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Female, Veiled, Active: Muslim Professionals in Self-development Training in Today's Kyrgyzstan

Manja Stephan-Emmrich, Mukaram Toktogulova

Abstract

This article investigates the nexus between private Islamic education initiatives and spiritual self-development trainings that address in particular Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan. Translating religious knowledge into a pedagogy for self-development that works through biography, embodiment and persuasive aesthetics, publicly active veiled Muslim women contribute to the pluralisation of Islamic knowledge circulation in Kyrgyzstan and shape a kind of female leadership distinct from that of traditional religious authorities. Tackling Muslim professionalism as a practice of articulation that works through an embodied pedagogy, the authors highlight how professional Muslim women engage in affective politics and construct collective subjectivities that build on notions of Muslim modernity by promoting the imaginary of the active, self-reliant and knowledgeable Muslim woman. Thinking Muslim professionalism through affective work, this article seeks to better understand how Muslim renewal and religious revitalisation inspire educational and media professionalism in today's Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the paper discusses the ways in which publicly active veiled Muslim women build inclusive communities of belonging through professional activities that transcend social and spatial boundaries.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan, women, Islam, Muslim professionalism, spiritual self-development, embodied pedagogy, religious knowledge, educational activism

“Don't wear a scarf on a dark head [i.e., an ignorant mind]! First, gain knowledge and develop yourself. Be well educated, self-confident, well-disciplined, mature, and then wear [the] hijab.” This call to action is from one of the public lectures organised on a much-frequented self-development online platform in Kyrgyzstan on 24 March 2021 in Bishkek. Both the instructor and her audience, as well as the

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founder of the online platform herself, Nurjamal,¹ a woman in her late 30s, are *joolukchan ayaldar* – veiled women – between 18 and 50 years of age. These instruction sessions aim at teaching women to practice Islam properly and, in doing so, to become pious and active citizens. Online and offline formats for personal development training have recently become popular in Kyrgyzstan, with its emerging Muslim public shaped in particular by hijab-wearing women. With her pedagogic advisory platform, Nurjamal introduces new teaching formats, with a focus on self-development, that encompass instructions for improving faith and piety through the transmission of religious knowledge, in combination with secular subjects such as seminars for women’s business and entrepreneurship, as well as seminars on life-coaching, mental health and psychology. According to the founder’s vision of education, her online platform aims at motivating women to gain knowledge in order to take responsibility for their own lives, as she states in an interview in one of her online programmes:

We have two problems with education here [in Kyrgyzstan]: universities teach abstract knowledge that is not oriented towards practice, [which] means, women don’t get life skills in university. The other problem is our cultural tradition that reduces moral education [*tarbiya*] to criticising, punishing, forbidding and shaming. Here, a woman’s identity is formed through public opinion. That makes her passive, she feels ashamed, she cries instead of changing her mind. (public lecture by Nurjamal in Bishkek, March 2021)

In parallel with the growing demand for digital education formats, the public speeches of popular female educators fill entire town halls. One of these publicly visible women is 70-year-old *ustaza*² Öqtöm. On 2 December 2021 she gave a speech in a conference hall in Bishkek in front of the Forum for Muslim Business Ladies:

Once Bauyrzhan Momyshuly [1910–1982], a military officer of the Legendary Panfilov division and hero of the USSR, when asked by a man: “Whom would you name as a hero?”, replied: “A girl”. When people asked, why a girl, he explained: “I can stay with strangers in an unfamiliar place for not more than one hour. Then I feel uncomfortable and hurry to go home. But what about a girl? When she marries, she moves to a place she has never seen in her life and has to live there with new people. There, she starts to call her husband’s parents ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad’, and treats them like her own parents. If the husband has siblings, she calls them ‘sister’ or ‘brother’. If she is educated [gained *tarbiya*; i.e., morals and good manners] she brings all in-law family members together, unites and respects them. Later she will give birth to sons and daughters. If she is educated, her children will also be well-educated, healthy descendants of the tribe. When the children become adults, she marries them off and becomes a mother-in-law, and later a grandmother for her grandchildren. See how a girl’s position in the new place will change. Finally, thanks to her knowledge and communicative skills she becomes a ‘queen’ and receives respect and a high position in her husband’s family.” [...] Are there

1 Some names in this article have been anonymised or altered.

2 *Ustaza* is a Kyrgyz term, here in the feminine form, while *ustaz* is the masculine form, designating a person who has expert knowledge in a particular field. This could be a master craftsman or a person who has religious knowledge and passes this on. As a rule, the title is used by pupils to address their teacher. The title is also regarded as a respectful designation for the person and is used by other people as well.

any ladies from Osh who married a man from Issyk Kul? Are there women from Chui who got married to a man from Osh or Jalalabad? Or is there anyone who moved with her husband to Talas from Naryn? Please raise your hands, ladies, because you are heroes!³

As these two ethnographic vignettes illustrate, there is an increasing demand for self-development trainings, life-coaching services and offers of proper Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan. With their educational initiatives, active and veiled Muslim women such as Nurjamal and Öqtöm serve different needs within Muslim society and shape a public pedagogy with roots in Islamic ethics and spirituality. Themes such as self-improvement, moral education and the search for inner harmony and happiness have begun to trickle into the agenda of multiple education initiatives led by religious actors and their focus on raising public morale. Imbued with the spirit of Muslim renewal and a religious revitalisation – which is fed by important impulses from transregional missionary and piety movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat or the Gulen movement or from discourses on Islamic renewal and “pure” Islam circulating through study tours, labour migration or educational initiatives between Kyrgyzstan and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim world, and riding the wave of entrepreneurial initiatives in the country – Muslim women take centre stage as activists, entrepreneurs and religious teachers. While the self-development, business and life coach sector is already shaped by male professionals such as Babur Tolbaev, Daniyar Chormoshev and Myktybek Arstanbek, among others, who use their national and transnational popularity to introduce Islamic values into the public debate, it is increasingly women who are specifically targeting a female audience with their training offers. Translating religious knowledge into an ethical pedagogy for self-development, these Muslim women professionals contribute to the pluralisation of Islamic knowledge production and circulation in Kyrgyzstan.

Four aspects prove to be formative here: 1) self-development is based on knowledge (*bilim*) and proper moral education (*tarbiya*); 2) self-development trainings are designed especially for veiled women (*joolukchan ayaldar*); 3) Islam is invoked as a foundation for personal autonomy and self-responsibility, and Muslim virtues provide the crucial spiritual and moral resource for women's self-development; and, finally, 4) religion, here Islam, is put to work as a philosophy for harmony, balance, love and strength. Promoting slogans like “Education is the key to happiness”,⁴ or “With Islam you will find peace in your heart”,⁵ the new educational activities aim at motivating and empowering women to become active in changing their lives for better through the acquisition of knowledge.

Considering the diversification in the field of public education in Kyrgyzstan, which allows people to choose specific services according to their needs, we are

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1DkEN59zFo> (accessed 19 December 2023).

4 In Kyrgyz: “Bilim jana бактылуук.”

5 In Kyrgyz: “Islam dini jurokko tynchtykty ornotot.”

driven by the following questions: How do women shape the growing field of self-development as female, religious and also professional actors? What is their pedagogic mission? As their way of teaching is clearly different from that of traditional female religious teachers such as *otinchas* and also from the missionary activities of female teachers belonging to the Tablighi Jamaat movement,⁶ what explains their success?

Articulating a Muslim professionalism

In this vein, we propose Muslim professionalism as a productive analytical lens to better grasp the dynamic and interrelated interaction of Muslim renewal, educational activism and self-development in today's Kyrgyzstan. Empirically, we build our analysis on ethnographic fieldwork conducted online and offline between 2014–2022 in Bishkek, Osh and Karakol. Following Nurjamal and Öqtöm in their educational activities during private female gatherings (*jamoat*), teaching sessions and public lectures, studying their biographical narratives, and depicting their professional self-image, pedagogic visions and missions, as well as tracing their performative footprints in social media such as video lectures on YouTube or online platforms, we approach Muslim professionalism as a lived reality and human experience embedded in larger processes of subject formation. Thus, we treat religion and everyday life not as separate entities. We instead follow anthropological positions that think together the power of normative discourses to structure daily life and identity formations, on the one hand, and the “open-ended productivity of everyday life that complicates normative discourses and shapes life trajectories” in unexpected, non-linear and ambivalent ways (Schielke 2018: 7), on the other hand. Accordingly, we grasp the “Muslim” in Muslim professionalism as a contextual rather than a textual category: as an identity marker through which professionally acting women in Kyrgyzstan position themselves in larger fields of identity politics shaped by secular, patriarchal as well as Islamic discourses on gender, morality and modernity.

Situating our research in the wider field of cultural and identity politics in Kyrgyzstan and thinking with Stuart Hall's critical cultural theory, Muslim professionalism can be tackled as a practice of articulation (Grossberg 1986: 53). Thus, we highlight how Muslim women, as professionals, engage in the work of political imagination and construction of collective subjectivities. These women build connections between different discursive elements in ways that lead towards

6 In a nutshell, the India-based Jama'at al Tabligh is a transregional Muslim missionary movement, established in British India in the 1920s and active in Kyrgyzstan since the early 1990s. The movement defines itself as a non-radical and non-political piety movement, promoting basic Islamic faith and practice on the basis of lay communities, religiously-motivated forms of travel and individual engagement in missionary work.

alignments and possible (re-)configurations (Clarke 2015: 278); this forms the social imaginary of *joolukchan ayaldar* as active, self-reliant and knowledgeable Muslim women.

With a special focus on the nexus between professional pedagogic action and identity politics, we combine articulation theory (Clarke 2015) with a religious aesthetics approach (Meyer 2010) to better grasp the *affective processes, means* and *material effects* of an emerging professionalism in the field of self-development training among Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan. Drawing on the concept of “embodied pedagogy” introduced by John Clarke (2015), we will elaborate on the following two leading questions: How does Muslim renewal inspire professional pedagogic practices by imbuing them with religious meaning? And, how does the connection of hitherto separated professional spheres – media, entertainment, and education – go hand in hand with processes of religious transformation and changing forms and modes of religious experience?

We use the term “Muslim professionalism” to refer also to the complex negotiated entanglements of religiosities, socioeconomic changes and moral complexities in the context of global capitalism and social activism that re-shape and re-configure Muslim lives, subjectivities and belonging in Asia and elsewhere.⁷ Following up on a previous article on Muslim professionalism (Derichs et al. 2022) that conceptualises the triangle of knowledge, religion and professionalism through women’s virtual mobility as digital entrepreneurs, we emphasise the specific role that Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan play as creative and faith-driven actors in producing and shaping spaces for both professional activities and the re-fashioning of religious identities. In line with this, Muslim professionalism is an articulation of our own epistemological concern, according to which we counterbalance politicised contexts in the social sciences and humanities-based knowledge production about Islam and Muslim women, especially in Western academia. Proposing Muslim professionalism as a heuristic concept rather than an emic category, we deliberately draw attention to domains of faith-based work, occupation and expertise that steadily grow outside established professions in the religious domain, and that blur the conceptual boundaries between activism, charity, affective work and entrepreneurship.

Bringing Muslim women from Central Asia to the fore, we want to create a higher awareness and visibility of certain groups of people and their creative agency, people who remain underrepresented in academic literature on professionalism. More concretely, a gender lens helps us to focus on Muslim women as co-constitutive of and articulating alternative epistemologies of professionalism that de-centre Western knowledge orders as well as those shaped by secular and patriarchal regimes. This goes in particular for the field of affective work, which in the widest sense of meaning refers to the creation of social relation-

7 C.f. Botoeva 2018, Koning et al. 2017, Sloane-White 2017, Mittermeier 2013, Schielke 2011, Rudnycky 2010.

ships, the building of communities and the construction of collective subjectivities. In line with the patriarchal labour division in twentieth-century post-war society that built on economic growth on the basis of mass production and advanced capitalism, affective work fell in the realm of the household and was not included in established concepts of professionalism that were based solely on the male workforce and public labour markets.

However, affective work is now becoming increasingly outsourced from the domestic sphere and has undergone a rapid professionalisation as a leading neoliberal and postmodern form of work (Hardt 2019: 425–426, Prinz 2019: 359). Moreover, as Muslim women from Kyrgyzstan are at the forefront of professionalising the field of affective work by merging religious knowledge production with personal development training and media entertainment, classical understandings of professionalism must be critically questioned as to their applicability.

The spiritual turn in self-development

Self-development is a popular theme in today's Kyrgyzstan. A growing body of advisory literature with a psychology or management background, public lectures and online courses instruct people on how to be happy and to find inner balance or self-motivation, as well as testifying to an emerging life-coaching market that, in line with the principle of neoliberal self-governance, serves the desire for self-optimisation and achieving the good life. While topics such as happiness and well-being fill the headlines, self-development has also become an important prerequisite for success in the globalised job market and is therefore closely associated with mental health and strength, a readiness to take risks, optimism and specific business skills.

The strong interest in self-development themes in Kyrgyzstan is a response to the economic situation in the country, which is marked by an unstable state economy, poverty, a lack of perspectives for youth, migration as a livelihood strategy and a perceived crisis of education. In addition, self-development initiatives take on topics such as the decline of moral values in Kyrgyzstani society, which results from the interplay of economic insecurity, the lack of future prospects and the aftermath of the loss of values, ideals and realities after the collapse of the socialist system (Yurchak 2005). For many people in Kyrgyzstan, the effects of this melange of economic insecurity and moral decline in society manifests in a growing rate of mental illness and stress.⁸

Kyrgyzstan is an agricultural country. While two-thirds of the inhabitants live in rural areas (Miholchich 2022), people struggle to develop and adapt

8 This observation is based on own fieldnotes.

farming in their villages to new national and global economic standards, as they lack access to appropriate knowledge and systematic training in agriculture.⁹ Moreover, due to the lack of good-quality educational institutions, Kyrgyzstan depends on international organisations and development assistance to help implement reforms in the higher education sector (Varhapovskis 2022). Although important door openers for the international job market, the international universities operating in Kyrgyzstan¹⁰ create new as well as amplify existing inequalities through high tuition fees that are unaffordable for a large proportion of the population. Among other factors, these attractive but high-threshold international educational institutions contribute to the persistence of labour migration to Russia remaining an important livelihood strategy, in particular for women (Varhapovskis 2022, Kim 2018: 15), as the high tuition fees required for the aforementioned universities are mainly raised through remittances.¹¹

In response to the dire economic situation in the country, the country is currently experiencing a significant upswing in the private business sector and in the field of entrepreneurship. State-led reforms of recent years have aimed at improving the business climate and ensuring sustainable economic growth, with a particular focus on the development of the business environment.

With the country's private sector and entrepreneurs being active players in contributing to developmental goals and economic growth, the entrepreneurial upswing in the country is significantly carried by women. Women have the strong will and creative potential to become entrepreneurs in order to combat poverty and secure family livelihoods – an alternative to labour migration to Russia or other migratory contexts (Turaeva 2017, Kuehnast 2007).¹² National awards such as “Best Women Entrepreneur” or international initiatives by the OSCE or UN Women Kyrgyzstan such as “Women’s Entrepreneurship Exhibition EXPO 2022” in Bishkek also bear witness to a highly supportive environment in Kyrgyzstan for economically active women.

Even as the economy becomes increasingly diverse, significantly impacted by women’s efforts, there remains a desire among the population not only for more personal fulfilment but also to build a better society based on a system of meaning- and decision-making that combines material prosperity with moral values and identity issues. Against this background, the increasing demand for

9 Nina Miholchich states that in 2009 only 7 per cent of agricultural workers in the rural areas received higher education in Agriculture (while 45 per cent of them had been educated in Pedagogy or Medicine; Miholchich 2022).

10 Among the numerous international universities operating in Kyrgyzstan are the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek, University of Central Asia (UCA) in Naryn; Ala-Too International University (formerly known as Atatürk-Alatoo University) in Bishkek; Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University in Bishkek; and the International Kuwait University, also in Bishkek.

11 In 2015, it was estimated by the UN that 59.6 per cent of migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia were women (Kim 2018: 15).

12 It is important to mention that according to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, women make up the significantly larger share of borrowers in all regions of Kyrgyzstan (NSCKR 2015). In 2015, 62 per cent of borrowers were women, while only 38 per cent were men (Sultakeev et al. 2018).

self-development is being met also by various religiously-motivated actors, who dress up principles of self-improvement and self-discipline in religious semantics and anchor them in Islamic ethics and moral teachings. A religious turn in self-development can be clearly observed in Kyrgyzstan, one that takes major impulses from piety movements and globally circulating discourses on Muslim renewal and religious revitalisation. Religious renewal in Kyrgyzstan unfolds as a multi-layered ongoing and open process with many different, sometimes conflicting varieties. For some Muslims, a restoration of traditional, cultural beliefs is important, for others, religious renewal means connecting to a transregionally dispersed Muslim network to learn more about a “pure Islam”, i.e., an Islam in its essence, purified of local culture and tradition (Montgomery 2016). Thus, the image of Kyrgyz not being “true Muslims” because of having deeply incorporated their Nomadic heritage into Islamic practices forms an important reference in the public discourse on Muslimness in the country (Tabyshalieva 2002). While for many Kyrgyz in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan being Muslim is considered an integral part of their ethnonational identity, recent anthropological studies highlight reflections and doubts, tracing the negotiations among people in Kyrgyzstan on what it means to be Muslim and Kyrgyz, as well as to be modern and Muslim today.¹³ It is in this context of everyday reflections and explorations of Muslim belonging, belief and piety (Montgomery 2016, Louw 2012: 155) and the local, national and transnational impulses that shape these negotiations, where we situate the religious turn in self-development training as promoted by professionals such as Öqtüm and Nurjamal.

According to the underlying credo of Muslim self-perfection among revivalist movements present in Kyrgyzstan, self-development occurs through the improvement of faith and piety. The understanding of self-development in these movements is as diverse as the methods to help achieve it. The mobile mission of Tablighi Jamaat teachings, for example, puts emphasis on the perfecting of a piety grounded in learning self-discipline in everyday life by following the model of the prophet Muhammad.¹⁴ Turkish educational institutions close to the Gülen movement (Balci 2022, 2003), as well as educational initiatives like Adep Bashati (Taalibekova 2022), which are run by graduates from the al-Azhar University in Cairo, creatively combine Islamic morality and secular knowledge and thus advertise an idea of self-development through education that serves as a path to a Muslim modernity. In line with the growing popularity of YouTube channels that provide instructional videos made by and designed decidedly for the demands of pious Muslims, such as Tunuk kanaly’ (registered 14 June 2020; 237,000 subscribers), Nasaat Media.kg (registered 22 September 2013; 1.26 Million subscribers), Marva (registered 12 December 2016; 7,600 subscribers), Sapat-

13 C.f. Artman 2018; McBrien 2017, 2009; Toktogulova 2014; Ismailbekova / Nasritdinov 2012; Isci 2010.

14 C.f. Baialieva 2021, Eshenkulova 2022, Nasritdinov 2012, Gugler 2011.

press (registered 15 January 2019; 189,000 subscribers) and Amanat Media (registered 16 April 2018; 287,000 subscribers), personal Islamic reform is advertised as a self-development project that builds on the improvement of faith (*yimon*) through the acquisition of knowledge.

Joolukchan ayaldar: “Wake up and become active!”

Whereas Öqtöm, a multiple award-winning Soviet-trained teacher and school headmaster in her seventies, today leads about eighteen learning circles (*jamoats*) and additionally offers multiple public lectures and motivational courses across the country that also go viral, Nurjamal, a popular media entertainer in her thirties, manages her own online educational instruction platform and in parallel maintains a media programme that also addresses religious themes in formats applicable to everyday life concerns of her audience. Her television journey began through a casting process when she was selected from 150 candidates to become a television anchor. In 2005, she made her debut on television contributing to the National Hit Parade Music Programme. After that, she transitioned to work in a private company and worked later for different Kyrgyz Television programmes before she started to run her own educational online platform. Born in the Issyk-Kul region in 1983, Nurjamal grew up in the context of a pastoral way of life. A dedicated student, she later studied International Relations at the International Atatürk-Alatoo University in Bishkek, graduated from the Social and Cultural Activities programme at the University of Arts and spent two years working on a PhD about the Manas epic¹⁵ at Ishenaaly Arabyev State University in Bishkek. During her studies at the International Atatürk-Alatoo University, Nurjamal became deeply impressed by the way her Turkish teachers integrated their own modern education into an all-encompassing Islamic lifestyle that included a high level of faith, piety and the cultivation of Muslim virtues in line with modern dress codes and international habits. Her teachers “were so different from our traditional Mullahs. It was the first time that I understood that Islam is not backwardness, but is the future” (Toktogulova 2014).

Women are clearly the driving force behind the spiritual turn in the self-development market. Hijab-wearing women are increasingly visible in public as professional religious actors who offer training programmes, give advisory lectures and courses, or manage online instruction platforms that are imbued with religious meaning. Like Öqtöm and Nurjamal, these active women engender

15 The epic of Manas forms central part of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan's national cultural heritage. The epic deals with the battle of the mythical Kyrgyz folk hero Manas and his companions and descendants against the Uyghurs in the 9th century. The epic of Manas represents the most important work of classical Kyrgyz literature as well as one of the most important oral works of the Turkic peoples in Central Asia.

a large community of followers as well as networks that transcend social boundaries based on gender, age, regional origin, educational background or cultural identity.

The spiritual turn in self-development is closely coupled to the changing social image of *joolukchan ayaldar*. Slogans such as “a woman is like a madrasa”¹⁶ bear witness to a growing self-confidence among veiled Muslim women and their role in Kyrgyzstani society as masters of religious knowledge in the family. However, becoming more active has multiple meanings, linking Quranic knowledge, spiritual experiences, Muslim virtues and Islamic ethics with the wider field of social activism and economic improvement.

Together with individual actors such as Nurjamal and Öqtöm, the multifaceted field of Muslim women’s activism covers a wide range of women’s organisations, networks, initiatives and public events in and from Kyrgyzstan that aim at empowering Muslim women through knowledge transmission and networking. Starting from the NGO Mutakallim, a pioneering women’s organisation founded in 1999 and initiated by Jamal Frontbek Kyzy that focused on educational initiatives and gender equality projects, we observe a subsequent pluralisation of the field of women’s public initiatives in Kyrgyzstan. The majority of them are active both offline and online. Like the NGO Mutakallim, Nurjamal’s online platform emphasises the principle of self-development through knowledge (*bilim*) and moral education (*tarbiya*). In these initiatives, the concept of *nur*, from the Arabic term “light”, meaning “spirituality” and “enlightenment” plays a crucial role. The concept signifies the idea of a progressive Islam that is based on the premise of achieving religious and moral education through didactic formats that meet the needs of a modern society. Such a notion of modern, or progressive Islam takes inspiration from Muslim missionary movements active in Kyrgyzstan such as the Fethullah Gülen-network (Balci 2022), as well as from the intellectual heritage of the early modern Central Asian Islamic reform movement of the Jadids (Kubatova 2020). The term “progressive” (Kyrgyz *onuguuu*) is also a key signifier of a discursive position through which active women like Nurjamal distance themselves from an Islamic tradition that, in their eyes, stands for a backward image of Muslim women and an understanding of Islam that is no longer up-to-date.

This connotation of Islam is obvious also in the vibrant field of female entrepreneurship. Muslim women’s NGO forums and organisations such as BossWomen Forum, 100 Women Leaders or Ishker Ayim are inspiring formats not only for Muslim women entrepreneurs to professionalise their economic activities. They provide important motivational templates for other women to become active in serving society in multiple ways besides economic activity, while also encouraging the fight against discrimination against veiled Muslim

16 See Toktogulova 2014.

women in the secular public and the stereotyping of *joolukchan ayaldar* as backward, illiterate and passive (Baialieva 2021, Nasritdinov et al. 2017).

With slogans such as “Wake up, woman!”, “Develop and grow!” or “Be strong!”, educational initiatives like that of Öqtöm and Nurjamal aim at strengthening the self-confidence of hijab-wearing women and motivating them to create an awareness of their own value and potential to become active citizens and participate in socio-political processes that concern their own role and situation as women in society, as well as the future of their families. Women’s educational initiatives clearly build not only on the transmission of Quranic knowledge or Muslim virtues alone. They are instead inclusive in nature, as they embrace a broad repertoire of different bodies of knowledge that cover political education, counselling in family law and matters of gender equality or domestic abuse, as well as instruction that supports women’s economic capability or the improvement of women’s digital and media competencies. This goes hand in hand with the creation, dissemination and enactment of an image of *joolukchan ayaldar* as self-reliant and active Muslim women. This image is a political statement that is powerful because it has a strong affirmative affect. Doing the work of articulation, the image of the “progressive” Muslim woman works in multiple ways: it challenges patriarchal stereotypes and counters the secular gaze that excludes veiled Muslim women from the narrative of modernity, development and responsible citizenship. Also, by proposing a new alignment of the religious and the secular as well as of the traditional and the modern, it is a proposal for a harmonious society without discrimination and radicalism.

Tarbiya: “Teaching is healing society”

The conceptual basis for individual and social harmony and balance is *tarbiya* – a moral education that, according to Nurjamal’s and Öqtöm’s understanding, mainly draws from the corpus of Muslim ethics and Islamic spirituality termed *adep* (from Arabic *adab*, “good manners” and “cultivated appearance”) and aims at imparting practical knowledge of life through the cultivation of Muslim virtues.

Öqtöm’s everyday working life is characterised by travelling. For her, being active means being mobile.¹⁷ Travelling became an integral part of her professional life when she gave up teaching after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and worked for some time as a manager in the tourism business in the Issyk-Kul region during the 1990s. Recently, she also started to travel to Russia more often to connect with Kyrgyz migrants there. Besides regular online performances

17 Interview with Öqtöm in Bishkek, 12 February 2022.

on YouTube, she often travels between Bishkek and Osh, and further to Batken, Karakol, Jalalabad or Talas to deliver her speeches at various public events and forums. In addition, she offers self-development courses and lectures to Kyrgyz migrants in cities like Moscow or Ekaterinburg. Driven by her pedagogic mission “to heal society” through increasing the level of morality, in her public lectures and speeches Öqtöm addresses pressing societal and familial problems such as domestic violence and unequal gender relations. With special reference to the situation of migrants in Russia, she also talks about themes such as immoral behaviour, divorce or problems that arise in divided families, such as the education of migrant children left behind by their parents in Kyrgyzstan.

According to the core of Öqtöm’s pedagogic mission, the moral crisis in Kyrgyzstan is not so much the result of external forces such as post-Soviet capitalism, which has created a melange of a loss of values and ideological orientation, self-centredness, greed, corruption and fragile social cohesion. It is rather the lack of *tarbiya*, i.e., proper instruction in morals and ethical values in society that denies people the necessary resilience and creative strength to respond to and change existing social conditions:

Today, our education [in Kyrgyzstan] lacks *tarbiya*, the schools, and universities transmit knowledge, but never think about *tarbiya*. Even religious schools [*madrasa*] invite me to give a lecture about *tarbiya*. Because in my lectures I address issues such as how to be a good mother, how to be a good son or a good daughter, good daughter-in-law [*kelin*], about good relationships between parents and children. Also, I address topics such as divorce and family violence. Besides, many young men call me and ask for advice on family issues, for example, “I can’t resolve the conflict between my mother and my wife” and so on. [...] I also give public lectures specifically for mothers-in-law [*kainene*]. I ask them to bring their daughters-in-law [*kelin*] to my lectures in order to improve their communication skills. At the end of my lectures I ask them to hug each other.¹⁸

This critical position directs the focus on human moral agency and questions female passivity and forbearance as the values appropriate to a modern society. *Tarbiya* provides the foundation for proper moral composure in dealing with oneself, the social environment and one’s own relationship with God. A good example of this critical response to an education sector drenched in a secular value system, is how Öqtöm makes sense of her own spiritual transformation. For the former Soviet-trained school teacher, the realisation that the knowledge taught in state schools (also by herself) lacked the ingredient of *tarbiya* formed an important motivating moment for her decision to become active as an instructor of religious knowledge. In her own words, the knowledge that the Soviet education system produced, and that is still transmitted in schools in the contemporary post-Soviet era, lacks spiritual content and produces “educated satans” (*bilimduu shaitan*).¹⁹ The term implies not only those devoid of

18 Interview with Öqtöm conducted in Bishkek on 21 May 2022.

19 Interview with Öqtöm conducted in Bishkek on 12 December 2022.

any spirituality but also those who lack the possibility to reach spiritual maturity, meaning that they are unable to act with the intention of doing a good deed for social welfare (*sadaqa*) that Allah will reward (Botoeva 2020) with religious merit for the hereafter (*savob*).

Nurjamal and Öqtöm clearly connect their instructions for self-empowerment, self-optimisation and self-responsibility to a concept of the moral self that is rooted in the ethical tradition of Islam, and that can only be cultivated through *tarbiya*. Thus, the acquisition of religious knowledge and the internalising of Muslim virtues, such as, for example, doing things with proper intention (*niyet, niyah*), being sincere (*ikhlas, rostkor*) in what you do, or doing what you do with respect (*urmattoo*) or self-love, love for others and love for God, forms part of a constant effort that leads to a specific moral disposition, according to which one is and acts as a human being and is able to translate religious knowledge into good action (*sadaqa*).

Öqtöm complained that a systematic moral education imbued with spirituality is missing in state schools. At the same time, she identified a deficit of knowledge of proper *tarbiya* also in families, with regard to how children should be taught moral norms and values. Her pedagogical activism is a critical response to established didactic methods that build on outdated conceptualisations of education and humanity:

People don't know how to raise children properly. Parents use violent language when they speak to their children, they punish them because they don't know how to talk to them correctly. But today, the aim of *tarbiya* should be to form independent, self-motivated, self-responsible and active individuals.²⁰

Proper communication skills are a crucial resource for becoming a self-determined and motivated person. For Öqtöm, all forms of violence start with the art of communication. Non-violent communication trainings therefore play a crucial role in her lectures, which she addresses particularly to women, as the source of moral education in Kyrgyz society. Accordingly, she instructs mothers to speak respectfully, appreciatively and motivationally to their children, learn to give them blessings (*bata*) instead of punishing them, and to motivate wives, mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-law to improve their communication skills to bring peace and harmony to the family and the household.²¹ The improvement of non-violent communication is also a response to hate speech forums in social media run by so-called “patriot” groups that address migrant problems in Russia by using a language of harassment and discrimination against migrant women (Murzakulova 2020).

The goal of Öqtöm and Nurjamal's pedagogical engagement, however, is not merely to help other women to become more spiritual in terms of being god-

20 Interview with Öqtöm conducted in Bishkek on 12 December 2022.

21 Interview with Öqtöm conducted in Bishkek on 21 May 2022.

fearing, faithful, spiritual and more aware of one's own religious belonging, as is the task of traditional religious leaders like those called *otincha* in Kyrgyz language. More than that, both women redefine *tarbiya* and reinterpret it in line with their own self-development training principles. Accordingly, *tarbiya* also encompasses the acquisition of practical knowledge that prepares women for a self-responsible and active life. Thus, the pursuit of spirituality in the terms described above builds a substantial basis, a resource, for engaging in self-development projects, which primarily concern worldly matters. In short, pedagogy is a spiritual engagement that covers the work of translating religious knowledge and experience into the daily life concerns of women. With titles such as “Wake up!”, “Be strong!”, “Happiness in education” or “Learn to say NO!”, Nurjamal's classes and lectures addresses issues such as solving problems in family life, including domestic violence, alcohol addiction, divorce or difficult mother/daughter-in-law relationships. In her teachings, Nurjamal encourages women to be open-minded, strong, educated and self-confident. Here is a quote from a lecture titled “*Jooluk salynyp ijgilikke jetse bolobu?*” (“Can Veiled Women Be Successful?”), given by her on her online platform:

Once, a woman called and said, “I am interested in your courses, but I am 42 years old, so I feel hesitant because I think it's too late to study.” Another girl asked me, “Will you accept veiled girls in your course?” Both questions surprised me. Why should age or religious beliefs create obstacles for education? Please learn to be independent, open-minded and self-confident. If you are veiled, the expectations from you might be even higher. You must strive to meet those expectations by being educated and following moral values. It is never late to pursue education. It becomes problematic when you limit yourself and create boundaries. Never restrict yourself; seek, learn, grow and be proactive.²²

As the story of the heroine girl given at the beginning shows, Öqtöm draws on a broad repertoire of different bodies of knowledge to address societal problems and motivate women for self-development. This covers surahs from the Quran, classical Kyrgyz poetry and literature, life stories of famous historical figures, political leaders, national heroes and religious figures from the Quran as well as everyday life stories, schoolbook texts and motivational literature from popular authors such as Saidmurat Davlatov or Nurzhigit Kadyrbekov. The involvement of different cultural knowledge traditions is part of a communicative pedagogical strategy that helps Öqtöm to translate abstract knowledge into forms applicable to the women's everyday life concerns. Even more, she motivates women to change by turning to authorised cultural and religious traditions.

Arguably, the educational missions of active Muslim women such as Öqtöm and Nurjamal unfold their “healing” potential precisely because they embrace the diversity of values and orientations in Kyrgyz society and build connections

22 The online lecture was given on 26 March 2021 in the Kyrgyz language. The extract reproduced in the text is an English translation.

that create a horizon to think modernity and progress differently through the articulation of a social imaginary of identity that provides guidance for social, economic and political action. In that sense, “healing” means balancing both the traditional and the modern, the religious and the secular. To put it differently: personal and societal development is possible through creating a balance of the “old” and the “new” and less through breaking with the “old”, i.e., rejecting cultural, patriarchal and Soviet values and traditions. Healing implies instead a kind of “bargaining with patriarchy” (Kandiyoti 1988) or the construction of female authority through custom, as Aksana Ismailbekova (2016) writes. It is precisely in this integrative rather than separating effect that the success of the pedagogical concepts presented here can be identified. This also applies to the transcending of gendered spaces of Islamic learning. Thus, Öqtöm is also invited by mullahs to present her pedagogical concepts to a male audience. In this context, the realisation that even local Quran lessons in the mosque lack the dimension of *tarbiya* also transcends the boundaries between a traditionally and conservatively oriented Islam and a modern-progressively positioned Islam in the country.

The need for a balance between Islamic tradition and secular values, and between tradition and modernity, has been described elsewhere as symptomatic of the reconfiguration of Muslim identities in post-socialist Central Asia (Stephan 2010). Accordingly, proper moral reasoning builds on internalising secular and religious values in a balanced way, which is seen as a preventive measure to counter radical forces that exist in both the religious and the secular camp and that shape the negative public image of the veiled Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan.

Connecting economic action with Muslim piety, the integrative pedagogy of veiled Muslim women finds also resonance in the booming business and entrepreneur sector. Both Nurjamal and Öqtöm tailor their motivational trainings explicitly for female entrepreneurs and business women. Öqtöm is regularly invited to give speeches at public meetings and events of women entrepreneurs. While addressing problems caused by neoliberalism and talking about how the free market creates inequalities and causes moral crises in society, she calls upon businesswomen to understand their business activities as a personal responsibility to serve society. This encompasses the improvement of specific work ethics, the conversion of business success into charitable deeds, such as giving *sadaqa* or distributing gifts to needy people during Ramadan. Over the last years, wearing the hijab has become both an important theme in public women’s meetings and an effective media event, such as the celebration of the World Hijab Day in Bishkek in 2020.²³ This is also due to the contribution of

23 The World Hijab Day has been held in Kyrgyzstan since 2016 to confront discrimination against veiled women and to show solidarity with Muslim women worldwide. Established in 2014 by an American activist, the idea was supported by 116 countries including Kyrgyzstan. See: <http://en.kabar.kg/news/bishkek-celebrates-world-shawl-day-photo-report/> (accessed 12 December 2022).

self-development instructors like Nurjamal and Öqtöm, who consciously turn the headscarf into a marker of their professional mission. It is not only that Öqtöm distributes headscarves when she meets with businesswomen and female entrepreneurs. With their own art of fashionable veiling and the way they speak about the hijab, Öqtöm and also Nurjamal redefine the headscarf into a signifier for the modern Muslim woman who has both religious and secular knowledge, and who is active, self-responsible, motivated, successful and independent.²⁴

Embodied pedagogy

In his analysis on the practice of articulation, John Clarke introduces “embodied pedagogy” as a concept that helps to explain the work of cultural politics through “the sense of a person as an embodied practice” (Clarke 2015: 283). For Clarke, the work of articulation takes place when the teacher connects fragmented realities and heterogenous political and cultural contexts into new possibilities and alignments (ibid.: 282). Articulation, therefore, encompasses both the work of translation and a specific “art of engaging”, i.e., an elaboration of ways to address and appropriate pedagogical content (knowledge) so that it attaches to and speaks for a particular subordinate group, appealing to that group’s sentiments and sensibilities in such a way that members of this group “can come to identify themselves in the leading project” (Clarke 2015: 279, Botoeva 2018: 243). In that reading, as Muslim professionals, Nurjamal and Öqtöm embody a certain “mode in which the personal and the political were articulated” (Clarke 2015: 285). Turning to the two women’s particular “art of engaging” in their pedagogical action, three things are relevant: biography, embodiment and affect.

Since Öqtöm and Nurjamal were already professionals when they turned to self-development training, their pedagogic endeavours benefit from a wide range of professional skills that the women can capitalise on to gain a leading position as religious actors in the field of self-development. The two women – a former school teacher and a media star – can draw on broad professional experience when speaking in public and in front of larger audiences. In addition to her speech competences, Öqtöm also points out that studying books is easy for her because she has been reading all her life and developed a passion for it.²⁵

Adding a spiritual component to their pedagogic professionalism, Nurjamal and Öqtöm endow the established corpus of two professional cultures with religious meaning. In doing so, they reshape the public imagination of an edu-

24 This argument builds on an observation taken from Öktöm’s public lecture given in Bishkek’s Saraksi Mosque on 21 February 2022.

25 Interview with Öktöm in Bishkek on 2 December 2022.

cational and media professionalism into one that is decidedly “Muslim” in nature. “The Muslim”, we argue, works as an identity marker in two ways. It firstly signifies the moral agency the women claim for themselves, as well as their concepts of and visions for personal and collective development and the religious subjectivity they formulate (Schulz 2011). Pedagogy, in that reading, is a personal spiritual engagement that becomes enacted through affective work. Secondly, based on this form of affective work, both women create communities of belonging through attachment to a shared aesthetics, which is persuasive as it connects the women and their pedagogic action to the discursive Islamic tradition as an authorising reference. Moreover, using digital teaching formats, dressing themselves up in fashionable Islamic clothing and pursuing a modern lifestyle that combines professionalism with mobility and entrepreneurship, this aesthetic attachment takes place in a way that resonates with the sensational nature of capitalist consumer culture.

The material religion approach entails understanding religion as a practice of material mediation. The form of mediation, as both a modality and a device, is a vital necessary condition to express content, meaning and ethical norms and values and to make the religious tangible and experienceable (Meyer 2013: 7ff). In the following, we shall relate materiality and related forms of material mediation, in short *matter*, to physical presence, appearance and action, i.e., embodiment as a form of professional engagement, or more concretely the way in which Öqtöm and Nurjamal embody the knowledge and put the values they teach to work in their professional action. Grasping the nexus of body, sense and representation, we think with Angela Zito (2015: 27) in terms of a double configuration as “the body as sign” and “the body as site”, thereby combining the concept of the body as a tool to organise metaphors of the world with that of the body as a location of practices, performances and sentiments that shape subjectivity and senses of being in the world (ibid.). When Öqtöm states “teaching is spiritual healing” she is emphasising that teaching is not simply transmitting content to her clients. For her, teaching means sharing knowledge with other people through the teacher’s physical presence, appearance and professional action. Thus, it is her mobility that creates presence and accessibility. After her lectures she offers individual consultations, as many people approach her and ask for pedagogic advice. Moreover, she frequently travels and delivers her lectures at public events, business forums, diaspora meetings held in the conference halls of business centres, shopping malls, hotels, educational institutions or restaurants. For her, sharing knowledge by means of being present as well as engaged is both a Muslim duty and a meritorious act of social welfare (*sadaqa*) and she serves society as a knowledgeable Muslim woman: “If we share our knowledge, Allah will give us reward.”²⁶ In this religious

26 Interview with Öktöm in Bishkek on 21 May 2022.

re-conceptualisation of pedagogy, teaching is a godly and noble profession, as it promotes the idea of life-long learning as a fundamental Muslim virtue that originates in the divine command addressed to the Prophet Muhammad to recite “to read” (*iqra!*) what was revealed to him as parts of the Quran.

In forming Muslim subjectivity, when Öqtöm shares her knowledge with her clients, she simultaneously builds affective communities not through prayer or spreading the message of Islam (*da'wa*) but through her style of teaching. Thus, she introduces an understanding of religious knowledge by means of engaging in affective work with her own body, senses and emotions. With her art of listening and speaking, that is, being patient when others are talking, being empathetic through hugs, sharing emotions and biographic experiences, as well as speaking respectfully, appreciative and motivating, Öqtöm bridges distances and translates abstract knowledge into a form accessible, perceptible and meaningful for her clients as well as applicable to their worldly needs.

Herself enacting the Muslim virtues she teaches, Öqtöm not only becomes a role model for other women. She also creates a sense of authenticity, credibility and trust, as she draws on a repertoire of affective and sensual forms that appeal to the women's sentiments and evoke and maintain experiences. These sensual forms can also provide access to the transcendental (Meyer 2010: 757). At the same time, and important here, they embed experiences and feelings in a religious framework that creates meaning, as it allows the women (sometimes also men) around her to feel as well as to share a sense of belonging to the local Muslim tradition. These senses are evoked by Öqtöm in her pedagogical action, when she uses Quranic references or examples from Muslim history in the region, or when she refers to her own biography.²⁷ Although she rediscovered religion and learned to pray only when she started to attend *taalim* groups in Bishkek in the 1990s, she emphasised that “religion already existed in my heart as memories of my beloved grandmother”. Her grandmother was an *otincha*, a female religious authority and knowledgeable woman, who took her granddaughter to meetings where she delivered religious speeches (*bayan*) and taught women from the village in Quran recitation. “I used to sit very close to my grandmother and listened carefully when she spoke to the women. She was an incredible storyteller. I still remember some of her stories and use them in my lectures.”²⁸

With its authenticity and trust through biography, the aesthetical dimension of Öqtöm's pedagogy also draws its persuasive power from her competence as a former teacher to speak in front of a public audience and to convince with her linguistic authority. It is this embodiment of individual biography, where the discursive Islamic tradition meets with the teacher's didactic professionalism and shapes an affective competence with a high inclusive impact, that encourages

27 Interview with Öqtöm in Bishkek on 21 May 2022.

28 Interview with Öqtöm in Bishkek on 21 May 2022.

women to open up, to talk about themselves and to articulate their concerns and needs. Overcoming the social closure characteristic of other forms of professionalism by means of this embodied pedagogy, Öqtöm and also Nurjamal build communities of Muslim belonging that are open and inclusive. This concerns not only a greater visibility of women as political actors in the Kyrgyzstani public. The inclusive nature of their pedagogy also bridges urban-rural divides, as well as transcending the spatial boundaries drawn by age or gender. Nurjamal, for example, is very successful in encouraging even women much older than herself to join her motivation seminars, saying that it is never late to get an education, as “the philosophy of life is continuous learning”.²⁹ Not only do her female clients ask Öqtöm to give lessons also to their husbands, but Öqtöm is also frequently approached by men themselves who not only listen to her online lectures but also call her by phone to ask for advice on how to solve marital and family problems. Even more, including her physical and virtual mobility, as well as mobility across multiple networks (clients, business, professional) in Öqtöm’s understanding of sharing knowledge, she connects hitherto separated social groups and networks, including imams, motivators, educators, businessmen and -women, pop singers, migrants, housewives and media persons.

Thus far, the spiritual turn in self-development has created as well as built upon networks as affirmative circles and discursive communities act transversally to the social order and its spatial boundaries established by secular, patriarchal and religious traditions and values. To better grasp the material effects of women’s networks as affirmative and binding circles, the work of religious aesthetics helps to explain Öqtöm and Nurjamal’s embodied pedagogy as a form of articulation that is situated in the context of “broader moralities of binding, and the politics of belonging” (Meyer 2010: 743). In reference to Jaques Ranciere and his *Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), for whom aesthetics forms an integral part of the politics of perception, Birgit Meyer (2010) identifies aesthetics as a possible resource for a critique of hegemonic formations. Being constituent of “specific orders of visibility and sense” (Meyer 2010: 755), aesthetics has the potential to invent sensual forms and material structures that become relevant for alternative forms of distributing religious knowledge. Thinking of pedagogy with John Clarke (2015) as an embodied practice of articulation, religious knowledge distribution can construct a politics which speaks to the experience of subordinate groups in an appropriate way (Clarke 2015: 279).

The very specific way in which Öqtöm and Nurjamal engage in self-development training has the power to attract, convince and mobilise through a repertoire of affective pedagogical rhetoric and sensational forms that is responsible for “truth effects” (Meyer 2010: 756). Authorised by a discursive Islamic tradition as well as by biographical experiences (spiritual and professional), the persuasive aesthetics of the women’s pedagogic action creates authenticity and trust, and

29 Observation taken from Nurjamal’s online lecture given on her educational platform on 26 March 2022.

forms communities of belonging. In addition to that, and following Meyer's observation that sensational forms provide an excellent entry point into processes of religious transformation (Meyer 2010: 751), Öqtöm and Nurjamal re-fashion religious knowledge in a highly sensational way through commodified globalised forms of cultural production and knowledge dissemination. The way in which they participate in globally circulating discourses on Muslim modernity by means of linking the local Muslim tradition with life-coaching and psychological literature, Islamic fashion, influencer activism and visual arts in media entertainment, has a highly compelling character. Including in their educational activism a material culture that is "in strong consonance with neoliberal consumer capitalism" and signs of a good life (Meyer 2010: 752), Öqtöm and Nurjamal make religious knowledge far more applicable and compatible to the needs, desires and demands of modern Muslim life than traditional religious authorities such as *otıncha* or Tablighi preachers are able to do.

Muslim professionalism, articulation and affective work

It is at the intersection of educational activism, entrepreneurship and Muslim renewal described above where we identify the emergence of a Muslim professionalism in Kyrgyzstan. Women like Nurjamal and Öqtöm are not only professional Muslims in the sense of working in a specific field of occupation and being a workforce in the national or global labour market as a school teacher or a media entrepreneur. Even more, embodying and enacting the imaginary of a progressive Islam, active veiled Muslim women like Nurjamal and Öqtöm translate Muslim subjectivity into professional action. Thus, the women place religion (their faith and piety) to work in the literal sense in order to change themselves and empower other women to shape their own lives and society itself. Linking professional action and spiritual transformation, active Muslim women become public role models that embody Islam as the key to a fulfilling good life and as a mobilising resource for individual and societal change.

In this article, we have introduced Nurjamal and Öqtöm as Muslim professionals. Equipped with a broad repertoire of cultural and professional skills to perform, convince and motivate, and proficient in handling digital technology, the two women connect multiple, hitherto separated social fields and related knowledge repertoires. Engaging in the work of articulation as connectors, mediators and multipliers, Nurjamal and Öqtöm are at the forefront of forging modern Muslim identities through the re-configuration of religious knowledge in the larger context of the global knowledge industry and a symbolic economy that feeds into the fast-growing market of religious and digital aesthetics.

Articulating Islam as a crucial resource for female agency and self-empowerment by means of an embodied pedagogy, the two professionals counter the rather negative image of *joolokchan ayaldar* in Kyrgyzstan as backward, passive and incapable housewives.

The ways in which Nurjamal and Öqtöm connect self-development with moral education, spirituality, psychological training, political agency and the distribution of business knowledge, is pioneering. Going public, being mobile and highly visible in both the offline and online world, the two women introduce innovative formats of knowledge application among women. Because these formats are aesthetically pleasing and highlight the personal competences, professional skills and religious biographies of both women, Öqtöm and Nurjamal are not simple religious teachers like *otincha*, who are engaged in basic religious education, such as Quran recitation and traditional healing rituals in the domestic sphere. Öqtöm and Nurjamal have become popular public figures and media stars in Kyrgyzstan, with a growing number of followers in all segments of Kyrgyzstani society, among them also men and male religious figures. Integrating religious messages into processes of aestheticisation that characterise global capitalism, and crossing the line between religious instruction, social activism and entrepreneurship, Nurjamal and Öqtöm are thus successful mediators and multipliers of different repertoires of knowledge.

Situating Muslim professionalism in the larger practice of articulation, in this article we have carved out the work of connecting as a specific way of professional engagement. Moreover, new alignments come into being through women's engagement in an embodied pedagogy that, as a practice of articulation, builds overwhelmingly on affective work. Thinking Muslim professionalism through affective work, we argue, provides a productive lens to understand how – by which means and to what ends – spiritual movements can shape educational and media professionalism in today's Kyrgyzstan as well as how these movements become driving forces in building communities and constructing collective subjectivities through professional action.

Based on the two ethnographic case studies presented, we conclude by discussing five features that illuminate the interrelationship of Muslim professionalism, articulation and affective work. Obviously, it is these features that highlight the proportion of veiled Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan as creative actors in professionalising affective work outside the domestic sphere. Moreover, as has been shown, in the course of its professionalisation, affective work experiences a partial economic appropriation through digitisation and entrepreneurship.

Firstly, turning to the “Muslim” in Muslim professionalism, the translation of religious knowledge into applicable forms happens by means of a pedagogy that builds on embodiment, biography and affect. Turning self-development into a practice of social welfare (charity, *sadaqa*), Muslim professionalism is embedded in the larger context of moral self-making. It is in the very process

of translation that a professional self-image gets infused with religious significance, and Muslim virtues and sensibilities turn into specific work ethics. The formation of the knowledgeable, active (professional) Muslim self happens secondly also through women's networking. The growing body of followers, colleagues and clients, such as businesswomen and female entrepreneurs, shape affirmative circles that foster knowledge exchange, female agency and empowerment, and the building of affective communities that are based on shared values and a persuasive aesthetics that creates belonging across social boundaries determined by gender, religion, age and space.

Accordingly, and the third feature of Muslim professionalism, the spiritual turn in self-development goes along with the transformation of religious experience. Thus, the work of connecting in Nurjamal and Öqtöm's pedagogy becomes a creative action that combines both innovation and improvisation. Creativity as improvisation is a productive lens to understand how local articulations of modern Muslim identities and subjectivities are embedded in larger processes of transregional connectedness, transformation and mobility (Svašek / Meyer 2016). The women's professional engagement in knowledge production and dissemination builds not only on the introduction of newness and of innovation, i.e., the application of religious knowledge through specific teaching formats in self-development. The women's pedagogic performances comprise affective practices of repertoire-building and "practices of repetition that depend on creative improvisation and constant adaptation and transformation" (Svašek 2016: 5, Meyer 2016: 313). Reconfiguring religious knowledge through embedding local traditions and global Islamic discourses on modernity, as well as heritage, into a culture of self-fashioning and in larger trends that "depend upon permanent aesthetic rejuvenation", Muslim professionals like Öqtöm and Nurjamal become a "performative model for [Muslim] personhood in capitalist modernity" (Meyer 2016: 316).

At the same time, and fourthly, with their professionalism, the two women indicate a power shift and highlight change in both policy or practice, which are related to an already existing secular and religious educational professionalism. In reference to the dialectic relationship between agency and structure, i.e., between individual professional skills (professionalism) and established bodies of professionalism with binding standards, values and orders, we recognise the potential of the emerging Muslim professionalism to re-shape professional cultures in religious and secular education through repetition, adaptation and transformation. Thus, we follow Linda Evans in her analysis on the reformation of educational professionalism in the United Kingdom, who states that individual professionalism influences and shapes "collective professionalism, which, in turn, stimulates or provokes responses in individuals that determine their professionalism orientations" (Evans 2008: 27).

As a fifth and last feature, we can identify a crucial moment for and of women's professionalisation in the field of faith-based educational activism, when women shift their activities to the public and thereby expand the scope of their initiatives and reach a larger as well as a new audience. Publicly visible in the online and offline world, Öqtöm and Nurjamal transcend the boundaries of established gender-segregated spaces for the transmission of religious knowledge. Leaving the domestic space, which was hitherto designated as the traditional locale for women's religious instruction in the local Islamic tradition, and shaping a Muslim public beyond state-framed educational institutions that offers religious knowledge transmission also for Muslim women,³⁰ professional self-development trainers like Nurjamal and Öqtöm renegotiate central Islamic concepts of Muslim women's morality such as *aurat*³¹ or *purdah*, that justify female invisibility in a still male-dominated public sphere (Taalaibekova 2022). Whereas these concepts are reproduced by traditional religious education experts called *otins* or by Tablighi *taalim* teachers on their missionary travels, Öqtöm and Nurjamal, as Muslim women active and visible in the public, introduce new formats of religious knowledge transmission and thereby participate in the competition for religious authority in Kyrgyzstan. In so doing, they run the risk of being rejected as knowledge experts by their audience (Derichs 2017: 130). Going public is therefore a conscious decision that forces veiled women to reflect upon their performative practices and the effects of their behaviour: what they say, the way they speak, move, dress, and so on. Bearing responsibility as role models, the step of going public demands a high degree of self-making and self-management, as well as calling for the ability to recognize the political potential to invent and articulate a new imaginary of the Muslim women in a public sphere shaped by hegemonic secular and patriarchal discourses about Islam and Muslim women. It is through the embodying of a Muslim professionalism in the self-development sector that Muslim women pro-actively shape discourses on the modern Muslim self. Arguably, going public, either online or offline, entails not only a greater need for women to professionalise their educational activities, but also provides important impetus for doing so.

30 We are thinking here in particular of madrasas, Islamic institutes and the Islamic university in Bishkek, which began operating in the country from the 1990s onwards.

31 The term *aurat* comes from Arabic term *awrah* or *aurat* and depicts in its Quranic use notions of privacy, vulnerability and nakedness. In many Muslim societies in Asia and the Middle East, the term *awrah* is associated with femininity and womanhood.

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