

## WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO PROFESSIONALIZATION IN MUSLIM ASIA RECONFIGURING RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE, GENDER, AND CONNECTIVITY

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Religious knowledge has acquired a hitherto rarely acknowledged relevance for female Muslim actors in the fields of mobile entrepreneurship and social activism. Starting out from two regions that play an active role in the global Islamic knowledge circulation, Southeast and Central Asia, our joint research collaboration addresses the contemporary religion-profession nexus in Asia's Muslim societies: women's vocational professionalization through religious knowledge.



Students of an Islamic educational institution in Tajikistan prepare for their lessons. © Manja Stephan-Emmrich 2011

If this sounds too abstract, consider some examples: Women from Tajikistan trading in the latest styles of Muslim fashion purchased in Dubai on local bazaars use their Islamic knowledge proficiencies gained in the Middle East to fashion themselves as pious entrepreneurs. Female Indonesian fashion designers translate piety into high-end clothing, and female education entrepreneurs from Kyrgyzstan take part in Quran recitation competitions in Indonesia. On the level of civil society activism, women's rights advocates from Southeast Asia and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region travel across the globe and lobby for Muslim Family Law reforms at the UN. Numerous other examples of professionally active, oftentimes cross-regionally mobile and religiously educated Muslim

women could be mentioned, including those active in the vibrant business sectors of Halal certification (where Malaysia provides standards that are followed in Central Asia) or Islamic finance (in which Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are leading nations).

For our part, we center our research on a set of selected case studies (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Malaysia) that reflect new and historically grown connectivities in and between Asia and the MENA region in the field of religious knowledge production, dissemination, and acquisition. Highly motivated by the cross-disciplinary (ethnography, political science, Islamic studies), multi-sited and transregional design of our research, we explore how female Muslim actors push forward new configurations of faith, knowledge, and work in multiple and creative ways. Thus, we are interested in how women

“put religion to work” without entering religiously defined fields of profession (i.e. positions such as priests, Imams, Mullahs, monks, nuns, judges at religious courts and the like), and how Muslim women therewith open up pathways into professionalization in the field of global economy and civic activism. In this context, it is important for us to find out which specific forms, processes and ideas of professionalization arise from these new configurations.

In the summer and winter term of 2019, we work on the topic together with IAAW master students in two research seminars and practice co-teaching - which is an enriching exercise in every regard. Earlier this year, we submitted a proposal for funding to the DFG (German Research Foundation). We hope that the reviewers of the proposal will be as thrilled by

the theme of our project as we are. The prime objective of our endeavor is to achieve theoretical and conceptual clarity pertaining to the connection between knowledge, religion and professionalization. By looking at the multidirectional exchange relations between Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, we draw attention to the emergence of new vibrant hubs of religious knowledge and explore how these condition the creation and regulation of Muslim women's professional subject-formation.

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