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King Mohammed VI and the Politics of Inclusion: The Gendered Dimensions of Religious Reform in Contemporary Morocco

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Abstract

Since King Mohammed VI came to power in 1999, he has adopted a comprehensive gender-sensitive policy to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in Morocco. Due to his dual role as both a political and religious leader, the monarch has played a crucial part in ensuring adequate consensus and overcoming polarization around the issue of advancing women's status in the Kingdom. In the religious sphere, women have consolidated their positioning, notably after the Casablanca bombings on May 16, 2003. The events triggered a significant feminization strategy, which has granted women access to diverse religious positions. This strategy has contributed to fostering the position of Moroccan women in religious institutions and involved them in the fight against extremism. This article uses qualitative content analysis of a sample of royal speeches, letters, and Sharifian Decrees to examine the official gender policy in the religious domain. This analysis provides a backdrop for investigating five major gender-driven initiatives in the religious field: inviting women scholars to speak before the king during the Hassania Lecture Series in the month of Ramadan, appointing women scholars to various institutions of religious scholarship, initiating the training of female religious professionals, supporting female public recitation of the Quran, and allowing women to access the notary profession. Data analysis reveals that the king's religious and political leadership and his oversight of gender-sensitive reform have facilitated the inclusion of women in the religious realm, despite its historically male-dominated nature.

Keywords

Gender-sensitive policy, King Mohammed VI, Religious sphere, Royal speeches and letters, Sharifian Decrees, Qualitative content analysis

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1. Introduction

The Moroccan Monarchy, deeply entrenched in the nation's history and socio-political fabric, serves as a linchpin of political stability, cultural identity, and diplomatic influence. Because the king holds significant executive, legislative, and religious authority, he acts as a unifying figure. Article 19 of the 1962 constitution was the first constitutional recognition of *Imarat al-Muminin*, Commandership of the Faithful, in Morocco, granting the monarch leadership status within the official religious sector. In addition to this constitutional legitimacy, the Moroccan Monarchy also derives its legitimacy from the king's lineage to the Prophet Mohammed (Toufiq, 2022, p. 176). This twofold legitimacy consolidates the king's monopoly within the religious sphere and beyond (see Hamzaoui, 2008), thus granting him the prerogative to initiate grand-scale and strategic policies in the country, especially within the religious field.

Advancing women's status in Muslim-majority countries, such as Morocco, is often complicated by deeply rooted cultural, religious, and societal norms that shape gender roles. Additionally, the interpretation of Islam's foundational texts and the political dynamics in these countries can create tensions between fulfilling progress and maintaining perceived religious and cultural authenticity (see Dieste, 2009). Advancing gender-sensitive reforms, notably within the religious realm, requires the effective contribution of official religious institutions, especially the Supreme Council of Ulema, to provide hermeneutical support for women's involvement in the religious sector and allow them to perform religious duties. As both a political and religious leader, the king plays a significant role in mediating reformist efforts and alleviating profound polarization around gender reforms.

Analyzing royal speeches, letters, and Sharifian Decrees is crucial for exploring the king's policy across various domains, including the advancement of women's status in the country. This is particularly important because these documents provide context for examining how royal policy is implemented on the ground. Royal speeches often articulate the monarch's vision and policies in diverse areas. They provide a platform for the king to express his stance on significant issues, notably Morocco's national integrity, socioeconomic progress, and political reform (see Mohammed VI, 2019). They also celebrate national identity, historic events, and cultural milestones (see Mohammed VI, 2019). Royal speeches frequently address current events and challenges, serving as a means to connect with citizens and demonstrate awareness of their concerns.

Royal letters serve a variety of important functions within the context of the Moroccan Monarchy. They are used for formal communication between the monarchy and government officials, other monarchies, heads of state, and institutions (see Mohammed VI, 2019). They convey decisions and directives, ensuring that important information is communicated clearly and officially. They inform the public and relevant parties about upcoming cultural or historical events. Royal letters can also serve as a means of engaging with the public on various issues. They may address national concerns, promote charitable causes, or encourage community involvement, fostering a connection between the monarchy and its citizens. Furthermore, royal letters document important decisions, events, and communications that provide insights into the political and social context of a particular era.

Sharifian Decrees, also known as *Dahirs*, are official proclamations or orders issued by the Sharif of Morocco (Buskens, 2010) and hold significant authority in Morocco. They can introduce new laws, amend existing ones, or provide legal clarification on various matters affecting governance, society, and culture (Buskens, 2010). *Dahirs* play a crucial role in the country's administration as they can establish or modify administrative structures, outline governmental procedures, and delegate responsibilities to various officials or ministries. Given the Sharif's position as a religious leader, Sharifian Decrees can promote Islamic values, regulate religious practices, and support initiatives that align with Morocco's cultural heritage.

2. Data Collection and Analysis

This article examines Morocco's gender policy within the religious sphere through a qualitative content analysis of a selection of royal speeches, letters, and Sharifian Decrees. Given the king's status as both a religious and political leader, these documents convey his vision for reform and provide a backdrop for examining the implementation of empowering policies for women in practice. This analysis included a sample of 25 royal speeches, 11 letters, and 10 Sharifian Decrees produced between 1999 and 2019. To select the relevant texts, I created a timeline of the major gender-driven decisions and policies during King Mohammed VI's reign. This initial procedure aimed to track the most significant events that have shaped Morocco's official gender policy, guide the selection of the royal speeches, letters, and Sharifian Decrees pertinent to exploring the issue at hand, and offer context for analyzing these texts

(Krippendorff, 2004, p. 87). Collectively, these steps established a methodological framework for a contextualized analysis of the articulation and evolution of Morocco's official gender policy in the religious sphere.

After selecting the relevant texts and printing them out, I scanned them to identify the relevant passages and highlight them. Following this, I conducted topic coding to assign headings and captions to the chosen passages (Richards, 2009, p. 92). To deepen my familiarity with these passages, I reread them several times over an extended period to analyze their meanings and the relationships between them. This process helped draw inferences about the most relevant passages to the research questions and objectives.

Gaining intimate familiarity with data, or 'feeling' the data, and building strong connections with their threads, convergences, and divergences were essential to extracting the dominant themes and deepening my understanding of their significance. I achieved this familiarity by consistently revisiting data throughout the analysis process and at various time intervals. This recursive process occurred during the data analysis procedure (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 194). My developing familiarity with the categories and subcategories enhanced my intuitive judgment regarding the value and relevance of the emerging themes. It also helped solidify my understanding of the datasets and determine their relevance to the research questions and objectives.

In this phase, I focused on the diction the king used to address the issue of women's integration within the religious sphere. In other words, does the king articulate women's integration into the official religious sphere through the vocabulary of 'equality', 'justice', 'equity', and 'empowerment', or through the diction of 'complementarity' and 'difference'? This semantic analysis was significant because of the king's dual leadership. On the one hand, his religious leadership holds him responsible for upholding religious precepts; on the other hand, his political leadership requires him to oversee the advancement of women's status in the country, given its significance to the nation's development strategy. The emergent categories and subcategories were then organized into tables to identify overarching patterns and create meaningful clusters.

After concluding this phase, I returned to the selected passages to conduct analytic coding. This process involved an in-depth analysis of the emergent categories and subcategories, along with a critical reflection on their analytic significance. In this phase, meanings were contextualized within the settings in which the passages had been produced. Analytic coding was guided by the question: "Why am I interested in that?" (Richards, 2009, p. 94). In other words, I was examining the reasons why those passages were relevant to the research questions and objectives. To establish this relevance, I focused on two questions. First, what triggered the full-scale feminization of the official religious sphere? Second, was this women-empowering strategy informed by the same discursive backdrop as Morocco's broader gender policy? To address these two questions, the selected passages were woven into their corresponding contexts and compared to gain insights into the king's gender policy within the religious sphere.

In the final phase of data analysis, I moved to the question, "What's then?" In other words, what do the emergent themes mean in relation to the state's gender-driven policy within the official religious sphere? After stepping back from the data, a bigger picture emerged, allowing the data to fall into place and make sense (Richards, 2009, p. 163). At this stage, I retained only the datasets most relevant to the research questions and objectives. This final stage of analysis was not just about selecting relevant data but also about attaining a deeper understanding of how the themes coalesced into a narrative about the king's close involvement in consolidating women's positioning within the Moroccan official religious sphere.

3. Integrating Women into the Post-5/16 Religious Policy

On May 16, 2003, several terrorist attacks rocked Casablanca, the economic capital of Morocco. Soon afterward, the regime launched a multi-faceted policy aimed at uprooting extremism. Besides its security-driven dimension, which primarily involved the adoption of the Terrorism Act (No. 03.03) to enhance national security and counter terrorist threats (Ministry of Justice, 2003), this strategy also involved reinforcing a unified and pacifist religious discourse and ensuring its dissemination across official media and institutions. This discourse is founded on the fusion of four religious constants: *Ach'ari* faith, Sunni Sufism, Maliki rite, and *Imarat al-Muminin*, constituting what is commonly referred to as 'Moroccan Islam' (al-Rouki, 2014).

The Casablanca terrorist events triggered a comprehensive gender-sensitive policy within religious institutions (see Harrington, 2013; Ouchelh, 2024).¹ To showcase women's crucial role in Morocco's fight against extremism, Harrington (2013) includes a photo of two veiled Moroccan women walking past the Hassan II mosque, Casablanca's religious icon, accompanied by a caption that states: "Morocco has armed itself with a dramatically different weapon against terrorism – the power of Muslim women to quell violence before it happens" (para. 1). This statement underscores a far-reaching and symbolic shift in Morocco's counter-terrorism strategy, wherein a gender-driven approach is implemented not only as a tool of inclusion but also as a form of soft power against extremist ideologies. This approach reflects a deliberate state strategy to leverage gender as a vital component of its broader policy to counter radicalization and promote a moderate religious discourse.

Wainscott (2017) argues that women's integration into the religious sphere has been a part of Morocco's post-5/16 religious reform and the country's active engagement in the global 'War on Terror'. Although this policy was primarily driven by security concerns and aimed at reinforcing the state's control over the religious field, Wainscott (2017) contends that it has transcended the security domain and involved the introduction of reform policies in other areas, such as advancing gender policy. The post-5/16 hyper-security atmosphere created 'convenient' conditions for adopting a form of "political opportunism" (Wainscott, 2017, p. 2) that has consolidated the regime's hard power and enabled it to promote large-scale reform projects, particularly within the religious sphere.² Therefore, while boosting women's status within the religious sphere diverges from the security-driven measures that Morocco has implemented in its War on Terror, it bolsters the country's narrative as a "moderate country" (Wainscott, 2017, p. 157). Belhorma (2016) argues that elevating women's status in the religious sphere also reflects the broader gender dynamics within Muslim-majority contexts (p. 222) and aims to achieve gender equality across all fields (p. 225). Thus, reinforcing women's positioning within the religious sphere has become integral to Morocco's post-5/16 anti-extremism strategy and its multi-sectoral gender policy. By emphasizing women's preventative role within the religious sphere, the regime has reframed traditional narratives around security, suggesting that combating terrorism extends beyond security measures to include educational interventions that promote moderation and renewal of religious discourse and practice.

McKenzie (2020) examines the capacity of religious institutions to promote women's empowerment and the extent to which they converge with or diverge from Islamic feminism. She argues that the *murshidat* program, which was launched as part of the post-5/16 religious strategy, does not align with the goals and values of Islamic feminism but follows its own trajectory (McKenzie, 2020, p. 36; see also Borrillo, 2010, pp. 27-28). In this context, the *murshidat* are spiritual guides responsible for instilling piety and promoting Islamic morality in society rather than advocating for a gender-equalitarian discourse. According to McKenzie (2020), female religious guides do not challenge the patriarchal system as Islamic feminists do but are "working for and within it" (p. 22). However, despite not engaging in a hermeneutical project, which involves advancing a gender-informed reinterpretation of Islamic texts, notably the Quran and prophetic tradition, the *murshidat* still exert "symbolic power" (McKenzie, 2020, pp. 26-27) in the community because their visibility within a male-dominated sphere, especially in the mosque, represents a significant breakthrough in women's pursuit of a stronger positioning in the religious realm.

Institutionalizing female religious activity has significant outcomes for women's status in the religious sphere. According to El Haitami (2012), the *murshidat* "are breaking ground for a new model of activism that disrupts conventional social and spatial dichotomies, as well as common stereotypes about Muslim women" (p. 228). They also embody and promote a "new model of activism" that aims to foster piety within the community (El Haitami, 2012, p. 233). Maritato (2015) argues that women's entry into religious bureaucracy has led to the "incremental de-privatization of female religious behaviors" (p. 438), which has removed female religious expressions from the private sphere and made them a public matter that is subject to state regulation (Hassan, 2011, p. 452). Moreover, fostering women's access to the public religious realm has paved the way for a serious and productive "reconsideration of female religious authority" within a historically male-dominated sphere (Maritato, 2015, p. 438).

¹ As of August 31, 2022, women comprised 34% of the total employees in the administration of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs (Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 2022).

² One major breakthrough that the regime achieved due to the Casablanca events was the reform of the Family Code in 2004. Prior to the 5/16 events, this reform project caused significant polarization between 'liberal' and 'conservative' forces, leading to the stagnation of the project (see Salime, 2011). The terrorist incidents created a favorable atmosphere for advancing the country's gender policy by diminishing the Islamist opposition vis-à-vis the liberal forces, which eventually led to the adoption of the new Family Code in February 2004.

There is a strong correlation between Morocco's anti-extremism policy and the promotion of women's empowerment within the religious sphere. The state has strategically integrated gender inclusion into its broader efforts to combat radical ideologies. Following the Casablanca bombings, Moroccan authorities recognized the need to reform religious discourse and restructure its religious institutions to promote a moderate, tolerant, and co-existent religious discourse and practice (Mohammed VI, 2019, Vol. 2, p. 197). Central to this reform was the significant inclusion of women into religious leadership roles, most notably through the training and deployment of female religious guides and the integration of women into the institutions of religious scholarship. These women are tasked with providing religious education, counseling, and community outreach, particularly among women and youth.

This research examines the role of King Mohammed VI in promoting gender-sensitive reforms within Morocco's religious sphere. It highlights how his dual role as both a political and religious leader has enabled him to navigate societal polarization and build consensus around women's empowerment. The study emphasizes the significance of the 5/16 Casablanca bombings as a catalyst for integrating women into religious institutions as part of Morocco's counter-extremism strategy. Through qualitative content analysis of a selection of royal speeches, letters, and Sharifian Decrees, the article explores how royal initiatives reflect a deliberate effort to incorporate gender reform into the post-5/16 restructuring of the religious sector.

4. King Mohammed VI and the 'Woman Question'

King Mohammed VI has expressed his commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in several of his speeches and letters (see, e.g., Mohammed VI, 2019, Vol. 1, pp. 41, 97-98, 101 & 144; Vol. 2, pp. 115, 193-195, 222-225 & 280; Vol. 3, pp. 329-330; Vol. 4, pp. 368-369; Vol. 5, pp. 401-403). Revisiting the 'woman question' in royal discourses demonstrates that this issue is integral to the king's reform policy and points to his oversight of women's inclusion in public affairs (see al-Uthmani & al-Musali, 2021). In his speech on August 20, 1999, the king stated:

How can one imagine achieving advancement and prosperity in society while women, who constitute nearly half of it, see their interests squandered without regard for the rights granted to them by the true religion, in which they are equal to men? [Enjoying these rights] aligns with their noble mission of treating them fairly in the face of injustice or violence to which they may be exposed, even though they have reached a level at which they compete with men, whether in the field of knowledge or work. (Mohammed VI, 2019, Vol. 1, p. 41)

This powerful statement underscores the inherent contradiction in aspiring to societal progress while marginalizing women, whose contributions are integral to progress and prosperity. By grounding his argument in religious principles that affirm women's equality and dignity, the king challenges prevailing social or institutional practices that undermine these rights and emphasizes that true progress must be inclusive and grounded in justice, particularly for those exposed to systemic injustice or marginalization. Moreover, the king's reference to women's academic and professional achievements highlights their proven capabilities in various domains. The statement, therefore, advocates for a gender-sensitive vision of progress that aligns religious values with human rights and gender equity.

In a letter to the First Forum of Moroccan Women of the World, held in Marrakech on December 19, 2008, King Mohammed VI stated:

This is an opportunity to reaffirm our strong commitment to making the advancement of women's rights a cornerstone in building a modern, democratic society and achieving the full citizenship we seek for all Moroccans, wherever they may be, and without discrimination or exception. (Mohammed VI, 2019, Vol. 3, p. 329)

This statement articulates a clear and progressive vision that regards advancing women's rights as fundamental to the construction of a modern and democratic society. By establishing gender equality as essential for the realization of full citizenship for all Moroccans, the king emphasizes that women's involvement in public affairs is crucial for the country's modernization efforts. Furthermore, the statement reflects an official acknowledgment that genuine democracy cannot be achieved without women's active participation in all areas of life. It also clearly conveys the state's commitment to inclusivity on the basis of equal rights as a universal standard.

The post-5/16 religious policy has triggered a full-scale feminization of religious institutions (see Ouchelh, 2024). Despite women's low numerical presence within terrorist groups and the fact that they typically perform nonmilitary roles (see Benslama & Khosrokhavar, 2017/2019; Grami & al-Arfawi, 2017), their integration into the counter-extremism strategy following the Casablanca terrorist events was significant. Two reasons can be provided to explain this gender-driven approach. First, women's roles within the religious sphere add qualitative value to the fight against extremism, especially as educators and spiritual guides (see Borrillo, 2010; El Haitami, 2012; Harrington, 2013; Ouchelh, 2024; Rausch, 2012). Second, boosting women's visibility in the traditionally male-dominated religious sphere advances the state's broader gender policy (see Wainscott, 2017). Therefore, it fosters a cohesive gender policy that spans all sectors and institutions and promotes Morocco's image as a country of tolerance and coexistence, especially given the transnational aspect of the fight against extremism.

Before the implementation of the counter-extremism policy in the religious sphere, women had been working within religious institutions, especially as mentors and preachers in local religious councils. However, because the state did not highlight their contributions, their work remained largely invisible to many people. As a pillar of Morocco's post-5/16 religious strategy, women's presence and contributions within the religious sphere are now strongly highlighted, primarily through boosting their numerical growth and showcasing their activities through official media. Today, women's status within official religious institutions is not only integral to the fight against extremism but also a 'marketing' strategy that Morocco has adopted to enhance its image worldwide.

5. Institutionalizing Female Religious Scholarship

In his speech on April 30, 2004, King Mohammed VI emphasized his commitment to promoting women's membership within the institutions of religious scholarship.³ The king stated, "We are committed to involving women scholars in local religious councils to ensure justice and place them on equal footing alongside their brothers" (Mohammed VI, 2019, Vol. 2, p. 280). Involving women scholars in the official religious field takes various forms, including their nomination for positions within the Supreme Council of Ulema and local religious councils, inviting them to public religious media to give lectures or respond to Moroccans' queries, and inviting them to participate in the Hassania Lecture Series during the month of Ramadan.



Figure 1

Rajaa Naji Mekkaoui delivering a lecture at the Royal Mosque Palace during the Hassania Ramadan Lecture Series in 2003

Note. A screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fl3BHRcd0XE>

The first major gender-driven leap within the official religious sphere occurred when King Mohammed VI invited Rajaa Naji Mekkaoui, a law professor at Mohammed V University in Rabat, to deliver a lecture at the Royal Palace

³ The institutions of religious scholarship refer primarily to the Supreme Council of Ulema, local religious councils, Dar al-Hadith al-Hassania, and al-Qarawiyyin University. These institutions play a central role in shaping and disseminating religious discourse in Morocco. They also serve as key institutions for training scholars, issuing religious opinions (fatwas), and ensuring that religious discourse aligns with Morocco's religious and political constants. In this respect, the concepts of 'Moroccan religiosity' and 'Moroccan Islam' have become integral to the post-5/16 religious strategy. Theoretically, 'Moroccan religiosity' and 'Moroccan Islam' represent a mode of religiosity that incorporate Islam into Morocco's geopolitical and historical specificity. In the context of the post-5/16 anti-extremism atmosphere, these two concepts have become carriers of the official interpretation and adaptation of religious texts to fit into the country's political strategies, including, but not limited to, fighting extremism. In this respect, Moroccan Islam is promoted as tolerant, open, moderate, peaceful, and coexistent (see, e.g., Mohammed VI, 2019, Vol. 1, p. 29 & Vol. 2, p. 119).

Mosque in 2003. This invitation was not merely symbolic but marked a profound shift in Morocco's religious and sociopolitical landscape. Traditionally, the Lectures were exclusively reserved for male religious scholars, making Mekkaoui's presence an exceptional break from their dominance. Her lecture, delivered before an audience of prominent figures and broadcast to the broader public, constituted a royal endorsement of her authority as a religious scholar. It served as both an acknowledgment of her academic and theological credentials and an assuring step toward institutionalizing women's roles within the official religious sphere. This act reflected King Mohammed VI's broader vision of promoting a more inclusive policy within the religious sphere, which aligned with his efforts to modernize Moroccan society while maintaining religious legitimacy.

This breakthrough was earned rather than bestowed, given that Mekkaoui's scholarly expertise and achievements had been remarkable even before the royal invitation. Mekkaoui had already built a reputable academic career as a pioneering researcher in the jurisprudence of organ transplants. Additionally, she had given lectures at several scientific conferences in Morocco and abroad (for more on Mekkaoui's intellectual journey, see [Al Jazeera Arabic, 2008](#)). This historic moment underscored the state's commitment to integrating qualified women into the religious sphere and set a precedent for acknowledging female scholarly authority within modern religious institutions.

Despite breaking a long-standing tradition of male exclusivity, Rajaa Naji Mekkaoui's participation in the Hassania Ramadan Lecture Series did not spark controversy. Mekkaoui clarified that, since it was a royal invitation (given the king's leadership in the religious domain), no one could contest it, at least publicly ([Al Jazeera Arabic, 2008, 32:00](#)). This further supports the idea that royal oversight of gender policy in Morocco and his uncontested religious leadership status have facilitated women's involvement in official religious policy.

Since Mekkaoui's lecture in 2003, the king has invited approximately 16 other women scholars to deliver lectures about various topics ([al-Uthmani & al-Musali, 2021, pp. 136-137](#)). These consistent invitations showcase the king's recognition of women's scholarly expertise and a call for them to contribute to the post-5/16 religious policy. They also consolidate women's religious leadership and enhance their visibility within the religious sphere. As the Hassania Lectures are broadcast on Morocco's official media, they present an opportunity for the state to highlight women's presence and contributions in this sector. In this regard, Sharifian Decree No. 1.03.300 states:

We have decided to restructure the Supreme Council of Ulema, which was placed under the direct supervision of our Majesty, to expand the network of regional religious councils, reorganize them, and extend the scope of their roles and specializations to ensure they can keep pace with the path of development and modernization, thereby fulfilling our aspiration to reform and change.

Recognizing what the Moroccan woman has achieved—by virtue of her scientific training, active participation in all fields, and fulfillment of all responsibilities, along with her qualifications deserving of consideration [as they] enable religious councils to open up to all social and religious matters affecting all citizens, both male and female—we have decided to include female religious scholars in these councils, honoring their contributions and trusting in their positive impact. ([Mohammed VI, 2004, para. 4 & 5](#))

In addition to inviting women to participate in the Hassania Lecture Series, Mohammed VI has granted them entry into the Supreme Council of Ulema and local religious councils. In 2004, Fatima al-Kabbaj, a graduate of al-Qarawiyyin University, was appointed to the Supreme Council of Ulema, making her the first woman to hold this position. In the following years, several other women have joined her. Promoting women's membership within institutions of religious scholarship, which have historically been male-dominated, reflects their growing pursuit of religious knowledge over the past two decades. In response to this interest, the state has strengthened women's presence in official religious institutions to make use of their expertise in its gender-inclusive strategy and post-5/16 religious strategy.

Enhancing women's status within religious institutions aims to strengthen the latter's connection with women, youth, and children, who have become primary targets in the post-5/16 religious strategy. This strategy rests on opening up to women and diverse age groups and reinforcing proximity to them ([Ouchelh, 2024, pp. 30-31](#)). In his letter to the participants at the First Encounter of *'Alimat* (Scholars), *Wa'idhat* (Preachers), and *Murshidat* (Religious Guides) in Skhirat in 2009, King Mohammed VI stated:

Amid extensive reforms in the religious sector, we emphasize the crucial role of women scholars and the various services that can enhance their programs. This is particularly relevant in the areas of improving family life and the women's sphere, enlightening the minds of girls, and fostering in them a love for their

country along with pride in its values and sanctities. We highlight a strong commitment to the tolerant values of Islam and its timeless principles. (Mohammed VI, Vol. 3, p. 392)

The king expressed his desire for the encounter to inspire a new generation of enlightened female scholars who are dedicated to authenticity and modernity while fostering the spiritual security of Moroccans (Mohammed VI, Vol. 3, p. 392). The letter positions the advancement of women's status in the religious sphere within Morocco's broader gender policy. Women scholars are expected to contribute to this policy, especially by promoting a gender-informed rereading of religious texts, making their contributions integral to the country's modernizing and developmental strategy. This strategy requires, among other things, enhancing women's visibility within various religious institutions and adopting a gender-sensitive approach to the renewal of religious discourse. Revisiting Islam's foundational texts is particularly significant when addressing issues such as gender-related legal reform, especially the Family Code, and promoting women's roles within the religious sphere.

In line with consolidating women's visibility within the institutions of religious scholarship, the regime is also engaging women in promoting a gender-sensitive hermeneutical project that aims to address the theoretical and jurisprudential exigencies of modern reality, notably women's evolving status in Muslim-majority contexts. A growing body of scholarly work has emerged to align the official religious discourse with the contemporary conceptualization of gender equality and women's empowerment. The Center for Feminine Studies in Islam (*Markaz al-Dirasat wa al-Buhouth fi al-Qadaya al-Nisa'ia fi al-Islam*), administratively affiliated with the Mohammedia League of the Moroccan Ulema (*al-Rabita al-Mohammedia li-Ulema' al-Maghreb*), serves as a research think tank that addresses the 'woman question in Islam' and examines how it can be approached in light of the current gender-driven dynamics in Morocco. According to its official webpage, the Center aims to:

- Review the Islamic heritage regarding women's issues and adopt a comprehensive approach to them in religious texts and everyday life;
- Fill the research gap on women's issues in Islam;
- Disseminate a calm and solid scholarly discourse on women's issues in Islam;
- Examine the liberal interpretations of the texts of Revelation and reformulate these interpretations according to the requirements of the religious constants;
- Uncover the confusion between the texts of Revelation and the understandings, applications, and jurists' *ijtihad* within the diverse historical realities and their various manifestations;
- Renew Islam's perspective on women within the framework of *ijtihad* across different Islamic jurisprudential schools;
- Address and assess ideas and concepts concerning the issue of women in light of social transformations;
- Highlight the cultural, historical, and social diversity of women in the Muslim world and strive to foster knowledge of this diversity in light of the requirements of Revelation. ([Markaz al-Dirasat wa al-Buhouth fi al-Qadaya al-Nisa'ia fi al-Islam, 2019](#))

These objectives underscore the Center's commitment to a gender-informed reevaluation of the contributions of past generations of Muslim scholars, taking into account contemporary understandings of gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as the increasing involvement of Muslim women in public life. The Center for Feminine Studies in Islam is crucial for bridging the gap between Morocco's commitment to advancing women's status, preserving its Islamic and cultural identity, and aligning religious institutions with the country's gender policy. It also fosters a dynamic and inclusive religious framework that upholds religious values and principles while evolving with current social and political realities, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy and relevance of religious discourse in contemporary society.

6. Female Religious Caretakers

In addition to promoting women's status in the institutions of religious scholarship, the state has increased the number of female religious caretakers in the country. Whereas women scholars engage in (re)interpreting religious texts and issuing fatwas on everyday matters, religious caretakers assume roles such as providing guidance, delivering lessons, and educating the public on fundamental religious and societal issues. Religious caretakers include *wa'idhat*, preachers, *mu'atirat*, mentors, and *murshidat*, religious guides. In contrast to *wa'idhat* and *mu'atirat*, who are appointed by local religious councils and do not receive specialized training, *murshidat* are

appointed by a centralized selection committee and undergo a twelve-month intensive training program at the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat in Rabat.

The *murshidat's* training program, initiated in 2004 as part of Morocco's post-5/16 religious policy, forms a key component of the country's anti-extremism strategy and its official gender policy in the religious realm. The first cohort of *murshidat* graduated in 2006. In the presence of Ahmed Toufiq, Minister of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, along with several domestic and foreign media outlets, the graduation ceremony served as a strategic moment to highlight women's pivotal contributions to the post-5/16 religious policy. Gini Reticker, Director of *Class of 2006*,⁴ reported:

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

This statement highlights the symbolic significance of the graduation ceremony of the first cohort of Moroccan female religious guides. The event garnered considerable media attention primarily because it challenged dominant Western narratives that often portray Muslim women as passive or oppressed in their communities. The international spotlight on the *murshidat* reflects both the novelty of women's inclusion into the official religious realm and the political significance of their achievement within a traditionally male-dominated domain. While the media celebrated gender-driven progress, it also revealed the complexities of visibility, where symbolic advancements may overshadow the broader inclusive context of religious reform. This groundbreaking moment reflects Morocco's strategic investment in gender narratives, which aims to project an image of modernity and religious moderation to both domestic and foreign audiences.

The inauguration of the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat (*Ma'had Mohammed al-Sadis li-Takwin al-A'ima al-Murshidin wa al-Murshidat*) in 2015 coincided with the escalating conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the heightened attention surrounding the 'War on Terror'. The shocking reemergence of the terrorist threat brought to the fore the significance of training religious professionals and institutionalizing religious activity in the battle against extremism. The inauguration event was a strategic and timely response to the global resurgence of violent extremism. As radical groups increasingly exploited religious discourse to recruit and mobilize followers, the Moroccan state recognized the urgent need to reclaim religious legitimacy and promote a counter-discourse rooted in moderation, tolerance, and coexistence. The Institute serves as a cornerstone of Morocco's consolidation of its soft power, training both male and female religious leaders in theology, jurisprudence, pedagogy, communication, and other contemporary social issues (Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 2019, pp. 33-43). By standardizing religious education, the state aims to insulate the religious sphere from extremist influences. Thus, this Institution represents a broader effort to position Morocco as a leader in promoting moderate Islam and a model for religious reform in the Muslim world.

⁴ *Class of 2006* is a documentary that follows the journey of 50 women who became the first officially trained female religious guides in Morocco. The filmmakers, producer Charlotte Mangin and director Gini Reticker, document the *murshidat's* experiences and the challenges they face in a society navigating between tradition and modernity. The story begins in 2004 when Mangin discovers a progressive shift in Moroccan law that grants women more rights. This development presents an opportunity to observe the roles female religious leaders play in the country's fight against extremism by promoting a more tolerant, coexistent, and Sufi-based Islam. Through firsthand observation and interviews with several *murshidat*, their families, and key figures, the documentary presents a nuanced view of Morocco's political and social dynamics, highlighting both the potential for change and the challenges that accompany it. (The film is available at <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/video/class-of-2006-video-full-episode/1038/>)



Figure 2

The king's group photo taken during the inauguration of the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat

Note. From <https://ar.le360.ma/societe/39957/>

Similar to the ceremony celebrating the graduation of the first cohort of female religious professionals at the Local Religious Council of Rabat in 2006, the inauguration ceremony of the Mohammed VI Institute highlighted women's central role in the Moroccan religious landscape. In mainstream Islamic legal practice, men typically occupy the front (especially during congregational prayers in the mosque), whereas women are placed at the back. However, the group photo above shows that women are at the front line, while men are 'sent to the back'. This positioning clearly indicates that women stand at the forefront of the current religious reform and, by extension, in the country's broader gender policy. The graduation ceremony at the Local Religious Council of Rabat and the royal inauguration of the Mohammed VI Institute exemplify the gender-sensitive dimension of the post-5/16 religious policy, marking the end of male historical dominance within the official religious institution.

The establishment of the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Murshidin and Murshidat was part of the state's official strategy to professionalize religious activity (see Ouchelh, 2024). This strategy has established a framework within which religious professionals must operate, which places significant emphasis on fostering a religious discourse that aligns with Morocco's national and religious constants (see Ouchelh, 2024). Currently, approximately 1400 *murshidat* are active within the local religious councils. Each year, 100 *murshidat* graduate from the Mohammed VI Institute, contributing to the numerical growth of female religious caretakers nationwide. As a result, the post-5/16 restructuring of the religious sphere in Morocco has created an opportunity for women to participate in its implementation, thereby reinforcing their visibility within the religious domain.

7. Female Notaries

In Morocco, the notary profession was historically male-dominated until the king intervened to allow women to enter the field. In most Sunni jurisprudence, officiating contracts such as marriage and inheritance is primarily regarded as a male prerogative (Ait Said 2007, pp. 81-93). On January 22, 2018, King Mohammed VI commanded the opening of the position of accredited notary, *'adl*, to women as part of a new Justice Scheme. The first cohort, consisting of 299 female notaries, graduated in the summer of 2020, marking a significant step toward achieving gender equality in this religio-legal profession. This groundbreaking event enhances women's participation in professional life and promotes their representation in key areas such as notarization and certification, thereby contributing to the development of the judicial system and reflecting the gender-driven dynamics in Moroccan society.

Although Law No. 03.16 regulating the legal profession does not contain any provisions prohibiting women from working as *'udul* (pl. of *'adl*), the reality has remained biased toward men, effectively barring women from this profession until the king's intervention. In 2006, the Ministry of Justice launched a Justice Scheme as part of its reform strategy for the judicial sector. This scheme aimed to integrate the judiciary into the country's socioeconomic milieu and enhance its capacity to keep pace with various transformations (Kingdom of Morocco, 2006, p. 3). A major contributor to incorporating women into the *'udul* profession is the notable educational performance of females, especially in legal streams, which has provided the Ministry of Justice with the necessary human resources to end women's exclusion from this sector and subsequently extend Morocco's gender policy.



Figure 3

Two female 'udul, notaries, officiating a marriage contract

Note. From <https://rb.gy/sm7s6a>

The responsibilities of a female notary in Morocco are divided into two main functions. The first, which has sparked controversy, involves documenting marriage contracts, witnessing divorces, and issuing certificates. The second function involves documenting various transactions, such as sales and purchases, as well as overseeing other legal procedures (al-Ashraf, 2024). Some argue that a woman cannot marry another woman, making any marriage contract overseen by a woman invalid (al-Ashraf, 2024, para. 7).⁵ Others believe that women's engagement in this profession aligns with their educational achievements and the skills they have acquired in various roles and positions (al-Ashraf, 2024, para. 7). However, the calls to reverse the decision to include women in the notary profession have not impeded the state's strategy to advance women's status in this domain.

The Supreme Council of Ulema, Morocco's highest religious authority, has endorsed the inclusion of women in the notary profession. This empowering *ijtihad* is based on women's significant academic training and accomplishments across various domains (al-Kchouri, 2018, para. 3). Without delving into its jurisprudential dimension, the Council's opinion rests on the changing reality driven by women's access to education and various professional positions. Women's achievements in 'non-religious' fields have contributed to advancing their status within the religious sphere. Therefore, boosting women's position in the religious realm is not exclusively jurisprudential, as their successes in other sectors can also strengthen it.

Integrating women into the 'udul profession demonstrates that their achievements in various sectors have strengthened the state's gender-sensitive strategies within the religious sphere. Because performing a profession rests on qualifications rather than gender, and since women have proven their qualifications in many domains, treating them unequally within the religious sphere could negatively impact people's perception of Islam and religious institutions, as well as women's status therein. Additionally, granting women access to religious positions and roles strongly articulates gender justice, which entails the involvement of women in all aspects of Muslim practice, performance, and policy development, as well as in political and religious leadership roles (Wadud, 2006, p. 10). In other words, promoting gender justice within the religious sphere relies on overcoming gender inequality and discrimination, as excluding women from certain religious positions was partially based on their presumed inferiority—an argument that has significantly diminished in light of women's notable accomplishments in various domains.

8. Female Recitation of the Quran

Public recitation of the Quran has historically been a male-dominated field. Unlike many men who have gained worldwide recognition as renowned reciters of the Quran, no woman has reached this level of acclaim. The concept of *karaha*, or undesirability, concerning women's public recitation of the Quran in Islamic jurisprudence may partially explain their exclusion from this domain. Some jurists have contended that since reciting the Quran involves

⁵ Several Moroccan Salafi figureheads have clearly expressed their opposition to opening the 'udul profession to women. Hassan al-Kattani, for example, said that this decision contradicts the views of the Maliki imams and most Muslim imams. He added that women's supervision of marriage contracts invalidates the marriage altogether. Al-Kattani called for putting an end to "tampering with the rulings" of Islam and urged Moroccan officials and women's rights activists who call for combating gender discrimination to "stop blindly imitating the West" (al-Asri, 2017).

chanting, it could provoke fitnah and stimulate men's sexual urges (Islamweb, 2009). This interpretation has contributed to the marginalization of women's voices in religious spaces, notably the mosque, reinforcing gendered boundaries within Islamic practice and limiting women's visibility and authority in the public religious sphere.

As part of his gender policy within the religious sphere, King Mohammed VI has demonstrated strong support for females' public recitation of the Quran. The Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs occasionally organizes local, regional, national, and international contests to encourage children and teenagers to memorize the Quran, learn the rules of its recitation, and understand its meanings (see Mohammed VI, 2005). These contests have attracted significant female participation.⁶ Additionally, Quranic circles, often run by local religious councils, host male and female pupils who wish to memorize the Quran, grasp the rules of its recitation, and learn the basics of the Arabic language. These circles have seen notable feminization in recent years, giving birth to proficient reciters of the Quran who have received worldwide acclaim.

On April 7, 2023, Hajar Lamrabet was invited to recite the Quran during the celebration of *Laylat al-Qadr*, Destiny Night, at the Hassan II Mosque. After concluding her recitation, *Amir al-Muminin* King Mohammed VI awarded her the 'Mohammed VI National Prize for the Memorization and Recitation of the Quran' (SNRTnews, 2023, 55:00-58:30).



Figure 4

Hajar Lamrabet reciting the Quran at the Hassan II Mosque during the celebration of *Laylat al-Qadr*, Destiny Night, in 2023

Note. A screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lq-5r8NGdvA&t=3500s>

The religious ceremony was attended by hundreds of thousands of worshippers and broadcast widely on Morocco's official media channels, reflecting its national significance and the symbolic weight it carries. The royal supervision of female recitation of the Quran during this event marked a historic moment, positioning women not just as participants but as visible leaders in a traditionally male-dominated religious domain. This ubiquitous support of female Quran reciters serves as a crystalline celebration of their excellence in Quranic memorization and recitation, disciplines deeply revered in Islamic tradition. It also stands as a powerful expression of the monarchy's deliberate efforts to legitimize and normalize women's active roles within religious spaces.

By placing female reciters at the forefront of a significant religious gathering under royal patronage, the ceremony not only fosters a spiritual atmosphere but also creates an opportunity to celebrate female religious empowerment in the religious space. It signals King Mohammed VI's explicit endorsement of women's inclusion in religious life, thereby linking religious reform to broader objectives of gender equality. This alignment reflects Morocco's evolving gender policy, where promoting women's visibility and leadership in the religious sphere is not isolated but embedded in a broader strategy to enhance women's status in public life. It suggests a state-driven model of reform that attempts to harmonize Morocco's religious constants with universal progressive values, subtly challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islam's foundational texts, which promote women's invisibility in the public sphere.

⁶ In 2005, Hajar Boussaq won the Mohammed VI National Contest, and in 2009, she won the Mohammed VI International Competition organized in Morocco and received her prize from the king himself. In 2013, Hajar Boussaq won the international contest organized in Malaysia and received her award from the Malaysian Queen. Her achievements have garnered her worldwide popularity and made her a role model for many young girls aspiring to follow in her footsteps. Hajar created a YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@hajarboussaq>) where she uploads educational videos on Quran recitation.

9. Conclusion

Despite being historically male-dominated, the religious sphere has smoothly accommodated the post-5/16 feminization policy. Three explanations have been provided to explain this shift. First, because the monarch has championed this project—given his political and religious leadership—advancing women's positioning in the religious sphere has been effective. King Mohammed VI has spearheaded several initiatives to bolster women's status in the religious sphere, notably inviting female scholars to participate in the Hassania Lecture Series, appointing female scholars to the Supreme Council of Ulema and local religious councils, initiating the training of female religious caretakers, integrating women into the notary profession, and promoting female public recitation of the Quran. Second, women's educational attainment, including in the field of religious scholarship, has allowed them to integrate seamlessly into the religious sphere. Third, women's achievements and visibility in other domains have fostered their leadership roles within the religious sphere.

The monarchical leadership has been integral to consolidating women's roles within a traditionally male-dominated field. The king's religious, historical, and constitutional legitimacy allows him to oversee both worldly and spiritual affairs. Since gender roles are elaborately defined in Islamic jurisprudence, advancing women's status necessitates a gender-informed reinterpretation of religious texts. Furthermore, promoting women's status is a political decision and often requires the king's direct intervention to mitigate political and social polarization. As promoting gender equality aligns with Morocco's modernization policy and the ulema's hermeneutical effort, it rightfully falls within the monarch's authority and necessitates his engagement.

Although the king's prerogative status allows him to initiate groundbreaking reforms while maintaining consensus, particularly within the religious establishment, his margin of maneuverability is constrained by his constitutional obligation to uphold Islamic precepts. This limitation may hinder his ability to promote full-fledged equality. Consequently, women's status is enhanced under the condition, or at least hermeneutical caution, of respecting gender-specific Islamic precepts. For instance, unlike their male counterparts, female religious caretakers are not permitted to perform specific roles, such as leading congregational prayer, calling for prayer, and delivering public sermons (see Ouchelh, 2024, pp. 25-27).

The prior exclusion of women represented a form of gender-based discrimination and highlighted the disparity between Morocco's vocal commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment and their significant absence, or at least invisibility, within diverse religious institutions. Integrating women into religious institutions has enabled the Moroccan regime to achieve three primary objectives. First, it has helped overcome gender discrimination within these institutions. Emphasizing women's visibility in a traditionally male-dominated sector has underscored the gender-driven dynamics within religious institutions and women's active involvement in advancing Morocco's gender policy. Second, this policy has empowered women by granting them new roles in shaping religious discourse and engaging in public religious activities. Third, fostering women's inclusion in religious bureaucracy illustrates how gender policies are deeply intertwined with national security strategies. Thus, the promotion of women's empowerment in Morocco's religious sphere is not merely a societal strategy but an integral component of the country's relentless counter-extremism policy.

Further research should address the impact of these gender policies on people's perception of religious authority. So, to what extent has the engagement of women within religious institutions enhanced Moroccans' perception of female religious authority? Exploring this line of inquiry requires engaging male and female participants from diverse age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographical locations to investigate their attitudes toward women's involvement in the religious sphere and its impact on their spiritual and social lives.

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