

Forum

Toward Women-Friendly Mosques

Louay Safi

The Islamic Social Services Association and Women in Islam have released a guide underlining a set of principles rooted in Islamic sources that outlines the rights of Muslim women to have full access to the mosque, and calling on Muslim leaders to privilege Islamic principles and values over cultural habits and traditions. The guide is entitled “Women-Friendly Mosques and Community Centers: Working Together to Reclaim Our Heritage.”

The guide is a serious attempt to deal with an issue that requires immediate attention by Muslim communities: the place of women in the mosque and the community. I personally faced the issue for the first time two decades ago when a Muslim Student Association board member objected to the inclusion of women in an executive meeting. He based his position on Islamic tradition, but his argument was found lacking by everyone else on the board. The meeting went on without him, but with the two sisters.

The point of view alluded to above has continued to be well-represented over the years within the Muslim community, particularly among immigrants who grew up in societies where women did not take an active role in social life and community development. The point of view that was hostile to the presence of women in the mosque gained more of a following in many Islamic centers throughout North America as the community grew more dependent on imams and scholars educated in universities that provide a narrow Islamic education.

Hampered by Islamic opinions apparently rooted in Islamic sources, many mosques started to erect barriers and drop curtains between the men’s and women’s areas. Eventually, many mosques designated a separate and secluded area for Muslim women. The strict seclusion often mimicked arrangements adopted by mosques in Muslim countries and was tolerated by women who grew up in a condition of seclusion.

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American-born Muslim women, including women who grew up in immigrant families, find it increasingly difficult to accept the regime of seclusion in the mosque that cuts them off from education and decision making. Some have chosen to stay away and find alternative ways to acquire Islamic education and engage in social services. Others went back to understand Islamic sources and found out that there is no ground for the regime of seclusion.

The “Women-Friendly Mosques” guide is the outcome of a quest by Muslim women who made the journey to examine the Islamic sources and to face head-on the arguments employed to perpetuate a regime that cuts Muslim women off from Islamic education and community service. The journey placed them in direct contact with the Islamic texts and put them in touch with Muslim scholars. The conclusion they came back with is both refreshing and relieving for every Muslim woman who was troubled with the sense of alienation that she had developed by visiting the center of Islamic life, whose Prophet, peace be with him, came to reaffirm the spiritual and moral equality of both men and women.

The guide demonstrates that the regime of women’s seclusion is rooted more in social rationalization than in Islamic teachings. It demonstrates that the Prophet was concerned about the possible exclusion of women by overzealous men and so unequivocally instructed the community to make sure that women are not prevented from attending the mosque. The guide also shows that the arguments against women’s participation in the mosque boil down to the principle of *dar’ al mafasid* (prevention of corruption). Such a principle cannot be invoked to invalidate an established right sanctioned by Islamic law.

The guide does not stop at articulating a position rooted in the most authentic Islamic sources, but provides practical guidelines to help community leaders ensure that the mosque is a center for spiritual growth and learning for all Muslims. It also shares the perspective of women who experienced seclusion first hand and documents, through statistical data, the extent of women’s seclusion and marginalization in North American mosques.

The guide is intended to clarify the Islamic position concerning women’s participation in the mosque by ascertaining the facts from Islamic sources. The conclusions will not sit well with Muslims who have already established their positions on the basis of their cultural experiences. In fact, it is likely to be dismissed by two groups: those who are convinced that women should stay away from the public square, and those who are oblivious to the importance of community support and maturation for realizing moral and spiritual equality.

Regardless of initial reactions, I am sure that most Muslims will view it as an important tool to deal with a complex issue. I hope that those who agree with the guide's conclusions will not only nod their heads in agreement, but will do their level best to make its guidelines a part and parcel of the daily life of the Islamic center and community. The fact that five of the largest and most influential mainstream Muslim organizations have embraced the guide will go long way toward translating its ideals into reality.

Women-Friendly Mosques

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Muslims are answerable to Allah in every sphere of their life, including their personal and public relations. Islam considers human relations and gender relations a sacred trust that we must guard and manifest in our interpersonal interactions and institutional arrangements. Islam demands that women and men be spiritual equals. It defines relations between women and men as mutually complementary, and indeed, this mutuality is a sign of the Divine (Qur'an 30:21). Each person has been entrusted with preserving the social order and establishing a just and moral society, and has been given the guidance to inspire goodness in each other and in society at large.

The respect, compassion, and mutuality must be visible not only in our family life, but also in how we conduct public transactions. Women and men, as well as girls and boys, should have equal access to and must feel equally welcome to participate in schools, the mosque, and other civic and cultural institutions.

Muslims need to revitalize the mosque as a center of the community. In the time of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, the mosque was a place where all were welcome, all participated, and all contributed, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, and status. The mosque was a central place of worship, education, political discussion, and social interactions. In short, it was the place where community life happened.

Living in a non-Muslim society, where Muslims struggle to maintain their religious identity and values and to instill them in their children, requires spiritual and communal support. Thus, Muslim women are seeking a dignified place in their mosque – a place where their spirits are nurtured, their intellects satisfied, and their skills and contributions are appreciated and utilized. To their credit, some North American mosques are becoming more inclusive. By including women in main prayer halls, in managerial positions, and on boards, these mosques have created an impetus and mechanism for community transformation.

However, according to data from CAIR's national survey of mosques (discussed below), this trend is not as widespread as the standard demanded by Islam. There are confirmed reports that many mosques relegate women to small, dingy, secluded, airless, and segregated quarters with their children. Some mosques actually deny women entrance, while some Islamic centers and mosques deny them the rights of membership, voting, or holding office.

These practices are unjust, degrading, and contradict the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Preventing women from full participation is a disservice to the mosque and the community. First, the capacity and growth of the mosque is stunted when the full human potential of all its members cannot be harnessed. Women who encounter such discrimination do not find the mosque a place of solace and spiritual renewal, and despair over the mosque leadership. When their efforts to contribute their talents to community development are circumvented, they work independently. Over the long term, this may reinforce divisions between leaders and communities.

The alienation that women feel also has profound consequences for the younger generations. When children are taught that Islam treats everyone as spiritual equals and that it has accorded women unprecedented rights, their commitment to the faith is challenged when they observe that the practice contradicts the principles. Without early and continued exposure to the mosque, children are less able to integrate into the mosque as they become older. The secondary inclusion of women will surely keep the mosque at the margins of community life.

Muslim women are working to be fully included in the mosque at every level: governance, development of educational programs, and other beneficial activities. They are calling for their input and ideas to be respected and considered, both seriously and fairly.

Now is the time for community leaders to seize the opportunity to create vibrant mosques and Islamic centers that honor the contributions of both women and men. Leaders must promote and demand a higher level of com-

petence in running professional Islamic institutions, which must include the full participation of women, so that no one, especially women and youth, will ever have to ask: “What are we fighting to be a part of anyway?” By transforming women’s access and participation in the mosque, we will show by example the liberation and gender harmony that Islam holds for all.

Women and the Mosque in the Qur’an and the Hadith

The mosque is a place for spiritual growth and development for all Muslims and should be equally accessible to both genders. The Qur’an has explicitly established all people’s spiritual and moral equality:

For the Muslim men and women, for the believing men and women, for the devout men and women, for the truthful men and women, for the men and women who are patient and constant, for the men and women who humble themselves, for the men and women who give charity, for the men and women who fast, for the men and women who guard their chastity, and the men and women who are exceedingly mindful of Allah, Allah has prepared forgiveness and great rewards. (Qur’an 33:35)

Both men and women are obliged to develop themselves morally and spiritually and to fulfill their social responsibilities. The mosque is, and has always been, the center of moral and spiritual learning and growth. Likewise, it is a public place for discussing issues of concern and to respond to challenges. The Qur’an is also clear on the equal responsibility of both men and women for developing public good:

The believing men and women are protectors and helpers of each other. They (collaborate) to promote all that is good and oppose all that is evil, establish prayers and give charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those are the people whom Allah would grant mercy. Indeed Allah is Exalted and Wise. (Qur’an 9:71)

Promoting the common good and opposing evil are public duties required from men and women, and the mosque is the place where they can meet to plan community development and outline strategies to fulfill this obligation. During Islam’s early years, women participated in public services, attended the Prophet’s Mosque, and shared the main space with men. In other words, they were fully engaged in public debate and influenced decisions affecting their lives and that of the community. For example, when Caliph `Umar ibn al-Khattab wanted to limit dowry, a woman stood up in the middle of the mosque and pointed out that his proposal violated Islamic law. He conceded and abandoned his proposed policy.

The argument against women sharing the main prayer hall is based on the principle of guarding against corruption (*dar' al-mafasid*), defined as “whatever leads to *haram* is *haram*.” The principle, though not widely accepted by Islamic jurists, has been extensively used to limit actions that are otherwise lawful. Some jurists even invoked it to reject the use of radio, television, the press, and other inventions because these have also been used to promote corrupt practices. Indeed, many good practices and devices could be declared unlawful, including the use of the Internet and democratic governments. Preventing women from exercising established rights or undertaking moral duties and social obligations cannot be justified by such a rationale. In fact, this argument was used at an early stage and rejected by eminent Muslim scholars.

ʿAbdullah Ibn ʿUmar reported: Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: “Do not deprive women of their share of the mosques when they seek permission from you.” Bilal said: “By Allah, we would certainly prevent them.” ʿAbdullah said: “I say that Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) said it and you say: ‘We would certainly prevent them!’”¹

Women were active in public life and regularly attended the prayer at the mosque at all times, including *fajr* and *isha*, during the time of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.² Children and babies accompanied their mothers to the mosque.³ The Prophet, peace be upon him, explicitly stated that men should not prevent the female slaves of Allah from entering the mosque of Allah,⁴ even at night.⁵ At the same time, he encouraged some women, depending upon their needs and inclinations, to pray at home.⁶

Given the Prophet’s advice and example, no woman should be told to leave when she wants to enter a mosque and participate in prayers or other activities. It is her right to choose whether she wishes to participate in mosque activities, and she must have open access to the mosque.

In addition, the Prophet laid down a specific *adab* (etiquette) for women attending the mosque. His guidelines about where women were to stand relative to men during prayer (in rows behind) indicate that women and men prayed in the same room. Out of his compassion for women and children, the Prophet would shorten his prayer when he heard a child crying. After the compulsory prayers, he would remain seated for a few moments along with the men in congregation to allow women to leave first.⁷ Also, he asked them to attend the mosque without wearing perfume.⁸ In addition, recognizing that some subjects were more easily discussed in separate gatherings, he occasionally taught women separately.⁹ Muslims should rush to emulate his flexibility, openness, and respect for women’s presence in the mosque.

The Current Situation for Women's Access and Participation

There is an urgent need for action on this issue throughout North America. Below, we discuss results of the CAIR 2001 Report from the Mosque Study Project (MSP) and our own qualitative interviews with many women. The MSP gives a general picture of practices in the Muslim community; the interviews capture women's experiences of mosque practices.

Mosque Study Project Results

The MSP, co-sponsored by the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Ministry of Imam W. Deen Mohammed, and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), surveyed 416 randomly sampled mosques in the United States. Results showed that:

- The majority of regular participants in mosques are men. The MSP showed that on average, 75% of regular participants are male.
- Although 54% of mosques reported regular activities for women, 27% reported only occasional activities and 19% reported none.
- While 50% of mosques reported that women have served on their governing or executive boards, 31% of mosques prevent women from serving on executive boards. In addition, 19% said they allowed women to serve, but that no woman had actually served for the past five years.
- The practice of women praying behind a curtain or in another room has increased. In 1994, 52% of mosques reported that women prayed behind a partition or in another room; by 2000, this had increased to 66% of mosques.
- Most regular participants are 36 years or older (53%).

Women's Experiences and Perceptions of Mosque Practices

In interviews across Canadian cities (conducted in 2001 by ISSA) many women voiced broad concerns, as well as problems of access, participation, and the approaches of mosque leadership. Women In Islam, Inc. also receives regular reports of gender discrimination in mosques and other com-

munity institutions. Many women believe that cultural biases and mindsets, rather than Islam's principles, are at the root of such discrimination.

Of course, women recognize that some mosque leaders may be well-meaning but cannot acquire the financial resources needed to build open spaces, maintain structures, or develop quality programs. However, they also thought that all communities can benefit from self-reflection and self-evaluation regarding mosque practices that affect women in particular, and the community in general.

In presenting the concerns we have heard, we are motivated by deep concern for community cohesion and the new generations' development. We are also aware that, unfortunately, these experiences are mainstream practices in our communities. Some of the key issues are noted below.

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS RELATED TO ACCESS

- Since education in Islam is not only a right but a duty for all Muslims, women are eager for religious knowledge and enjoy learning from imams, scholars, and other speakers. However, some felt that their education is impeded when they are not allowed to attend the mosque, hear or see the speakers, or given an opportunity to ask questions. Some reported that they were discouraged from – and even rebuked for – entering the mosque's library!
- A younger generation of women and men who have professional training and are yearning to contribute these talents to improving mosque programs and governance felt that they were not encouraged to do so and, at times, were actively discouraged or obstructed.
- Qualified women scholars, professionals, and activists are not invited to speak. Women feel that they, as well as their children and communities, would benefit tremendously from contact with such role models who are maintaining their *din* (religion) as well as advancing in their fields.
- Women who may be interested in exploring Islam for conversion or recent converts/reverts feel inhibited to enter the mosque and ask questions. Without women's regular participation in mosque activities, recent reverts/converts have a more difficult time identifying sisters who may be able to befriend them and support their transition.
- Some women reported problems with entryways and exits. Surprisingly, in some mosques women are told to use fire exits rather than the front door along with the men. Not only does this endanger their safety and that of their children, it is also discriminatory.

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MOSQUE GOVERNANCE AND MOSQUE PARTICIPATION

- Although more women participate in mosque activities, some also simultaneously felt that the dignity and honor given to them by Islam is not reflected in how they are treated in the mosque. For example, women who have tried to approach the mosque leadership have sometimes found these men dismissive of their ideas and concerns. When women are invited to take managerial roles in mosque programs, they are often limited to serving as cooks and cleaners. While women enjoy taking care of their communities in these ways, they felt the leadership can do more to include women in mosque consultation processes or meetings. They believed that the men's cultural and gender biases limited their right to have a role in decision-making.
- Mothers with children said that they would feel more encouraged to attend the mosque if there were designated play areas for children, provided there are community resources to build these spaces.
- The low attendance of women adversely affects unmarried, divorced, and widowed women. More specifically, they feel a greater sense of isolation at the mosque and find it harder to maintain contact and integrate with the wider community. These women have a right to special community buffering and support.
- Women felt that standards of modest dress are not applied consistently for men and boys, as they are for women.
- Lastly, women perceive that the Friday sermon must become more sensitive to the language and culture of North America and more balanced in its content. Gender issues must be discussed in ways that highlight the differences between culture and religion and recognize the diversity of Muslim women's experiences.

Due to the above limitations, many women go to the mosque with some trepidation, and some go only occasionally or do not attend at all. One unfortunate consequence is that women and their children are losing the knowledge about the rules of attending the mosque and congregational prayers. In addition, an entire generation of women and children is moving away from the mosque and finding other avenues for their intellect and training. Mosque leaders who reject women's input are also missing the benefit of women's perspective and ideas for community improvement. A status quo that excludes women also makes them and their children less able to practice their community responsibilities to promote good and forbid evil.

Surely, these experiences are not in accordance with Islam. Our beloved Prophet, peace be upon him, encouraged active learning and questions by all members of the community. In addition, a mosque and other facilities (e.g., libraries) belong to the community and, therefore, must be accessible to all community members, including women and the physically challenged.

The alienation of women from the mosque must be addressed at the local level. Each mosque must gradually, but in a determined fashion, modify its architecture, governance, and programs to include women and children. The leadership at each mosque must be proactive in initiating and supporting these changes.

In closing, we urge our leaders to make a serious commitment to educate their communities regarding these issues and to initiate changes in mosque access, participation, and governance. Leaders must honor and promote the right of female servants of Allah to be fully included in the community's affairs and to worship and supplicate in peace and dignity in their places of worship – the mosque – without fear and anger. As the Prophet (peace be upon him) noted in his last sermon: “The rights of women are sacred, so see that they are maintained.”

Endnotes

1. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, book 4, no. 891.
2. This hadith is also agreed upon. Some references include, but are not limited to, al-Bukhari, 899 and 900, 81:826, and 83:831; Muslim, p. 327; Ibn Hanbal, 2:167, 49, 98, 143, 145; Abu Dawud, 568; and al-Tirmidhi, 570.
3. This hadith is also agreed upon. Some references include, but are not limited to, Muslim, p. 343 and Ibn Majah, no. 989.
4. This hadith is agreed upon. It is narrated by both Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim. See, for example, Muslim, no. 442.
5. This hadith is also agreed upon. See, for example, al-Bukhari, 80:824 and 84:832.
6. Ibn Hanbal, 2:76-7 and 2:297.
7. Al-Bukhari, 81:826 and 83:831.
8. This hadith is agreed upon. See, for example, Ibn Hanbal, 2:438 and 2:475.
9. This hadith is agreed upon. See, for example, al-Bukhari 36:101.