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Beyond victimhood or empowerment, Salafi women shape their own lives

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Popular narratives often trap Salafi women in a simplistic choice between oppression and empowerment. But, as Arndt Emmerich writes, these women actively negotiate faith, tradition, and modern life on their own terms, offering crucial, often overlooked, insights into gender, religion, and agency.

Salafism, an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam, is frequently associated with rigid interpretations of women’s roles. Academic discussions commonly present Salafi women as either passive victims or uncritically empowered agents. However, a deeper understanding reveals a far more intricate picture: these women actively exercise agency within their chosen religious framework, navigating complex interactions with diverse societies.

Two dominant views

Historically, the study of Salafi women has been shaped by two dominant, yet limited, perspectives. Research prevalent in the wake of 9/11 and counter-extremism discourse often adopted a securitisation and threat lens. This approach portrayed Salafi women primarily as victims. Such views depicted women as drawn to Salafism due to marginalisation and alienation, possessing little personal agency. These portrayals often cast Salafi women as instrumentalised figures within a male-defined movement, lacking independent thought or action. Controversially, women adopting a Salafi lifestyle and public attire were even linked to concepts like “sexual jihad,” a sensationalist and largely unfounded claim that further distorted their image. This one-dimensional portrayal largely ignored the complex motivations and lived experiences of these women, perpetuating stereotypes that hindered genuine understanding.

In response to these largely negative and passive portrayals, a “philo-Salafi” perspective emerged. This research approach sought to highlight the agency, autonomy, and empowerment experienced by Salafi women. Scholars employing qualitative and ethnographic methods [uncovered their intrinsic motivations](#), emphasising their active negotiation and reflection within Salafist movements. This perspective showed that Salafism can offer women a sense of belonging, an appealing alternative lifestyle, and a countercultural identity, providing a framework for self-development and community engagement. For some, it provided autonomy from restrictive family traditions and opportunities for self-discovery, allowing them to forge spiritual paths independently.

The emphasis on individual choice, a direct connection with the divine, and the welcoming environment of Salafi spaces – often in stark contrast to more traditional, ethnically-rooted mosques – further contributed to its appeal. Salafi mosques are unique in [prioritising piety over ethnic or national background](#) in Germany, attracting a diverse range of adherents. These studies also highlighted that choices based on free will and authenticity hold more value for Salafi women than those imposed by family, underscoring their [active pursuit of a meaningful life](#). While this “philo-Salafi” lens offered a crucial corrective to earlier victimisation narratives, it sometimes risked overstating the emancipatory aspects, potentially overlooking internal challenges or normative pressures.

Beyond simplistic frameworks

While acknowledging the empowering aspects of Salafism, it’s crucial to move beyond a simplistic framework of agency that assumes a bottom-up resistance against all perceived constraints. The newest research, including [The Cambridge Companion to Women and Islam](#), edited by Professor Masooda Bano of the University of Oxford, reveals a more nuanced understanding: Salafi women engage in complex negotiations, contradictions, and compromises in their daily lives, often finding agency in unexpected ways that challenge both victim and purely empowered narratives.

This novelty lies in recognising that agency is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, nor is it always a direct rebellion. Instead, it manifests in the subtle, everyday decisions and interpretations that shape their lived realities. Like other faith practitioners globally, Salafi women do not always adhere rigidly to ideal doctrines. They may question, modify, or even reject aspects of the Salafi ideal in everyday situations and on their own terms. This nuanced understanding of agency acknowledges the dynamic interplay between religious ideals and practical realities, highlighting their capacity for adaptation and interpretation.

Examining specific examples from recent fieldwork illustrates this dynamic, revealing the scope for pragmatic decisions and personal interpretation in Salafi life. During the 2022 football World Cup in Qatar, a Salafi activist in Germany enthusiastically shared an article from the Süddeutsche Zeitung. The national newspaper, according to the activist, published a [“well-balanced” and “positive” piece](#), including authentic Quranic citations. It reflected the high status of mothers and women in Islam, especially prominent after Moroccan players celebrated with their mum’s. This sentiment resonated with prominent Salafi preachers who also remarked on how these images, particularly of veiled mothers, transcended common Western perceptions of Muslim women as “uneducated and oppressed,” arguing they achieved “more than a thousand words.” These seemingly small moments highlight a keen awareness of public perception and a desire to influence narratives, even though seemingly secular events such as a football tournament.

Furthermore, recent empirical investigations into the everyday realities of Salafi women have shown that the widely held assumption of them striving for total isolation and gender segregation is often debunked. The empowering process of becoming a Salafi woman, accompanied by increased autonomy and self-determination in relation to societal expectations, inevitably leads to contradictions and pragmatic compromises in both Muslim minority and majority contexts. For instance, in the [Muslim-majority context of Tunisia](#), some Salafi women engage in theoretical debates and negotiate their own “derogations to the rule,” even discussing sensitive principles like al-wala’ wa-l-bara’ (loyalty and disavowal) in their daily lives. Researchers have observed them “opening a debate on what entails being a [Salafi woman entrepreneur](#),” demonstrating their capacity to adapt theological concepts to contemporary social and economic realities. These instances show that agency is not just about overt resistance, but about nuanced navigation and reinterpretation within their religious framework. Even when women find elements of Salafism problematic, they often reach this conclusion by independently examining Salafi gender discourse through an [“internal Salafi common sense” logic](#). This means they are not simply spoon-fed interpretations but engage in their own ijtihād (independent reasoning) within their chosen framework, actively shaping their understanding of their roles and rights. They are not merely recipients of doctrine but active interpreters and negotiators, demonstrating a significant degree of intellectual and personal autonomy.

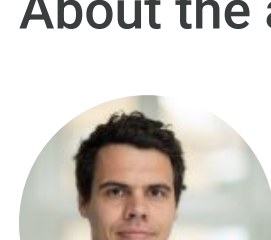
Implications for understanding gender, religion, and agency

This evolving understanding calls for [processual approaches](#) and historically grounded methodologies in future research, particularly relevant for the Women, Peace and Security agenda. This involves examining the experiences of Salafi women within urban religious networks and post-secular landscapes, recognising the profound influence of local environments and social interactions. The goal is to transcend essentialist portrayals and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Salafi women’s everyday lives, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of their agency in a globalized world.

As the scholar Petra Kuppinger argues, “Religious transformation[s] do not occur in isolation from other urban processes, but [are reflective of and constitutive of the former](#).” This perspective helps us see Salafi women not as isolated figures, but as active participants in broader social and religious changes. New research avenues are emerging that can reduce the sensationalism surrounding Salafi women, making them comparable to other social and religious phenomena and communities. This directly contributes to the burgeoning field of [post-Salafism](#), which moves beyond a monolithic view to explore the diverse and evolving nature of Salafi thought and practice, including the significant, often understated, role of women within it. Understanding their active negotiation of faith and life is key to a more complete picture of women’s agency and their impact on peace and security debates globally.

Photo credit: Pexels

About the author



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Arndt Emmerich is a Lecturer in Sociology and Programme Leader for BA (Hons) Sociology at the University of Hertfordshire. His research focuses on the sociology of Islam and religious diversity, particularly the transformations and internal dynamics of Salafi movements. His recent work on Salafi women, co-authored with Alyaa Ebbiari, is featured in: Emmerich, A., & Ebbiari, A. (2025). *Becoming Salafi*. In M. Bano (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Women and Islam* (pp. 151-173). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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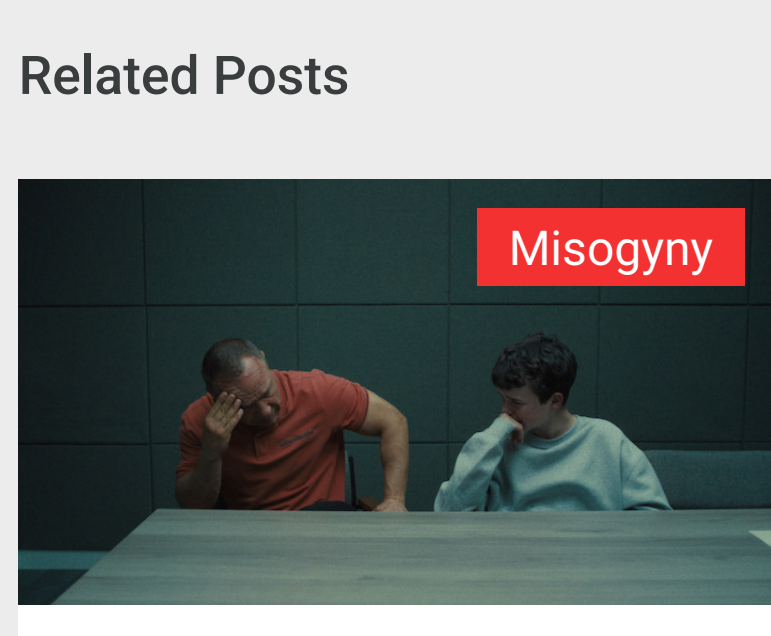
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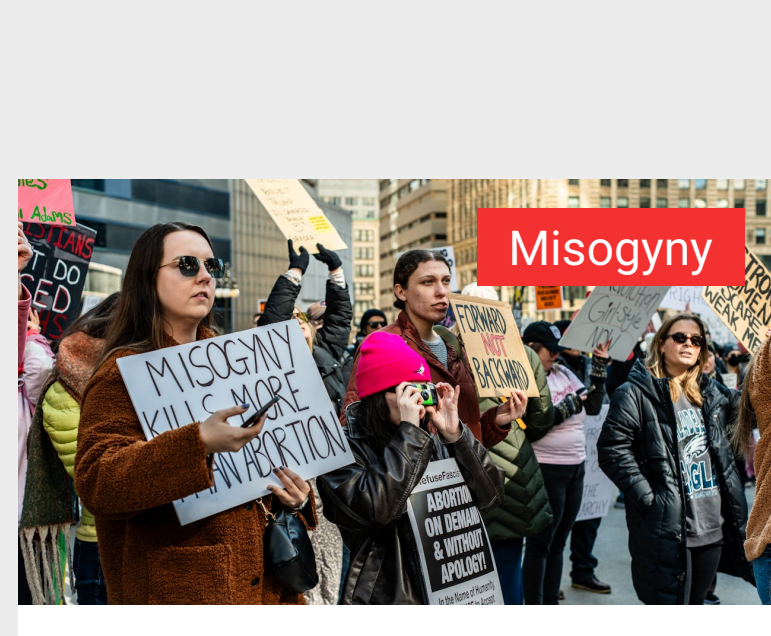
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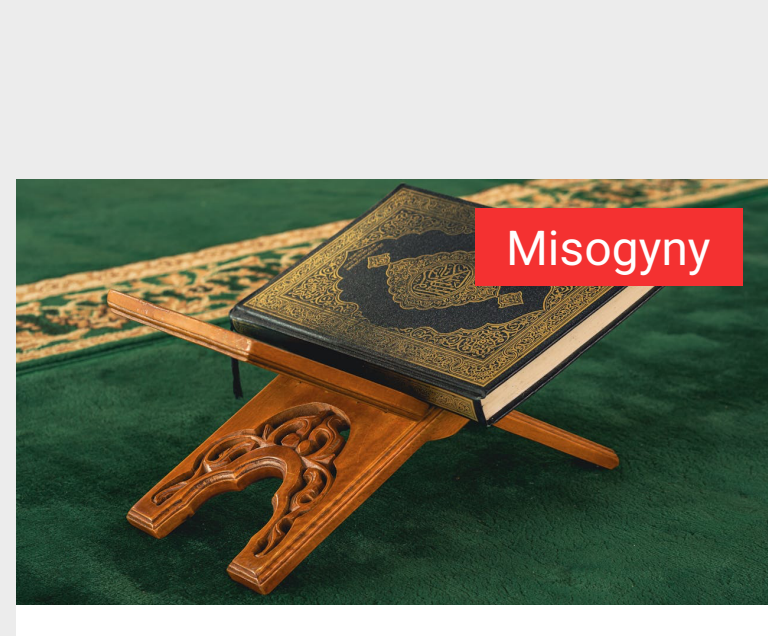
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