



Female Islamic Studies teachers in Saudi Arabia: A phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights on describing the experiences of Saudi Arabian female Islamic Studies teachers by exploring what it means to be an Islamic Studies teacher teaching in the current unprecedented vibrant and complex tapestry of social, religious and political debates occurring in the larger context of the country. The study draws on phenomenology as a guiding theoretical framework. The seven teachers involved in the study used their identities, beliefs and values to make sense of their everyday lived experiences. Discussions about their lived experiences provided a counter-discourse that challenges the traditional image of Islamic Studies teachers as transmitters of sacred knowledge. The study points to the growing complexity of the Islamic Studies teachers' roles due to an array of challenges that surfaced both in society at large and within the classroom walls.

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1. Introduction

Religion in Saudi Arabia is regarded as the bedrock of all educational decisions. In fact, the constitution of Saudi Arabia reflects the country's philosophy: 'The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God's Book and the *Sunnah* [ways and practices] of His Prophet, peace be upon him, are its constitution, Arabic is its language' ([International Constitutional Law Document, 2005](#)). With regard to the education sector, the first general objective and strategic starting point of Saudi Arabia's Sixth Development Plan (1995–2000) made it a priority 'to safeguard Islamic values by duly observing, disseminating and confirming Allah's Shari'ah (God's Divine Law)' ([Ministry of Planning, 1995](#)).

Religious education, namely *Islamic* education, is emphasized throughout all levels of the school system in Saudi Arabia. Its subjects are: *Quran*, *Tajwid* (conventions of Quranic recitation), *Tafsir* (Quranic Interpretation), *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet), *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and *Tawheed* (the Oneness of God). Failure in anyone of the above subjects requires the student to repeat the whole academic year. Approximately 30% of the students' total classroom hours is dedicated to teaching these subjects in elementary school, whereas 24% of class time is committed to teaching these subjects at the intermediate and secondary levels ([Prokop, 2005](#)). The emphasis on Islam, however, is not limited to the parts of the school day that are explicitly devoted to religious subjects, but

pervades the teaching of all subjects at all academic levels. Sciences and humanities subjects are enveloped in layers of Islamic thought and philosophy. For instance, history classes emphasize such elements as the history of Islamic civilization and the life of the prophet, and Arabic literature classes are heavily influenced by Islamic teachings ([Prokop, 2003](#)).

Current research on Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia focuses on reforming the 'official curriculum' and school textbooks in response to fierce attacks alleging that on the Saudi national curriculum promotes hostility against non-Muslims ([Prokop, 2003](#); [Stalinsky, 2003](#)). Such allegations were met with an aggressive response, most notably from the Imam at the Holy Mosque of Makkah, Sheik Saud Al Shuraim, who publically declared that any change in the curriculum material would be regarded as an act of 'high treason' ([Prokop, 2003](#)). Nonetheless, Ministry of Education and other government officials continue the call for toning down the anti-non-Muslim rhetoric in the curriculum and have made efforts to retrain teachers in fostering tolerance and open-mindedness among the Saudi youth. Despite widespread attempts to develop new curricula and materials for schools the impoverished understandings of the complex role of the teacher and the classroom context has resulted in the creation of a parochial and simplistic understanding of this fundamental issue. In this context, I seek to broaden the scope of educational research by steering away from the heated debate around the 'official curriculum' and focusing on what is known as the 'delivered curriculum' ([Eisner, 1992](#))—i.e., that which is actually taught in the classroom, taking account of teacher identity beliefs, styles, and their impact on the form and content of curricular materials that students actually receive.

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1.1. Why study women?

There are several reasons for limiting the study to women teachers. First, the conservative nature of the Saudi society would make it difficult for a female researcher like myself to interview or interact with male Islamic Studies teachers. Second, Saudi women, let alone Saudi women teachers, are an understudied population. Research in Saudi women is scarce and often lacks meticulous description. This could be due to the fact that women in Saudi culture are regarded as *oura*, a term used to designate something extremely private, including private body parts (Arobi, 1994). Women are also regarded as objects of family honor and hence protecting them from the public eye is not limited to physical concealment or veiling, but includes shielding the disclosure of their identities and voices. Hitherto, very few researchers have attempted to study the Saudi Arabian female. One of the prominent researchers in this area is the Saudi anthropologist Suraya Al Torki, who has conducted research on women's development and employment in Saudi Arabia (1992), on the ideology and behavior of privileged Saudi women (1986) and on family organization and women's power in Saudi urban society (1977). Arobi (1994) has also contributed to the understanding of Saudi women through her study on Saudi women writers and the political discourse.

Thirdly, given that Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country and that, like many developing countries, it has undergone rapid economic, social and demographic changes, the country implemented what was known as a 'rapid expansion policy,' in which the emphasis has centered on quantitative expansion of the education sector (Abd-el Wassie, 1970; Prokop, 2003). The advances in terms of infrastructure, developing books, training teachers and establishing schools have been so rapid that it has been difficult to evaluate the efforts expended into education (Abd-el Wassie, 1970). In fact, female teacher education for Saudi women only began in the late 1960s. Most teachers prior to that time were imported from neighboring Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Syria. In the late 1960s, as part of its effort to address the dire need for Saudi teachers, the Ministry of Education implemented a two-year diploma programme for teacher preparation. The participating teachers were only required to have completed an elementary school degree. Today, due to increasing unemployment among Saudis, the country has implemented a policy known as 'Saudiization,' in which Saudis are given priority for job placements over non Saudis, a policy that is felt strongly in the education sector. Hence, there exists today a new generation of female Saudi teachers working in the education system. These women, I believe, are key players in the development of education in Saudi Arabia today; however, they lack voice and presence in current research regarding Saudi Arabia and its education system.

Fourthly, choosing to focus on the experiences of the female Islamic Studies (referred to as IS hereafter) teachers, who are regarded as the weavers of the moral fiber of Saudi society, is unprecedented in the Saudi Arabian context. These women teachers are important because they are situated at the core of the ongoing debates about the role of women in Saudi Arabia today. As stakeholders in this debate, whether active or passive, their identities and experiences are constantly being shaped and reshaped by the political, social and religious changes in the nation at large. Moreover, according to Prokop (2005), 'the influence of religious forces is particularly felt in the field of female education' (p. 63). Indeed, women's education in Saudi Arabia is strictly controlled by the *ulama* and is impacted by a prominent gender ideology or ideal image of the Muslim Saudi Arabian woman that is sustained by the state, by society and by the *ulama* (Doumato, 1992).

According to Kirk and Winthrop (2008) both in North America and western contexts, there is a wealth of literature that addresses

individual teachers' experiences, identities, biographies, narratives and voices (see for example, Casey, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, 2000, 2003; Goodson, 1992). The previous type of literature has greatly informed teacher education programmes, especially in more progressive institutions and is recognized for its importance in the area of teacher professional development (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008). However, in Saudi Arabia, there is very little attention given to the various experiences, perceptions and narratives of teachers. Simply put, no one has endeavored to ask teachers for such input – perhaps because no one has considered their experiences to be a valuable subject of study, since the teacher is still regarded as an implementer of reform policy who may occasionally require 'retraining' rather than as an active stakeholder in the reform process.

1.2. Why now?

As a political unit, Saudi Arabia's origins lie within the puritanical *Wahhabi* movement that gained the allegiance of the powerful Al Saud royal family. This political/religious alliance is not only the basis of the present Saudi Arabian state, it also shapes the social, cultural, and political norms, attitudes, behavior and environment of the nation. The field of political psychology takes the view that political systems routinely shape the identities, memories, stereotypes, beliefs, language, emotions and actions of citizens. Seen from this perspective, the people of Saudi Arabia have historically been habituated to a system within which change is rare and most individuals choose to remain within the realm of the familiar, thus buttressing and perpetuating a ubiquitous belief in *accurate knowledge and indisputable truths*. This exemplifies the view of Taba and Til (1945) that 'Homogenous cultures are largely conservative: change comes slowly and the core of the culture is preserved intact' (p. 62). In the wake of the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, many of the perpetuated 'truths' have been challenged and education reform in the Arab and Muslim world has emerged as a subject of great debate. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the country is currently experiencing a metamorphosis due to the unprecedentedly vibrant and complex tapestry of social, religious and political debates occurring in the larger context of the country. This phenomenon is best described in the words of Al Rasheed (2007), who explains that 'more than any other time, Saudi society is polarized over religious interpretation and political aspirations. Without ignoring the impact of rapid social and economic change, the polarization is primarily a product of a widening gap between professed symbols and reality. The ongoing debate, together with the increased violence, simply indicates that Saudi Arabia is undergoing a transformation' (p. 13). This transformation has led women to become more vocal about their role in society. This was particularly evident in the 2004 National Dialogue Forum, at which women debated many issues regarding women's education in the kingdom, such as the introduction of physical education, which was previously banned (Prokop, 2005).

Furthermore, due to increasingly widespread literacy and mass media, ordinary Muslims have become increasingly familiar with religious concepts and interpretation. This has led to a modern phenomenon in the Muslim world known as the 'objectification of religion,' in which issues that were once practiced unreflectively are constantly being debated among the masses (Eckleman & Piscatori, 1996 as cited in Mahmood, 2005). These debates, once regarded as exogenous to the Saudi classroom, have become increasingly salient among students and teachers. Hence, in addition to the task of teaching about religious practices, IS teachers are constantly being asked to 'persuade' students about the authenticity and sanctity of their religion. Mahmood (2005) explains this phenomenon succinctly as the 'pedagogy of persuasion' (p. 79). Hence,

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