

Shari'a Councils and Muslim Women in Britain: Rethinking the Role of Power and Authority

IT is not always the case that doctoral projects make an effective evolution into publishable research monographs, but in this instance, the transition has been successfully accomplished. The book builds on the growing volume of social scientific research about the operation of Shari'a councils in the UK, with particular reference to the experiences of Muslim women attempting to end unsatisfactory marriages. In this, Tanya Walker is building on the previous work of Samia Bano, John Bowen and Ralph Grillo, in particular, and her findings are often presented 'in conversation' with these earlier works, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

Walker carried out ethnographic research with four well-established Shari'a councils located in different parts of the UK, acknowledging the fact that there are many less prominent or formally constituted councils operating in the country. Overall, her work is based on observation of 100 'cases' and 43 interviews, suggesting the existence of a substantial dataset upon which to base her conclusions. Most of the women approach these councils as a last resort, when all other avenues of mediation have failed. The councils were variably receptive to researcher access, although several have been the subject of previous in-depth investigation and have become relatively hospitable research sites. Walker successfully challenges the widespread assumption that these institutions are monolithic by outlining their differences, and the way in which these can affect judgments and the experiences of women as they engage with the council. Three

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Shari'a Councils and Muslim Women in Britain:
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of the institutions were Sunni (one with a strong Sufi character) and the fourth was Shia. Walker's research methods combined both observation of the women as they engaged with the councils and interviews away from these settings, thus enabling some access to the 'hidden transcript'. Such is the discrepancy between public and private performance that Walker sometimes 'didn't recognise the women in question' (76) when she met them in a new context. I suspect that this difference between front-stage and back-stage performance might equally apply to the judges involved in the study; their voices are largely silent. These inconsistencies also apply to the public claims made by the councils via their websites, and their actual operation in practice.

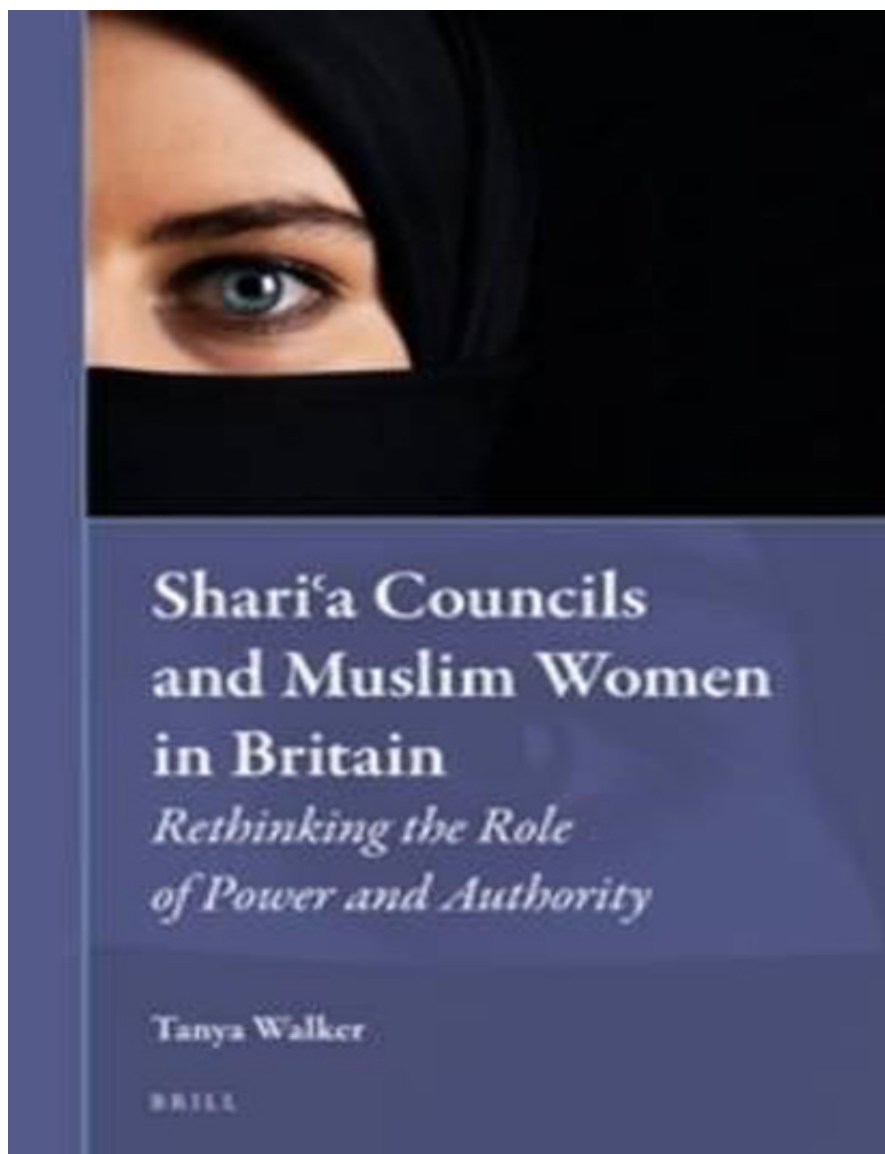
The book comprises a lengthy 'scene-setting' Introduction, followed by four chapters, the first of which

describes the councils, profiles the women involved in the study and outlines some methodological issues. Chapter 2 involves a critical evaluation of the notion of authority. The key finding of this chapter is that the women in Walker's study did not necessarily consider the councils to be authoritative for themselves, but recognized the authority invested in them by their communities. Chapter 3 makes the case that consideration of 'power' is a more useful tool for explaining the dynamics involved in women's use of Shari'a councils. We see that women's agency is constrained by bounded possibilities as they seek freedom from unhappy marital relations: 'the interplay of law, community norms and the practices of Shari'a councils work together to construct a particular set of boundaries – a "field of possible action" – around which women feel they have to navigate in pursuit of their own objectives' (137). It is clear that conservative attitudes sometimes prevail in the workings of the councils, and that Muslim women may suffer as a consequence. In Chapter 4, Walker suggests the tactical way in which Muslim women engage with Shari'a councils in order to achieve their freedom by constructing 'patriarchal bargains' (156); they endeavour to use the power of the councils to exert pressure on their husbands and undertake the necessary performance to convince judge of their 'respectability' and the merits of their case.

Walker's writing reflects a sensitivity and clear regard for the women in her study, and she often gives them a voice by quoting interview extracts.

These accounts sit alongside some forceful and arresting conclusions about the operation of some of the councils, and the take-home message that these institutions may perpetuate the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Muslim women in Britain. Women appear to be in a catch-22 situation whereby they are inadvertently reproducing and reinforcing the conservative and constraining discourses of their communities by continuing to rely on the councils to dissolve their unhappy marriages.

Shari'a councils have been subject to considerable scrutiny over the last decade, both academically, and more recently, politically, via the Home Office 'Review'. Most of the work conducted thus far emphasizes the experience of users – especially women – as they engage with these institutions. It would be illuminating if future research considered more fully the experiences of the judges, both individually and collectively, given the positive transformations taking place as the number of home-grown, British-born Muslim leaders increases. Walker notes the changes in personnel at some of the councils she worked with, suggesting that these institutions are adaptable to new circumstances and the recruitment of new judges. Some attention to the organic and potentially very positive changes that are likely for the future of Shari'a councils might have been offered in the Conclusion, as a counterweight to the rather depressing accounts of discrimination and abuse suffered by some of the women involved in the study. Walker's work perpetuates the focus on the most formally constituted Shari'a councils in the UK, and is thus suggestive of the need for future research to examine the experiences of women who obtain their divorce via less prominent or formally constituted councils.



This is a well-written, carefully researched and very readable monograph, though the extensive footnoting may be tedious for some readers. The introduction and conclusion to each chapter highlight key points, and this makes it relatively easy for readers to get quickly to the gist of the argument. But a superficial reading of this book would miss a rewarding and sophisticated discussion of a complex and often hidden arena of social life, and

a far more nuanced understanding of the complicated dynamics that shape women's involvement with Shari'a councils. The book is theoretically informed (with particular reference to Foucault), and will likely be of interest to researchers from a wide range of fields, including sociology, Islamic Studies, law and politics.

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