is why it means everything for Muslims. The ‘ilm of life and languages. Then there’s the Qur’an, the first source. Not everything is understood. The tafsir helps us and the sunnah. Everything in life is bound together’. (Interview 14)

Less stringent interpretations mixed the two definitions, while others understood that ‘ilm exclusively refers to the search for knowledge through the Islamic sciences and other interviewees questioned this understanding or simply conceived of ‘ilm and the search for it more individually. In this line, as a personal and individual approach to knowledge, we find the following answers:

⁷ A term used by Tariq Ramadan to refer to second or third-generation immigrants who, in some cases, have been nationalized and/or born in Europe. ‘¿Es Tariq Ramadan un musulmán europeo, un intelectual iluminado que busca definir un modelo musulmán original, adaptado a Occidente?’ in www.webislam.com/articulos/18522es_tariq_ramadan_un_musulman_europeo_un_intelectual_iluminado_que_busca_definir, accessed on 4 March 2017.

⁸ Conversations with University of Alicante Prof Khaled Omran have helped to make this distinction clear. Moreover, his advice regarding the concordance of Arabic and Spanish religious terms was essential for the interviewees’ understanding of the questionnaire.

'I can read a chapter today and tomorrow it says something else to me. The Qur'an parallels my life. The sunnah exists, but the Qur'an is enough for me. I didn't feel this way before I read. Now I think that [the schools] are a human interpretation, so I go back to the Qur'an because the Qur'an makes things easy for me; it makes the path to knowledge easier, more than a sheikh-spiritual leader- or a school, which put up barriers'. (Interview 23)

'In terms of religious knowledge, I think that reading the Qur'an is essential and every reading renews the interpretation according to the context. The interpretation is first and foremost for me. I think that there shouldn't be any intermediaries. Every experience with God is intimate. As a community we must understand that there are no hierarchies, political or intellectual. Opinions should not be deified. Leaders and political hierarchies should be done away with. 'ilm is personal knowledge. Discovering yourself every day is the greatest knowledge. I used to study more, but now reading the Qur'an is enough for me'. (Interview 16)

On the other hand, the most common responses contain what could be seen as a more theoretical view of religious knowledge.

'It is Islamic knowledge. It is knowledge about legislation and Islamic law, sharia'. (Interview 18)

'Islamic knowledge refers to all the areas where a Muslim should be well informed. This includes knowing the life and sayings of the Prophet (sunnah), the elements of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), the hadiths (sayings and acts of the Prophet) and the Qur'an (memorization and tafsir, exegesis or interpretation)'. (Interview 25)

'With regard to knowledge, I understand that the Qur'an gives me a constant source of reflexion. I accept this because there are reasons. There's coherence. You're not passive with Islam. There's no dogma. I, freely, search for balance. I have a searching attitude, open to knowledge. And reflection. A positive attitude, so that I can keep on receiving knowledge on the way back'. (Interview 17)

'For me, knowledge is in the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Prophet, the books of the imams and some sheikhs. The most important thing is to look for modern imams -prayer leader who leads and give the sermon at the Mosques- and sheiks and to seek knowledge in questions. Everything that sheds light and knowledge in Islam forms the base. The answers to your questions. You have to put it into practice every day'. (Interview 13)

5. Educational Activities and Teaching Contents

The educational activity carried out by most of the women interviewed took place in a mosque. Mosques are not only the most visible Muslim institutions in Europe (Aubarell and Moreras 2005), but they also serve as centers where traditional Islamic teachings are studied, promoted and disseminated, alongside classes adapted to the needs of neo-Muslims, as this research project confirmed. The professors interviewed observed that the largest classes were usually made up of Muslim immigrant women from North Africa and, to a lesser extent, Muslim women whose mother tongue was not Arabic, from countries such as Senegal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, who could nonetheless recite the Qur'an. The groups were arranged according to the students' levels and schedules, and they went to the mosque to learn more about their religion of origin. However, these voluntary halaqas, or study circles, also included a smaller number of neo-Muslims learning Arabic by memorizing the surahs of the Qur'an. The female teachers were responsible for imparting traditional Islamic manners and encouraging study among the new believers who wished to embrace Islam. Although almost all of the teachers interviewed were associated with a mosque or Islamic association, a small group of five women used social networks and study groups created through personal contacts outside the mosques. Of these five women, two gave

classes for women seeking information about Islam in order to convert, who made contact through the caminoalislam website administrator⁹.

In this cultural context, the interviewees worked in several educational areas, including classic education in accordance with the teachings of Islam as taught in the rest of the Islamic world today (Hefner and Zaman 2010), with memorization and recitation of the Qur'an. Other groups focused on the basic foundations of the religion with an up-to-date focus and classes in Spanish. Several interviewees explained that they often combined traditional and practical education and that a lack of Arabic language skills did not impede a deeper knowledge of Islam.

The materials used by the teachers in their classes included, primarily, the Qur'an and other methods for learning Arabic using the sacred texts of Islam, as well as the classic compilations of the hadiths and Qur'anic exegesis, or tafsir. However, some teachers, as in the following fragments, disagree on the usefulness of the memorization of the Qur'an by its students and, therefore, in the use of the traditional forms of transmission of the Sacred Text.

'In the classes, all the Islamic concepts are important and should be learned, but I stress the teachings from the life of the Prophet, his examples and, above all, not focusing on Islam as halal, or lawful, and haram, or forbidden. It often seems that the only important thing to know about religion is what you can or cannot do, forgetting the blessings and compensations that come from getting close to Allah, both on Earth and in the hereafter. Above all, Islam teaches us to live in harmony with creation and when you live in this harmony, everything flows around you, everything finds its place and you acquire wisdom that is only within the reach of those who want to see, learn and listen'. (Interview 25)

'If you teach religion to Arabs, you have to know the terms, understand the terminology perfectly. The Qur'an uses a very high level. There are words that are used carefully. Knowledge helps you know what to say and what not to say, the context. Intelligence. Just memorizing the Qur'an and reading it without understanding it isn't going to get you anywhere. Islam doesn't need that type of Muslim. As children, we are taught to memorize the Qur'an without knowing what it says. But later, it's the behaviour that counts. The Prophet knew nothing of his religion. 'Ina al din al muamalla' means that religion is respect, manners; that is religion. There is no obligation at all to learn the Qur'an by heart'. (Interview 8)

'I teach the Qur'an. At first, I teach other women beginning Arabic, the Arabic alphabet, for two years. Now, young people are becoming interested in the Qur'an and the sunnah, as well as tarteel, how to read the Qur'an properly. I myself study it with them. The classes are held every Sunday and the group has 6 women in it'. (Interview 20)

'There are 10–12 women who aren't Arabic (from Brazil, Bulgaria, Spain), who are learning Arabic with me. We meet every Sunday, first to study Arabic and religion in Spanish and then we recite the Qur'an in a halaqa [study circle] with another Moroccan teacher'. (Interview 12)

'The books I use and consult for my classes are the hadiths of al-Bukhari for examples of daily life. These materials help me in my classes and my daily life. The book by al-Bukhari and the life of the Prophet. The tafsir that I use is Tafsir Ibn Kathir. The commentators I know are all men. I usually read from different types of tafsirs, like those by the imams al-Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir, Sayyid Qutb, al-Mawdudi and the commentary on the Qur'an by Muhammad Asad'. (Interview 15)

⁹ (Convertirse al Islam 2017).

Some educational experiences that were designed, programmed and instituted by Valencia Islamic Cultural Centre President Abdelaziz Hammaoui¹⁰ have been replicated around Spain by former students, currently teachers. The first program, 'The Training and Education of Young Muslims', was devised, according to Hammaoui, 'so that students can expand their knowledge about the different branches of the Islamic sciences, in addition to teaching them social, associative and leadership skills, offering information about the progress of Islam in Europe and Spain and encouraging Muslim youths to work to normalize Islam, integrate the Muslim community in Spain and involve themselves in the development of Spanish society'. The second of Hammaoui's educational programs, the Dar al-Arqam School¹¹, is based on learning the Islamic sciences as well, but also seeks to inculcate three fundamental ideas in its members: growth, brotherhood and involvement. With the same course of study as the original program, the school now operates in the Basque Country, Mallorca and Navarre.

6. Authority and Gender in Islamic Education

Studies by [Bano and Kalmbach \(2011\)](#) and [Van Bruinessen and Allievi \(2013\)](#) discuss the different pedagogical movements involved in the transmission of Islamic knowledge in non-Islamic contexts. As Bano and Kalmbach observe, the relative decentralization of Islamic leadership structures presents both opportunities and challenges for women seeking religious authority. The lack of a sole model in this field, particularly in the Sufi context, has broadened the possibilities of creating alternative paths to authority and, subsequently, potentially expanded the emergence of new types of Islamic leadership in the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, this decentralization has heightened the importance of being seen as a highly qualified authority legitimized by other religious leaders, students and the public in general, something often based on apparent conformity with the status quo. As a result, according to the cases analyzed by [Bano and Kalmbach \(2011\)](#), female Islamic leaders are expected to adjust to the teachings of male authorities, behave and be seen differently from men in public, and limit their teaching and preaching to women. They are also often excluded from the formal and informal organizations that supervise religious education and institutional administration. Central religious spaces like mosques and madrassas and the leadership positions affiliated with them can be especially associated with maintaining the status quo. The different Islamic movements and educational activities designed by women for women operate in this contradictory context, dealing with these dynamics and constructs, participating in what can be subversive circumstances, and developing alternative roles, platforms, spaces and networks to circumvent the limitations of official religious positions and formal spaces of transmission.

In her book on female Islamic education movements, [Bano \(2017\)](#) discusses the creation and disperse nature of Islamic knowledge in education observed in ethnographic work in the diverse contexts of Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria. She dates the creation of these movements back to the 1970s and challenges the restricted conception of female agency associated with them, exploring the educational networks that have attracted educated, professional and culturally progressive women to the textual study of Islamic knowledge, helping to reverse this idea.

Following [Eickelman \(2015\)](#), this fieldwork project on female Muslim teachers in Spain set out to identify a category of women described as 'possible religious authorities' by their community, students and/or leaders of the centers where they teach. To that end, the study asked the interviewees whether

¹⁰ Information provided by Abdelaziz Hammaoui in an interview, May 2017. In addition to his post as president of the Valencia Islamic Cultural Centre for many years, Hammaoui is a technical engineer in telecommunications, with a degree in Islamic Sciences from Ouzai University in Lebanon. He has a Master's degree in coaching and talent management and is currently a student in Sociology at the National University of Distance Education.

¹¹ Dar al-Arqam means the House of al-Arqam. At the age of 16, al-Arqam ibn-abil-Arqam was one of the first converts to Islam. Arqam offered his house in Mecca to the Prophet as a safe space to meet and learn about Islam at a time when both the Prophet and his followers were being persecuted. Information from materials provided by Abdelaziz Hammaoui for this study.

knowing their religion well could give them authority as a *mualima*, or teacher, in their communities, what person or people proposed that they become teachers and if they thought that having academic education or certifications legitimized or reinforced the figure of the *mualima*, as occurs with men in Muslim societies who are *ulema*, religious authorities or role models. Participants were then asked about the degree of leadership involved in educational activities, which were often *pro bono*, and in their dedication to knowledge transmission.

Perhaps due to modesty or humility, none of the interviewees indicated that they saw themselves as authorities in their field. Rather, they attributed the ambition to teach to their peers, downplaying their knowledge and placing more importance on their attitude, love of Islam and 'heart-felt approach to teaching the beauty of the message'¹² when it came to being considered models. Their desire to volunteer and gratitude towards the other 'sisters' and leaders at the centers where they worked appeared in all of the interviews. Although the participants did not define themselves as authorities or reach a consensus about whether a solid education was an essential prerequisite for this generation of teachers, they did mention how they were legitimized and authorized by their community in the exercise of this 'noble activity'. For example, this extract demonstrates how one of the interviewees felt legitimized as a teacher:

'They call me that because of the years that I've been teaching, although I educated myself. I began learning my religion by listening, when I came to Spain, to Madrid 22 years ago now, to audios of imams who practice *da'wah*. With affection and love, I explain the life of the Prophet to converts and other Muslim women who are not very schooled in the tales and stories needed to understand the *Qur'an*'. (Interview 1)

In another account, the interviewee recognized herself as an *ulema*, in other words, a person with substantial religious knowledge:

'We *ulama* [they refer to themselves as *ulama*] say that Muslims have to learn everything. Example: if we're going to a town and there's no doctor, one of us, the Muslim, has to learn this. Knowing everything is compulsory. But *sharia* comes first, because according to a hadith from the Prophet, 'whoever travels a path in search of knowledge, Allah will make easy for him a path to Paradise'. Whoever teaches and whoever learns will be compensated. The explanation for this hadith says that there is '*ilm*, inner and outer knowledge. Outer knowledge is that of books and inner, the 'fear of Allah'. There must be a balance and a relationship between these '*ilm*' for a person to be 'someone'. (Interview 7)

In some cases, the women feel legitimized as teachers because they have been asked about certain topics, they were offered them or they themselves have proposed new courses, workshops, conferences or debates, even though their work is charitable and done for the common good:

'It's true that knowledge positions you and gives you recognition, but there is much more to be done. We need more prepared people and one of the disadvantages of the education courses offered is that they are for people who speak Arabic, so Spanish Muslims can't get an education this way''. (Interview 25)

In the interviews, the names of some women came up as female models in Spain today. Indeed, it appears that within the field of Islamic knowledge transmission, in addition to a category of potential 'education authorities' defined by local experiences, there are also several generations of Muslim women in Spain, both immigrants and neo-Muslims, who have left a special imprint on female Muslim erudition. Throughout the fieldwork, women were mentioned who hold positions of some importance in Islamic organizations in the country, whether as presidents of cultural centers and

¹² Expression used by the first interviewee at the Alicante Cultural Centre.

directors of institutions, like Isabel Romero, or activists like Natalia Andújar. Women also lead several Islamic associations and centers across the country, such as the Islamic Levantine Cultural Association, the Valencia Islamic Cultural Centre, the An-Noor Association in Valencia, the Islamic Board of Spain and the Bidaya Association in the Basque Country, to name but a few.

7. Conclusions

On the whole, the presence of Muslim women both in Islamic knowledge transmission and education centers and also working among activists leading Islamic organizations and cultural and social associations is still in its infancy in Europe. According to [Cesari \(2004\)](#), with the exception of the United States since 2000, Muslim women are still left out of positions of leadership in Islamic institutions in the West. The fieldwork done in Spain confirms that access to positions of leadership in Europe is difficult, though not impossible. Indeed, some Muslim women with public careers in Islamic feminism, such as Malika Hamidi and Saida Kada in France, have begun to attract attention, leading non-profit associations in initiatives clearly related to religious activism.

Educational activity done by and for women in Spanish mosques—an area also studied at the European level ([Ali 2012](#); [Aubarell and Moreras 2005](#); [Dominguez Diaz 2014](#); [Jonker 2003](#))—can be interpreted as a revitalization of religious dynamics ([Moreras 1999](#)), as processes of re-Islamization ([Cesari 1999](#)) or as a step towards new positions for Muslim women within their communities. However, as the interviewees themselves observed, there is no revitalization or re-Islamization in their actions, because ‘we never stopped believing and practicing’, suggesting that, as [Van Bruinessen and Allievi \(2013\)](#) have argued, this educational activity should simply be understood as an active search for Islamic knowledge in a non-Islamic European context ([Lems 2016](#)).

This project did not set out to categorize or classify the interviewees, their opinions or their worldviews. Neither was the aim to examine either the ways of conveying Muslimness or the degree of religious observance, to avoid contributing to the fossilization of Islam as a monolithic whole that unifies its believers. Casting a light on the educational activities carried out by a large group of female teachers imparting Islam in Spanish mosques also draws attention to the growing number of students requesting this teaching and training. At this time, the activities studied in the fieldwork project are, for the most part, being performed by immigrant Muslim women with the participation of neo-Muslims.

These female teachers, who were not active in the field of Islamic education in their countries of origin, work in a European context, gaining greater prominence and a degree of legitimacy among their colleagues. As they modestly recognize, they have succeeded in establishing themselves as legitimate educational authorities thanks to their level of Islamic knowledge, their wisdom, their gifts and their aptitude for teaching. As a result, they have become the examples of educated women in their community. The women in this study play a traditional female role in Islamic Arab culture in religious education and training [Pérez Mateo \(2015, 2018\)](#), and they themselves have been educated for that role, going to conferences, taking classes and receiving accreditation, or *ijazat*, for memorizing and acquiring new readings of the Qur’an.

Despite the work they do, these female educators are not necessarily known to the public outside of their classrooms and private circles, and they should not, therefore, be considered leaders on either a bureaucratic or community level, to borrow terminology from [Cesari \(2004\)](#). Indeed, they define themselves as women with some talent for teaching, ‘sisters’ admired by their peers, in charge of transmitting Islamic morality and practices in Spain and, possibly, Europe. The goal of their work, they say, is to fight ignorance, to search for and transmit the knowledge that is the individual duty of all Muslims, male and female, to be familiar with, as expressed by one interviewee:

‘as Muslim women, we don’t have to know everything, but we do need to know something from every field. We have to search for knowledge as the duty of every Muslim man and woman’. (Interview 2)

One fact, however, was stressed: this fight against ignorance is fundamentally aimed at women:

‘Islam places a lot of importance on women. Women have to know their value, they have to love and raise their children well in order to reach the goal. The goal is for Allah to be happy with them. Women must know their mission and you can know what it is, this mission, by how the Prophet treated his wives. Every time the Prophet went to battle, he drew the name of a woman to go with him. There is a very important, quite long surah that talks about this: Surat an-Nisa’. (Interview 1)

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