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**Women and Sufism:  
Perspectives on History, Gender, and the Contemporary Application of  
*Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah***

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**Abstract:** This article examines the role of women in Sufism from the perspective of Islamic law, focusing on their spiritual practices, historical contributions, and contemporary relevance. It employs a qualitative interpretive approach, drawing on literature analysis, observations of online Sufi learning activities, and semi-structured interviews with women participating in Sufi study circles. The analysis is grounded in Jasser Auda's *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* framework, through which women's spiritual engagement is assessed in relation to key legal objectives, including the preservation of religion (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), life (*ḥifẓ al-naḥs*), intellect (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*), lineage (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), and human dignity (*ḥifẓ al-karāmah al-insāniyyah*). The findings demonstrate that Sufi teachings, which emphasize spiritual equality and inner transformation, provide a normative Islamic basis for women's active participation as spiritual leaders, intellectuals, and social actors. The study contributes to Islamic legal discourse by showing that women's engagement in Sufism represents a viable and internally grounded framework for advancing gender equity and holistic human well-being within the tradition.

**Keywords:** Women, Sufism, Islamic history, gender dimensions, and contemporary Sufism practices

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**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji peran perempuan dalam Sufisme dari perspektif hukum Islam, dengan fokus pada praktik spiritual, kontribusi historis, dan relevansi kontemporer mereka. Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan interpretatif kualitatif, yang didasarkan pada analisis literatur, observasi aktivitas pembelajaran Sufi daring, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan perempuan yang berpartisipasi dalam lingkaran studi Sufi. Analisis ini berlandaskan pada kerangka *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* karya Jasser Auda, di mana keterlibatan spiritual perempuan dinilai dalam kaitannya dengan tujuan hukum utama, termasuk pelestarian agama (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), kehidupan (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), akal (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*), garis keturunan (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), dan martabat manusia (*ḥifẓ al-karāmah al-insāniyyah*). Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa ajaran Sufi, yang menekankan kesetaraan spiritual dan transformasi batin, memberikan landasan Islam normatif bagi partisipasi aktif perempuan sebagai pemimpin spiritual, intelektual, dan aktor sosial. Studi ini berkontribusi pada wacana hukum Islam dengan menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan perempuan dalam Sufisme mewakili kerangka kerja yang layak dan berlandaskan internal untuk memajukan kesetaraan gender dan kesejahteraan manusia secara holistik dalam tradisi tersebut.

**Kata Kunci:** Perempuan, Sufisme, sejarah Islam, dimensi gender dan praktik Sufisme kontemporer

## Introduction

The mystical dimension of Islam, known as Sufism, has long provided unique pathways for spiritual fulfilment and self-realization that transcend conventional social norms. This journey highlights the importance of inner purity, love, devotion, and closeness to God.<sup>1</sup> Challenges Anne Marie Schimmel's reading of "Mysticism in Islam," contending that Sufism is an essential component of Islamic practice rather than just a type of mysticism. The belief in God, the practice of *'ibadah* (worship), and the development of social connection and transformation are all part of Sufism, according to Thohir. As one of the three pillars of Islamic doctrines, along with *Imān* (faith) and *Islām* (submission), it is actually an essential component of *al-sharī'ah al-Islamiyah*, or the Islamic legal system.<sup>2</sup>

While traditional Islamic disciplines like philosophy, *kalām*, and *fiqh* have historically guided religious understanding, Sufism gained increasing attention due to its focus on the inner and spiritual journey, addressing perceived

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<sup>1</sup>Salman Faris Tc, "Impact of Bhakti and Sufi Mysticism on Social Harmony: Understanding Mystical Experiences and Practices," *Maklumat: Journal of Da'wah and Islamic Studies* 2, no. 4 (2024), p. 246–55. Farhana Mustafa, et.al., "The Sufi Islam and Mysticism in Islamic Philosophy," *Al-Kashaf* 3, no. 3 (2023), p. 9–15.

<sup>2</sup>Bijan Bidabad, "Public Law: An Islamic Sufi Approach," Available at SSRN 4270931, (2022). Saude Saude, et.al., "Living Sufism: The Transformation of Dhikr Practices in Indonesian Majelis Ta'lim," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 14, No. 1 (2026).

insufficiencies in guiding individuals toward religion's ultimate purpose.<sup>3</sup> A fundamental tenet of Sufism is that the ultimate reality of God cannot be grasped through purely logical or rational methods, typically associated with exoteric knowledge. Instead, the experience of God's reality is attained through a transformative love that leads to an intimate divine encounter, requiring the dissolution of ego and self-centeredness.<sup>4</sup> This transformative process is supported by *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, which emphasizes the protection and cultivation of the *nafs* (soul), aligning spiritual development with the broader goal of human flourishing and ethical well-being.<sup>5</sup>

*Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, with its approach introduced by Jasser Auda, provides a solid foundation for discussing gender equality and women's empowerment within the context of Islamic law. This approach facilitates the development of a more inclusive and humanistic Islamic legal framework, emphasizing the protection of fundamental human rights, including the rights of women.<sup>6</sup> One of the core aspects of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* is the preservation of human dignity and rights, which, according to Auda, can be understood as the protection of women from all forms of discrimination, violence, and marginalization. This principle falls under the broader scope of *hifz al-nafs* (preserving life) and *hifz al-'aql* (preserving intellect), which not only aims to protect the life and well-being of individuals but also to foster the full development of human potential, including that of women. Thus, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* supports gender equality as a fundamental aspect of Islamic principles that focus on the welfare of all members of society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kamaluddin Ahmed, "Science in the Framework of Islamic Legal Epistemology: An Exploratory Account," in *Islam and Biomedicine* (Springer, 2022), p. 255–70. Suleyman Sertkaya, "Prophethood in Islamic Thought and the Interconnectedness of Kalām and the Sīrah Genre," in *Modern Approaches to Sīrah Genre: Fethullah Gülen's Contribution* (Springer, 2025), 31–56.

<sup>4</sup> S Manzoor, N Shah, and A Manzoor, "Sufism As A Global Highway To Peace," *Ihyā' al-'ulūm-Journal of Department of Quran O Sunnah* 19 (2020). G Amitay, D Hawa-Kamel, and N Ronel, "Sufi Non-Doing Offender Rehabilitation: Positive and Peacemaking Criminology in Practice," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 65, no. 8 (2021), p. 916–36.

<sup>5</sup> A & Ghofur Umami A., "Human Rights in Maqāṣid Al-Sharī'ah Al-Āmmah: A Perspective of Ibn 'Āshūr," *International Journal of Islamic Law* 41, no. 5 (2022), p. 415–33.

<sup>6</sup> Nadia Hanım Binte Abdul Rahman and Jarman Arroisi, "The Philosophy of Human Rights in Islam: Beyond Western Universalism," *Al-Risalah: Journal of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (ARJIHS)* 9, no. 1 (2025), p. 1–27. Būsra Gülsah Akbaba, "Access to Justice and Human Rights: A Comparative Study of Islamic Jurisprudence and Secular Legal Systems," *İnsan ve Toplum* 15, no. 2 (2025), p. 171–92. Zumiyati Ibrahim et al., "Integration of Maqasid Al-Shariah in the Criminal Law Reform to Achieve Justice and Human Dignity," *Jurnal Hukum Islam* 23, no. 1 (2025).

<sup>7</sup> Shaista Batool, "Sharī'ah Governance and Objectives of Sharī'ah (Maqāṣid Al-Sharī'ah)," *Available at SSRN 5255159*, 2025; Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman and Mikail Kolawole Abdulsalam, "Applying Maqāṣid Al-Sharī'ah in Contemporary Fatwās: Medical, Family Law, Zakāh, and Hajj Perspectives," *IJUS: International Journal of Umranic Studies* 9, no. 1 (2026),

In recent years, the discourse on gender in Islamic law has been significantly enriched by the emergence of Islamic feminist scholarship, which critically re-examines classical interpretations of *fiqh* and Qur'anic exegesis. Scholars such as Babakhani, Öztürk and Van Oost et al, argue that gender inequality in Muslim societies often stems from patriarchal interpretations rather than the normative foundations of Islam itself.<sup>8</sup> More recent studies extend this argument by emphasizing justice, equality, and ethical reciprocity as central Islamic values within contemporary legal reform.<sup>9</sup>

Historically, Islamic narratives have often overlooked the significant contributions of women, particularly in the spiritual and intellectual realms. Data from history demonstrates that women have attained high spiritual positions and made substantial contributions to the Sufi community by challenging conventional gender norms and advocating for their own spiritual empowerment.<sup>10</sup> For example, in medieval Turkey, women held powerful positions within Sufi orders, particularly the Mevlevi Order,<sup>11</sup> a fact often overlooked in historical records. This spiritual equality suggests that Sufism offers valuable resources for reconsidering gender within Islamic law, going beyond mere gender equality.<sup>12</sup>

The deep engagement with historical context, gender dimensions, and significant contributions of women in Sufism, from its early days to the present, provides a comprehensive understanding of how women have navigated the

p. 97–108; Yusida Fitriyati et al., “Reconsidering Inheritance Equality: Gender Justice in Religious Court Decisions through the Lens of Maqashid Al-Shariah,” *Nurani: Jurnal Kajian Syari'ah Dan Masyarakat* 25, no. 1 (2025), p. 122–40.

<sup>8</sup> Cemal Öztürk, “Revisiting the Islam-Patriarchy Nexus: Is Religious Fundamentalism the Central Cultural Barrier to Gender Equality?,” *Zeitschrift Für Religion, Gesellschaft Und Politik* 7, no. 1 (2023), p. 173–206; Pascaline Van Oost et al., “Gender Inequality Discourse as a Tool to Express Attitudes towards Islam,” *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 11, no. 2 (2023), p. 690–707; Atieh Babakhani, “Control over Muslim Women’s Bodies: A Critical Review,” *Sociological Inquiry* 94, no. 1 (2024), p. 241–62.

<sup>9</sup> Mughees Shaukat, et.al., “Islamic Framework for Behavioral and Socio-Economic Justice,” in *Islamic Finance in the Modern Era* (Routledge, 2024), p. 52–78. Abdullah Sahin, “Islam, Social Work and Common Good in the Muslim Minority Context of Europe: Rethinking Shari‘a as Relational Ethics,” in *Exploring Islamic Social Work: Between Community and the Common Good* (Springer, 2022), p. 179–200. Aftab Sohail, et.al., “Justice, Governance, and Legal Stability: Functional Parallels and Philosophical Divergences in the Rule of Law across Islamic and Western Legal Traditions.,” *Manchester Journal of Transnational Islamic Law & Practice* 21, no. 2 (2025). Sumiati, et.al., “Maddate, Sufism, And Moral Education: A Study On Tarekat Khalwatiyah Samman In Bulumparee, Bone, South Sulawesi,” *Malikussaleh Social Politic Review* 6, No. 2 (2025).

<sup>10</sup> Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism,” *Religions* 14, no. 9 (2023), p. 1082.

<sup>11</sup> Feyza Burak-Adli, et.al., “Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts,” *Culture and Religion* (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Shaikh, “Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism.”

intersection of gender, spirituality, and mysticism. Sufi teachings give women special chances to actively participate in Sufi orders and activities by promoting concepts of equality and the transcendence of social and gender distinctions<sup>13</sup>. In addition, Sufism's mystical character has given women more freedom to express their spirituality than other religious traditions that have traditionally enforced strict gender restrictions. Sufi women have not only been devoted followers but have also made profound contributions as instructors, poets, saints, and spiritual mentors, shaping the tradition with their wisdom, creativity, and leadership. The application of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, particularly the framework reconstructed by Jasser Auda, serves as a robust tool to analyse and strengthen arguments regarding women's roles and positions in Sufism. This approach offers a rare, in-depth exploration of how women's involvement in Sufism reflects efforts to achieve the objectives of Sharia, while also contributing to a more inclusive religious practice.

However, while Islamic feminist approaches have made substantial contributions to reformulating gender discourse within *fiqh*, they tend to focus predominantly on textual reinterpretation.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the experiential and spiritual dimensions offered by Sufism remain underexplored. Recent scholarship indicates that Sufism provides an alternative epistemological framework in which gender relations are negotiated through lived spiritual practices and ethical transformation, not merely through legal discourse.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that Sufism may complement Islamic feminist approaches by grounding gender equality within the internal spiritual logic of Islam.

Auda's theory of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* brings a significant shift from the classical focus on preservation to the development and enhancement of human rights.<sup>16</sup> By expanding the meanings of *al-dharūriyyât al-khamsah*, Auda's framework enables Islamic law to become more flexible, dynamic, and relevant to contemporary developments. For instance, *hifz al-dîn* is broadened to include

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<sup>13</sup> Burak-Adli, Xavier, and Piraino, "Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts."

<sup>14</sup> Pamela Jabbar, "In What Ways Do Feminist, Islamic, and Development Discourses Compete, Converge, and Conflict in Contemporary Constructions of Gender and Gender Justice?" (University of Birmingham, 2024); Moha Ennaji, "Mernissi's Impact on Islamic Feminism: A Critique of the Religious Approach," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 4 (2022), p. 629–51. Aysha Hidayatullah, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents," *Islamic Feminism: Hermeneutics and Activism*, 2024, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Shaikh, "Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism"; Burak-Adli, Xavier, and Piraino, "Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts"; Bianca J Smith and Atun Wardatun, "Domestic Violence and Islamic Spirituality in Lombok, Indonesia: Women's Use of Sufi Approaches to Suffering," *Contemporary Islam* 16, no. 2 (2022), p. 427–47.

<sup>16</sup> H Zaprul Khan, "Maqāṣid Al-Shariah in the Contemporary Islamic Legal Discourse: Perspective of Jasser Auda," *International Journal of Islamic Law and Ethics* 34, no. 2 (2018), p. 110–28. Solahuddin Al-Ayyubi, "Maqasid Sharia In Tabarru' Contract Laws," *Jurnal al-Dustur* 6, No. 1 (2023).

'freedom of religion,' *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-'irdh* focus on 'protection of human dignity' and 'human rights,' and *hifz al-'aql* encompasses 'development of intellectual thought' and 'resisting imitation.' Auda's holistic and multidimensional system ensures that the analysis is not merely textual but also considers the social realities and broader objectives of Sharia aimed at promoting human welfare.<sup>17</sup> This theory enables an analysis of how Sufism, through its emphasis on spiritual equality and the concept of the feminine divine, contributes to the realization of *Maqāṣid* objectives, such as *hifz al-dīn*, *hifz al-nafs*, and *hifz al-karama al-insaniyya*.

Furthermore, recent studies in Islamic legal theory highlight the increasing relevance of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in addressing contemporary issues, including gender justice and social inclusion. Auda's systems approach has been widely used to reinterpret Islamic law as a dynamic and human-centered framework that promotes dignity, equality, and human development.<sup>18</sup> Empirical findings also show that women's participation in religious and spiritual movements contributes to the realization of *maqāṣid* principles, particularly in education, social welfare, and community empowerment.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, these studies rarely integrate Sufism into their analysis, indicating a significant research gap that this article seeks to address.

Despite the growing body of literature on gender in Islam, there remains a lack of integrative studies that connect Sufism, Islamic legal theory, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* within a unified analytical framework. Existing works tend to treat these domains separately, resulting in a fragmented understanding of women's roles in Islam.<sup>20</sup> This study addresses this gap by offering a

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<sup>17</sup> J Auda, *An Outline of the Islamic Maqasidi/Purpose-Based Approach* (Islamic Philosophy Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Ibrahim et al., "Integration of Maqasid Al-Shariah in the Criminal Law Reform to Achieve Justice and Human Dignity"; Zeinab Rezaei, "Reframing Floridi and Cowl's AI Ethics Framework through Islamic Moral Thought," *AI and Ethics* 6, no. 2 (2026), p. 185; Wildani Hefni, Imam Mustofa, and Rizqa Ahmadi, "Looking for Moderate Fiqh: The Thought of Mohammad Hashim Kamali on the Reformation of Rigidity and Inflexibility in Islamic Law," *Al-Istinbath: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 10, no. 1 (2025), p. 30–57.

<sup>19</sup> Andi Martina Kamaruddin et al., "Implementation of Maqāṣid Al-Syāriah in Empowering the Zakah Community Development Program," *Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Raushan Fikr* 13, no. 1 (2024), p. 174–85. Hamdy Abdullah et al., "Developing Tahfiz Empowerment Index Based on Maqasid Shariah," *International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management* 18, no. 5 (2025), p. 1066–91. Hamdy Abdullah et al., "Faith and Sustainability: Developing Maqasid Shariah-Based Elderly Care Organization Empowerment Index," *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults* 26, no. 3–4 (2025), p. 101–17.

<sup>20</sup> Intan Erwani and Anisa Suryani Siregar, "The Role of Women in Islamic Sacred Texts: A Critical Study of Women's Narratives and Authority in Islamic Tradition.," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 106, no. 1 (2025); Petek Onur, "Paradigms, Approaches, Issues, Challenges," *Ethnographic Discourses on Women and Islam in Turkey: A Critical Reading*, 2024, 41–108; Gazi

multidimensional analysis that bridges spiritual practice, legal objectives, and gender discourse. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender within Islamic mysticism by shedding light on the historical context, gender dimensions, and significant contributions of women in Sufism from the early to contemporary Sufism eras. By highlighting key figures such as Rabia al-Adawiyya<sup>21</sup> and Fatima of Nishapur, the study fills significant gaps in historical narratives and underscores the influence of women in shaping Sufi thought from the early centuries to the present. The study further analyzes the gender dimensions in Sufism through the lens of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* as articulated by Jasser Auda. It demonstrates how Sufi principles, which emphasize spiritual equality and the concept of the feminine divine, align with *maqāsid* objectives aimed at promoting social and spiritual justice. This provides a theological basis for gender equality in spiritual practices, offering insights into the empowerment of women in both religious and societal contexts. Additionally, the study explores the contemporary relevance and practical application of these principles. It examines how modern female Sufis continue to develop their roles as spiritual leaders, activists, and intellectuals, forming a new dialogue between gender and Islamic spirituality. Through case studies such as *Majelis Dzikir* and *Kajian Tasawuf Perempuan Istiqalal*, the research shows how Sufism empowers women to contribute to society and challenge gender norms that limit their potential.

This article holds long-term relevance as it outlines the potential of Sufism as a progressive and inclusive spiritual framework that inherently supports gender equality and the empowerment of women in Islam. By offering valuable resources to rethink gender within Islamic law, the study moves beyond mere gender equality, contributing to a more holistic and just understanding of Islam. As emphasized by Haidar Bagir, Sufism encourages responsible social engagement, meaning that female Sufis, through their active roles, contribute to the betterment of society and universal welfare (*jalb al-masalih*).<sup>22</sup> Therefore, this study not only brings attention to a forgotten history but also projects a future where women continue to play an increasingly significant role in the Islamic mystical tradition, enriching both spiritual and social life sustainably, while ensuring that the objectives of Sharia are achieved inclusively for all individuals.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to comprehensively explore the roles and lived experiences of women within Sufi traditions, examining their historical participation, the gender dimensions

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Islam and Zoe Sanderson, "Critical Positions: Situating Critical Perspectives in Work and Organizational Psychology," *Organizational Psychology Review* 12, no. 1 (2022), p. 3–34.

<sup>21</sup> Tc, "Impact of Bhakti and Sufi Mysticism on Social Harmony: Understanding Mystical Experiences and Practices"; Rkia Elaroui Cornell, "Ascetic Spirituality in Islam," *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Islamic Spirituality*, 2022, p. 297–315.

<sup>22</sup> H Bagir, "Positive Sufism: Spiritual Growth and Social Engagement," *Islamic Studies Journal*, 2002.

inherent in Sufi thought, and the dynamics of divine love, the beloved, and gender from the perspective of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. The design is primarily descriptive and analytical, aiming to construct a nuanced understanding of how Sufism has historically facilitated spiritual empowerment among women and how these contributions align with the higher objectives of Islamic law. The guiding theoretical framework for this research is the contemporary interpretation of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* as advanced by Jasser Auda. Auda's systems-based approach offers a dynamic re-conceptualization of the objectives of Islamic law, moving beyond a preservation-centric paradigm to one that emphasizes the development and enhancement of human rights and societal well-being.<sup>23</sup> This study critically engages with Auda's expanded understanding of *al-dharūriyyât al-khamsah* (the five essential objectives).

### Early Sufi Women

Sufism's mystical nature has offered women a unique and liberating space to express their spirituality freely and authentically, in contrast to other religious contexts that have historically imposed restrictive gender norms. This contrast can be understood through the lens of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, specifically *hifz al-din* (the preservation of religion) and *hifz al-nafs* (the preservation of life or honor). By allowing women to achieve spiritual depth without artificial barriers, Sufism fundamentally supports the religious objective of preserving pure faith and spiritual practice for all individuals, as well as safeguarding their dignity and freedom in the pursuit of God<sup>24</sup>. While rigid interpretations of Islamic law and cultural practices often confine women to narrowly defined roles, Sufism has traditionally provided greater opportunities for women to actively engage in both the social and spiritual life of their communities. This inclusivity allows women to participate more fully in the spiritual journey, breaking through traditional boundaries and contributing to the broader Sufi tradition.

Beyond pursuing their own spiritual paths, women in the Sufi tradition have held important positions as leaders, educators, poets, healers, and spiritual mentors. These roles directly support *hifz al-aql* (the preservation of intellect) and *hifz al-nasl* (the preservation of progeny/society). Through leadership and education, Sufi women contributed to the development of spiritual knowledge and wisdom, while their roles as healers and mentors contributed to community well-being, ensuring the continuity and spiritual development of future generations. With their roles, Sufi women have made significant contributions to the development of the Sufi tradition, demonstrating that spiritual power and leadership are not bound by gender. This reality stands in contrast to dominant

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<sup>23</sup> Auda, *A Maqāṣidī Approach to Contemporary Application of the Sharī'Ah*.

<sup>24</sup> S Suwito et al., "Hybrid Sufism for Enhancing Quality of Life: Ethnographic Perspective in Indonesia," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022).

trends in classical *fiqh*, where women's public religious authority has often been debated and, in many cases, restricted. Contemporary gender studies in Islamic law argue that such limitations are historically contingent rather than theologically absolute. In this regard, the active participation of women in early Sufism can be interpreted as an alternative model of authority that aligns more closely with the higher objectives of *sharī'ah*, particularly in promoting justice (*al-ʿadl*), human dignity, and social inclusion. This reinforces the argument that Sufi practices may serve as an important complementary framework for rethinking gender roles within Islamic legal theory.

Additionally, women have found deep and transformative ways to connect with God through poetry, meditation, ascetic practices, and group rituals<sup>25</sup>. In many Sufi orders, women were treated as equals to men – a rare occurrence in other religious settings. This equality reflects the principle of justice (*al-ʿadl*), which is at the core of *Maqāṣid*, affirming that spiritual achievement is universal and not limited by gender. Notably, both male and female descendants could inherit the *baraka*,<sup>26</sup> a tangible manifestation of *maqāṣid hiḥz al-nasl* that underscores how spiritual blessings and divine lineage can be passed on through both sexes, rejecting gender discrimination in spiritual and hereditary contexts. Recent scholarship in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* further supports this interpretation by emphasizing that the objectives of Islamic law inherently promote inclusivity and gender justice. A systems-based approach, as developed by Jasser Auda, expands the classical framework to include human rights, dignity, and social development as central legal aims.<sup>27</sup> Empirical studies in contemporary Muslim societies also indicate that women's involvement in religious and spiritual movements contributes significantly to education, social cohesion, and community development key indicators of *maqāṣid* realization.<sup>28</sup> However, these studies rarely engage with Sufism as a distinct *المجال* of analysis, highlighting the importance of integrating mystical traditions into broader Islamic legal discourse.

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<sup>25</sup> Melaku Terefe, "Becoming All Flame Orthodox Spiritual Formation Curriculum and Lenten Meditation Based On the Liturgical and Monastic Tradition," 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Sulieman Ibraheem Shelash Al-Hawary et al., "The Education of Children in an Islamic Family Based on the Holy Qur'an," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (2023), p. 8273.

<sup>27</sup> Aniceto Masferrer, *The Making of Dignity and Human Rights in the Western Tradition* (Springer, 2023); Elen de Paula Bueno and Emilio Mendonca Dias da Silva, "An International Legal Perspective on Human Dignity: The Extrinsic Recognition of an Intrinsic Condition," *Canadian Yearbook of International Law/Annuaire Canadien de Droit International* 59 (2022), p. 313–40; Ko Hasegawa, "Human Dignity as a Global Common Good," in *Dignity, Freedom and Justice* (Springer, 2024), p. 77–103.

<sup>28</sup> Abdullah et al., "Developing Tahfiz Empowerment Index Based on Maqasid Shariah"; Abdullah et al., "Faith and Sustainability: Developing Maqasid Shariah-Based Elderly Care Organization Empowerment Index."

According to al-Fassi, Khadijah bint Khuwailid, Fatima bint Muhammad, and Aisha bint Abu Bakr are regarded as among the early Sufi women.<sup>29</sup> These remarkable women played pivotal roles in the early days of Islam and were radiant figures within the Prophet Muhammad's PBUH family circle. Khadijah, often regarded as the first Sufi woman, was the Prophet's first wife. Known for her kindness, generosity, wisdom, and purity, she devoted her considerable wealth to supporting Muhammad PBUH and his mission. The second key figure, Fatima, was born around the time of the Prophet's first revelations. As the youngest daughter of Khadijah and Muhammad PBUH, she dedicated much of her life to fasting, prayer, worship, and serving the growing Muslim community. Then, Aisha was the Prophet's youngest wife. Married at an early age, she grew up in the Prophet's household and shared in his spiritual journey, acquiring vast knowledge from his teachings and example.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the three remarkable women were steadfast supporters of the Prophet Muhammad's PBUH mission to spread Islam. They endured the trials faced by the early Muslim community in Makkah and later in Madinah, embodying the spiritual strength, resilience, and unwavering dedication that would come to define the essence of the Sufi tradition. Their lives and contributions have left a lasting legacy, continuing to inspire and guide generations within both the Sufi and broader Islamic communities. Through their example, they exemplified the transformative power of faith, sacrifice, and spiritual commitment, establishing a timeless precedent for women in Islam and showing the deep, enduring impact of their roles in shaping the spiritual landscape. From a critical perspective, the historical representation of early Sufi women also invites comparison with contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship. While figures such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas emphasize the reinterpretation of Qur'anic texts and *fiqh* doctrines to challenge patriarchal structures, the experiences of early Sufi women demonstrate that gender inclusivity was already practiced in certain spiritual contexts without formal legal reform.<sup>31</sup> This suggests that Sufism functioned not only as a spiritual path but also as a lived corrective to rigid gender norms embedded in some classical legal interpretations. However, unlike Islamic feminist approaches that explicitly articulate gender justice as a normative goal, Sufi traditions often frame women's authority implicitly through spiritual excellence rather than legal discourse, indicating both a strength and a limitation in its transformative potential.

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<sup>29</sup> Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi. "Women in the Islamic Middle East." In *Routledge Handbook on Women in the Middle East*, 42–62. Routledge, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Hawary et al., "The Education of Children in an Islamic Family Based on the Holy Qur'an."

<sup>31</sup> Shaikh, "Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism"; Burak-Adli, Xavier, and Piraino, "Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts."

Women in early Sufism were attained high spiritual status and earned admiration for their unwavering commitment and contributions to the mystical path. Many of these spiritual luminaries inhabited in cultural and intellectual centres such as Basra and Baghdad (Iraq), Damascus (Syria), Cairo and northern Egypt, Nishapur (Iran) and greater Khorasan (spanning parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia). These women not only shaped the early development of Sufism, but also played a crucial role in enriching the spiritual and intellectual life of their communities.<sup>32</sup>

Among the most renowned figures is Rabia al-Adawiyya, a Sufi mystic from Basra, Iraq, who lived in the eighth century. Rabia is especially celebrated for her radical interpretation of divine love. She advocated for an untainted, selfless devotion to God that transcended both the desire for paradise and the fear of hell. Her emphasis on love for God as the highest spiritual goal marked a transformative shift in Sufi philosophy and highlighted the significant role women could play within the Sufi tradition. Rabia's concept of divine love perfectly aligns with *hifz al-din* at its highest level achieving the essence of faith through sincere and unmotivated love, an accomplishment open to all souls, regardless of gender.

Fatima of Nishapur (9th century) is often cited by later Sufi scholars as a distinguished figure renowned for her piety and profound knowledge. Regarded as one of the greatest female Gnostics in Sufi history, she hailed from one of Khurasan's oldest and most esteemed dynasties. Fatima earned the deep respect of two of early Sufism's most prominent figures, Abu Yazīd al-Bistāmī and Dhuan-Nūn al-Miṣrī. It is believed that, prior to her return to Mecca, Fatima made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, further demonstrating her unwavering devotion and commitment to worship. During her lifetime, no other woman achieved the same level of spiritual stature, and her legacy continues to serve as a source of inspiration within the Sufi tradition.

One of the revered women who devoted her life to prayer and spiritual dedication was Umm Ahmad bint 'Aisha. She spent fifty years living in seclusion, becoming widely recognized for her exceptional spiritual status. According to as-Sulami (1999), she is quoted as saying, "Knowledge (*'ilm*) is the life of humanity, spiritual practice (*'amal*) is its vehicle, intellect (*'aql*) is its ornament, and gnosis (*ma'rifa*) is its illumination and insight." These words reflect her deep understanding of the interconnectedness between knowledge, practice, intellect,

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<sup>32</sup> Shaikh, "Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism"; Mhd Putra Ritonga, Fadil Nurdin, and Nunung Nurwati, "Social Transformation in Urban Sufism: The Process of Selecting New and Popular (Rising Star) Scholars in Urban Environments.," *Dinasti International Journal of Education Management & Social Science* 6, no. 1 (2024); Aziza Khan, Ghulam Abbas, and Talib Ali Awan, "Sufi Contributions To Human Development And Peace: A Critical And Scholarly Analysis," *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)* 8, no. 1 (2025), p. 1607–21.

and divine insight, offering a profound vision of the spiritual journey. In the Sufi tradition, her life and teachings stand as a powerful example of wisdom, devotion, and unwavering spiritual commitment.

Ā'isha Bint al-Shati' (1913–1998), an influential Egyptian scholar and Sufi practitioner, is another notable example of a female spiritual leader who made a profound impact on Arab intellectual and religious circles. With a solid grounding in Sufi philosophy and Islamic mysticism, Bint al-Shati' sought to bridge the gap between contemporary culture and traditional Sufi practices. She challenged conventional boundaries, advocating for greater female participation in Sufism and emphasizing the vital role women could play in both the intellectual and spiritual life of the Muslim community. Her research and writings sparked a growing interest in the involvement of women in mystical practices and spiritual leadership, inspiring many Arab women to engage more deeply with Sufism. Through her efforts, Bint al-Shati' significantly influenced contemporary discussions on gender and spirituality in the Arab world, reshaping perceptions of women's roles and responsibilities within the Sufi tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, historical challenges have not always aligned with *maqāṣid* principles. In Syria, women's participation in mosque activities, particularly during Friday communal prayers, has historically been discouraged and, in some cases, outright prohibited, as noted by Haroon.<sup>34</sup> However, the emergence of figures like Sheikha Waffa and Munira Qabaysi, both playing important roles in redefining women's participation in Sufi groups and wider Islamic spiritual life, signifies a significant shift. Their roles can be analyzed as a restorative effort to realize *Maqāṣid hiḏ al-din* and *hiḏ al-naḏs* in contemporary religious practice, ensuring that social restrictions do not hinder women from full spiritual participation and public recognition. These women's growing impact in Syria's spiritual landscape signifies a critical shift in the position of women in Sufi activities.

Despite the rich historical documentation of women's contributions in Sufism, much of the existing literature remains descriptive and insufficiently connected to broader debates in Islamic legal theory and gender studies. There is still a lack of integrative analysis that systematically links Sufi practices with *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and contemporary gender discourse. Addressing this gap is essential to reposition Sufism not only as a spiritual tradition but also as a

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<sup>33</sup> Hadeer Abo El Nagah, "Against Silencing: Redefining Women's Voices in Islam with Reference to the Life and Works of Aisha Abd Al Rahman (Bint Al Shati)," in *African Philosophy in an Intercultural Perspective* (Springer, 2022), p. 147–60; Asma Sayeed, "Women as Transmitters of Knowledge," *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women*, 2023, 259.

<sup>34</sup> Kathleen M Moore, "Religious Practices of Muslim Women in the Middle East," in *Routledge Handbook on Women in the Middle East* (Routledge, 2022), p. 274–90; Zouhir Gabsi, "Sufism: Is It the Alternative Face of Islam?," in *Muslim Perspectives on Islamophobia: From Misconceptions to Reason* (Springer, 2024), p. 191–237.

normative resource within Islamic law. Women's leadership in Sufism is evident, though they often lead smaller women's groups within larger Sufi organizations typically headed by men. This phenomenon is particularly notable in Indonesia, where most Sufi leaders and *mursyid* are men. While cultural factors can influence gender dynamics within Sufi groups, women continue to play vital roles in supporting and managing these organizations. The next section explores the dimensions of Sufism that emphasize equality between genders in the pursuit of devotion, love, and compassion toward God, highlighting how both men and women are equally capable of achieving spiritual fulfillment. This is a direct reflection of the *maqāsid* to ensure social and spiritual justice, affirming that the human potential for divine proximity is inherent and independent of social or biological constructs.

### Spiritual Equality

Islam's mystical branch, Sufism, is well known for emphasizing the inner journey, first-hand encounters with the Divine, and the transformational potential of devotion and love. Gender and its ramifications within the Sufi tradition have remained a significant and occasionally controversial topic, despite Islamic mysticism's emphasis on transcending the self and achieving union with the Divine. Although women's positions in spiritual traditions have historically been subject to various limitations, Sufism offers a noteworthy space for women to actively participate in spiritual practices, assume leadership roles, and make substantial contributions to the tradition's development<sup>35</sup>. This inherent inclusivity and focus on inner transformation resonate profoundly with the core objectives (*Maqasid*) of Islamic law, particularly as articulated by contemporary scholars like Jasser Auda, who champion justice, human dignity, and the promotion of universal human welfare.

At the core of Sufism is the quest for *tawhid*, or the Oneness of God, and the realization that all people are essentially equal in the sight of the Divine. This focus on spiritual unity transcends external differences such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. According to the Sufi perspective, the soul's path to unity with God is an inward, spiritual process that necessitates letting go of the ego and material attachments. The mystic path, in Sufism, is one of self-transformation and inner cleansing, wherein the pursuit of Divine Love finally transcends human limits like gender.<sup>36</sup> From a *maqasid al-shari'ah* perspective, this emphasis on *tawhid* and the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah*) directly aligns with *hifz al-din* (preservation of religion) by fostering a deeper, more authentic understanding of

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<sup>35</sup> A & Benedict Nisar R., *Exploring Gender Equality: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Feminism, Islamic Perspective, and Feminism in Sufism* (Gender Equality Press, 2024).

<sup>36</sup> Constance A Jones, "J. Krishnamurti: Self-Inquiry, Awakening, and Transformation," *Elements in New Religious Movements*, 2025.

divine unity, and with *hifz al-nafs* (preservation of the soul/self) by enabling individuals to realize their full spiritual potential regardless of social constructs. Jasser Auda's systemic *Maqasid* approach underscores that the objectives of Islamic law are to serve human benefit (*maslahah*) and justice ('*adl*), principles which are inherently supported by Sufism's universalist spiritual outlook.

There is an underlying spiritual equality between men and women within this paradigm, exemplified by the mystical vision of the Perfect Human (*al-insan al-kamil*)<sup>37</sup>. This concept posits that spiritual perfection is attainable by any individual who purifies their soul and embodies divine attributes, irrespective of their gender. Such a notion directly informs *hifz al-karama al-insaniyya* (preservation of human dignity), a fundamental *Maqasid* objective that ensures all individuals are recognized for their intrinsic worth and spiritual capacity, dismantling any theological basis for gender-based hierarchies.

In his book *Mathnawi*, Rumi explained the metaphor of interdependence between men as sky and women as earth, not in the sense of distance or domination, but rather as a necessary symbiosis. If the sky is meritorious in bringing down rain, the earth is ready to grow shoots. Without one, life would be impossible, emphasizing a nature that needs to always be cared for. Moreover, he emphasized the position of women as active and equal subjects, not as objects of male actions. In his poem he says: "Women are reflections of the Divine light, not only to be loved. No, it is said that women are not ordinary creatures, they are even lovers." Rumi's perspective strongly reinforces the *Maqasid* objectives of promoting justice (*hifz al-adl*) and fostering social cooperation (*ta'awun*), as it portrays gender relations as complementary and essential for the flourishing of life, mirroring the systemic balance advocated by Auda.<sup>38</sup> This interpretation champions a form of justice that recognizes reciprocal value and rejects hierarchical domination, promoting the well-being of the entire community (*hifz al-nasl* and *hifz al-mujtama'*).

The Naqshbandi order, one of the most widespread Sufi orders, provides an example of the complexities and evolving nature of gender relations in Sufism. Although the Naqshbandi order, like many others, has been primarily male-dominated, there have been cases in which women have assumed leadership roles within their own communities, leading spiritual retreats and guiding other women in their mystical journeys. In countries like Syria, Turkey, and Egypt, women have participated in both public and private rituals, demonstrating that Sufism offers a flexible framework for gender relations, allowing women to transcend social

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<sup>37</sup> John R Schairer, *The Eroticism, Spirituality, and Neurotheology of the Beloved: Skillful Means and Wisdom Working Together to Achieve Individuation* (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2023); Julian Ungar-Sargon, "The Duality of Divine Presence: Exploring the Dark Schechina in Jewish Mystical Thought and Post-Holocaust Theology," 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Zaprul Khan, "Maqāṣid Al-Shariah in the Contemporary Islamic Legal Discourse: Perspective of Jasser Auda."

limitations and achieve spiritual realization.<sup>39</sup> These instances of female spiritual leadership and active participation align with Auda's contemporary *Maqasid* framework, which identifies women's rights and their active role in society as key objectives of Islamic law, aiming to foster an inclusive and equitable society.

Furthermore, while Sufi teachings have sometimes reflected the gender norms of the broader Islamic societies in which they developed (with *Sufi sheikhs* often holding leadership positions and women relegated to supportive roles), the *Maqasid* perspective prompts a re-evaluation of such historical and cultural limitations. Auda's approach emphasizes moving beyond rigid literalism to the spirit and objectives of the *Shari'ah*, which inherently promotes justice, equality, and human flourishing. The historical examples, even within traditional Islamic jurisprudence, where women's legal autonomy and rights were recognized, such as a wife having no obligation to fulfill duties to her husband beyond the marriage contract itself, or being able to pursue legal recourse if a husband fails his financial duties, demonstrate that Islam contains internal resources for challenging patriarchal norms. Sufism, by elevating women spiritually, provides a powerful parallel to these legal arguments, offering a spiritual basis for demanding gender equity.

Finally, this study explores the evolving role of women in Sufism, highlighting their contributions to spiritual leadership, activism, and academic pursuits. At this point, modern female Sufis are reshaping the dialogue between gender and Islam's spirituality, offering new perspectives on the intersection of the two. As Sufism continues to develop in the contemporary world, women are poised to play an increasingly significant role within the mystical tradition. Then, the findings on the implementation of Sufi orders and their interpretations of human essence, divine love, and gender relations, as seen through the perspectives of both male and female *mursyid* (spiritual guides) and female members of a Sufi organization in Jakarta, reveal how these individuals, guided by *tasawwuf*, incorporate these concepts into their understanding and practice of Islam. This contemporary dynamism in Sufism, with women taking on expanded roles, fully supports the *Maqasid* of *hifz al-nafs* (preservation and development of human potential), *hifz al-aql* (preservation of intellect and critical thought), and the overarching objective of realizing universal human welfare (*jalb al-masalih*), affirming that the objectives of Islam are best served by the full and equitable participation of all members of society, irrespective of gender.

### Islamic Law and Gender within the Sufi Framework

The relationship between Sufism and Islamic law has historically been characterized not by opposition, but by complementarity. While *Shari'ah* governs

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<sup>39</sup> E et al. Burak-Adli, "Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts," *Journal of Gender Studies* 10, no. 3 (2024), p. 123–39.

the external dimensions of human conduct through legal norms and ethical guidelines, Sufism (*tasawwuf*) addresses the internal dimension, focusing on spiritual purification and the cultivation of sincerity (*ikhlas*). Within this integrated framework, gender is not merely a legal category but also a spiritual condition that must be understood holistically through both jurisprudential and metaphysical lenses. Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that a *maqāsid al-shari'ah* approach allows Islamic law to be interpreted in ways that uphold justice, dignity, and equality, particularly in gender relations.<sup>40</sup>

From a classical jurisprudential perspective, Islamic law establishes a framework of rights and responsibilities for both men and women, rooted in principles of justice (*'adl*), balance (*mizan*), and public welfare (*maslahah*). However, Sufi interpretations often move beyond formal legal distinctions to emphasize the unity of the human soul and its equal capacity for divine proximity. This dual approach reflects what scholars describe as the *zahir-batin* (outer-inner) integration, where legal rulings are complemented by spiritual ethics.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, Sufism does not negate Islamic law but rather deepens its objectives by aligning legal compliance with spiritual consciousness.

Sufi traditions further reinforce this perspective by emphasizing ethical virtues such as humility, compassion, and love - qualities that transcend gender binaries and are essential for spiritual realization. The emphasis on inner transformation (*tazkiyah*) ensures that legal obligations are not reduced to formalism but are imbued with moral and spiritual significance. This aligns with the Maqasid objective of *hifz al-din* (preservation of religion), not merely as ritual compliance but as a lived ethical and spiritual reality. Consequently, the integration of Sufism and Islamic law offers a more holistic framework in which gender justice is realized through both legal reform and spiritual awakening.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, contemporary discussions on Islamic law increasingly highlight the role of women as legal agents, scholars, and interpreters of religious knowledge. Historical precedents, including female jurists and transmitters of hadith, demonstrate that women have long participated in the development of Islamic legal thought. When viewed through a Sufi-*Maqasid* lens, these

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<sup>40</sup> Ibrahim et al., "Integration of Maqasid Al-Shariah in the Criminal Law Reform to Achieve Justice and Human Dignity"; Muhamad Zaenal Muttaqin et al., "Family Harmony in Contemporary Islamic Law: Ibn 'Ashūr's Maqāsid Perspective on Marital Rights and Duties," *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review* 5, no. 1 (2026), p. 61–79.

<sup>41</sup> G Hussein Rassool, "Exploring the Intersection of Islāmic Spirituality and Psychotherapy," *Cham: Springer*, 2024; Farah R Zahir and M Walid Qoronfleh, "Traditional Islamic Spiritual Meditative Practices: Powerful Psychotherapies for Mental Wellbeing," *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (2025), p. 1538865.

<sup>42</sup> Burak-Adli, Xavier, and Piraino, "Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts"; Muarrah Nisar and Sunil Maria Benedict, "Exploring Gender Equality: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Feminism, Islamic Perspective, and Feminism in Sufism," *Islamic Perspective, and Feminism in Sufism* (, 2024), 2024.

contributions are not exceptions but affirmations of Islam's broader commitment to inclusivity and intellectual participation. This reinforces the objective of *hifz al-'aql* (preservation of intellect), ensuring that both men and women contribute to the ongoing interpretation and application of Islamic law.<sup>43</sup>

In conclusion, the intersection of Sufism and Islamic law provides a robust epistemological and ethical foundation for rethinking gender relations in Islam. By integrating the outward structure of Shari'ah with the inward depth of Sufi spirituality, this approach advances a vision of justice that is both legally grounded and spiritually transformative. Such a framework not only addresses contemporary gender concerns but also remains deeply rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition, demonstrating that the pursuit of equality and human dignity is central to the objectives of Islam itself.

### ***Maqāsid al-Shari'ah* and Its Relevance to Contemporary Sufism**

Islam's Sufi traditions, which include metaphysics, ethical disciplines, devotional practices, music, poetry and mystical experience, are not so widely recognized as compatible with modern life, either within Muslim communities or by social scientists trying to understand the relationships between religion and modernization.<sup>44</sup>

Some authors (Chih, Silverstein, Werbner, for example) assert that there are paradigmatic concepts that shape both social relations and ritual practice across place and time wherever people draw on the Sufi heritage: the need for an intimate relationship of affection and trust between a spiritual guide (shaykh, murshid, pir, etc.) and a seeker (*murid*, *muhibb*, etc.), and the inevitable blossoming of bonds of solidarity among fellow seekers under the guidance of a particular master. These relations require, and typically find, a meeting place that provides a physical locus for the enactment of those relations (*zawiya*, *pesantren*, etc.), and the gifts and hospitality that support and literally feed those relations.

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<sup>43</sup> Galym Zhussipbek, et.al., "Interdisciplinary Approach to Overcoming the Persistence of Patriarchal Islamic Interpretations: Gender Equality, the Development of Empathy and Children's Rights, and Insights from the Reformist Eurasian Scholars of Early Twentieth Century," *Open Theology* 10, no. 1 (2024). Syifa Mutiara Putri Heriandita et al., "The Role of Islamic Inheritance Law with a Maqasid Al-Shariah Approach in Addressing the Challenges of Social Justice for Women," *AJIS: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025), p. 231–52.

<sup>44</sup> Taufiqurrohman Taufiqurrohman, "Mystical Mobility in the Poetry of the US Sufi Poet Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore" (Itä-Suomen yliopisto, 2024). Adam Sabra, "Economies of Sufism," *Sufi Institutions*, 2021, 27–57; Olav Hammer, "Sufism and New Religious Movements," in *Sufism in Western Contexts* (Brill, 2023), p. 99–115. Merin Shobhana Xavier, "Western Sufi Institutions and Practices," in *Sufism in Western Contexts* (Brill, 2023), p. 116–38. Hermansen, "Sufism in the Modern World." William Rory Dickson, "Sufism and Shari 'a: Contextualizing Contemporary Sufi Expressions," *Religions* 13, no. 5 (2022), p. 449. Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, "Sufism Studies—The Mystical Philosophy of Islam," n.d.

Each author, however, shows through their distinctive case materials that there is considerable variation in the ways that such bonds are actually constructed, responding to local historical, cultural and political circumstances and making use of the distinctive personal and social assets of the guide. As Chih reveals, recognition of the actual flexibility of Sufi tutelary relations enables us to appreciate how Sufi institutions have been able to spread to so many places and endure over time (even in many modern contexts), and yet preserve a coherent Sufi tradition<sup>45</sup>.

The contemporary relevance of Islam's Sufi traditions, despite being frequently underestimated by both Muslim communities and social scientists in terms of compatibility with modern life, offers a profound avenue for re-evaluating women's roles and empowerment through the dynamic lens of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. With an emphasis on both the egalitarian principles of Sufism and the complexity of gender roles within larger Islamic communities, this essay investigates gender relations in Sufism by looking at the spiritual, social, and historical factors that have influenced women's participation in Sufi practices. This section meticulously analyzes how Sufism, particularly when undertaken by women, serves as a powerful force for social and spiritual transformation, directly aligning with and manifesting Jasser Auda's expanded *Maqāṣid* framework.

The spiritual journey in Sufism, especially as embraced by women, profoundly manifests as a subtle yet potent resistance to conventional, often restrictive, gender norms prevalent in traditional Islamic societies.<sup>46</sup> This dynamic can be sharply analyzed through Auda's reconstructive *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, particularly his emphasis on human rights and the expansion of *hifz al-din* to "freedom of religion," and *hifz al-naḥs* and *hifz al-irdh* to "protection of human dignity and rights". This modern interpretation of *Maqāṣid* moves beyond mere preservation, advocating for development and the enhancement of human rights.<sup>47</sup>

Through practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance), *khalwah* (spiritual retreat), and *wird* (devotional recitations), women actively carve out space for spiritual expression and development. This engagement directly embodies the "freedom of religion" as an essential component of *hifz al-din*<sup>48</sup>, allowing women unhindered access to their spiritual pursuits. Furthermore, by assuming critical

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<sup>45</sup> Asif Mohiuddin, "Religious Authority in Islam: Resilient Patterns of Evolution from the Formative Period to Contemporary Times," in *Navigating Religious Authority in Muslim Societies: Islamist Movements and the Challenge of Globalisation* (Springer, 2023), 117–63; Jamal Malik, "Analytic Essay: Sufism in Western Regional Settings," in *Sufism in Western Contexts* (Brill, 2023), p. 165–98.

<sup>46</sup> Rodrigues, *Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the 'Self': Gender in Islamic Ritual*; Annika Schmeding, "Dissolving Gender Difference—Female Teachers, Male Allies and the Creation of Islamic Sufi Authority in Afghanistan," *Afghanistan* 4, no. 2 (2021), p. 142–69.

<sup>47</sup> Zaprulkhan, "Maqāṣid Al-Shariah in the Contemporary Islamic Legal Discourse: Perspective of Jasser Auda."

<sup>48</sup> Auda, *A Maqāṣidī Approach to Contemporary Application of the Sharī'Ah*.

roles as transmitters of knowledge, mystical poets, female spiritual guides (*murshidat*), and even leaders of Sufi orders, women directly contribute to and realize Auda's expanded *hifz al-aql*, which advocates for "the development of scientific thought" and "combating *taqlid*".<sup>49</sup> Their intellectual and spiritual leadership actively challenges stagnant interpretations and fosters an environment of continuous learning and critical engagement with religious texts and practices.<sup>50</sup>

The historical example of Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyah, who centered divine love (*mahabbah*) as the core of spiritual transformation, represents a profound act of liberation from patriarchal structures<sup>51</sup>. Her emphasis on selfless devotion, transcending fear of hell or hope for paradise, not only redefined Sufi philosophy but also robustly aligns with *hifz al-nafs* by affirming the spiritual autonomy and dignity of every individual, irrespective of gender<sup>52</sup>. The transformative power of divine love, compassion, and beauty, as instruments for women to redefine their positions and roles, underscores the realization of *al-Maqāṣid al-‘Ammah* such as justice and equality<sup>53</sup>, which are fundamental to a balanced and harmonious society. This demonstrates how female Sufis cultivate distinctive forms of spirituality marked by empathy, aesthetic sensitivity, and inner strength, thereby transcending social boundaries and fostering transformative, inclusive spiritual communities<sup>54</sup>, all of which are outcomes consistent with the holistic and purposive nature of Auda's systems approach to *Maqāṣid*<sup>55</sup>.

In Indonesia, the significant role of Prof. Dr. H. Nasaruddin Umar as a foremost Sufi scholar actively promoting *tasawwuf* through an inclusive and transnational approach,<sup>56</sup> serves as a compelling case study. His *majelis taklim* (spiritual learning assemblies), conducted both offline at the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta and online, demonstrate a conscious effort to expand the reach of spiritual education. The active participation of women in these gatherings not merely as attendees but as organizers, moderators, and spiritual facilitators directly

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<sup>49</sup> Auda, *A Maqāṣidī Approach to Contemporary Application of the Shari‘ah*.

<sup>50</sup> Malik, "Analytic Essay: Sufism in Western Regional Settings."

<sup>51</sup> Y Muhajirin and A Soleh, "Rabi‘ah Al-Adawiyah’s Sufism Toward the Culmination of Spirituality in the Perspective of Irfani Epistemology," *Islamic Review Jurnal Riset Dan Kajian Keislaman* 12, no. 2 (2023), p. 135–46.

<sup>52</sup> S Maulida and M Ali, "Maqasid Shariah Index: A Literature Review," *MSR* 2, no. 1 (2023).

<sup>53</sup> M Muthoifin and A Rhezaldi, "Community Economic Empowerment through Mosque Management to Improve People’s Welfare," *Multidisciplinary Reviews* 7, no. 8 (2024), p. 2024134.

<sup>54</sup> Burak-Adli, "Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts."

<sup>55</sup> Auda, *A Maqāṣidī Approach to Contemporary Application of the Shari‘ah*.

<sup>56</sup> T Zitouni and K Jedidia, "Does Islamic Microfinance Contribute to Economic Empowerment in Tunisia?: A Case Study of Zitouna Tamkeen," *Journal of Business and Socio-Economic Development* 2, no. 1 (2022), p. 67–81.

manifests the realization of Auda's expanded *hifz al-din* (freedom of religion and access to religious knowledge) and *hifz al-aql* (promotion of knowledge and critical thinking). This pedagogical model, leveraging contemporary technological advancements, directly creates new spaces for female participation in the Islamic spiritual domain, addressing historical restrictions and fulfilling the *Maqāsid* objective of promoting universal access to spiritual growth.<sup>57</sup>

The existence of groups like the “*Majelis Dzikir dan Kajian Tasawuf Perempuan Istiqlal*” is a powerful testament to women's capacity to establish robust spiritual communities despite gender-based constraints prevalent in conservative Islamic cultures.<sup>58</sup> This assembly, composed of women from diverse backgrounds, actively engages in discussions on profound mystical themes such as *ma'rifah* (gnosis), *mahabbah ilahiyyah* (divine love), and *fana* (annihilation). Their sustained engagement in these complex spiritual and intellectual discourses robustly fulfills Auda's expanded *hifz al-aql* by "developing scientific thought" and "combating *taqlid*" through deep, introspective study. Simultaneously, their ability to create a "strong and independent spiritual space" within a challenging social environment underscores the critical achievement of *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-irdh*, safeguarding their dignity, spiritual well-being, and right to self-expression.<sup>59</sup> As research suggests, female Sufis skillfully create flexible and profound spiritual spaces despite structural limitations.<sup>60</sup> The transformation seen in the Indonesian Sufi tradition, serving as both a means of women's empowerment and the preservation of a transformative and inclusive Islamic mystical heritage, directly reflects the dynamism and adaptability inherent in a *Maqāsid*-informed approach to religious practice.

While women's involvement in Sufi groups has historically been impacted by gender-based restrictions, the contemporary landscape demonstrates a persistent effort to overcome these limitations. The ability of female Sufis to build robust spiritual groups where they can share narratives and discuss mystical topics in environments that respect their autonomy represents a clear advancement of *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-irdh* the protection of human dignity and rights.<sup>61</sup> By asserting their place within the greater religious community and achieving spiritual power, women in Sufism are leveraging the mystical path to transcend

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<sup>57</sup> M Wahab and A Naim, “The Reviews on Sustainable and Responsible Investment (SRIs) Practices According to Maqasid Shariah and Maslahah Perspectives,” *Etikonomi* 20, no. 2 (2021), p. 397–412.

<sup>58</sup> A Setiawan and M Yusoff, “Islamic Village Development Management: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Jurnal Ekonomi Syariah Teori Dan Terapan* 9, no. 4 (2022), p. 467–81.

<sup>59</sup> M Haq and N Wahab, “The Maqasid Al Shariah and the Sustainability Paradigm: Literature Review and Proposed Mutual Framework for Asnaf Development,” *Journal of Accounting and Finance in Emerging Economies* 5, no. 2 (2019), p. 179–96.

<sup>60</sup> Burak-Adlı, “Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts.”

<sup>61</sup> Auda, *A Maqāsidī Approach to Contemporary Application of the Sharī'Ah*.

cultural boundaries and challenge restrictive norms.<sup>62</sup> This aligns with the core tenet of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* to always seek the greater good (*maslahah*) and remove hardship (*hajiyyat*),<sup>63</sup> ensuring that religious practice is accessible and empowering for all, irrespective of gender. The continued influence of women on Sufi rituals and communities, even when sometimes overlooked in historical narratives, underscores their vital role in shaping an inclusive spiritual future that consistently upholds the higher objectives of Islamic law.<sup>64</sup>

### The Women's Life in Sufism

Sufism, the mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam, has long served as a vital path for both men and women to attain self-purification, inner peace, and a deeper connection with God. While Sufism's universal spiritual appeal is well recognized, the role of women within it has often been overlooked in broader Islamic discourses. This lack of academic focus, however, does not reflect the significant contributions that women have made to Sufi thought, practice, and the institutional development of Sufism across various historical periods and geographical regions<sup>65</sup>. Recent scholarship increasingly challenges the traditional view that portrays women as passive participants in religious narratives, shedding light instead on their active agency and influential roles within Sufi circles<sup>66</sup>. This growing body of research underscores the often-underappreciated impact of women in shaping the spiritual and intellectual legacy of Sufism.

This section explores the roles and lived experiences of women within Sufi traditions by emphasizing their historical contributions, gendered spiritual dynamics, and continued relevance in contemporary contexts. Drawing on interviews with women involved in Sufi study circles, the analysis reveals how Sufism serves as a meaningful spiritual framework that helps them navigate their identities, responsibilities, and challenges in modern life. Their narratives demonstrate how Sufi teachings shape personal growth, ethical awareness, and social engagement while informing their understanding of rights and responsibilities as Muslim women. This discussion is framed within the *Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, analyzing how Sufi spirituality aligns with broader Islamic law objectives, particularly in promoting human dignity, moral development, and social well-being.

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<sup>62</sup> Burak-Adlı, "Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts."

<sup>63</sup> Auda, "Maqasid Methodology for Re-Envisioning Islamic Higher Education."

<sup>64</sup> S Bohang and N Sohaimi, "An Overview on the Alignment of Radiation Protection in Computed Tomography with Maqasid Al-Shari'ah in the Context of Al-Dharuriyat," *Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences* 30, no. 3 (2023), p. 60–72.

<sup>65</sup> M Maulana, "Spiritualitas Dan Gender: Sufi-Sufi Perempuan," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2018..

<sup>66</sup> S A Khan and A Bano, "Women and Sufism in South Asia: A Survey of Historical Trends," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal*, 2020.

One of the most significant insights shared by the women interviewed was the emphasis on gender equality in Sufism. According to Narasumber 1, a participant in a Sufi study group led by Prof. Nasaruddin Umar, the teachings emphasized that both men and women share an equal potential for spiritual advancement. She recalled, "In our studies, there is no difference in rank between male and female participants; what matters is the sincerity of the heart and consistency in practice." This egalitarian principle is a cornerstone of a balanced and fair society, which *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* aims to establish. The alignment with the Sufi concept of *tazkiyah* (purification of the soul),<sup>67</sup> further reinforces *hifz al-nafs*, affirming that spiritual health and progress are universal human potentials, unconstrained by biological sex.<sup>68</sup> These interpretations of Islamic doctrines, supporting gender equality and challenging traditional norms, align with Auda's dynamic approach to *Maqāsid*, which necessitates adaptation to contemporary needs for universal welfare and human flourishing.<sup>69</sup>

This egalitarian view is also evident in the daily lives of Sufi communities. Two participants of the study, emphasized that "God's love and mercy are not confined by gender," reflecting the belief that divine attributes such as love (*mahabbah*) and mercy (*rahmah*) transcend human concepts of gender. The Sufi path does not prioritize male or female identity; instead, it encourages spiritual excellence through virtues like humility, compassion, and love values inherent in both men and women. This inclusive approach allows women to play active roles in Sufism and affirms their moral and spiritual authority within the family as spiritual leaders. The first participant notes, the Sufi approach fosters mutual respect and love within familial relationships, emphasizing the honoring of divine qualities. By embracing equality in spirituality, Sufi women challenge traditional gender hierarchies, creating more balanced and just home environments. The second shares how Sufi spirituality transformed her perception of gender roles: "Through my practice of tasawuf, I learned that divine love is not gender-specific; therefore, women have as much potential as men to lead and guide their families."

One particularly striking account comes from a housewife (the third participant), who actively involved in Sufi studies described how her approach to family leadership transformed after embracing Sufi teachings. "Before learning Sufism, I felt I had to adopt a passive role as a wife and mother. But after studying Sufism, I realized that spirituality embraces all aspects of life, including my role

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<sup>67</sup> N Muarrah, "Exploring Gender Equality: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Feminism, Islamic Perspectives, and Feminism in Sufism," *Philosophy International Journal*, 2024.

<sup>68</sup> A Jalil and S A Azis, "Gender Dalam Tinjauan Sufisme Sebagai Konsep Kesetaraan Feminim Dan Maskulin Melalui Pendekatan Spiritual," *Kuriositas: Media Komunikasi Sosial Dan Keagamaan*, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Haq and Wahab, "The Maqasid Al Shariah and the Sustainability Paradigm: Literature Review and Proposed Mutual Framework for Asnaf Development."

as a leader of the family." She explained how Sufi teachings empowered her to lead her household with love and justice, based on spiritual depth rather than gender. "I began to see the family as a spiritual community, where every member plays a role in bringing us closer to Allah. I am not just a mother managing the household, but also a spiritual guide for my family," she added. This illustrates how Sufism empowers women to redefine traditional gender roles, transforming the household into a spiritually balanced space and fostering deeper, more harmonious relationships.

This inclusive perspective directly supports Auda's expanded *hifz al-din* (freedom of religion and spiritual expression) and *hifz al-nafs* (protection of human dignity),<sup>70</sup> emphasizing that divine favor and spiritual excellence are accessible to all. By encouraging virtues inherent in both men and women, Sufism empowers women to assume "moral and spiritual authority within the family as spiritual leaders," thus profoundly contributing to *hifz al-nasl* (preservation of progeny and family). The housewife's transformation, seeing herself as a "spiritual guide for my family," illustrates how Sufi teachings redefine traditional gender roles within the household, fostering spiritually balanced, harmonious, and just family environments a direct application of *Maqāṣid* principles to family well-being.

Sufism also challenges conventional gender roles by enabling women to actively engage in spiritual practices and assume leadership roles. In Senegal, for example, women like Rokhaya Thiam have emerged as leaders within Sufi orders, developing initiatives that address critical community needs such as healthcare and economic empowerment<sup>71</sup>. This shift in women's roles highlights how Sufi practices allow women to reclaim agency, using their religious and cultural capital to champion community development while negotiating and redefining traditional gender norms. Sufi women are often seen as possessing the spiritual insight and qualifications needed for leadership, which contrasts sharply with their marginalization in other Islamic interpretations.

The impact of women in Sufism extends beyond family life into the broader community, particularly in the realms of social justice and peacebuilding. Many women involved in Sufi circles, such as those interviewed in this study, view their spiritual path as inherently linked to the betterment of society. Through practices like *sama'* (listening), *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and *tawbah* (repentance), women foster not only personal peace but also contribute to the collective welfare of their communities. The fourth participant emphasized that Sufi women, through their engagement with spiritual practices, "transmit values of tolerance, humility, and compassion qualities that resonate deeply within multi-

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<sup>70</sup> Auda, *A Maqāṣidī Approach to Contemporary Application of the Sharī'ah*.

<sup>71</sup> J Hill, "Charismatic Discipleship: A Sufi Woman and the Divine Mission of Development in Senegal," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 2017.

religious and multi-ethnic societies, particularly in Indonesia." The inclusive nature of Sufism provides women a spiritual platform to engage with and contribute to their communities, promoting tolerance, cooperation, and peace.

Sufi women, as spiritual leaders and teachers, also play a central role in interfaith dialogue and community cohesion. She also notes that Sufi teachings promote a deep sense of connectedness not only with fellow Muslims but also with people of different faiths. This perspective is critical in today's world, where religious and cultural divisions often create barriers to social harmony. Through their practice of *mahabbah* (divine love) and *tawhid* (unity of God), women involved in Sufism contribute to interfaith peace and social justice by emphasizing shared human dignity and spiritual equality. This, in turn, helps pursue the objectives of *maqāṣid al-shari'ah* such as preserving life, protecting dignity, and ensuring social harmony not only within Islamic communities but also in broader society.

A female entrepreneur (the fifth participant) who has studied Sufism recounts how these teachings influenced her approach to business and social responsibility. Before learning about Sufism, she was focused solely on achieving financial success, often feeling pressured by material demands. However, after embracing Sufism, her understanding of success shifted. "Sufism teaches me not only to pursue material things, but also to ensure that my work benefits others. Success is not about what I have, but about how I can make a difference in the lives of others," she said. She began applying Sufi principles in her business, offering job opportunities to women and young people from underprivileged backgrounds and allocating a portion of her profits to support community education and health programs. "I believe my business should positively impact society. If I get more, I must be able to give more," she added. This example highlights how Sufi principles of balance, social responsibility, and spiritual ethics can be applied in everyday life, allowing women to become agents of change through entrepreneurship. This direct engagement in societal welfare aligns with Auda's expanded *hifz al-mal*, which encompasses "social aid," "economic development," and "reducing inter-class socio-economic disparities".<sup>72</sup>

Haidar Bagir's concept of positive Sufism, which advocates for inclusive and socially responsible engagement, complements this vision. He asserts that a good Sufi is one who actively contributes to improving the environment and society through honest work and social responsibility.<sup>73</sup> Sufism encourages a balanced approach to life, integrating spiritual discipline with worldly engagement and societal welfare. This perspective challenges conventional asceticism, promoting a Sufism deeply embedded in communal upliftment and

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<sup>72</sup> Auda, *A Maqāṣidī Approach to Contemporary Application of the Shari'Ah*.

<sup>73</sup> Bagir, "Positive Sufism: Spiritual Growth and Social Engagement."

equitable resource distribution. This demonstrates how Sufism, guided by *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, empowers women to become agents of change, fostering comprehensive human welfare (*jalb al-masalih*) and equitable resource distribution objectives central to the ethical and social dimensions of Islamic law.

In conclusion, the lives and practices of women in Sufism, far from being passively overlooked, represent a dynamic and potent force for embodying the comprehensive objectives of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. Their emphasis on spiritual equality, their leadership within families and communities, and their contributions to social justice and economic empowerment are not merely incidental but are profound manifestations of *hifz al-din*, *hifz al-nafs*, *hifz al-aql*, *hifz al-nasl*, *hifz al-mal*, and the overarching pursuit of al-*Maqāṣid al-'Ammah* for justice and welfare. This analysis, therefore, strongly argues that women's engagement with Sufism offers a contemporary and deeply rooted Islamic framework for advancing gender equity and holistic human flourishing.

## Conclusion

This study has comprehensively explored the pivotal role of women in the Sufi tradition, emphasizing their significant contributions to the development of Sufi practices and doctrines. By applying *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, it has been demonstrated that women's involvement in Sufism aligns with and promotes fundamental Islamic goals, such as the preservation of faith, intellect, lineage, and human dignity, ultimately contributing to the pursuit of justice and social welfare. Historical figures like Rabia al-Adawiyya and Fatima of Nishapur, along with contemporary female spiritual leaders, exemplify the empowering potential of Sufism to transcend gender constraints, offering a transformative space for women to influence both spiritual and societal change. The research advocates for recognizing Sufism as a powerful, Islamically-rooted framework for fostering gender equity and promoting holistic human development, where the active and equitable participation of all individuals, regardless of gender, is essential to realizing Islam's ultimate objectives. This examination of the role of women in Sufism calls for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Islam's teachings and foreshadows an increasingly significant role for women in shaping the future of Islamic mysticism.

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