

## Professor Masooda Bano

### Women in Mosques and Madrasas: A Growing Trend

Mosques and madrasas have traditionally stayed in the hands of the male scholars (ulama), barring a few exceptions in early Islamic history. Since the 1970s, however, a steadily growing trend has emerged whereby Muslim women are seeking formal study of Islamic texts by joining study circles in mosques or enrolling in degree programmes run by madrasas. This growing presence of women in the formal spheres of Islamic authority initially attracted the attention of Western feminist scholars who wanted to see if growing engagement of women, with serious study of Islamic texts, will result in them renegotiating traditional Islamic gender norms. The evidence to date counters such assumptions. The female scholars leading these initiatives, as well as the women joining them, adhere to the classical teachings of Islam.

This paper first highlights the need to understand the difference between formal educational programmes offered to women by madrasas as compared to the more informal education many Muslim women are receiving through joining study circles in mosques. Looking specially at the madrasa tradition in South Asia, the paper will explain why the number of female madrasas and students is rapidly rising and why the madrasa curriculum for women is curtailed to four years as compared to the eight-year programme traditionally taught to men. The paper will also draw on examples from Syria, northern Nigeria and the UK.

Finally, the paper addresses the concern of feminist scholars that teaching the traditional approach means that participation in these study circles and madrasa programmes makes Muslim women disengage with modern life. Drawing on debates that take place between the students and the preachers, the paper will show that there is much dynamic energy within these educational initiatives; the key issue is to understand the importance of socio-economic background of the students as well as the preachers. Women living in small low-income neighbourhoods in urban centers or rural areas, who still are living traditional lives, raise questions that are relevant to them: how to be more pious, how to manage expectation of the husband and in-laws, or how to raise the children. Educated professional Muslim women while also seeking means of becoming more pious, on the other hand, also raise questions linked to their modern lives,



## Professor Masooda Bano

### University of Oxford

Prof. Masooda Bano is Professor of Development Studies at The University of Oxford. Her research focuses on the relationship between knowledge production and societal conditions. She has written extensively on Islamic scholarly networks in the Sunni tradition, in the Muslim majority countries, and also among Muslim diaspora in the West. Prof. Bano currently holds a European Research Council Advance Grant exploring current trends in Islamic knowledge production in the UK and Europe. Prior to this she held a European Research Council Starting Grant titled: '*Changing Structures of Islamic Authority and Consequences for Social Change*.' The project looked at how both the old and new centres of Islamic authority are responding to changed expectations of Muslim youth.