

## Female Spiritual Guides (Mourchidates) in Morocco: Agents of Change or State Tools? A Case Study of Khenifra

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### Abstract

*The female spiritual guides (Mourchidates) program was introduced as a state strategy to promote moderate Islam and fight extremist ideologies. Their role can be seen as dual in promoting gender equality as well as reinforcing traditional gender norms through providing religious guidance to women in mosques and other institutions. Within the Mourchidates one-year training, the new Family Code (Moudawana) is taught to pave the way for addressing gender-related issues in the light of Islamic teachings. The current study examines the role of Mourchidates in acting as gender equality leaders or traditional gender roles reinforcers in Khenifra City, Morocco. This research employs a qualitative research design. Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews with seventeen Mourchidates recruited within the Local Scientific Council of Khenifra, supported by participant observation in mosque settings. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze and interpret the collected data. The findings demonstrate that Mourchidates play a paradoxical role. While they empower women through religious counseling and legal awareness under the Family Code, they also reinforce traditional gender roles, addressing cautiously sensitive gender issues and equality topics. This study aims to assist policy makers in Morocco in making the Mourchidates agents of change and giving them some reasonable freedom to go beyond the guidebook and address gender issues with confidence.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Under the leadership of King Mohammed VI, Morocco has adopted a series of political, religious, and social reforms as an urgent solution to dramatic influential factors, namely terrorism, extremism, globalization, and democratic movements (El Haitami, 2013; Eddouada & Pepicelli, 2010; Swink, 2017). After the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks, the state responded by prioritizing urgent national security and religious reforms (Eddouada & Pepicelli, 2010; Swink, 2017). Subsequently, the Moroccan Family Code (Moudawana) was introduced by King Mohammed VI in 2004 so as to promote women's rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody within an Islamic context (Swink, 2017). Following the 2004 reform of the Moroccan Family Code, which stressed gender equality and women's rights, the female

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spiritual guides (Mourchidates) program was announced in 2005 and launched in 2006, as a state religious policy with the aim of empowering women as religious leaders as well as promoting moderate Islam (El Haitami, 2013). At this point, it is noteworthy to raise an important question about the empirical impact of female religious guidance and teaching on enhancing women's empowerment and challenging traditional gender norms within their communities.

Most prior studies (Nast, 2010; Eddouada & Pepicelli, 2010; El Haitami, 2013; Swink, 2017; McKenzie, 2020; Ait Kharouach & El Moutaki, 2024; Ouchelh, 2024) provided a solid theoretical and historical background of the significance of the Mourchidates program in Morocco, and they also focused strongly on the institutional religious authority and state power. However, they failed to address the empirical fieldwork, such as in-depth interviews or case studies, to discover their life experiences and how they perceive their roles. The previous research focused primarily on conducting a study on Mourchidates working in specific central cities such as Fes and Rabat. This study addresses this gap by investigating the role of Mourchidates in challenging traditional gender norms or promoting gender equality in the city of Khenifra, Morocco. The study seeks to highlight direct voices from the Mourchidates themselves using interviews and participant observation to find out how they perceive their role in Moroccan society.

This inquiry aims to explore the role of female spiritual guides (Mourchidates) in empowering women, promoting gender equality, and challenging traditional gender norms within the socio-religious context of Khenifra. It investigates how these women implement the state policy related to advocating for women's rights. The objectives of the study are threefold: (1) to examine how Mourchidates *perceive their role* in enhancing women's empowerment through religious and social guidance. (2) to analyze the ways in which Mourchidates *promote gender equality* through their preaching and religious instruction. (3) to investigate how Mourchidates *challenge traditional gender norms* within a traditionally male-dominated society. To attain these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

### 1.1. Research Questions

- 1) How do Mourchidates perceive their role in enhancing women's empowerment through religious and social guidance?
- 2) In what ways do Mourchidates promote gender equality through their preaching and religious instruction?
- 3) How do Mourchidates challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms within a traditionally male-dominated society?

This article is structured as follows: the first section reviews the existing literature on the emergence of Mourchidates in the religious sphere, their role in women's empowerment, gender equality, and challenging traditional gender norms. The second section provides an overview of the research methodology utilized to collect and analyze data, followed by the results in the third section. This is followed by a discussion and interpretation of results in the light of existing literature in the fourth section. And the article concludes with implications and recommendations for policy and future research.

## 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This section presents a literature review on female spiritual guides role in Morocco, providing a brief definition of the Mourchidates program and discussing their contributions to

women's empowerment as well as their reinforcement or challenging of traditional gender norms.

### **2.1. The Definition of the Mourchidates Program**

Swink (2017) and El Haitami (2013) highlighted that the training program of Mourchidates operates within the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs in the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Mourchidines and Mourchidates in Rabat. The curriculum consists of Islamic studies, standard Arabic, and courses in psychology, sociology, IT, law, and languages. The selected Mourchidates go through one-year training (El Haitami, 2013). The Mourchidates' position is highly competitive. Before entering the institution for training, the female candidates must have at least a bachelor's degree and have one-third of the Quran memorized (El Haitami, 2013; Swink, 2017). Besides, they must pass an oral exam of 30-40 minutes, which involves oral citation of parts of the Quran. The women must then be evaluated based on their knowledge of the religious sciences (Swink, 2017). The Mourchidates are recruited on a contractual basis and earn a monthly income of 5,000 Moroccan Dirhams (approximately \$580). Efforts are undertaken to assign them to areas close to their family homes (El Haitami, 2013; McKenzie, 2020).

### **2.2. Mourchidates and Women's Empowerment**

In light of the Family Code reform, women are given a symbolic role to play as religious leaders so as to promote social justice and gender equality within an Islamic basis (Eddouada & Pepicelli, 2010; Swink, 2017). Accordingly, the king, as the Amir al Moumimine (Commander of the Faithful), is incorporating female religious scholars and guiding their focus to women's issues (McKenzie, 2020). The state-trained female religious guides (Mourchidates) provide religious instruction and spiritual counseling to diverse social groups. Consequently, they tend to bridge the gap between religious authority and promoting pious behavior within society (El Haitami, 2013). Although these female religious authorities and leaders are seen as tools of the state's vision, their "official" access into the religious sphere can pave the way to democracy, positive change, and social welfare in their communities. (El Haitami, 2013).

In the same vein, Swink (2017) emphasized that the Mourchidates program aims to attain two main objectives. The first one is fighting radicalism and terrorism as well as maintaining Morocco's position as a tolerant Muslim country. The second objective is "allowing space for women to have some form of religious authority made it possible for Moroccans to have "autonomous action in the field of Islam." The roles of female religious guides are highly valuable in removing barriers of knowledge of Islam and "allowing women access to safe spaces for open conversation about womanhood in Islam" (Swink, 2017). Attending lessons led by female religious guides, as female scholars, offers women an interactive space to share ideas or concerns and ask intimate questions. The Mourchidates' Islamic teachings are institutionalized so as to enhance the impact of religion as a form of soft power on the wider community and pave the way for social reforms (El Haitami, 2013). Ultimately, religious training institutions were created to empower women and provide them with answers to inquiries they have about Islam (Swink, 2017).

### **2.3. Gender Equality**

The Mourchidates not only promote tolerant Islam or reject radical extremism but also take advantage of the use of religion to enhance gender equality in an Islamic Feminist way (Swink, 2017). Similarly, El Haitami (2013) explained that the Mourchidates program can be seen as a way to reflect Morocco's image in the Western media as a modern and democratic country that enhances women's engagement in all public spheres. Therefore, the Mourchidates portrays the

King as a leader of gender equality. In contrast, Swink (2017) highlighted that although the Moudawana identifies women's rights in the home within the family structure, they have not been granted leadership roles in the mosque. A plausible explanation is that the traditional interpretations of the Quran affect women's roles.

#### **2.4.Reinforcement vs. challenge to traditional gender roles or norms**

In spite of having legitimized access to teaching and leading activities in mosques as well as other institutions, those Mourchidates still face limitations in interrogating and challenging the patriarchal interpretations of religious texts (El Haitami, 2013). Such practice relies heavily on one's personal charisma and audience engagement rather than institutional and formal training (El Haitami, 2013). Swink (2017) pointed out that "it is forbidden by texts of Islam for a Mourchida to actually guide the prayer in Islam due to the biological cycles of women, which, according to some interpretations of Islam, prevents women from being able to conduct prayer." Likewise, Mckenzie (2020) added that "the Murshidat, being part of the larger context of hierarchies of Moroccan government and religion, are not (at least at face value) fighting against the patriarchal system; they are working for and within it". The Mourchidates confessed that "the road to empowerment must be through the patriarchal systems and traditions that exist, not directly against them" (Mckenzie, 2020).

Having delved into the existing literature on the historical context of the Mourchidates program and its dual impact on women's empowerment and the reinforcement of traditional gender norms, the following section outlines the methodological procedures utilized in this study.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the methodological procedure adopted in the present study, including research design, study sample, data collection methods, data analysis strategies, and ethical considerations.

#### **3.1. Research Design**

The study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for obtaining personal lived experiences, narratives, and perceptions of the Mourchidates. Qualitative research design focuses, therefore, on gathering data through semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method, as well as participant observation to explore the role of Mourchidates in promoting gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms within Khenifra Province. This approach allows obtaining the depth and richness of the data needed.

#### **3.2.Study Sample**

The population consisted of 17 Mourchidates recruited in Khenifra province, Morocco. This involved two female coordinators who supervise the implementation of the Mourchidates program in different geographic areas in the Khenifra province, but also have administrative responsibilities within the Scientific Local Council of Khenifra. The two coordinators oversee a total of 15 Mourchidates, eight recruited in urban areas (Khenifra city) and seven in rural areas (Merirt, El Kbab, Tighssaline, Lahri, Ait Issehak, Aguelmous, and Ouaoumana).

The study used a total population sampling, including and interviewing all 17 Mourchidates of the Khenifra province. Gentles et al. (2015) defined total population sampling as a purposive sampling utilized to include all the participants of a small and accessible population for in-depth inquiry and comprehensive data collection. This approach permitted a profound understanding of the roles of Mourchidates across both urban and rural areas.

The interview guide was piloted with two Mourchidates to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions. Although they are limited in number, their insights were sufficient for rewording the questions and refining the instrument.

### **3.3.Data Collection Methods**

Data were gathered using two qualitative methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation is a qualitative data collection method that took place in mosques of Khenifra across urban and rural areas. Each Mourchida was informed in advance through her coordinator. The observed elements included communication style, themes discussed, and interaction with women. The researcher adopted a non-intrusive observation method, during which the researcher acted as a silent observer during preaching sessions, taking discreet notes without disturbing the session. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 17 Mourchidates immediately after each session with the Mourchidates' consent, following a flexible interview guide that allowed in-depth investigation of key themes while giving the participants the freedom to elaborate on issues they considered significant. The combination of these two instruments provided a rich insight into the role of Mourchidates in promoting gender equality and challenging gender norms.

### **3.4. Data Analysis Strategies**

Following the interviews, the data were translated into English. Thematic analysis was used to analyze collected data according to the six-phase approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely, (1) transcription, (2) familiarization, (3) coding, (4) theme development, (5) defining and reviewing themes, and (6) interpretation. First, all interviews were manually documented and later transcribed based on handwritten notes. Second, all reading transcripts were read to guarantee familiarization with the content. Third, important codes were labelled as significant features of the data related to research questions. Subsequently, the highlighted codes were organized and grouped manually into broader themes without using any software. Then, each theme was supported and illustrated by quotes from interviewees' responses. In the final stage of analysis, themes were interpreted based on research objectives and relevant literature. Thematic analysis was conducted inductively to identify the emerging themes in the qualitative data gathered through interviews with Mourchidates in Khenifra Province. Multiple themes emerged reflecting the interviewees' experiences and perspectives on gender equality and traditional gender norms.

### **3.5. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were attentively taken into account throughout this study. Ethics involve "the responsibilities of researchers towards their participants, their audience, their society, and their academic communities" (Mirza et al., 2023). All participants were given clear information about the purpose and main objectives of the study prior to the interview. Their informed consent was obtained before starting any data collection. The researcher assured participants that all identities would remain protected and anonymous, and pseudonyms were used. Respecting ethical guidelines in qualitative research upholds the protection of participants and ensures trustworthiness, credibility, and academic responsibility of the research process (Mirza et al., 2023).

## **4. RESULTS**

This section introduces the findings that emerged from the semi-structured interviews carried out with the Mourchidates. The data were thematically organized and analyzed to highlight important features related to research questions. Each theme is supported by direct quotations



from the interviews using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The summary table below provides an overview of the main themes, subthemes, and direct supporting quotes.

**Table 1: Summary of Themes Identified from Interview Data**

Themes	Sub-Themes	Participant Quote
<b>Financial Independence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Income sufficiency</li> </ul>	‘Yes, my income provides financial stability, and I don’t rely on other financial resources.’ (Mourchida, A)
<b>Perceived role of Mourchidates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious literacy</li> <li>Role Model</li> <li>Social Support</li> </ul>	‘I perceive my role as Mourchida as essential and effective in fighting religious illiteracy among those women’ (Mourchida, B).
<b>Empowerment and status enhancement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women’s rights</li> <li>Self-confidence</li> <li>Gaining respect</li> </ul>	‘I make women aware of their rights and duties’ (Mourchida, C). Women become able to find solutions to their family problems thanks to attending lessons.” (Mourchida D)
<b>Changes in self-perception and social roles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Growing confidence</li> <li>Challenging stereotypical image</li> <li>Active participation</li> </ul>	Women learned that they merit being treated with dignity and respect. They are able to overcome the misconception that women are inferior and subordinate.’ (Mourchida E)
<b>Addressing Gender Issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender justice</li> <li>Safe space</li> <li>Mutual respect</li> </ul>	“Men and women are equal in terms of religious obligations, each fulfilling complementary roles within the framework of Islamic teachings. I often refer to the verse from the Qur’an, "And one of His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may find comfort in them. And He has placed between you compassion and mercy. Surely in this are signs for people who reflect." (Surat Ar-Rum, 30:21) (Mourchida F)
<b>Reinforcement or challenging of Gender Roles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious Models</li> <li>Gender Roles</li> </ul>	‘I address gender-related issues through the lens of the Qur’an and Sunnah. I frequently refer to the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as exemplary models for women, particularly in their roles as wives. Additionally, I draw upon the biographies of notable female companions (Sahabiyyat) to highlight women's strength, wisdom, and active participation in society.” (Mourchida G)
<b>Encouragement of Female Education and Employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women’s education</li> <li>Economic empowerment</li> </ul>	‘I encourage women to pursue education and become financially independent, as long as it does not create conflict or tension in their marital relationship.’ (Mourchida H)
<b>Promoting Gender Equality through</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender equality</li> <li>Sensitivity to gender issues</li> </ul>	‘I address the concept of equality from the perspective of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and any equality outside the Qur'an and the Sunnah is not considered equality. God has assigned both genders their roles in this life.’ (Mourchida I).
<b>The Moroccan Family Code integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family issues</li> <li>Marriage</li> <li>Divorce</li> </ul>	‘Yes, I address the Family Code according to context; for example, I address it in a lecture or seminar, especially the topic of marriage from the perspective of Moudawana.’ (Mourchida J)

<b>Teaching Women's Rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Islamic Rights</li> <li>▪ Raising awareness</li> </ul>	<p>'I discuss lawful women's rights when women need enlightenment concerning inheritance and money property issues.' (Mourchida K)</p> <p>'I do not discuss lawful women's rights in mosque lessons. It is not part of my specialty.' (Mourchida L)</p>
<b>Challenges Faced by Mourchidates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Limited mobility</li> <li>▪ Limited mosque coverage</li> </ul>	<p>'Some mosques are located in isolated areas.' (Mourchida M).</p> <p>'The number of female religious guides in Khenifra Province is small and does not cover all the mosques.' (Mourchida N)</p>
<b>Future Opportunities and Professional Development through the Mourchidates Program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Professional networks</li> <li>▪ Leadership skills</li> </ul>	<p>'Having the opportunity to perform the rites of the pilgrimage at the expense of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.' (Mourchida O).</p> <p>'To my knowledge, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs does not announce any exchanging programs. If it is possible, I wish I could benefit from it.' (Mourchida P)</p>
<b>Recommendations for Improving the Mourchidates Program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organizational support</li> <li>▪ ICT integration</li> </ul>	<p>'The Ministry of Islamic Affairs should increase the number of Mourchidates due to the growing number of mosques in Khenifra Province, ensuring that each mosque has a permanent female spiritual guide.' (Mourchida Q).</p> <p>'Mosques should be equipped with the latest ICT tools, including laptops, projectors, and large TV screens, to enhance their role in education and community engagement.' (Mourchida R)</p>

The findings of interview data reflected seven key themes related to participants' personal experiences: (1) financial stability and independence, (2) perceived role and the impact of the Mourchida, (3) gender roles and equality, (4) integration of Family Code (Moudawana), (5) patriarchal system, (6) challenges faced by Mourchidates, and (7) opportunities and aspirations.

Many participants revealed that they feel financially stable thanks to their income sufficiency. Some express satisfaction relying partially or wholly on their husband's income. Mourchidates consider themselves as spiritual leaders, educators, and agents of change, influencing women's family relationships, raising religious literacy, and assisting women in finding inner peace. Some accept 'equality' between man and woman in religious duties and education. While others discourage using the term 'equality', preferring rather 'balance and harmony' derived from Quranic verses (e.g. Surat Nissae) and examples from the Prophet's wives and Sahabiyyat (the female companions of the Prophet). As for the Family Code (Moudawana), most of the Mourchidates refer to it in their lessons, especially regarding, marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Some refer to Moudawana to correct misconceptions about it (e.g., a belief that Moudawana changed the Quran principles). Most of the woman interviewed reveal that they are obliged to work in a patriarchal system. They prepare topics for preaching lessons weekly based on the theme of the Friday sermon. Many emphasized some key challenges they faced, such as transport difficulties, especially in remote mosques, lack of ICT tools and teaching tools, language barriers, especially with Amazigh speakers, literacy class preceding preaching sessions, and it lasts for two hours, which often causes fatigue among attendees. Finally, some

interviewees mentioned the Pilgrim Program as a key opportunity and benefit. At the same time, others lacked awareness of further opportunities.

These findings reflect a complex interplay between the roles of Mourchidates in the socio-religious context.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings are discussed in the light of research objectives, literature review, and participants' narratives. Each subsection below addresses each research objective to provide a relevant interpretation of the outcomes.

- **Objective 1:** Examining how Mourchidates perceive their role in women's empowerment through religious and social guidance.

The findings show that the female spiritual guides are not delivering only religious knowledge and literacy but also providing psychological counseling, behavioral, and relational transformation. Besides, they function as facilitators of legal literacy. Their role is to simplify the Family Code (Moudawana) for women so as to make them aware of their legal rights in marriage and divorce. This aligns with prior research by several scholars (El Haitami, 2013; Swink, 2017; Ouchelh, 2024) who argued that the Mourchidates are assigned to deliver religious, social, and spiritual guidance to women in different institutions such as mosques, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and prisons, allowing them to approach large and diverse audiences. They are trained to provide counseling on family issues and to combat radicalism by promoting moderate Islam and tolerance. Mourchidates have gained visibility and legitimacy within religious institutions so as to provide religious education, community services, and counseling or open sessions about intimate issues. Although these female religious authorities and leaders are seen as tools of the state's vision, their "official" access into the religious sphere can pave the way to democracy, positive change, and social welfare of their communities (El Haitami, 2013). McKenzie (2020) stated that the Mourchidates' conversations are basically about offering advice to women about spiritual matters, Quranic teachings, sex, marital issues, and women's health.

The roles of female religious guides are highly valuable in removing barriers to knowledge of Islam and "allowing women access to safe spaces for open conversation about womanhood in Islam" (Swink, 2017). As Saadia, a Mourchida, explained, "I perceive my role as Mourchida as essential and effective in fighting religious illiteracy among those women and changing their lives" (Saadia, personal communication, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025). Ouchelh (2024) also confirmed that Mourchidates "act as exemplary models for the girls aspiring to become good, well-educated, and successful women as they exemplify both academic attainment and attachment to their identity and religion." Nora, a Mourchida, expressed, "I consider my role to be effective and efficient because I see this in the women's interaction with the preaching lessons and their commitment to attend the mosque. In the listening sessions programmed at the end of the class, they acknowledge how much they have benefited in their religious matters" (Nora, personal communication, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025).

The findings, previous studies, and participants' narratives about the Mourchidates' role in empowering women indicate that female spiritual guides play a significant role in enhancing women's status as they act as facilitators of religious and legal literacy, making them aware of their rights and encouraging them to pursue their education and gain financial independence. Ultimately, the findings confirm the initial hypothesis that Mourchidates perceive their role as



significant and influential in enhancing women's empowerment through religious and social guidance.

- **Objective 2:** Analyzing the ways in which Mourchidates promote gender equality in their lessons.

The findings report that the Mourchidates *cautiously* address sensitive gender topics and equality due to diverse audience backgrounds. Research conducted by El Haitami (2013) indicated that Mourchidates do not prioritize promoting gender equality since they work under male supervision and within a patriarchal system. Although the King has aimed to protect women's rights and to put into practice equality between women and men through the Family Code (Moudawana), which calls for gender equality within the family and public sphere (Eddouada & Pepicelli, 2010; El Haitami, 2013; Swink, 2017), McKenzie (2020) emphasized that women are mostly interested primarily in topics related to family relationships with husbands and children as well as issues related to the afterlife and judgement day. Above all, the Mourchida, whose multiple identities of a mother, wife, and sister, plays an influential role in her surrounding (McKenzie, 2020). In an interview with Mourchidates, several participants claimed that gender equality is rarely tackled in their lessons and teachings, which focus basically on family issues and religious duties. According to one Mourchida, "I always refer to the Quran, namely Surat Nissae, to tackle gender issues." (Hannane, personal communication, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025). Karima added, "I address gender issues in the light of the Quran and Sunnah and I always refer to the prophet's wives as an ideal example to any wife as well as the biography of female companions (Sahhabiyat)" (Karima, personal communication, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025). Similarly, Nadia claimed that, "women and men are equal in terms of religious obligations, and they have a complementary role. I always refer to this verse of Quran:

And one of His signs is that He created for you spouses  
from among yourselves so that you may find comfort in  
them. And He has placed between you compassion and  
mercy. Surely in this are signs for people who reflect.  
(Surat Roud, Verse 21) (Nadia, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025).

Zineb added, "I do not address gender equality issues in lessons. I do not go beyond the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah. I am required to prepare topics of mosque lessons based on the nationally unified Friday sermon theme, which is always posted in advance in the Scientific Council official site" (Zineb, personal communication, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2025). Khaoula likewise stated that, "gender-related topics create controversy and debate when they are brought up, which is why I'm being wise when I bring them up. This controversy is because women come from different backgrounds and discuss women and men based on their upbringing, background, and experiences. Some women are quick-tempered, some are patient, and some are hypersensitive, which is why I'm cautious to bring up topics about women's and men's trust" (Khaoula, personal communication, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025).

The hypothesis suggesting that Mourchidates promote gender equality directly through their mosque lessons was not supported by the findings, previous studies, and participants' narratives.

This may reflect institutional religious constraints and socio-cultural expectations of gender roles. Those institutional constraints control religious discourse delivered in mosques or different institutions, imposing on Mourchidates to apply the official guidelines of the Ministry.

- **Objective 3:** Investigating how Mourchidates challenge traditional gender norms within traditionally male-dominated society.

The findings report that the Mourchidates do not challenge traditional gender norms within male-dominated society. The institutional patriarchal framework limits Mourchidates' freedom to choose topics that specifically address gender-related issues. Research carried out by McKenzie (2020) stated that the Mourchidates "cannot speak about anything outside of the guidebook. They need approval from their boss to talk with people; this shows how much control there is of these women in their work." Similarly, El Haitami (2013) confirmed that the Mourchidates are working in a masculine religious hierarchy in which no high positions of leadership are assigned to them, and they still face limitations in challenging patriarchal religious texts.

Several Mourchidates confessed that they do not challenge traditional gender norms in their lessons. As Salima noted, "Challenging traditional gender norms is not my concern. I rather insist in my lessons on husband obedience as a duty, and I recommend those women beautify themselves for their husbands at home" (Salima, personal communication, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025). Similarly, Hayat explained, "I do not tackle this issue. I insist on the female attendees developing themselves through learning and working to assist their husbands with financial duties" (Hayat, personal communication, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025). Najat reinforced this view, stating:

I encourage women to learn about religion so as to become that she was created by Allah with dignity and respect. Although man and woman have different biological functions, they have equal responsibilities in learning about their religion. Seeking knowledge is a duty for every believer, man and woman. When women are ignorant and uneducated, they are more likely to struggle with providing good education to their children, which may hinder society progress. (Najat, personal communication, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025).

Similarly, Salma added, "During the religious guidance, the traditional roles of women and men were reinforced. The woman's role is to take care of the house and her husband, and the man's role is to work and be responsible for the family's livelihood, while raising children remains a joint task between the two of them" (Salma, personal communication, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025). Hanane acknowledged that, "I encourage women to study and become financially independent, but only if it doesn't cause them trouble with their husbands" (Hannane, personal communication, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025). In contrast, one Mourchida challenged this view, stating that the traditional role of women is a wrong perspective because throughout history, the mothers of the believers, the wives of the Prophet, and the Sahaba (the Prophet companions) were Mujahideen (Islamic militants), merchants and nurses during the invasions, and the best example is Aisha (May Allah be pleased with her), who was a scholar, jurist and nurse. I always refer to these women from the Sahaba whenever I address the extent to which woman has a significant and vital role in her community (Monya, personal communication, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025).

During the fieldwork phase, when I tried to interview the female coordinator of Mourchidates at the local Scientific Council of Khenifra, she asked me to submit the list of interview questions in advance to be reviewed and approved by the president of the Council before the interview process. This incident reflects the extent of the presence of patriarchal control within

religious institutions. Such constraints reflect that female religious guides work under male authority, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

The hypothesis suggesting that Mourchidates challenge traditional gender norms through their teachings and lessons within a male-dominated society is disconfirmed by the findings, previous studies as well as participants' narratives. This indicates that Mourchidates consciously avoid any form of hate discourse that may bring about conflict between spouses. Their lessons are carefully designed to deliver mutual respect, harmony, and financial collaboration within the family.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study attempted to explore how female spiritual guides perceive their role in women's empowerment through religious and social guidance and to analyze the ways in which Mourchidates promote gender equality and challenge traditional gender norms within traditionally male-dominated society. The findings reflect that Mourchidates play a significant role in empowering women as they act as facilitators of religious literacy. However, those findings reveal that female spiritual guides cautiously address sensitive gender topics, with less attention given to prioritize promoting gender equality. They also do not challenge traditional gender norms within male-dominated society.

Although this study contributes to a profound understanding of Mourchidates role in enhancing women's empowerment through religious guidance, it is crucial to highlight certain limitations. It was not allowed to audio-record the interviews because of administrative regulations set by the president of the Local Scientific Council, which may cause data loss. Although the president asked the Mourchidates' coordinator to provide me with their monthly scheduled program of each mosque, she was uncooperative, which resulted in a significant loss of time during the data collection phase. Another key limitation is that the research adopted qualitative interviews, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. This study relied on a single geographical area involving a small interview sample. While those previously mentioned constraints limit this inquiry, it paves the way for further research into how to realize a concrete influence of Mourchidates on women's empowerment and status quo.

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