

Women's Authority in Patriarchal Social Movements: The Case of Female Salafi Preachers

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Abstract: *How do women gain authority in the public sphere, especially in contexts where patriarchal norms are prevalent? I argue that the leaders of patriarchal social movements face pragmatic incentives to expand women's authority roles when seeking new movement members. Women authorities help patriarchal movements by making persuasive, identity-based arguments in favor of patriarchy that men cannot, and by reaching new audiences that men cannot. I support this argument by examining the rise of online female preachers in the Islamist Salafi movement, using interviews, Twitter analysis, and automated text analysis of 21,000 texts by 172 men and 43 women on the Salafi-oriented website *saaid.net*. To show the theory's generality, I also apply it to the contemporary white nationalist movement in the United States. The findings illustrate how movements that aggressively enforce traditional gender roles for participants can nevertheless increase female authority for pragmatic political reasons.*

Replication Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/6YNZTE>.

How do women gain authority in the public sphere? Scholars have focused on understanding how women gain access to political office (Bush 2011; Karpowitz, Monson, and Preece 2017; Krook 2010; Lawless and Fox 2005; Teele 2018), especially when patriarchal attitudes remain prevalent in society (Bush and Gao 2017). But political power is not just about holding political office, and political scientists have also turned attention to other ways women enter public politics, such as activism in social movements, religion, and civil society (Ben Shitrit 2016; Clark and Schwedler 2003).

In this article, I document how conservative Muslim women are gaining authority as religious preachers, called *dāʿiyāt* in Arabic, in a conservative social movement called Salafi Islam. As in many other religious traditions, religious authority in Islam has generally been held by men. There are notable exceptions (Bano and

Kalmbach 2012; Hassan 2009; Kalmbach 2008), but men have generally occupied authority roles in the Muslim world even if women's authority is deemed permissible under Islamic law (Kloos and Künkler 2016). The Salafi movement in particular has a gender ideology that appears to leave little space for women's authority. For example, Salafis seek to avoid almost all contact between men and women outside of family relationships for fear of committing the sin of gender mixing (Rock-Singer 2016). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the scholarly literature on Salafism has been largely concerned with men.¹

Yet, despite the Salafi movement's explicit opposition to women's authority, women's words comprise a remarkable amount of Salafi religious and political discourse. Data from a census of Muslim preachers on the Internet show that approximately 2.5% of Muslim preachers are

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¹For example, two of the most important recent works on Salafism, Meijer (2009), and Lauzière (2016), have no discussion of female Salafis, and to my examination, there are no women listed in the index of either.

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women, but on the Salafi website I examine in this article, 20% of the authors are women.² This is not the only place where female religious authority is on the rise in Islam, but it is perhaps one of the more puzzling.

Some scholars propose *pragmatist* explanations for women's empowerment: Men grant women power because it is politically useful (Bush and Gao 2017; El-Ghobashy 2005; Weeks 2018). Other scholars favor *agency-from-below* explanations, in which women claim increased authority for themselves in political organizations that remain resistant (Ben Shitrit 2016). I develop a theory that integrates these two approaches: Pragmatism creates demand within movements for female authorities, and agency-from-below creates supply. Siding with the pragmatists, I argue that women gain authority when movement gatekeepers find them useful. Yet in contrast to many pragmatist arguments that focus on gender quotas for political office, I show that women can offer arguments and ideas that help movements, rather than merely filling seats in legislatures. Producing these arguments and ideas is an act of agency-from-below by women, even if the movement is only receptive for pragmatic reasons. Female authorities are helpful to patriarchal movements because they can wield their identities as women to make persuasive arguments supporting patriarchy that men cannot. This *identity authority* is useful to patriarchal social movements because it can justify movement gender norms and draw in new audiences. Movement gatekeepers are pragmatic enough to set aside some of their concerns about women's empowerment to harness the persuasiveness of women's arguments and attract more followers.

I develop and test this argument by examining the roles of 215 preachers—172 men and 43 women—on the Salafi-oriented website *Ṣayd al-Fawā'id*, which I refer to by its URL, saaid.net. Through a variety of methods, I triangulate evidence for the key observable implications of my theory: that movement gatekeepers are intentionally extending authority to female spokespersons because these women reach new audiences by offering identity-based arguments for patriarchy that men cannot. Specifically, I provide interview evidence that the editors of saaid.net seek out female preachers, statistical evidence that writings by female preachers reach new audiences on Twitter, and textual evidence that women use identity authority more than men, whereas men assert authority through citations to authoritative texts more than women. To show that my theory generalizes beyond the Salafi movement, the penultimate section demonstrates

that the same argument explains the role of women in the contemporary white nationalism movement in the United States.

If political pragmatism can encourage change in patriarchal social movements, activists seeking to increase women's participation in the public sphere should focus on creating political incentives to do so. However, my findings also remind us that women in positions of authority can work to perpetuate patriarchy rather than fight it. This article leaves open questions about whether the increased prominence of female authorities in patriarchal social movements will expand women's rights generally.

Women's Authority in Patriarchal Social Movements

Women in many parts of the world have long been disempowered relative to men (Inglehart and Norris 2003a), and women in the Arab Muslim world are no exception (Ahmed 1992; Inglehart and Norris 2003b; Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent 2016, 1557–61). Scholars have debated whether Islam is responsible for the status of women in Muslim-majority countries or if the blame is more appropriately laid at the feet of other forces (Donno and Russett 2004; Fish 2002; Ross 2008). In this debate, scholars have embraced the potential for liberal women's activism to overturn patriarchal societal norms in Muslim-majority societies, either focusing on these movements where they have occurred or lamenting their absence where they have not (Arat 2000; Badran 2005; Weiss 2003). However, scholars have paid less attention to the activism of conservative women supporting patriarchal systems. Most who have focus on the question of why women would support a vision of society that seems inimical to their interests (Blaydes and Linzer 2008). In the words of Ozorak (1996, 17), "Why do women disproportionately invest in an institution that systematically devalues them?"

The emerging picture from this literature is that conservative female activists are not duped about the movements they support. They exhibit as much agency as liberal female activists. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of a "patriarchal bargain" is useful for understanding these patriarchal women activists. In exchange for upholding the overarching patriarchal system, women are allowed spheres of influence. This in turn gives them incentives to perpetuate the system.

Examples of conservative women's activism come from a diverse set of cases. For example, Ulrich (2017, xiii) highlights the agency of Mormon women in 1870s Utah who defended their faith's practice of "plural

²The Internet census of Muslim clerics comes from Nielsen (2017). The data for calculating that 2.5% of online Muslim preachers are women are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PG4A7K>.

marriage,” a form of polygamy, by agitating for women’s suffrage. She asks, “How could women simultaneously support a national campaign for political and economic rights while defending marital practices that to most people seemed relentlessly patriarchal?” Ulrich’s answer is that Mormon women used the political confrontation between the Mormon community and the U.S. government to “strengthen their position within their own community” (xiv). Mormon women’s “support for their brethren was sincere, but it was also strategic. They knew when and how to ask for the things they wanted, and they wanted the right to vote” (xiv).

Saba Mahmood’s 2005 work on pious women in the patriarchal *da’wa* movement in Egypt also contradicts the idea that “women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan” (1). Instead, the Egyptian women Mahmood studies have created new spaces for themselves, “altering the historically male-centered character of mosques [and] Islamic pedagogy” (2). Mahmood’s interlocuters are empowered agents, choosing to support patriarchy.

Lihi Ben Shitrit (2016, 5) is critical of focusing on the question of why women support conservative movements. In her words, this obsession in the literature “takes for granted that there is something strange or puzzling about this support—that it is an anomaly or a peculiarity that requires explanation” (5). Instead, Ben Shitrit urges scholars to focus on the *means* through which women act to support their conservative movements. Ben Shitrit (2016, 4) states the puzzle succinctly: “How do [female] activists in patriarchal religious-political movements, with clear notions about male and female different private and public roles, manage to expand spaces for political activism in ways that seem to transgress their movements’ gender ideology?” This article proposes some answers to these questions.

Top-Down Movement Strategies Can Create Space for Women’s Authority

There are two general arguments about how space for women’s activism and authority expands in patriarchal social movements and political organizations. The first type of argument emphasizes pragmatic movement strategies that increase women’s access to authority. In these arguments, movements have most of the agency, and women are slotted into activist roles as movement leaders see fit. The second type of argument emphasizes the individual strategies women use as agents to carve out space as activists in movements that remain inherently skeptical of women’s activism. These pragmatism and agency-from-below arguments are not mutually

exclusive, but most research tends to emphasize one or the other.

The most prominent pragmatist arguments suggest that parties and political organizations empower women when they gain electoral advantage for doing so (Bush and Gao 2017; Teele 2018; Weeks 2018). This argument finds some support in accounts of the changing views about women’s authority in Islamist groups. El-Ghobashy (2005) argues that political pragmatism made the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood moderate their views on a number of issues, including the scope of women’s rightful authority. Instead of the conservative views on women’s empowerment espoused by the Brotherhood’s old guard, the new leaders of the Brotherhood “have devoted much space in their arguments on women’s citizenship rights to refuting obstinate views and reinterpreting Quranic injunctions that specify men’s tutelage over women” (382). The logic is one of pure pragmatism. One spokesperson for the updated views of the Brotherhood writes, “Limiting the Muslim woman’s right to participate in elections weakens the winning chances of Islamist candidates” (382).

Additional pragmatic considerations arise when movements seek to gain or retain members as societal gender norms change. Iannaccone and Miles (1990) argue that patriarchal groups face a dilemma when societal gender norms shift away from patriarchy, making the group’s gender ideology nonmainstream. Moderating the group’s gender ideology attracts new members who prefer to join mainstream groups but alienates old members (1246). Facing these pressures, movement leaders may allow women increased authority to convince new members that the movement is not overly patriarchal, while selecting female authorities who support continued patriarchy to avoid alienating older members who prefer the patriarchal status quo. These pragmatic considerations are almost certainly facing Islamists. Governments in some Muslim-majority countries have granted women authority within the state’s “official Islam” (Hassan 2009; Künkler 2018), offering a highly visible alternative to traditional Islamist claims that religious authority rightfully resides with men. As women claim more public visibility and leadership in society, Islamists may feel pressure to defend their steadfast embrace of patriarchy by deploying women to make counter-arguments.

If women are primarily visible in patriarchal movements at the behest of men, then perhaps they are constrained to perform roles scripted for them. Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013, 258) writes that female Salafi preachers can be “trusted to endorse official messages and never question rulings on women” from their male counterparts. Al-Rasheed finds that gender segregation of Salafi

audiences is strict. “Female preachers enter the public sphere only as women preaching to other women, thus creating a parallel yet structurally inferior space for women in order to preserve overall male dominance” (248). In her view, female Salafi preachers are not religiously innovative, but instead seek to faithfully transmit the messages of their male counterparts to women. “Religious activist women can only hope to play an auxiliary role enforcing the rulings of religious men. Women aspire to extend men’s control in areas where they cannot reach” (247–48).

In this account, female Salafi preachers have no responsibility, and probably no right, to speak authoritatively to a male or mixed-gender audience. Instead, female preachers speak solely to women, urging them to comply with rulings issued by male clerics on a wide range of so-called women’s issues. As Al-Rasheed puts it, “Their words are meant to be consumed by women only” (2013, 248).

Women Can Carve Out Space of Authority from the Bottom Up

Other scholars emphasize women’s capacity as agents working from below to create spaces of activism and authority in patriarchal movements and societies.

Agency-focused explanations often emphasize the importance of women’s rhetoric justifying their authority and activism. Ben Shitrit (2016) offers a compelling account of how female activists in patriarchal movements create rhetorical “frames of exception” that “provide women with discursive framing tools to justify and promote forms of political participation that diverge from the gender ideology upheld by the movements” (12). These frames of exception are primarily available to women activists in religious movements with a nationalist flavor, “outwardly focused on a struggle against a foreign rival” (8). A context of nationalist struggle allows space for transgressive activism by women because they can “argue for the temporary prioritization of the nationalist struggle over concerns with gender-role complementarity and female modesty” (12). Exceptional times allow for exceptional activism by women because it is both “righteous” and temporary: righteous because the overarching cause of the nationalist struggle justifies the activism, and temporary because the activism is viewed as rightfully limited to the period of nationalist struggle (14). Ben Shitrit contends that women in proselyting movements—those that “seek primarily to spread religiosity in their own communities” (8)—cannot frame possible activism as necessary to meet the challenge of exceptional times and are thus less likely to be activists in ways that transgress movement norms.

Ben Shitrit’s notion of “frames of exception” explains much of the variation in the cases she examines in contemporary Israel-Palestine: ultra-Orthodox Shas, the Islamic Movement, Jewish West Bank settlers, and Hamas. It offers a less satisfying explanation for female Salafi preachers because Salafis are a proselyting movement—precisely the kind that she argues are unlikely to permit women to violate gender norms during exceptional times. If female Salafi preachers were only preaching to women, then this would better match the “piety promotion among other women” that she believes is the likely form of female activism in proselytizing movements (Ben Shitrit 2016, 10). Certainly, this fits how Salafi women preach in face-to-face settings, but I demonstrate that online, these female preachers are writing to, and reaching, mixed-gender audiences.

New media forms, especially broadcasting technology, can create ambiguous spaces where women can assert a right to preach while circumventing doctrinal prohibitions on gender mixing (Roald 2016; Schulz 2012). Le Renard (2014) notes that in Saudi Arabia, “many young women study IT or sciences that in other contexts are studied by a majority of men. Computer-based professions are particularly accessible to women because they can generally be exercised from home or within a space that respects gender segregation” (38). The Internet creates space for female preachers by mediating interactions that were formerly face-to-face.

Female preachers may carve out space for themselves by increasing their charisma and scholarly knowledge. An ethnography by Le Renard (2012) suggests that knowledge and charisma are key sources of authority for female preachers (113–15). Le Renard recounts a 2009 lecture by Ruqayyah al-Maḥārib that “gave the impression that her knowledge of Qurʾān and *Sunnah* was exhaustive, and that she was deeply touched by what she was telling to the audience” (116). Perhaps movements are unable to rein in these impressively knowledgeable, charismatic women, although this does not explain why men would endorse their preaching.

Movements Give Women Authority in Order to Reach New Audiences

Why would movements with patriarchal ideologies give women authority? In the previous section, I contrasted pragmatic and agency-from-below arguments. In this section, I combine them to offer a new theory of how women can gain authority in patriarchal social movements. Two elements of my argument are additions to existing theory:

the ability of female spokespersons to reach new audiences and their ability to make particularly credible arguments in favor of patriarchy.

Recent pragmatist theories of women's empowerment focus on the electoral benefits of giving women authority (Bush and Gao 2017; Weeks 2018). I am interested in a more general setting where there is not an electoral incentive created by legislative gender quotas, and where the social movement is not necessarily associated with a political party.

Even without electoral incentives, movement leaders still face pragmatic incentives to give women authority. Movement leaders often want to expand the size of their movement by attracting new supporters. Potential new supporters must come from the broader society outside of the group's current membership. Some individuals in society may already believe the same things as the social movement but be unaware of it. Others may be aware but are unpersuaded that they should agree with the social movement. One role of movement authorities, then, is to increase movement support by reaching new audiences and offering arguments that persuade these audiences to believe in and join the social movement.

The pool of potential supporters for any given social movement is diverse. As such, it is unlikely that there is a single spokesperson or line of argument that is best for reaching and persuading all potential supporters. Instead, I argue that some movement spokespersons will be able to reach some potential supporters whom others cannot. And potential supporters will find different arguments persuasive.

Social movements with a patriarchal vision of society are likely to begin with men as the movement's authorities. This is not because women cannot support patriarchy, but because social movements are likely to organize themselves to be congruent with their vision of society. This means that at their founding, patriarchal social movements are likely to have a relatively homogenous, predominantly male, set of authoritative movement spokespersons. When reaching out to potential supporters, these men are likely to reach similar audiences and deliver similar messages.

Social movements with homogenous authorities face limits in their ability to attract new followers because these authorities cannot access or persuade all members of society equally. When movements hit these limits, they face a choice: either increase the authority of a more diverse set of individuals to reach new potential recruits or stop growing.

Faced with the limits of male authorities to reach new audiences, movements, I argue, turn to women as potential spokespersons. Women offer access to new audiences

and offer styles of argument that men cannot. Movement leaders may decide that the benefits of reaching these new audiences outweigh the risks of granting women authority, especially if they perceive that these women are making arguments that support, rather than undermine, the role of patriarchy in society.

In a society where patriarchal norms are being challenged, women can be particularly effective advocates for patriarchal social movements. This is because "a person who makes proclamations that run contrary to their personal and political interests" (Berinsky 2015, 2) is more persuasive. This suggests that a key source of authority for women in patriarchal movements is their identity. Women are persuasive because, unlike men, they can make arguments of the form, "As a woman, I reject feminism." This argument holds weight with new audiences precisely because of the identity of the speaker. I label this phenomenon *identity authority*.

In patriarchal social movements, women are often cast as living symbols of the movement's moral foundation and virtue. This symbolism centers around women's roles as mothers. For example, Ben Shitrit (2016, 128) highlights the rhetorical construction of "maternal frames" by the activists she studies, as well as women in other settings. I argue that this rhetorical framing enhances women's identity authority. When women couch their arguments in the language of motherhood, this makes their arguments more persuasive with audiences both inside and outside the social movement. This means that motherhood rhetoric in patriarchal movements is a double-edged sword. On one hand, this rhetoric is clearly intended to restrict women's authority to the domestic sphere. Yet in this instance, women are deploying their domestic identities to speak authoritatively in the public arena.

This highlights the role of women's agency in my theory. These women are not passively filling a role given to them by men. Rather, they must actively create authentic, public arguments supporting patriarchy. This takes a certain activist orientation, especially within a movement that urges women to direct their efforts toward domesticity. It is necessary that these women have agency or else their arguments will not be effective. This is because their persuasiveness lies in being seen to *freely* endorse patriarchy, despite being women. If they are seen as puppets controlled by male movement leaders, then the persuasiveness of their identity authority is largely negated. This contrasts with the electoral setting described by Bush and Gao (2017). A vote is a vote whether the woman who casts it does so freely or is controlled by men, but an argument based on identity authority is undermined if it is not made freely.

There is nothing about identity authority that is inherent to gender. It can derive from any identity that bestows authority and credibility in a particular context. In general, identity authority is strongest for actors who are perceived to speak against the interests implied by their identity: gay individuals who oppose gay marriage, ethnic minorities who endorse discriminatory practices against their ethnic group, and high-income earners who advocate higher taxes on the rich, for example. Thus, my theory is general to social movements that seek to expand their membership beyond the audiences accessible to their current movement spokespersons. In the subset of these social movements that are patriarchal, I expect these pragmatic calculations to result in increased women's authority, but patriarchy is not a strict scope condition. Future work might empirically test whether identity authority based on identities other than gender operates in the same ways.

Women's Authority in the Salafi Movement

I now show how my theory explains the rise of women's authority in the Salafi movement in Islam.

First, are these women really authorities? Following Weber's classic definition (Weber 2009), I consider authority to be "the probability that a command with a specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons, despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which that probability rests" (Uphoff 1989, 300–301). Religious authority, then, is authority "legitimated by reference to the supernatural" (Chaves 1994, 756). My emphasis on obedience suggests that "the authorities" of "official Islam" in the Middle East (Brown 2017) may not actually be very authoritative if they have little influence over how lay Muslims choose to practice their faith. Conversely, online preachers who have no official position can have a great deal of authority if they are influential.

Establishment clerics in Islam—the *ʿulamāʾ*—have built their religious authority through varying combinations of scholarship, peer recognition, and association with political authority. The Salafi movement draws on these sources of authority too, but recently, the movement has turned to popularity and mass participation for legitimacy. Of course, Salafis still justify their approach with scholarly arguments from Islamic law, but they also tout their large and growing popularity as a sign that they are right.

The advent of the Internet has played decisively in favor of the growth of Salafism. The Internet helps religious

actors who construct authority through popularity, media visibility, charisma, and lay engagement—precisely the sources of authority that differentiate many independent Salafi religious authorities from the traditional religious elite in Islam. The Internet is not the only innovation that has upended traditional Islamic authority. Indeed, a centuries-long "crisis of authority" in Islam caused by colonialism, increasing codification of sharia, and the rise of the modern nation-state (Brown 1997) has been exacerbated by print technology and, more recently, audio-cassette tapes (Bulliet 2002). But the Internet has greater reach than any of these prior technologies, which means that it weighs even more heavily in favor of preachers and clerics who rely on "media authority" (Herbst 2003; Turner 2007).

I argue that the Internet creates pragmatic demand for female religious authority within the Salafi movement. The messages of female preachers resonate with online audiences outside of the traditional base of Salafi support, expanding the base of potential Salafi supporters. By virtue of their identities as women, these preachers offer potentially persuasive defenses against the seductions of Western notions of women's rights. If female voices can contribute patriarchal arguments that male voices cannot, then movement gatekeepers have incentives to give online female preachers unprecedented roles.

Evidence from a Salafi-Oriented Website

My primary data source is a Salafi-oriented website titled *Ṣayd al-Fawāʾid*, at the URL saaid.net. Saaid.net is a large, high-traffic missionary website promoting Salafism³ through writing, and occasionally other media. Two sections of the website provide data for my study. The section titled *ʿulamāʾ wa ʿulbat al-ʿilm* contains hyperlinks to the works of 172 male Salafi preachers. These include well-known scholars, high-ranking state appointees, and relatively obscure preachers with a range of credentials (45 with a doctorate, 106 listed as "*al-shaykh*," eight listed as "professor/teacher," four listed as "preacher," and the rest with other or no listed qualifications).⁴ A separate section titled *multaqā al-dāʿiyāt* lists 43 female preachers, also with a range of credentials

³To confirm that saaid.net is generally representative of Salafism, I identified two crowdsourced lists of 208 prominent Salafi figures on Wikipedia and confirmed that most of them (87%) appear in some form on saaid.net.

⁴The index for male preachers is <http://www.saaid.net/Waratah/index.htm>.

(10 with a doctorate, five listed as “professor/teacher,” and 17 listed as “preacher” or “author”).⁵

My theory has at least three empirical implications that I expect to find evidence for when I examine data from *saaid.net*. First, I expect that gatekeepers administering the website will proactively seek to promote some women as authorities, which I interpret as evidence that they feel a need for women’s voices. Second, I expect to find differences in the content and form of men’s and women’s preaching, including more frequent invocations of identity authority in women’s preaching. Third, I expect to find evidence that female preachers on the website reach audiences that male preachers do not.

Website Gatekeepers Seek Out Female Preachers

Do the administrators of *saaid.net* seek out female authorities as my theory predicts? To find out, I contacted preachers writing on *saaid.net* with four questions about the editorial process: How are your writings published on the website? Do you work with an editor of the website to publish your writings? Why did you decide to publish your writings on this website? Have you published your writings on other websites?

Relatively few wrote back,⁶ but those who did say that the website administrators actively sought out women. Two of three women respondents had their writings posted to *saaid.net* at the behest of the website administrators. Hind Umar reported that website administrators asked for permission to publish some of her publicly available writings, although she did not have much choice about what they posted. Fatima al-Buttah was not even asked before her writings were posted to *saaid.net*. “These writings were originally published in some Islamic magazines and I honestly don’t know who published them on the website!” The third woman who responded to my inquiries, Noha Katergi, sought out the opportunity to publish and has never faced any editorial resistance: “I learned of the site *Ṣayd al-Fawā'id* by accident and in the beginning, I sent them some of my articles and they published them. I don’t know much about the editor of

⁵Female preachers are listed at <http://saaid.net/daeyat/>. To see when these women were added, see Appendix A of the supporting information (SI). These are not “sock puppets.” I also found evidence of their preaching from other sources.

⁶I found email addresses for 11 of the 43 female preachers and 89 of the 173 male preachers. I emailed all 11 women and 50 of the men. Three women (27%) and 8 men (16%) responded. I also contacted the website administrators, who did not respond.

the site except that I send them articles and they publish them.”

Men on the website were more likely to report that they reached out to the *saaid.net* administrators, rather than the other way around. Four out of eight reported proactively promoting their work by emailing with the site administrators, and only one reported that his writings were posted without his explicit permission. Because of the poor response rate, this is only weak evidence that women are solicited by the website more than men, but the women’s responses show that website administrators are actively recruiting women.

The most revealing piece of evidence is that Noha Katergi told me that she was “forced . . . to have a special page” with the title “female preacher” even though she prefers the title “researcher on women’s issues.” It is remarkable that movement gatekeepers insisted on elevating Katergi’s titular religious authority beyond what she claims for herself. However, this is consistent with my argument that Salafis want to empower female voices that they believe will communicate their patriarchal norms to new audiences in ways that men cannot. Katergi’s criticism of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is more persuasive to *saaid.net*’s target audience when it comes from Noha Katergi the *dā'iyyā* rather than Noha Katergi the researcher.

Female Preachers Support Salafism with Different Arguments Than Male Preachers

To show that women support the Salafi movement with different types of arguments than men, I collected all of the texts by the 215 preachers on *saaid.net* as of January 2016. I exclude a handful that are in English or French, leaving me with 21,324 Arabic documents. Most are under 1,500 words, but some are lengthy monographs. Some authors post new works regularly, though website administrators control the actual posting.

Who reads these documents? I do not have website user data, but I can see reactions when *saaid.net*’s official Twitter feed publicizes new postings to its 75,000 followers. Only a minority of Twitter users list their location, but extrapolating from those who do suggests that 80% of those who interact with *saaid.net*’s Twitter feed are from Saudi Arabia. This matches data from Alexa web services reporting that the website is extremely popular in Saudi Arabia, and has a significant following in Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, and Algeria.

I examine the topics of men’s and women’s writing using a structural topic model (Roberts, Stewart, and

Airoldi 2016). I omit most methodological details here and instead focus on the intuition of the procedure and the findings.⁷ Intuitively, a topic model assumes that text is generated from latent topics which are not directly observed in text, but which generate connections between words. Based on the assumed text generation process, the model predicts which words in a collection of text were generated from each possible topic, providing a topic classification for each word. After estimating the model, I infer the general content of each topic by examining the most frequently occurring and exclusive (unique to a topic) words associated with each topic. I include author gender as a predictor of topic prevalence to estimate whether each topic is preferred by men or women.

Figure 1 shows the results of a 10-topic structural topic model⁸ with preacher gender as a predictor of topic use. The y-axis shows each topic, represented by the top eight words associated with the topic⁹ to allow the reader to see the words informing each topic label. The topics are ordered based on the difference in topic prevalence between women and men. The x-axis shows the estimated average prevalence of each topic in writings by women (black discs) and men (white discs). These are proportions and can be interpreted directly; the first topic accounts for approximately 30% of words in women's writing and 15% of words in men's. Lines extending from each disc show 95% confidence intervals, but many of the topic proportions are so precisely estimated that the range is obscured by the disc itself.

These 10 topics provide a high-level picture of themes in the writing of Salafi preachers. Eight of these topics are about the substance of authors' writing and two are about writing form. Among the substantive topics, three—*teaching*, *Westernization*, and *women*—are considered “women's issues” by Salafis. The topic I label *doctrine* captures Quran quotations and themes in Islamic cosmology. *Worship* contains legal rulings and guidelines for how Muslims should worship, whereas *jurisprudence* contains legal rulings and guidelines for a variety of other topics in Islamic law. The *heterodoxy* topic captures debates about orthodoxy and heterodoxy between Salafis and their critics. And the *monotheism* topic contains discussions about the Islamic concept of monotheism and whether it can be used to justify militant jihad.

Two topics—*hadith* and *salawat*—are about the form of preachers' writing rather than the content. The *ha-*

dith topic contains the set phrases with which authors cite the hadith tradition. *Salawat* captures the set phrases called *ṣalawāt* that Muslims often recite when mentioning Muhammad (*ṣalā allāhu ʿalayhi wa salam*, “blessings and peace be upon him”) or his companions (*radī allāh ʿanhu*, “may Allah be pleased with him”). The next section explains why the fact that men use these topics far more than women is remarkable.

Among the eight substantive topics uncovered by the model, three are more prevalent in women's writing than men's: *teaching*, *Westernization*, and *women*. This corroborates prior scholarship showing that women focus on “women's issues,” and it adds detail on the proportion of writing devoted to each of these topics: almost 30% to *teaching*, and almost 20% each to *Westernization* and *women*. The fact that Salafis understand *Westernization* to be a women's issue supports my claim that female preachers can offer persuasive rhetorical defenses against women's rights norms that Salafis see as threat promulgated by the West.

However, in contrast to the findings of previous scholars who study female Salafi preaching in face-to-face settings (Al-Rasheed 2013; Le Renard 2012), I find that women also write on topics outside of the traditional “women's issues.” Men are more likely to write about *jurisprudence*, *monotheism*, *salawat*, *hadith*, *worship*, and *heterodoxy*, but women write on these topics as well. Figure 1 shows that about 8% of women's writing is on *worship* and that around 3–4% of women's writing is devoted to most of the other topics. This suggests that women write on topics other than those specifically viewed as “women's issues,” which requires that we rethink the role that female preachers play in the Salafi movement.

Women are Less Likely to Support their Arguments with Citations to Authoritative Texts

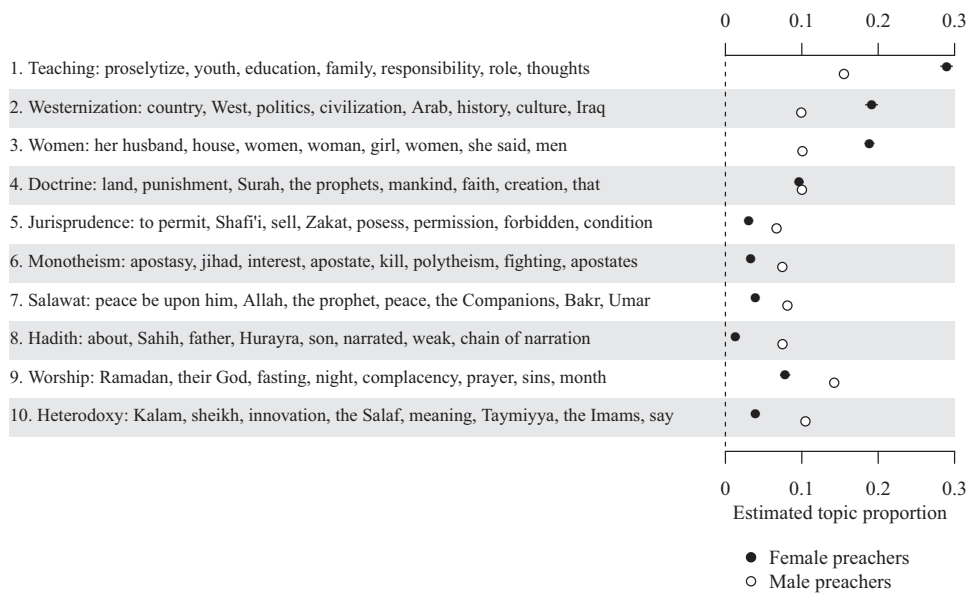
Next, I explore gender differences in how preachers support their arguments. A central tenet of Salafi methodology is to cite the Quran and hadith, avoiding later interpretations by Muslim jurists. Hadith are sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad, passed down through chains of narration until they were collected and curated into compilations. Salafi religious arguments often become scholarly debates about the meaning and merits of a particular hadith. A strong hadith with an unbroken chain of reliable narrators is favored over a weak hadith of dubious provenance.

⁷See SI Appendix C for text preprocessing details.

⁸I estimated models with anywhere from four to 100 topics. Most give similar results. See SI Appendix B.

⁹Top words are those that jointly maximize frequency and exclusivity (Bischof and Airoldi 2012).

FIGURE 1 Preacher Gender Predicts Topic Frequency



Note: Estimated topic proportions for female and male Salafi preachers in the saaid.net corpus are shown. Topics are ranked by the difference in proportions between women and men.

Hadith citations use set phrases. These words appear in the *hadith* and *salawat* topics uncovered by the topic model. The *hadith* topic contains words that appear in the *isnād*, or chain of narration that accompanies each hadith, as well as names of the compilers of authoritative hadith collections. The *salawat* topic contains words of blessing invoked for the prophet and his companions every time they are cited. The topic model shows that hadith and salawat account for almost 20% of words written by Salafi men but less than 4% of words by women.

This hadith citation gap is not an artifact of the topic model. Table 1 shows that male preachers use 11 phrases related to the use of Quran and hadith far more frequently than women. The first three terms in Table 1 all relate to the use of honorifics when referring to Muhammad or other figures from Islamic history whose statements are considered authoritative. The first result is that the word *allāh* accounts for fully 3% of words written by men, but women use the word only half as much. Of course, there are many contexts in which the word *allāh* can be used, so I consider two specific phrases: the honorific for the prophet, *ṣalā allāh(u ʿalayhi wa salam)*, and the honorific for other notables, *raḍī allāh (ʿanhu)*. The phrase *ṣalā allāh* appears less than half as many times in women’s writing, either when I calculate the percentage of documents that use the term (67% for men versus 32% for women) or the percentage of men’s and women’s words

(0.5% for men and 0.2% for women). The gap is similar for the phrase *raḍī allāh*.

Women are also far less likely to use the word *ḥadīth*, the phrases “the prophet said” (*qāl al-rasūl*) and “the prophet says” (*yaqūl al-rasūl*), or to reference some of the famous compilers of the hadith tradition: al-Bukhari, al-Bayhaqi, Abu Hurayra, al-Tabarani, Ibn Taymiyya, and Abu Dawud. The most popular of these hadith compilations is Sahih al-Bukhari which was completed in about 846 CE, contains approximately 7,000 reported sayings of Muhammad, and is one of six major hadith collections in Sunni Islam. Documents by male preachers cite al-Bukhari 40% of the time, compared to only 10% for women. Men cite the other hadith collections approximately 10 times more frequently than women.

Men and women tend to write on different topics, and some topics typically involve fewer hadith citations. Does the hadith citation gap disappear when women and men write on the same topics? To test this, I identify the main substantive topic of each document. Then I collect all documents with the same main topic, divide them by author gender, and calculate the rate of citation to eight prominent hadith collections: al-Bukhari, Ibn Taymiyya, al-Bayhaqi, Abu Hurayra, al-Tabarani, Abu Dawud, Sahih Muslim, and al-Tarmidhi. Figure 2 displays the results graphically. The results show that hadith citations vary quite strongly with topics, but that this does not account

TABLE 1 Men Use Hadith-Related Phrases More Than Women

Term	% of Documents Using Term		% of All Words	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>allāh</i>	95	85	3.02	1.60
<i>ṣalā allāh</i>	67	32	0.50	0.21
<i>raḍī allāh</i>	50	20	0.18	0.10
<i>ḥadīth</i>	64	39	0.30	0.14
<i>qāl/yaqūl (al-)rasūl</i>	30	10	0.047	0.026
Ibn Taymiyya	23	3	0.030	0.006
al-Bukhari	41	10	0.098	0.030
al-Bayhaqi	17	1	0.013	0.001
Abu Hurayra	29	4	0.048	0.008
al-Tabarani	16	1	0.014	0.002
Abu Dawud	29	4	0.043	0.006

Note: This table counts the use of hadith-related phrases in 3,470 documents (1,306,641 words) by women and 17,854 documents (74,991,711 words) by men on saaid.net. The left two columns show the percentage of men's and women's documents that contain each phrase. The right two columns show the percentage of men's and women's words devoted to each phrase. All gender differences are statistically significant at the .05 percent level.

for the difference in hadith citation rates by men and women. Figure 2 shows a persistent gap in the number of hadith citations by men and women, regardless of topic. This can be seen by examining the consistent size of the citation gap for any single topic or by examining the roughly parallel slopes of the best fit lines for men and women. On average, men are twice as likely to cite a hadith compilation as women, regardless of whether the topic tends to have many hadith citations or few.

In further statistical tests, I show that this result holds when I also account for the scholarly credentials of each author and a proxy for the genre of each document. For brevity, I report these results in the Supporting information (Appendix D).

Women Invoke their Identities to Support Arguments

If women are less likely to support their arguments through authoritative citations, then how do they persuade readers? My theory predicts that women invoke their identities to assert authority.

The following pair of texts illustrates how women invoke identity authority, whereas men prefer citations. The document "An Amiable and Urgent Call" (*nadā wadd ʿājil*), by female preacher Dr. Jawāhir bint ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz āl al-Shaykh, is a 400-word piece urging jihadists to lay down their weapons.¹⁰ The topic falls well outside

of so-called "women's issues" and addresses men, so citations might be expected. But Al al-Shaykh entreats in a motherly tone: "We are all like mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers to you." She then appeals to emotion rather than legal evidence. "The most painful in the short- and long-term: that you have made the countries of the Muslims into the fields of jihad, even the holiest of their holy sites, and made those closest to you your victims."

Compare this to the male preacher Safar al-Hawali urging jihadist fighters to stop killing fellow Muslims in Iraq.¹¹ Hawali supports his admonition with a barrage of citations.

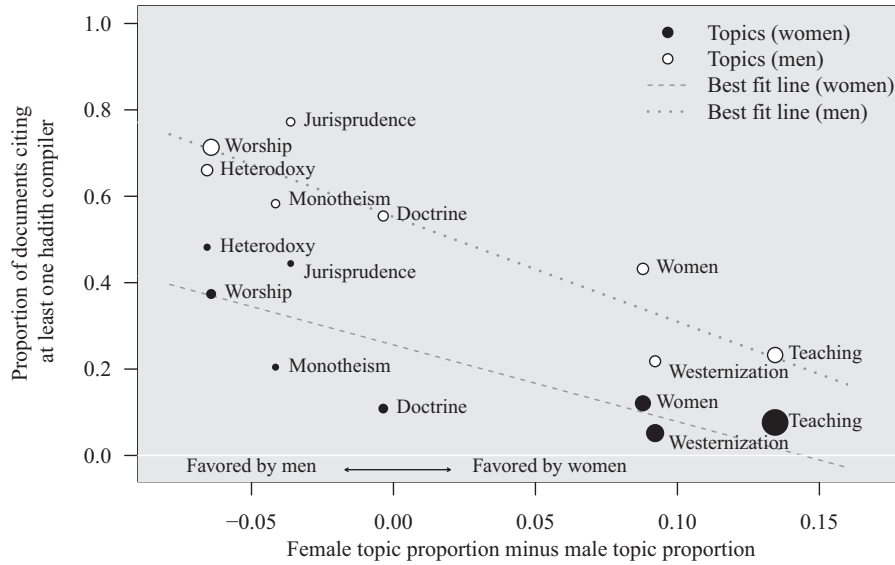
For it was said: "All things of a Muslim are inviolable for his brother-in-faith: his blood, his property and his honour" (1). And it was said: "The rights of a Muslim over another Muslim are six" (2) And it was said: "The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe"(3).

The references for these parenthetical citations are listed at the end of the letter: "(1) Narrated by Muslim, n. 2564. (2) Narrated by Muslim, n. 2162. (3) Narrated by al-Bukhari, n. 6119." And in case the reader did not get the point, the paragraph ends with a quote from the Quran: "For the almighty says 'For the believers are brothers,

¹¹See "A Letter to Our Brothers in Iraq," <http://saaid.net/Warathah/safar/16.htm>. To avoid cherry-picking, I selected the document with the most similar word choice to "An Amiable and Urgent Call" according to the cosine similarity of each document's word frequencies.

¹⁰See <http://saaid.net/daeyat/jawaher/15.htm>.

FIGURE 2 Women Cite Hadith Less Frequently Than Men When Writing on the Same Topics



Note: Each disc is a topic, plotted separately for men (white discs) and women (black discs). The size of the disc indicates the proportion of documents associated with each topic. The x-axis location of the discs shows the difference in topic use by gender. The y-axis shows the proportion of documents that cite at least one hadith compiler. The dashed lines show linear trends for men and women. The consistent gap between these trend lines shows that women cite hadith less often than men.

therefore reconcile with your brothers’ (al-Hujurat: verse 10).”

This pair of documents shows one instance of a woman using identity authority,¹² but is this a general pattern? Topic models are not very useful for answering this question because the phrasing that invokes identity authority cuts across topics. However, invocations of identity authority leave other linguistic traces. If women are systematically using identity authority more than men, I expect to find that women use seven gender-neutral personal pronouns such as *I* and *we* more frequently than their male counterparts.¹³ Consistent with my argument, I find that women use the word *I* 24% more than men, the word *you* 58% more, and the word *we* 115% more. If I consider the seven pronouns together, women use them 48% more than men. All of these differences are statistically significant and remain substantial when I control for document topic.

The higher rate of personal pronoun use by female authors indicates that their writing is more

self-referential, and more in the first and second person. Female Salafi preachers use this personal tone as a substitute for at least some of the citations to the hadith tradition that they are eschewing.

Female Preachers Reach New Audiences Online

My theory suggests that women’s preaching helps the Salafi movement reach new audiences online. To show this, I examine the audiences that preachers’ writings reach. The website does not report who accesses particular documents, so I cannot comprehensively measure readership. However, saaid.net has an official Twitter account that regularly publicizes new documents to approximately 75,000 followers. I examine how Twitter users react.¹⁴

I collected the 3,247 tweets from the saaid.net Twitter account posted from November 7, 2014, to October 5,

¹²See SI Appendix E for another example.

¹³See the SI Appendix F, for a complete list.

¹⁴Twitter is the primary platform saaid.net uses to promote articles. Its Twitter feed features prominently on the website home page and is very active, whereas the saaid.net Facebook page has been defunct since mid-2016.

2017. Of these, 283 linked to a female preacher's writing and 1,629 linked to a male preacher's writing. Twitter allows people to react to a tweet by retweeting it, which places the tweet in the feed of the retweeter. I collected the 16,870 retweets for these tweets, by 5,345 unique users. I used self-reported user names and user handles to guess the gender of each retweeter. Some users give whimsical, inscrutable names, but an Arab research assistant and I were able to guess the gender of 4,588 of them with high confidence.¹⁵

Previous scholarship argues that "in most [Muslim] communities, women are confined to female audiences not because political or legal factors prevent them from reaching out to men, but because believers by and large still prefer male religious authorities" (Kloos and Künkler 2016, 488). This is not true for the female Salafi preachers on *saaid.net*. Twitter posts publicizing female preachers' writing are retweeted by an average of 8.5 people, of whom 74% are men. This is a striking contrast to the exclusively female audiences documented by Le Renard (2012) when some of these same women preach in face-to-face settings.

Although female preachers get a great deal of attention from men, they attract female readers. A tweet publicizing writing by a female preacher will get 26% of its retweets from women, whereas a tweet publicizing writing by a male preacher *on the same topic* will get only 12% of its retweets from women. This result hints that female preachers are reaching new audiences. In a further test, I divide retweeters into two groups: those who retweeted at least one post publicizing a male preacher's writing, and those who only retweeted writing of female preachers. The first group is 29% female, whereas the second is 58% female, suggesting that female preachers are extending the female audience for Salafism.

Another way to see that female preachers reach new audiences is to see whether they are retweeted by more people who are not regular followers of the *saaid.net* Twitter feed. Twitter reports which accounts follow *saaid.net*, meaning that they regularly see *saaid.net* tweets in their personal Twitter feed. Thirty-nine percent of people who exclusively retweeted posts linking to female preachers were followers of *saaid.net*, whereas 47% of people who retweeted at least one post linking to a male preacher were followers. This suggests that tweets publicizing women's preaching get more reaction outside of *saaid.net*'s follower network than tweets publicizing men's writing. All together, these findings support my argument that female

¹⁵I could not confidently guess the gender of 757 Twitter users. I get the same general results when I reestimate the models below under the two most extreme possible scenarios: assuming that all of them are men or all are women.

preachers expand the reach of *saaid.net* to new online audiences.

Applying the Theory to the White Nationalist Movement in the United States

To show that my theory has traction outside of Salafi Islam, I turn to a movement that is not explicitly religious in a very different context: the contemporary white nationalist movement in the United States (also called the alt-right). This movement is predominantly male, and members typically hold patriarchal gender norms, including growing norms against certain types of male-female social interactions that mirror Salafi concerns about gender mixing (Hawley 2018). Yet several women have risen to prominence in the movement. One of the best known is Ayla Stewart, whose blog, *Wife with a Purpose*, became a movement phenomenon because of a post encouraging white readers to participate in a "white baby challenge" to "combat demographic decline." Her popularity garnered her an invitation to speak at the 2017 "Unite the Right" white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which she ultimately declined, citing safety concerns and a desire to not violate movement gender norms.¹⁶

If my theory explains this case, I expect to find evidence that alt-right movement leaders want to gain followers through online recruiting and believe that women are especially effective at reaching new audiences. I also expect that women will deliver messages that male alt-right spokespersons cannot, basing their authority on their identities as women. Interview-based accounts by journalists give evidence supporting each of these predictions. Writing for the *Atlantic*, Caroline Kitchener reports that "the alt-right is divided on how visible—and vocal—they want women to be. On one hand, there are organizations like Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), a gender separatist group that cautions men against relationships with women, that bar women from membership. On the other, there is a growing contingent of alt-right men who encourage the women in their community to speak out and become leaders themselves." The reason that some alt-right leaders want women to speak out is exactly what my theory predicts. "Many alt-right men like it when they have women who are contributing content, recording podcasts, making YouTube channels. That's because women in this movement have an easier

¹⁶See <https://wifewithapurpose.com/2017/08/13/charlottesville-may-have-redefined-womens-roles-in-the-alt-right/>.

time amassing followers” (scholar George Hawley, quoted by Kitchener).¹⁷ Journalist Seyward Darby concludes from her interviews with alt-right women that their goal is to extend the alt-right message to new audiences. “[T]hey think that at this point in their movement, the more people they can bring in, the more people they can convince that they are on the right side of history, the better, and that includes appealing to more women.”¹⁸

To confirm that women in the alt-right rely heavily on identity authority, I examined Ayla Stewart’s blog. Much of the time, Stewart’s invocation of identity authority is implicit. Set among pictures of her with her children, posts such as “Debunking the Claim that Nationalism Is Hostile Towards Women” send the message that the white nationalist movement must be friendly toward women if Stewart is happy as a member.¹⁹ Other posts are more explicit, such as “Feminism, My Experience with It, My Rejection of It,” which draws on Stewart’s identity as a woman and experience as a former feminist to argue that feminism opposes women’s interests.²⁰

The rise of female spokespersons in the contemporary U.S. white nationalist movement is worthy of a far more comprehensive analysis than I can undertake in this article, but this preliminary evidence suggests that the story is the same.

Conclusion

Why might patriarchal social movements choose to promote female authorities when the movement’s prevailing gender ideology appears to strictly limit female authority? I argue that women can be particularly effective at influencing target audiences for these social movements because they can reach new audiences and can deliver particular messages that men cannot. Specifically, women draw on their identities as women to deliver messages supporting patriarchy that are persuasive because they are in apparent opposition to the messenger’s self-interest.

I provide evidence for this argument with an in-depth exploration of the role of female authorities in the Salafi movement. Salafism is a conservative social movement

within Islam that has a patriarchal gender ideology that is unfriendly to women’s religious authority. Yet examining a prominent Salafi website, *saaid.net*, I find that female preachers are present in large numbers, constituting fully 20% of the preachers listed by name for website readers.

To understand this apparent puzzle, I collect roughly 21,000 documents written by the preachers on this website, along with data from Twitter about how website readers react when these documents are publicized by the official *saaid.net* Twitter feed. The data from *saaid.net* allow me to reach a number of conclusions about why Salafis are promoting women as religious authorities. Through email exchanges with *saaid.net* authors, I learn that website administrators are proactive in seeking women contributors to tout as authorities. Using statistical text analysis, I explore the differences in men’s and women’s preaching and show that men support arguments with more citations to authoritative texts, whereas women support arguments with personal appeals to their identity. Using Twitter data, I show that female preachers are able to reach new, disproportionately female audiences that men do not.

To demonstrate that my theory applies beyond the Salafi movement, I also briefly show that it plausibly explains the rise of women spokespersons in the contemporary white nationalism movement in the United States.

My findings raise important questions about the future of Salafism. If female Salafi preachers are gaining prominence and reaching mixed gender audiences, what is the quality of the resulting authority? Is an expanded role for women in online preaching a harbinger of expanded roles for women in other facets of the Salafi movement? Or will men retain control of women’s preaching, harnessing it to reach new audiences when it suits their interests and clamping down if it threatens the movement’s gender ideology? The answers will depend on how female Salafi preachers use their agency to wield the authority that movement leaders have pragmatically given them.

References

- ¹⁷See <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/the-women-behind-the-alt-right/537168/>. See also Hawley (2018, 15).
- ¹⁸See <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544134546/the-women-behind-the-alt-right>.
- ¹⁹See <https://wifewithapurpose.com/2017/12/01/womens-roundtable-debunking-the-claim-that-nationalism-is-hostile-towards-women/>.
- ²⁰See <https://wifewithapurpose.com/2018/10/02/feminism-my-experience-with-it-my-rejection-of-it/>.
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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A: Historical website data shows when female preachers were Added

Appendix B: Varying the number of topics in the structural topic model

Appendix C: Stemming and Topic Model Insensitivity to Stemming Choices

Appendix D: Statistical models showing the hadith citation gap

Appendix E: An additional example of identity authority

Appendix F: List of personal pronouns used to identify womens' identity authority