

Shī'a Female University Experiences Shaping Religious Authority Conceptions

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The particular analysis of women's experiences, in religious spaces, is a growing aspect of ethnographic research that has arisen from appreciating the gender-specific dynamics that exist within any social space.

This paper brings to light some of the findings resulting from an ongoing PhD research project, exploring Shī'a Muslim university student organisations in the UK, the *AhlulBayt Societies (ABSocs)*.

While this sociological study draws on conceptual understandings of religious authority particularly in Shī'a Islam, it is primarily an ethnographic analysis of the practices and social constructs of religious authority, as seen within a specific community. The social science project has employed group and individual interviewing, as well as forms of observation, as methods for collecting data.

From amongst the key finding stemming from the analysis of the collected data, is that some of the experiences of female ABSoc affiliates on campus, are specific to them and identifiable as such; largely not felt by the male research participants, or perhaps not realised in the same way. The challenges they face often involve cross-gender contact, in secular campus environments, but they are not limited to this dilemma. The study also unearths issues regarding the observation of *Hijab* and gender-segregation.

The wider research explores the concept of religious authority in *Twelver Shi'ism*, and the performances thereof, among this very distinct segment of UK Muslims. As such, this paper discusses how, because of their gender-specific experiences, some female participants, in practice, adopt their own religious jurisprudential agency independently of authorities recognised within Shī'i orthodoxy; and how their gender-related contexts may have impacted upon shaping their perceptions of the said established authorities.

Following and emulating the mentioned religious authorities, primarily based in Iran and Iraq, is thought to be a central and significant tenet in Shī'ism and Shī'i practice. This paper uncovers ABSoc organizational performances of religious authority which have helped maintain a consistent Shī'i identity on campuses, especially when the teachings of those transnational authorities may not have been palatable for female members.

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