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Muslim women leaders in the Ferghana Valley: Whose leadership is it anyway?

By Svetlana Peshkova [1]

Abstract

There are many geographic and historical examples of Muslim women leaders, yet questions about women's ability to lead and the kinds of leadership women can assume are still a part of scholarly and public debates among Muslims. In this article, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in the Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan), I provide examples of Muslim women's leadership and argue that in order to fully understand women's leadership we need to question the assumption that men and women desire the same forms of leadership. A desire for leadership is not intrinsic to women (or humans in general) but is socio-historically specific. Approaching critically some existing assumptions about women's leadership, I identify and provide examples of different, equally important, forms of leadership that a specific socio-historical context has engendered.

Keywords: Women's leadership, Islam, Uzbekistan

People's Professor

Feruza-opa[2] was described by some of her students as "the one who brings Islamic knowledge and spiritual peace into the hearts of the believers." Her other students called her a "people's professor." She called herself an *otincha*, a religious teacher. As she said, she "taught Islam" to some local women and occasionally children; some local men came by periodically to get her advice. At a meeting in 2002 in the Ferghana Valley, I asked Feruza-opa about *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (the Party of Liberation), a transnational Islamist movement with the aim of establishing an Islamic State, which has became a prominent actor in regional political discourse in the first decade of the twenty first century. She replied, "they [the *Hizb*] think they have authority to go against the existing authority. I think that they will not do anything, just aggravate. Muhammad said 'do not go against the authority: good or bad, it is all from Allah. Do not go against the Time [history]: it is still God's creation.' All their parties…it is a waste of time. Many of them, men and women are in prison." Feruza-opa did not support a vision such as *Hizb-ut-Tahrir's* of the Valley (or Uzbekistan) as an Islamic state. Her emphasis, in her words, was on "Muslim" and "Islamic" living, which according to Feruza-opa, heavily depended on one's religious education and ritual prayer: "When you pray – keep the line with what Allah wants. 'Five times a day remember Me' [referring to Allah]… *Namoz* (ritual prayer) keeps you from [doing] different bad things. If you read *namoz* Allah will give you [grant your wishes]." Feruza-opa saw corporal and intellectual learning about

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[2] In light of an on-going persecution of devout and born-again Muslims in Uzbekistan, the names of the interlocutors have been changed. When quoting individuals I omit references to a particular city or village.

"Islamic living" as the only viable way of changing individuals, the local community and Uzbek society at large; as the only way of "not wasting time" and not being imprisoned. Feruza-opa believed in and stressed the transformative value of education: Our people are *ovam hulq* [uneducated people]. One needs to change people slowly. *Otinchalar* should also do it slowly, not fast. I believe that people should read the Qur'an more. Those who read will change themselves…We are yet to learn our religion. My *mahallah* [neighborhood], my students - they do not do and do not allow others to do *gnoh* [bad/evil deeds] because they know Islam. *Mullahs* [male religious leaders] also should not read for themselves; they should read for and with the people…. One needs to share what God gives you. If it is *illim* [knowledge, Ar. *'ilm*] you should share it too. What we can and must do is to tell people about Islam, to share knowledge, to educate each other and *ovam hulq* slowly.

For Feruza-opa and women like her, individual and societal transformation through religious education was a slow moral process beginning with the sharing of (religious) knowledge. Through this sharing at religious ceremonies or during religious lessons, women like Feruza-opa,[3] who were educated at the Soviet secular schools and had different levels of religious education acquired through family members, home-schools and/or self-education, actively engaged in religious renewal in the Valley. They led others towards an ethical ideal of a moral community that knows the difference between evil and good deeds – that "knows Islam."

Can Muslim women be leaders?
There is an ongoing debate among Muslims about women in leadership positions (cf. Stowasser, 2001): Can women be leaders? And, if so, what kind of leadership can they assume: religious (spiritual), political, both, or none? Muslim women, such as women leaders in the Ferghana Valley, continue to act as leaders without necessarily being recognized as such by formal religious and secular authorities. These women's informal leadership is an example of an Islamization from below, from within local communities, as a moral individual and communal transformation. In this article I demonstrate that a distinction between formal and informal forms of religious leadership—the former associated with public domains and the latter with private domains—is not natural. Rather it is a result of certain historical developments characterizing a process of secularization and of religious renewal in the region. I show how women's religious leadership informs local social transformation. Finally, I address the relevance of my research to the debate about Muslim women's leadership.

Writing the place and the researcher
My ethnographic research (2001-2003) about post-Soviet religious renewal took place in the Ferghana Valley, a densely populated agricultural area (about six million people) with a few industrial cities shared among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.[4] The Valley is variously described by some as a hub of Islamic radicalism (e.g. Rashid, 2000; Rotar, 2006) and by others as the heart of Central Asian religious practices, arts, sciences, and spirituality (e.g. Egger, 2008; Khalid, 2007). Although it is tempting to talk about the region as Uzbek and Muslim, not every inhabitant of the

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[3] She graduated from a Pedagogical Institute with a degree in Farsi.
[4] My research was conducted in the part of the Ferghana Valley that belongs to Uzbekistan.

Valley is Uzbek, not every Uzbek is a pious Muslim, and not every pious Muslim is Uzbek. Society and religion "do not coincide" (Makris, 2007:7). There are other ethnic groups in the region, including Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Koreans, Russians, Roma and Jews, who variously profess Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and atheism. Among Muslims, being Muslim is expressed in a variety of ways. Some are devout. Others are cultural Muslims whose religious observance is limited to certain religious holidays. There are born-again Muslims who have transitioned from being cultural to being devout in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.[5] There are also Muslim atheists who claim to not believe in God but who identify as Muslim because they were raised in Muslim households. In this article I focus on devout and born-again Muslims, Uzbek and others.

Researching about born-again and devout Muslims in post-Soviet Central Asia, I travelled widely in the Valley and met Muslim women religious practitioners, teachers, and leaders (*otinchalar*) (cf. Fathi, 2006; Kamp, 2006). Their importance in local communities was highlighted by the interviewees on several occasions. I identified thirty *otinchalar* and focused on five of these and their students. These women, who were in their 40s-60s[6], had been educated in the secular state schools and a couple had the equivalent of a bachelor's or master's degree (cf. Tolmacheva, 1993). They also had different levels of religious education acquired through family members, home-schools and/or self-education. They operated mainly in the private domain of individual homes and had full access to women and children and occasionally to men.[7]

These women generously included me in their social circles. I was able to attend religious classes and ceremonies. I observed, participated in (sometime by just *being there*), and asked questions, while being questioned and observed by the *otinchalar* and others about my life and research interests. My academic degrees in religion and filmmaking, my Russian citizenship, my growing up in the Caucasus and my education in the United States might have facilitated my acceptance into these women's social circles, within which I was grateful for being treated as a student and was taught about these women's lives and their understandings of the teachings of Islam. However fragmented this process of learning might have been, it gives me some foundation to talk about these Muslim women's leadership.

Writing women's lives as leaders

Soviet ethnographers frequently categorized Muslim women in Central Asia as "the preservers of survivals," "the bearers of a special 'female religion'" and as representatives of "a certain cultural lag. . . and deficiencies in cultural-enlightenment work. . ." (Snesarev, 1974:226). Several scholars writing about post-Soviet Central Asia have criticized such essentialized assessments as being driven by ideological incentives and political expediency and argued that such accounts ignore the women's differing histories, social and class contexts and levels of religiosity (e.g. Kamp, 2006; Keller, 2001; Northrop, 2004). Despite recognizing a tapestry of women's religious lives as a critically important element of social transformation in the region, the binary of "tradition" vs. "modernity" is still used by some scholars to explain complexities and

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[5] Uzbekistan achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.
[6] Younger *otinchalar*, in their 20s-30s, reported difficulty combining their religious leadership and family responsibilities.
[7] I do not speak about all the women in the region that self-identify as *otinchalar*.

contradictions in women's lives in general and their religiosity in particular (e.g. Akiner, 1997; Alimova & Azimova, 2000). Following Mahmood (2005), I argue that an understanding of these women's religiosity should not be reduced to such *a priori* categories but should be critically analyzed as emerging from a particular socio-historical context that enables certain understandings of relationships among individuals, the state, the self and the Divine (2005:34).

Women leaders are an important subject in academic writing about Muslim women's lives in Indonesia, Iran, the Philippines, China, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan and other areas (e.g. Hoodfar, 2001; Horvatich, 1994; Jaschok & Jingjun, 2000; Mahmood, 2005; Privratsky, 2004; Shalinsky, 1996; von Doorn-Harder, 2006). In studies of post-Soviet Central Asia, Muslim women leaders are variously described as female clerics/*mullahs*[8] (Fathi, 1997; Kramer, 2002); a distinctive age-group of elder women who act as guardians of tradition and "preach the faith" (Alimova & Azimova, 2000; Corcoran-Nantes, 2005:139; Imamkhodjaeva, 2005; Tolmacheva, 1993); teachers (Constantine, 2007; Kamp, 2006; Kandiyoti & Azimova, 2004); experts in religion and ritual (Tokhtakhodjaeva, 1996:27); Qur'anic reciters (Khalid, 2007; Sultanova, 2000); and as mechanisms of conflict mediation within local families (Gorshunova, 2001).

Various terms are used to refer to these women, such as *otin*, *otonoy,* or *otin-oy* (cf. Fathi, 2006; Khalid, 2007; Kramer, 2002). I utilize the term *otinchalar*, a plural form of the word *otincha*, which is a term of self-reference used by the women with whom I studied. The word *otincha* is often translated as "teacher," yet in my experience its usage and conceptual meaning exceed educational domain. Following Marranci (2008), I think of *otinchalar* as women who feel to be Muslim, desire to be better Muslims, rationalize and act on these feeling and desire in various ways, including but not limited to facilitating religious ceremonies among local women by reciting and interpreting religious texts, and teaching these women (and occasionally children but rarely men) about Islam's history, principles and sacred texts (cf. Fathi, 2006). Some of them perform and teach hymns about justice and salvation, while others focus on healing. Through this array of activities, discourses, and performances, they systematically modify their environment and lead their communities towards moral transformation, as understood by these women.

Are *otinchalar* female *mullahs*, clerics, or *imams*?

The word *imam* is often taken to mean a leader in both religious scholarship and congregational prayer. To be an *imam* one has to have a set of minimal qualifications, such as an ability to recite the Qur'an, sufficient knowledge about performing a ritual prayer, and a reputation for reason and piety (Mattson, 2005:11). Some scholars refer to *otinchalar* as female *mullahs* and clerics. These women and their communities, however, do not use these labels, although *otinchalar* do perform functions among local women similar to those an *imam* does among the men. In addition to the qualifications described above, some *otinchalar* are familiar with Islamic doctrine, history, and Islam's normative system (Ar. *al-Shari'ah*) and become local religious leaders through promoting educational and ritual practice and providing social advice articulated in religious terms. Following Mattson (2005), I argue that to define or think of *otinchalar* as clerics, *mullahs*

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[8] The word is often taken to mean Islamic cleric or a leader at the mosque.

or *imams* is to assume that these leadership positions are standard, thus obscuring rather than clarifying gendered dynamics of Islamic religious leadership. In order to understand these dynamics we should critically interrogate socio-historical contexts that engender different forms of leadership such as *otinchalar's* and question the assumption that all Muslim women everywhere aspire to have the same leadership positions as do the men.

Muslim women leaders: a her-story

There are many examples of Muslim women leaders in authoritative religious and historical sources, such the *hadith* literature, the Prophet's biographies (e.g. by Muhammad Ibn Sa`d (d. 844-45)),[9] and in contemporary academic biographies of these leaders.[10] Yet, Mattson (2005) suggests that the quest for clear Qur'anic guidelines for gendered leadership and a clear distinction between political and religious (or spiritual) leadership is fruitless: these are not to be found in the Qur'an. Rather, Qur'anic verses give general guidelines regarding forms of leadership. For instance, these verses stress regularity of ritual performance and the importance of consultation with one's community (Q 42:38); highlight leading one family's and one's life in righteousness (Q 25:74); and thus emphasize a critical importance of a code of individual and social ethics, and warn against selfishness and evil (Q 4:49). Hence, Quran'ic verses do not provide a clear set of standards for gendered leadership, nor do they clearly distinguish between the two forms of leadership, religious (spiritual) and political. Rather, such Qur'anic verses emphasize ritual performance and individual and communal ethics as important markers of a leader.

The *hadith* literature, a more potent source used to debate women's leadership, provides both examples of women's leadership and the stories (I will refer to one of these later in the article) used to limit women's leadership. The Prophet and his family play critically important roles in the historical and contemporary global, local, physical and online debates about women's leadership. Many Muslims regard the members of the Prophet's family as behavioral models worth imitating. The *hadith* literature provides the early models of feminine behavior, ranging from sincere support to rebellion to leadership. The Prophets' wives Khadijah and Aisha, his daughter Fatima, and granddaughter Zaynab are the earliest examples of Muslim women leaders (see Abbott, 1942; Ahmad, 2006; Mernissi, 1996; Wadud, 1999).

The fourteen hundred years of history of Muslim communities is both a his-story and a her-story. Although putatively universal histories often turn out to be histories of the masculine (his-stories) (Irigaray, 1974:165), contemporary scholars of Islam have successfully highlighted the stories of the feminine (her-stories). Beginning with Hagar, the mother of Ish'mail, the one divinely appointed to bear forth "the Arab and later Muslim civilization," we encounter a multitude of women leaders (Abugideiri, 2001:81). Their patience and perseverance assured expansion of Islamic principles and genealogical and cultural continuity and contiguity of his- and her-stories in the histories of Muslims in various parts of the world.

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[9] The *hadith* literature (pl. Ar. *ahadith*) is a compilation of reports of the Prophet's paradigmatic acts and utterances, which constitutes the secondary body of religious authoritative texts.
[10] Among these women are: Umm Ayman, Umm Kulthum bt. `Aqaba, Umayya bt. Qays, Umm Sinan, Umm `Umara. The review of the literature that follows is by no means exhaustive but includes references to other important Muslim women leaders.

A long history of religious leadership among Muslims includes various women Sufi masters (e.g. As-Sulami, 1999) and Muslim women scholars of *hadith* (e.g. Siddiqi, 1993). Muslim women leaders are mentioned in several bibliographical accounts about the Prophet's women companions (Ar. *sahabiyyat*). Among these is Umm Waraqa bt. `Abd Allah b. al-Harith, who was instructed by the Prophet to continue leading members of her household (both men and women) in prayer at her home (Afsaruddin, 2002).

Muslim women's leadership assured steady incremental changes in both practice and theological developments from medieval to contemporary Islamic thought. Al-Sakhawi, a 15th century scholar, in his bibliographical work *Kitab al-Nisa* (the Book of [about] Women), describes a large number of women religious scholars, refers to them as *kathirat al-riyasa* (having plentitude of leadership), and notes that they became spiritual and educational leaders for him and other male scholars (Afsaruddin, 2007). Nadwi (2007) also provides biographies of various women teachers and scholars who wielded considerable public authority in their societies; these were not exceptional cases.

Some Muslim women leaders, such as Rabyah al-Basri (e.g. Schimmel, 1975) or Zaynab al-Gazali (e.g. al-Ghazali, 1989), avoided public spaces (thought of as "male spaces") by both literary and figuratively veiling themselves with special veils. Others, such as Bahithat al-Badiyah, aggressively injected themselves in these spaces to challenge the status quo of local mosques as male spaces (al-Jabri, 1976:16; Badran, 1995: 54-55). Pious Shi'a women in Lebanon and an Egyptian women's mosque movement are other examples of Muslim women's leadership in various Islamic and Islamists movements (e.g. Deeb, 2006; Mahmood, 2005; von Doorn-Harder, 2006).

The most widely publicized historical examples of Muslim women's leadership are Razia al-Din, a 13th century ruler of India (Zakaria, 2000); Nana Asma'u, a 19th century revivalist in the West Africa (Mack & Boyd, 2000); and the 16th -17th centuries' "sultanate of women" in the Ottoman Empire (e.g. Peirce, 1993). The 20th-21st centuries present multiple examples of Muslim women leaders such as Huda Shaarawi, an Egyptian leader in the struggle against colonialism (Shaarawi, 1987). Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Amira Sonbol, Sharifa Alkhateeb, Hadia Mubarak, Ingrid Mattson, Heba Raouf Ezzat, are among well-known current Muslim scholars and activists.[11]

Finally, several ethnographies recognize, describe and analyze the everyday lives of Muslim women leaders whose names are largely pseudonyms, such as Turkish *hojas* (or *hocas*) (Saktanber, 2002); Philippine *pandai* (Horvatich, 1994); Syrian *Qubaysis* (ethnographic research is yet to be done but see Hamidi, 2006; Kalmbach, 2008:39); female Syrian teachers (Kalmbach, 2008); Iranian "female mullahs"(Hoodfar, 2001); Bosnian *bula* (Bringa, 1995); Chinese *ahong* (Gillette, 2000; Jaschok & Jingjun, 2000), Indonesian activists, preachers, and leaders (von Doorn-Harder, 2006), and women leaders and preachers in Pakistan (Hegland, 1997; Nasr, 1994), Egypt (Mahmood, 2005) and Nigeria (Sule & Starraff, 1991). In short, there is no shortage of Muslim women leaders throughout the historical and geographical landscape of Muslim communities. *Otinchalar* in the Ferghana Valley are among them.

The State, Islam, and gender

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[11] Some Muslim women are acting and former heads of state, such as the late Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Tansu Penbe Çiller of Turkey, and Khaleda Zia and Sheik Hasina Wazed of Bangladesh.

To understand the importance of *otinchalar* and their forms of leadership in Uzbekistan, I would like to present a précis of historically rather problematic relationships between Islam and the state in the 20th century (for a detailed historical analysis see Keller, 2001; Khalid, 2007; Northrop, 2004). Following Marranci (2008), I take Islam to be a map of discourses on how to feel and act as Muslim. Following Foucault (1978), I take the state to mean an aggregation of various administrative and law enforcement institutions, constituted by individuals whose individuality is submitted to a set of patterns. This aggregation has an authority to make rules that govern people living within a particular territory and its "techniques of power [are] present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse [social] institutions …"(Foucault, 1978: 141).

From its inception, the Soviet state was envisioned as a secular union of republics. In order to imprint this vision of the state onto its diverse subjects in Central Asia, the Bolsheviks (later known as the Communists) sponsored a socio-political campaign against overtly expressing one's religious identity. Defined by the organizers as a normative Islamic practice, veiling became a focus of this campaign. Assault on legal religious institutions, such as *Shariat* courts,[12] and the *waqf* property (religious land endowment) were other foci of this campaign (Haghayeghi, 1996). The organizers positioned gender as a center of radical social change (Northrop 2004), while essentialized Islam was defined as an oppressive socio-politically system that molded its subjects through restrictive practices such as veiling (cf. Geertz, 1968; e.g. Northrop, 2004). According to this model, if Islam was uprooted through unveiling[13] and other means, the Soviet state as a secular union would have an uncontested ability to exercise power over its Central Asian subjects. During this campaign many mosques were closed and some clergy were arrested, exiled, or executed. Some religious activities became formalized under state political control and required registration and state-run economic management. Other religious activities became informal as they took place mainly in domestic space. These activities and leaders, such as *otinchalar*, could not be effectively persecuted or controlled by the state and became respected conduits of religious knowledge and practice for the local population.

Scholarly assessments vary regarding these attempts at producing a Soviet state as a secular union and at transforming gender roles (Kamp, 2006; Tokhtakhodjaeva, 1995). But there were two important outcomes of this campaign. First, some religious activities became formalized under state political control and required registration and state-run economic management. Other religious activities became informal as they took place mainly in domestic space. These activities and leaders, such as *otinchalar*, could not be effectively persecuted or controlled by the state and became respected conduits of religious knowledge and practice for the local population.

The second outcome was adoption and definition of certain expressions of religiosity as "national traditions" by the Communist Party in 1930s while realizing that excessive use of force only alienated local populations (Keller, 2001). By the end of

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[12] *Shariat* (Ar. *al-Shari'ah*) is "a normative system of Islam as historically understood and developed by Muslim jurists… [which] includes a much broader set of principles and norms than legal subject matter as such" (An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed. 2002 *Islamic Family Law in a Changing World*. London: Zed Books. p. 1).
[13] Kamp (2006) argues that unveiling was underway among some women before the Bolsheviks' campaign (p.133).

the1930s, the Communist Party realized its inability to uproot Islam completely and adopted definitions of certain expressions of religiosity as "national traditions" maintained by discourses such as "differences in gender roles," importance of sexual honor and family values, and "views of marriage … [as] companionship more than equality" (Kamp, 2006:230). Reflecting some of these discourses about family values and differences in gender roles, men were expected "to go out and engage in the rough and tumble of the world, whereas women were to guard the chastity of the home and of the community" (Khalid, 2007:103). Women's participation in Soviet social life was not limited, yet centered heavily on "inner values of the community" that were nurtured through social gatherings and religious ceremonies taking place in domestic space (and at sacred sites), thus giving them [women] a central place in religious leadership (e.g. Kandiyoti & Azimova, 2004; Khalid, 2007:103).

The independence of Uzbekistan from the Soviet Union in 1991 stirred a new hope of religious freedom and a growing support from the Uzbek state of Islam as a symbol of national identity. New mosques were built. Some religious schools were re-opened, and some clergy—overwhelmingly male— were trained in Turkey (Khalid, 2007:118-120). Religious education for many men and for some women was offered at various outlets in both informal (e.g. home-schools) and formal (e.g. Islamic University in Tashkent and schools of higher Islamic education (*madrasas*)) domains (cf. Fathi, 2006; Rasanayagam, 2006).

Soon after independence, in the context of a great economic decline, ex-Communist elites consolidating their power and fearing religious and political opposition pursued a course of taking control of Islam and persecuting many religious leaders, both formal and informal and both men and women (e.g. McGlinchey, 2007). The informal leaders operating in the private domain of people's homes were less accessible to the state and therefore suffered less persecution (Fathi, 2006:313).

Thus, a distinction between formal and informal forms of religious leadership (the former associated with public domains and the latter with private domains) was a result of certain historical developments characterizing a process of secularization and of religious renewal in the region. This distinction continued to inform expressions of public religiosity. Although all religious leaders -- formal and informal -- were respected by the local people, at the time of research *otinchalar* were among informal religious leaders seen by the local people as independent from the discredited political regime, who continued to lead local Muslims through religious education, ritual practice, advice, and persuasion, towards moral transformation in spite of growing state control.

Leading how?

Otinchalar lead local communities in three areas: teaching, religious practice and socio-religious advice. *Otinchalar* with a higher level of religious knowledge teach women at their home-schools. The acquired religious knowledge allows some of these women to critically assess their religious rights and their social context. This critical assessment does not manifest itself in production of either clearly gendered or feminist (broadly defined) discourses. It does help local women to evaluate their social environment in light of religious knowledge as a first step towards changing this environment, if they chose to do so.

During one class Feruza-opa began a discussion of polygyny (a social practice when a male has multiple female spouses) by reciting the verse from the Qur'an (Q 4:3) that some interpret to sanction polygyny.[14] Polygyny was a highly contested issue in the Ferghana Valley. In an interview Aylar, one of the students, stressed that since Uzbekistan's independence it became a common practice for some men (often financially secure) to have mistresses: "They can have three or four mistresses and it is not considered to be a problem. One of these mistresses may become an illegal wife [in secular terms]." Aylar also mentioned that people's evaluation of such marriages varied from condemnation to acceptance. In some cases, according to her, "the wives could even come and visit with each other."

In response to the recited verse and its interpretation by Feruza-opa, who emphasized equal treatment of the wives as a necessary prerequisite of a polygynous marriage, two students expressed their disapproval of polygyny. Another student highlighted its situational usefulness as in a case of the first wife's sickness, when, according to this student a husband could take a second wife to help raise the kids and care for the sick wife. Another student talked about the economic security that a polygynous marriage, although emotionally draining, can offer some women in Uzbekistan.

Reminding the students about the cultural and historical context of this social practice by locating the verse in the "old times Arabston [referring to what now is Saudi Arabia and surrounding countries]," Feruza-opa stressed that "Islam set a limit to four," and posited a question to her students whether one could deal justly with four wives. The students differed in their answers. Normative morality, however Divine in origin it might have been, was understood by the students over against their social environment, thus allowing these women to form their understanding and their moral assessment of polygyny. For some this understanding was the first step towards accepting polygyny, while for others it was the first step towards challenging it as unjust.

During another class in Feruza-opa's home-school, the teacher and the students discussed the issue of *mahr*[15] and marriage contracts, which Feruza-opa defined as a normative Islamic practice. A couple of students stated that they have not heard of any marriage contracts in the Valley. Another student replied:A marriage contract would be a good thing if it were to provide a woman with enough money to support her and her children after divorce or if something happened to her husband. Local *mullahs* are against it. They say 10-30,000 *sums* [about 10-30 dollars at the time] is sufficient, depending on whether a female is a virgin. It is less if she is not a virgin. It is not right (participant-observation 2003).

By assessing local practices of *mahr* and noting a lack of marriage contracts in light of their religious knowledge, the students and the teacher eventually concluded that local practices supported by formal religious leadership were "not right."

Fatima-hon, also an *otincha*, insisted on using the Qur'an as the foundation of her teaching rather than accepting the opinions of others, such as formal religious leaders, as normative: Some say "My relatives did this…. My dad was a *mullah*, he did that…" I

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[14] This verse can be understood as follows (from Yusuf Ali's (1938) English translation): "Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice." (*The Holy Qur-an, Text, Translation and Commentary*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Arabia)

[15] *Mahr* is a reverse dowry paid by the groom to the bride used for her maintenance in the event of divorce.

say, God will not care about it. You need to do things God's way…. I am trying to teach people what is right and good, based on what is in the Qur'an.

Thus, *otinchalar's* religious knowledge helped them and their students evaluate and when necessary challenge Islamic orthodoxy[16] produced by other religious leaders, identified by *otinchalar* as male. These women generated *their own* discourses about being "right and good" Muslims.

These differing discourses on how to feel and act Muslim were contested among *otinchalar* and between themselves and other formal religious leaders. The latter criticized *otinchalar's* educational and religious practices as wasteful and un-Islamic, while the secular Uzbek state saw these as subversive activities that could potentially foster religious and political opposition (cf. Fathi, 2006:309-312; Kandiyoti & Azimova, 2004:342-343). There were other formal religious leaders, however, who consulted with some local *otinchalar* on matters of Islamic knowledge (cf. Imamkhodjaeva, 2005:336). Feruza-opa reported that "the most important *imam*" in one city in the Valley called on her several times for advice on religious matters. Many local men also sought blessings and advice from an *otincha*.

Otinchalar also provided local women with places for religious observance inside the women's homes and at sacred sites. Some *hadith* literature,[17] spatial restrictions, or customary practices are used to discourage women from attending mosques. Muslim women have varied responses to defining the mosque as a male space. Some of them struggle to carve their place in the mosque (Egypt see Mahmood, 2005), choose not to attend the mosque (Iran see Friedl, 2000:159), have their own mosques (China see Gillette, 2000; Jaschok & Jingjun, 2000), or use local shrines (Bosnia, Uzbekistan, Iran see Bringa, 1995; Friedl, 2000; Gorshunova, 2000). In the Ferghana Valley some customary practices referred to locally as "our tradition" and spatial limitations (such as a lack of women's space at the local mosques) stifled women's attendance and prayers at mosques (although I was told that in the capital Tashkent, a very small number of women did attend mosques).[18] In this context, local women developed their own vital religious activities, which often were home-centered, excluded men, and were officiated by *otinchalar*, who sacralized women's domestic space and made it suitable for congregational prayer and ceremonial activities by reciting the Qur'an.

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[16] Asad (1986) defines Islam as a discursive tradition. The adherents of this tradition are actively engaged in production of orthodoxy—"the establishment of a dominant version of religious tradition in specific historical conjunctions through a discursive process that extends in time and space" (Makris, 2007: 38).

[17] For example, "Do not forbid women from going to mosques, (but) their houses (buyut) [*sic*] are better for them" (Abu Dawud, Sulayman b. Al-Ash'ath, 1935, Sunan, 4 vols. Cairo: Dar al-Fikr). In the process of production of orthodoxy, however, a range of opinions addressed gendering of space. Some interpreted sacred sources (the Qur'an and the *hadith* literature) as neither precluding nor fostering women's participation in the mosque's activities. Others insist that a house, not the mosque, is the most appropriate place for women's religious observances. [Here I am referring to the Sunni positions, as many devout and born-again Muslims claimed to follow the Hanafi *mashab* (Ar. *madhab*) one of the schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam.] These differing positions are historically contingent and are inhabited variously by devout individuals.

[18] Imamkhodjaeva (2005) refers to this prohibition in the past tense. My feeling is that her data is gathered in the capital and also at the time when the regime was toying with the idea of "safe" Islam (1991-1995). Fathi (2006) mentions women's attendance of the mosques without specifying where. During my research in the Valley this prohibition, both overt and covert, was still in action.

These *otinchalar* also delivered messages that addressed the community's moral standards and individuals' ethical behavior. In this sense, the mosque came to the women's homes instead of them going to the mosques. Although during interviews some local women expressed a desire to attend mosques, many were completely disinterested: "The Qur'an says that one needs to pray socially within a group and we do just that at our meetings and the information discussed in the mosques we receive from our husbands" (interview 2002).

As part of religious ceremonies, *otinchalar* taught and preached about religious renewal through didactic storytelling. These stories were based on the Qur'an, *ahadith* and other sources and produced by *otinchalar* in response to the local people's everyday concerns. In the first decade of the 21st century many local women and men suffered great economic hardships as a result of growing state authoritarianism and crumbling local economies and industries. On one occasion Feruza-opa's message focused on a moral obligation of individuals to share their resources and called on the individuals to change their socioeconomic situation: In Islam it is a good thing to help others, either with money, a good deed, or a kind word…. The more you give, the more you get. Even if you give spiritual goods such as a kind word or a prayer, you might get material goods as a reward from God. If you will give material you might get spiritual rewards, such as peace and love. If God gave you money but did not give you *imon* [dignity], God will not multiply your wealth. If you do not have *imon* you will lose your material goods. There are some poor people, who… are lazy and are envious of those who do have money. This is not good either. The envy should stimulate people and not destroy them. God wants you to share and work towards changing your economic condition…. If you are jealous of those who make money, try to use this jealousy to make more money than they do, and share it with others (participant-observation 2002).

This message targeted the moral side of economic inequality by focusing on and fostering individual desire to share, yet equally emphasizing individual moral responsibility in the process of on-going socioeconomic transformation in the Valley.

As reservoirs of religious knowledge, *otinchalar* are often asked for advice on social and familial matters. On one occasion in the spring of 2003, some local women asked an *otincha* if physically punishing minors was an Islamic practice. She responded that [i]f a child offended you, do not strike your child. The child is not guilty. It is you who is guilty. You did something wrong… did not pray, or have neglected some of your religious duties…. Instead you should thank God for reminding you about your duties through your children. Do not offend God, so that you can give a proper example to your children of how to live their lives Islamically and not to offend you. Change your behavior if you want to change your children's.
Hence, according to this *otincha,* physical punishment was un-Islamic. It was individual moral transformation that served as a prerequisite to a moral change within one family and society.

Leading toward what?

Muslim women leaders in the Ferghana Valley actively participate in regional social change. They think of social change as a moral renewal, a purification of existing Islamic practices, and seem to have an implicit methodology for this renewal. Societal moral renewal starts with a moral regeneration in *otinchalar's* lives, their families' lives,

and then their students' lives. Once they achieve a level of moral transformation, *otinchalar* begin leading local Muslims (women, children, and men) away from certain practices defined by them as un-Islamic and foreign; as Feruza-opa stated at a meeting in 2002, "[t]here are many practices that have nothing to do with Islam. Our people are *ovam hulq* [uneducated people], who are mistaken in their practices. *Otinchalar* have to correct them… we have to educate each other and the *ovam hulq* slowly."

This leadership continues toward what I, following Asad (2003) and Marranci (2008), call *otinchalar's* highly variegated discursive Islamic orthodoxy about how to feel and act as Muslims. They disagreed on various matters such as shrine worship and attendance of sacred places (whether these practices were Islamic), on how to conduct burial rites, number of spouses (wives), marriage ceremonies, and what was an appropriate form of covered (Islamic) dress. Although at the time of the research there were some disagreements among *otinchalar* on how to be "right and good" Muslims, these women saw not a revolution but a moral evolution as the primary paradigm for legitimate social change in the Valley. There was a very clear sense of the temporal extension of this process in Fatima-hon's description of her leadership: I criticize people's actions and I know that it is hard for people to hear criticism…. I ask for their forgiveness and continue to criticize…. I ask my audience to think about what I said. "Maybe later, maybe tomorrow"… I am sure it comes back to them… [W]e, *otinchalar*, have to help people with these changes…. If we were good, our rulers would be good. Everything starts with a person and with the family… One needs to work on her goodness… We need to change ourselves first (interview 2003).
These *otinchalar* realized and upheld the importance of individual desire to change and saw themselves as facilitators (or helpers) in cultivating this desire by providing some of the necessary tools, such as their knowledge of religious sources. In Feruza-opa's words, "[t]hose who read [the Qur'an] will change themselves." Hence, the genuine change had to come from an individual capable of reading and understanding these sources, not *otinchalar*, and not the state.

These women claimed to not believe in political engagement with the state. According to them, an Islamist political party could not bring a meaningful social change, Feruza-opa saw political activism of a local branch of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (The Party of Liberation) as "a waste of time" and "an aggravation." Rather, *otinchalar* were engaged in a very different, according to them *apolitical* and yet, similar to the mosque movement in Egypt, very political project— a project of moral transformation from within an individual and local communities (Mahmood, 2005:34-35). Their politics exemplified what Mahmood (2005:192) refered to as "politics in unusual places." By constituting informal networks rather than formal organizations, *otinchalar* were more productive in constructing and transmitting Islamic knowledge and helping to forge a common, however contested, moral identity as "right and good" Muslims among some members of their communities. Less vulnerable to the state and formal religious authorities' control, they became important nodes connecting local women in their pursuit of moral transformation. These expanded networks were more sustainable and effective than the occasional political demonstrations that took place in the region and which were easily put down by the state.[19]

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[19] As reported by Human Rights Watch (2005), one of these protests in 2005 culminated in the massacre of civilians by government forces in the Valley's city of Andijan (*Andijon*) (Khalid, 2007:192-198).

These *otinchalar* acted as leaders among other women and within their local communities without necessarily being recognized as such by formal religious and secular authorities. They did not accept the formal religious leadership's understanding and interpretation of Islamic principals as normative, but inhabited this normative discourse and actively participated in the production of *their* variegated orthodoxy as ways of being "right and good" Muslims. By teaching religious classes in their homes, conducting ritual ceremonies at local women's homes, and by providing advice on social and individual matters, these *otinchalar* introduced incremental social changes, both as intended and "unintended outcome[s] of social reproduction…" (Giddens, 1984:220). In other words, as leaders they cultivated a gradual moral renewal in their lives and their communities.

Although these women were not referred to locally as clerics, *imams* or *mullahs*, nor did they self-identify as such, they performed functions, as discussed above, among local women similar to those performed by *imam*s and *mullahs* among the men. They were also recognized by the local communities as legitimate reservoirs of religious knowledge and practice; they were "people's professor[s]" and "taught Islam," as the opening paragraph demonstrates. But did they desire to hold the same leadership positions as did the men?

Whose leadership? What leadership?

In an ongoing debate among Muslims about women's leadership, which is connected to the question of gender equality, the Qur'an and *hadith* literature are used to justify different and often opposite positions. For the purposes of this article I sort these positions into three categories: conservative, Islamic feminist, and no-uniformity. These different positions all share an assumption that women desire the same forms of leadership as the men hold. Further, in making a distinction between religious (spiritual) and political leadership these positions reflect an assumption that political leadership is limited to the realm of "politics as usual" such as participation in political parties, judiciary system, and/or electoral office, or acting as formal religious leaders at the mosques; in short to one's public engagement with the state.

A radical conservative view considers women's leadership (both religious and political) to be un-Islamic and a result of Westernization and moral corruption. A less dramatic conservative view allows for religious leadership among women but prohibits all forms of political leadership. One of the most interrogated verses in regards to women's leadership is Qur'an 4:34.[20] This verse and a famous *hadith* reported by Abu Bakra[21] serve a backbone for a conservative position on religious leadership, whose proponents, as Abugideiri (2001) argues, have a gendered understanding of the word

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[20] English interpretations of the verse are often gendered and reductive. These interpretations are contested. According to Yusuf Ali's (1938) English interpretation a relevant part of this verse reads as follows**:** "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard…" (*The Holy Qur-an, Text, Translation and Commentary*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Arabia). For a different interpretation of this (and other) verse(s) see Laleh Bakhtiyar (2007) *The Sublime Qur'an*. Kazi Publications.

[21] Imam Bukhari reports from Abu Bakra "… When news reached the Prophet that the Persians had appointed Chosroe's daughter as their ruler, he said: 'A nation which placed its affairs in the hands of a woman shall never prosper!'" (Volume 5, Book 59, Number 709).

"leadership," which "comes to represent the invisible construct, certainly assumed to be masculine, to which the qualifier 'female' must be added in order to shift the focus from larger issues of Islam to issues exclusive to women" (2001:89-91). Unquestionably accepting this gendering of leadership relegates Muslim women "to the role of subject, but without agency" (ibid.). One of the prominent representatives of the conservative position, the famous theologian Syed Abul A'ala Maududi (d. 1979), interpreted this Qur'anic verse to mean that if "[m]en are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because men spend of their wealth on women," then women cannot be leaders over or for men (Shehab, 1986:117).

The supporters of an Islamic feminist view of leadership provide different articulations of leadership among Muslims through alternative readings and re-interpretations of the same (and other) religious and historical sources (for a discussion of Islamic Feminism see Badran, 2002, 2009). Some representatives of Islamic feminism argue that this *hadith* by Abu Bakra is not authentic (e.g. Mernissi, 1996). Other scholars interpret the same Qur'anic verse to mean that men are "those who provide a means of support or livelihood," which does not mean that women cannot or should not provide for themselves, but simply that in view of the heavy burden that most women shoulder in childbearing and rearing, they should not have the additional obligation of providing the means of living at the same time (Hassan, 1999: 264).
Amina Wadud, an American Islamic feminist and scholar, challenged the conservative view of women's leadership theologically in her writings and interviews and physically by leading a mixed-gender Friday prayer in New York City in 2005 both as "a leader and a woman" (Wadud, 1999; 2007:183).

A no-uniformity view suggests that there is no uniform position on the matter of women's leadership. Recognizing a de-centered nature in religious knowledge production, this view's proponents suggest that the very nature of Islam should result in multiple positions on this issue. Muslim theologian Abu Hanifa suggested that women could hold public office and act as judges "except in the case of criminal law (*hudud*)" (Hasyim, 2006:143). Ibn Jarir "allowed women absolute rights to be leaders," while Ibn Hazm argued that women could have every position but not a head of the state (Hasyim, 2006:143,139). Other scholars pointed out the historical context of Abu Bakra's *hadith* as a response to particular developments in Persia at the time and argue that the *hadith* cannot be read and applied literally to the contemporary issues in Muslim communities (Izzat, 1997). Shaykh al-Qaradawi, a current religious leader with a strong physical and virtual presence in various Muslim communities, granted Muslim women the right to hold political office, as a way of furthering the cause of Islam (Stowasser, 2001:110-114).

Whose leadership is it anyway?
The most obvious contribution of my research to this debate about Muslim women leaders is that it continues to problematize conservative views of women's leadership by providing numerous examples of it. This research also continues to challenge the assumption that political leadership is limited to formal, public arena such as the mosque (a male space), and/or to one's engagement with the state. Operating under this assumption makes it easy to overlook women's religious and political leadership taking place in unusual places, including public places created in the private domains of individual Muslims' homes and at sacred sites. By abandoning this assumption we can

clearly see the existence of other leadership models operating in and engendered by the particular socio-historical contexts of their respective societies. *Otinchalar* in the Valley claim not to engage with the state; rather they retreat from the state into a public domain of private space.

Further, by focusing on politics in unusual places, it becomes difficult to establish and sustain a critical distinction between religious (spiritual) and political leadership. In the case of *otinchalar*, their religious (spiritual) leadership is at the same time political leadership that emerges from a systematic attempt to remake themselves and their communities through religious education, observance, and advice based on the ethical message of Islam as understood by these women. *Otinchalar's* politics are not centered on political engagement with the state, but on one's moral being by teaching others how to "not do and do not allow others to do *gnoh* [bad deeds]," by telling "people about Islam," by sharing knowledge, and educating "each other and *ovam hulq* [uneducated people] slowly" (interview, Feruza-opa, 2002).

My research also demonstrates that formal and informal distinctions regarding religious leadership reflect historically contentious relationships between the state and Islam and are based in contextually particular constructions of gender. These distinctions between formal and informal do not reflect a natural condition of men to be leaders in the public arena and women to be their followers or lead in the private one. In a sense *otinchalar* are formal leaders as well, as some local women in the Valley perceive their meetings at homes to be as formal as those at mosques.

Further, I have exemplified how the current demarcation between formal and informal in regard to leadership is porous. A merge of these domains takes place (1) within family circles where husbands share information with their wives about the meetings at the mosques and wives share with their husbands their Islamic knowledge, and (2) among some formal and informal religious leaders, where male leaders consult with female leaders on religious and social matters. *Otinchalar's* leadership does extend to local men through their advice on socio-religious matters and through intra-family communications. Hence, in order to fully comprehend the importance of Muslim women's leadership in its different forms, we must critically interrogate the very definition of leadership: does to lead others necessarily mean to physically preside over them? In the case of *otinchalar*, their leadership is not *over* local women and men (nor do they aspire to have such leadership positions). Rather it is a leadership *by sharing* knowledge in particular ways engendered by their socio-historical context.

My research also questions the assumption common to the debate about women's leadership that women desire exactly the same leadership positions possessed by men. One's desire for particular forms of leadership is formed through a human interaction with social and physical environments and is historically situated. Some North American Muslim women leaders like Amina Wadud have served as leaders in mixed-gender communal prayers and were both praised and condemned by Muslims and non-Muslims. In a North American context, the history of women's suffrage and the civil rights movement has engendered such desires; many American women fought for a long time to be able to occupy male-dominated positions of leadership and authority. Yet, why should we assume exactly the same desires on the part of women worldwide, or even on the part of all women in North America?[22] While some desired and fought for their right to work,

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[22] For a discussion of other forms of leadership see Mattson (2005).

others, particularly poor underprivileged women, like some Muslim women in southern California, desired a right to not work, not to be like men (see Rouse, 2004).

Leading men in congregational prayer at the mosque is only one definition of leadership. There are other forms of leadership, such as *otinchalar's*, that do not seek formal political authority and leadership and do not pursue or advocate radical social restructuring. Rather they produce socio-political criticism and leadership in a self-reflexive manner at a local level, where one has to change oneself and then a collectivity of these morally transformed individuals will eventually constitute a morally sound Islamic community and perhaps even a polity.

Finally, I argue that Muslim women's leadership has to be considered in light of the contested models of gender differences within their local communities. These differences are not intrinsic, but are socially produced, historically engendered, dynamic, and inform not only the division of labor in a society, but also result in often contrasting possibilities of expression for men and women. Thus, leadership is enacted and experienced differently by and among men and women. In the Valley desire for the positions of authority and leadership in the formal public domain are often perceived as men's desires. Local women often desire different forms of socio-religious accomplishments through an ongoing cultivation of individual and social moral renewal in other spaces and places. They, too, lead. Their leadership, however, takes on different forms, equally important, but not exactly the same as those of *imams* and *mullahs* at local mosques and within local communities. We may read these forms of leadership as what I. M. Lewis (1986) called the "dual spiritual economy" in Islam with the two branches, male and female, being "interdependent and complementary" (1986:106). Yet, this dual spiritual economy, as I have demonstrated, is historically constituted and is not absolute. A careful contextual and historical consideration of gender dynamics in a community in question may provide a more fruitful venue for a debate about Muslim women's leadership.

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