

Women in the Mosque: Historical Perspectives on Segregation

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Abstract

This paper deals with the issue of women's full or partial access to the mosque from 610-925. This period is divided into two timeframes. The first, 610-34, consists mainly of the time in which the Prophet was active in Makkah and Madinah. The second, 634-925, is the period beginning with `Umar's reign to the time when the Hadith literature was written down and set into the well-known compilations. Two types of evidence are examined for both periods: material and textual records. Material records consist of the layout of the various mosques, where the existence or absence of dividing walls or separate entrances could be important clues. Textual records consist mainly of the Qur'an and Hadith literature.

The Qur'an is used as a primary source for the first period, whereas the Hadith literature is used as a primary source for the second period. The Hadith is used to distinguish trends and directions in the Muslim community after the demise of the Prophet, rather than as a source of information on the Prophet himself. This avoids problems of authenticity, while not denying that much of the Hadith may well be authentic. From the primary sources available for the first period, there does not appear to be any evidence of segregation; rather the evidence indicates that women had full access to the mosque. In the second period, three trends appear: a pro-segregation trend, an anti-segregation trend, and a trend that sought to prohibit women from going to the mosque altogether.

Introduction

The early mosque was not only a place for prayer, but also a center for many other activities as well. It functioned as the school where people learned their religion, and the Parliament where the community discussed new laws and affairs of state. It was also the courthouse where judgments were passed, and the community center where families met their friends and neighbors and held their celebrations. In short, it was the hub and center of public life for the emerging Muslim nation.¹

For women, the mosque meant access to almost every aspect of public life. Debarring or limiting their access means restricting their participation in public life. Gender segregation, as seen in most mosques today, is such a limitation, for it limits women's full access. This both hampers their participation and can even shut them out completely. Segregation can be implemented either through a screen or a wall, or by distance, as happens when placing women behind men during the congregational prayers. This paper will provide a historical analysis of women's physical access to mosques.

The status of women in Islam, especially with regards to such issues as marriage, inheritance, veiling, and seclusion, has received a great deal of scholarly attention.² However, little has been written on gender segregation in the mosque. One should perhaps mention Nimat Hafez Barazangi, who has expressed the need for women to frequent mosques in her "Muslim Women's Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right: The Action Plan."³ However, she does not address gender segregation. Other works include Nabia Abbott's "Women and the State in Early Islam," which provides a useful historical perspective on this issue during the early Islamic period.⁴ Also noteworthy is the work of two Islamic scholars. The first one is Muhammad al-Ghazali, a conservative scholar who advocated a better position for women.⁵ He severely criticized the widespread exclusion of women from the mosque and defended their right to participate, albeit behind the men and only if they had fulfilled their household chores. The second one is Ahmad Shawqi al-Fanjari, who specifically addressed segregation in his *Al-Ikhtilat fi al-Din fi al-Tarikh fi 'Ilm al-Ijtima'*. He promoted non-segregation and women's participation in public life, including the mosque.⁶

In my historical overview, I deal with the period from the beginning of Muhammad's career as a prophet in 610 until about 925, when many of the first textual sources were recorded. I then divide this period into two sub-periods. The first subperiod consists mainly of the time during which the Prophet was active in both Makkah and Madinah (610-32) and when the Qur'an, the foundation of the Islamic faith, was revealed. During this time,

religion was in the hands of one person, who was regarded by his followers as the ultimate religious authority. This can be viewed as a theocratic period, for the people believed that God was guiding them through the Prophet. It is also characterized as a prophetic or “ideal” period. The reign of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (632-34) will be regarded as more or less a continuation of that time, since it was too short and he was too faithful to the Prophet’s example to allow any changes in women’s situation.⁷

The first major changes in the placement of women in the mosque took place during `Umar ibn al-Khattab’s reign (634-44), which initiated the second subperiod. By this time, most of the primary textual sources used in this study had been recorded. This was also a time of conquest, when Islam spread into new lands and Muslims interacted with many other peoples. Religion was now in the hands of a scholarly elite that had emerged over the years. In addition, this was a formative period for Islam, when many of its religious laws and doctrines were formulated. This time can be characterized as an “interactive” period, for many debates took place within the Muslim community. Using primary and some secondary sources relating to these subperiods, I will evaluate and contrast women’s access to the mosque.

To do this, we must examine the primary material and textual sources. The material record consists mainly of the mosques’ architecture. But since most early mosques have been changed and restructured, we cannot acquire a clear picture of the original layout from the material record alone. Therefore, textual sources also are consulted for they enable us to identify such physical and spatial features to determine if there were any walls or other barriers separating men and women, and whether they used separate entrances. These architectural features can provide important evidence about the nature of women’s presence and participation in early mosques.

Primary textual sources, mainly the Qur’an and Hadith literature, also provide a historical context. For the early period, our main record is the Qur’an. Although it does not contain a great deal of historical information, both western and Muslim scholars consider the Qur’an to be a useful source for information on the Prophet’s life and practice. In this study, the Qur’an will be used as a reflection of the first period’s sociocultural conditions as well as a means to discern prophetic narratives.

The Hadith literature is often used as a primary source for the Prophet’s directions and model behavior. However, the first compilations, which had been scrutinized by early scholars for authenticity, appeared only in the ninth century. This inadvertently raises questions of reliability. Western scholars hold views ranging from rejecting the entire traditional

literary corpus to according it the status of a genuine core.⁸ On the other hand, Muslim scholarly opinion ranges from accepting the entire “canonical” corpus to subjecting it to rigorous criticism. The latter group has called attention to the problems associated with some of the traditions.⁹ Prominent advocates of the “canonical” corpus seem to have recognized some of these problems and, as a result, have attempted to solve them by “contextualization” and “interpretation.”¹⁰

This study neither seeks to investigate the various reports’ authenticity nor the individual motives behind preserving or composing them. Rather, the material will be used as a reflection of the directions and inclinations of the people who retained and transmitted the Hadith literature. Thus, this literature will be limited as a primary textual source for the second period under investigation, rather than for the first. This approach will avoid any conflict over authenticity and, at the same time, will not deny the fact that much of the Hadith literature could well be authentic and contain accurate historical information on the Prophet.

Another textual source used in this study is Ibn Sa`d’s biographical dictionary, which contains important historical information on the periods of `Umar and `Uthman. Both Ibn Sa`d (d. 845) and the events he recounts belong to the second period under examination. One should perhaps also mention al-Azraqi, who belongs to the second period.¹¹ His book, *Akhbar Makkah*, contains important information on the Makkan sanctuary.

Women in the Prophetic Period

During the first period (610-34), the most important material records include al-Haram al-Sharif in Makkah and the Prophet’s mosque in Madinah. Although Muslims believe that Muhammad was transported miraculously to Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa Mosque, this cannot be regarded as a material record because the physical mosque had not yet been built. The ancient Israelite temple, which some people believe existed prior to the al-Aqsa Mosque, had been destroyed centuries ago.¹² Furthermore, the Prophet’s experience had a kind of spiritual character and cannot be regarded as material evidence. However, the al-Aqsa Mosque does figure in the textual record: Qur’an 17:1.

The most important material record for the Makkan period is Makkah’s al-Haram al-Sharif, the first mosque in which Muslims prayed. This sanctuary, which has its origins in the pre-Islamic period, continued and flourished after the advent of Islam. Al-Haram al-Sharif features the

ancient house. This is a simple apsidal structure consisting of an almost square-shaped room with an apse¹³ attached to it, known as *hijr* Isma`il. Both Hagar and Isma`il are reportedly buried there.¹⁴ The structure is located in a courtyard, in which prayers and other rituals are conducted. In the Makkan and Madinan periods, houses surrounded the courtyard¹⁵ and no barriers separated the men from the women. Even the sacred space was not enclosed by a wall.

The Qur'an is our main textual source for this period. However, it is more useful for the Madinan than for the Makkan period, since Makkan chapters (*suwar*) have little to say about women in the sanctuary. During the Prophet's early activity in Makkah, conditions were more or less a continuation of *jahili* practices. Jawad `Ali, who deals with Makkah's pre-Islamic religious practices,¹⁶ informs us that women made *tawaf* (ritual circumambulations around the Ka`bah), sacrificed their animals to one of the deities, and that Qurashi women performed *sa`y* (running between the two hills of Safa and Marwah). Pre-Islamic rituals, however, could not be performed in clothes in which the pilgrim had sinned. The sole exception was for members of the Quraysh. If a pilgrim could not borrow clothes from a Qurashi, then he or she performed the rituals without clothes.¹⁷ This is why women preferred to perform their rituals at night. A verse of poetry that some of them recited was:

Today, some of it or all of it appears;
what appears of it, I do not consider permissible.¹⁸

For Muhammad, this sanctuary remained the principal mosque. Every Muslim, whether male or female, is required to perform this pilgrimage at least once if they can meet the relevant conditions. However, for most of the Prophet's sojourn in Madinah, Makkah was at war with Madinah. Therefore, the Muslims did not have access to that sanctuary. When relations were reestablished between the two cities, Muslims began to perform the pilgrimage. Some of the pre-Islamic rituals continued (e.g., *tawaf* and *sa`y*), and others were changed (e.g., the idols were removed and all pilgrims had to wear *ihram* clothes).¹⁹ Women's access to every part of the mosque continued unchanged from *jahili* times. Even today, women pilgrims have complete access to the mosque and can pray wherever and whenever they like.

The Prophet, after migrating to Madinah, built a second mosque there. This structure, which also functioned as his home, was a simple nearly square enclosure of approximately 56 x 53 meters with a single entrance. The *qiblah* side had a double range of palm-trunk columns thatched with

palm leaves. Needy Companions had a lean-to toward the southeast, and Muhammad's wives had rooms along the western perimeter.²⁰ The prayers were conducted in the vast empty courtyard. Significantly, there appear to have been no walls or other barriers separating men and women, or any other known material evidence of gender segregation during the Madinan period.

The Qur'an also provides interesting evidence for women's access to the mosque during this period. A close examination shows two kinds of verses that contain relevant information. The first kind consists of general verses that deal more or less with all Muslims. They are usually in the male plural, which, in Arabic, can include women. On the other hand, the female plural does not include men. The second kind are gender-specific and specify women, either by the female plural or by referring to a specific person (e.g., Mary). I will first examine the general verses and then the specific verses.

All Muslims are asked to pray in every mosque and to take their adornments:

Say: "My Lord has commanded justice and that you look toward (Him) at every mosque ... (7:29)²¹

O children of Adam! Take your adornments to every mosque ... (7:31)

Several verses talk negatively of those who prevent believers from mosques and warn them of severe punishments (e.g., 2:114, 8:34, 22:25, and 48:25):

Who is more unjust than one who prevents [believers] from celebrating God's name in his mosques and strives to ruin them? It is not fitting that such should enter them, except in fear. Disgrace will be theirs in this world and an exceeding torment in the world to come. (2:114)

The above verses indicate the right and obligation of every Muslim to participate in the mosque's activities. The context suggests that this applies to "the believers," regardless of gender. The participation of women is not stated explicitly in the above verses. However, it is clearer in the gender-specific verses, to which I now turn.

Two verses specify women's relationship to group prayers. The first is as follows:

The male believers and the female believers are each others' allies. They enjoin good and forbid evil, establish prayers and pay the alms, and

obey God and his Messenger. Upon these God will have mercy. God is Almighty, All-Wise. (9:71)

The word *awliya'*, which I have translated as “allies,” signifies a close working relationship. It can also be translated as “friends, protectors, neighbors, or followers.” It comes from the root *waliya*, which means to be near or adjacent to somebody or something. The same term is used to describe the relationship between the Muhajirun (Makkan immigrants) and the Ansar (Madinan helpers) (8:72) and between God and His “close ones” (10:62). The above verse signifies a togetherness in prayers as well as in enjoining good, forbidding evil, giving alms, and obeying God and his Prophet. These activities clearly have a public aspect to their fulfillment and are mandated for both men and women.

The second gender-specific verse is addressed to Mary, as follows:

O Mary! Humble yourself before your Lord, prostrate yourself, and bow down with those who bow down. (3:43)

The term used for “with those who bow down” is *ma`a al-raki`in*. *Raki`in* is the masculine plural form. It may or may not include women, but it must include men. The feminine plural would have been *raki`at*, which is not used in this context. So, Mary is ordered to pray with a group that includes men. Also interesting is the preposition *ma`a*, which means “with,” not “behind,” “away from,” or “segregated from” in any way.

Mary is also presented as praying in the *mihrab*. In later Islamic times, the *mihrab* came to mean a recess in a mosque indicating the prayer direction. However, this is not the Qur’anic meaning, since the *mihrab* is connected there only with ancient Israelites: Mary, David, Solomon, and Zachariah (3:37, 39; 19:11; 38:21-22; and 34:13). In place of the mosque’s *mihrab*, Solomon’s temple had the Holy of Holies, which housed the ark of the covenant. In non-Israelite temples, the Holy of Holies often contained the image of a deity.

Mary’s presence in what could possibly have been the Holy of Holies may have significant implications for female access to mosques. This is the inner sanctum to which only a select few, mainly highly placed priests or persons, had access. In other words, Mary would have been on a par with such figures as David, Solomon, and Zachariah. This warrants a closer investigation of how the Qur’an portrays Mary’s position in the temple, since Islam considers it a major mosque. As I will show below, Mary not only had a privileged position with full access to the mosque, but is depicted as not being segregated from men.

According to the Qur'an, Mary's connection with the temple began before her birth. Her mother is portrayed as saying:

My Lord, I have consecrated by vow (*nadhartu*) to you what is inside my womb as a freed person (*muharraran*). (3:35)

The Arabic *nadhara* is equivalent to the Hebrew *nadhar*, which appears only in the *qal* form in the Old Testament and means "to make a vow."²² *N-z-r*, a related root that appears only in the *nifal* form,²³ means to dedicate oneself to a deity or to live as a nazirite.²⁴ One such *nazir*/nazirite was Prophet Samuel, whose mother (Hannah) made a promise that resembles the one made by Mary's mother. Hannah promised to give her as-yet-unconceived son as a nazirite (1 Samuel 1:11). He grew up ministering to the Lord in His temple at Shiloh (1 Samuel 2:18). In other cases, persons vowed to the temple were sold, and their price varied according to age and gender (Leviticus 27:2-8). The Qur'anic *muharrar* seems to mean a freed person. This implies that Mary's mother was promising her unborn child would be a nazirite, part of the temple's personnel, but would not be sold into slavery. The same root, *n-z-r*, is also used in Hebrew for consecrating or ordaining priests.²⁵

Not a great deal is known about the ancient Israelite nazirites. Some seem to have been connected with the temple, as in the case of Samuel. The Old Testament also portrays him as a prophet who received revelation from the Lord (1 Samuel 3:1-21). If Mary was a nazirite like Samuel, she probably would have had access to the Holy of Holies. Samuel used to minister to the Lord in His temple at Shiloh, where the ark of the covenant was housed (1 Samuel 2:18). Solomon's temple had not yet been built. After its construction in Jerusalem, the ark was moved to the Holy of Holies there.

Not everyone agrees that the Qur'anic *mihrab* should be identified with the Israelite Holy of Holies. In fact, some scholars consider it to have been a private ladies' chamber.²⁶ However, both David and Zachariah are presented as having been inside the *mihrab*. Zachariah is recorded to have prayed there privately and, after receiving revelation from the angels (3:39), going out to address his people (19:11). This would have been in the temple's third compartment: the courtyard. David is also presented as being in the *mihrab*, for two people scaled the wall and found him there (38:21-22). Thus, the Qur'anic *mihrab* was probably not a ladies' chamber.

Other than temples, the only known monumental architecture from ancient Israel is palaces. A palace would not fit the description as well as the temple, since Zachariah was not a king. Furthermore, it is unlikely

that he would pray in a palace sanctum, even if one were known to exist, and then habitually leave it to address the people. It is also unlikely that his people would be gathered in a room near the palace sanctum, waiting for the priest to address them. Thus, the ancient Israelite Holy of Holies appears to fit the Qur'anic *mihrab* best.

The Qur'an calls the Solomonic temple, which contains the Holy of Holies, al-Masjid al-Aqsa (17:1, 7). The four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, along with the Shi'i Ja'fari school, consider al-Masjid al-Aqsa to be the third holiest site after the Makkan and Madinan *harams*.²⁷ Many Muslims make pilgrimage to it during politically safe times. That a woman is depicted as being present in its innermost sanctum means that she had full access to that *masjid*. She is also presented as not being segregated from men, since Zachariah entered the *mihrab* when she was there and talked with her (3:37). Thus, we can see that Mary's example is a significant aspect of understanding the Qur'an's position on women's access to sacred space.

The other two high-ranking mosques are the Prophet's mosque in Madinah and the Makkan sanctuary. In the Prophet's mosque, his daughter Fatimah is thought to be buried next to him.²⁸ If this is indeed the case, then it can be viewed as a material record of full, unbarred female access to this mosque. However, this tradition is disputed, and al-Baqi` seems to be a more generally accepted burial place for her.²⁹ Nevertheless, this tradition does indicate that the thought of a woman being buried there was acceptable.

According to Islamic tradition, Hagar was buried with her son Isma`il inside the Ka`bah, specifically in the apse, which is considered part of the sanctuary. This tradition also can be regarded as indicating full unbarred female access to that *masjid*'s innermost sanctum. Although this account dates back to pre-Islamic times, it was maintained and transmitted in the two periods under investigation until it was formally documented in the `Abbasid era.³⁰

From the evidence, we can conclude that the material and textual records appear to support full female access to the major mosques during the Makkan and Madinan periods. Importantly, at the two earliest and most important Muslim shrines, there were no barriers separating women from men and no separate entrances. There also appears to be an indication that the thought of women being buried together with men in the inner sanctum was acceptable. The Qur'an testifies to the legitimacy of women's using the *mihrab* and interacting with men in al-Masjid al-Aqsa, the third major Muslim shrine. Both general and gender-specific Qur'anic verses

indicate that women had full access to the mosque and that praying next to men was considered normal and legitimate. Therefore, in the material as well as the textual sources dating to Islam's "ideal" period, there appears to be no indication of gender apartheid; rather, evidence points to the conclusion that women had full access to the mosque.

Later Developments

In the second period, the Makkan sanctuary underwent some changes. `Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph, bought the surrounding houses, tore them down, and surrounded the area with a wall.³¹ However, there were no walls or barriers separating men from women within the courtyard.

During his reign, Muslims conquered and spread into many countries. As a result, they founded garrison towns, each containing a mosque, an administrative office, and a dwelling for the commander-in-chief in the center. This points to the mosque's importance in public life. In Basra and Kufa (Iraq), the mosques were almost exact reproductions of the Prophet's mosque. In Fustat (Egypt), however, there was one important difference: multiple entrances.³² Although there is no evidence of partitions separating men from women, it is possible that women could have used separate entrances.

Perhaps the most important mosque built during this period is Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque. It too was initially a simple rectangular structure, much like the Prophet's mosque.³³ This mosque seems to be the first one to have a clear partition separating men and women, for there seems to have been three *maqsurat* (separate enclosures or compartments shut off by wooden lattices or even by balustrades) for women in 912/13. The first *maqsurah*, probably built during the early Umayyad era, was an enclosure near the *mihrab* that separated the ruler from the people. This was regarded as an innovation unique to the Islamic world and was condemned by some scholars.³⁴ From this evidence, we can conclude that there could be an indication of gender segregation in the second period's material record. However, it is unclear how widespread it was.

The most important textual source for the second period is the Hadith literature, which was mostly gathered and documented during the ninth century. The most famous "canonical" collections are those of Ibn Majah (824-56), al-Bukhari (820-70), Muslim (817-75), Abu Dawud (817-89), al-Tirmidhi (d. 892), and al-Nasa'i (830-915). Each *hadith* comes with a chain of transmission identifying each transmitter, all the way back to the Prophet. These collections contain several traditions pertaining to women in the mosque. As discussed previously, neither their authenticity nor the transmit-

ters' reliability are of concern here. Whether individuals fabricated some of the reports or not is irrelevant, since they are not used as sources of information about the Prophet, but rather as sources about the composers or the transmitters. Thus, they are taken as reflections of social trends shortly after the Prophet's demise up to the time of their compilation.

The following are some of the relevant reports found in the Hadith collections:

The Prophet said that a dog, an ass, and a woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qiblah*.³⁵

This hadith, which is found in some of the major Hadith collections,³⁶ appears to be aimed at placing women behind men during prayer. However, other *ahadith* contradict it. These seem to be of five types. The first type is attributed to `A'ishah, who is said to have responded with the following words:

You compare us now to asses and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there, lying on the bed between him and the *qiblah*. And in order not to disturb him, I did not move.³⁷

`A'ishah's tradition, with minor variations, is also found in many of the major Hadith collections.³⁸ She criticized the lumping together of women with dogs and donkeys, both of which can be regarded as insults. She brought evidence from her own experience with the Prophet to contradict the report. Four more tradition types state the following:

The Prophet used to pray while carrying Umamah bint Zaynab, the daughter of the Messenger of God, and Abu al-`As ibn Rabi`ah ibn `Abd Shams. When he prostrated himself, he put her down; when he got up, he carried her.³⁹

The Prophet led them in prayer in al-Batha'. He prayed the two *zuhr rak`as*, during which a goat was in front of him, and the two *`asr rak`as*, during which a woman and a donkey were crossing in front of him.⁴⁰

From `Abd Allah ibn `Abbas: "I came riding on a female donkey and was approaching adulthood (*ih tilam*) at that time, while the Prophet was leading the people in prayer at Mina without any walls. I crossed in front of some of the people in the row, came down and sent the donkey to graze, and entered into the row. Nobody disapproved."⁴¹

From `Ali ibn Abi Talib on the pulpit: "Oh people! I heard the Prophet (pbuh) say: 'Only excrement can disrupt a man's prayer.' I do not shy away from telling you what the Prophet did not shy away from." And he said the excrement is if he breaks wind or if he farts.⁴²

The abundant reports of the first tradition, as well as the responses to it, portray a lively debate that seems to have started early in the interactive period. The traditions represent two conflicting views: The first places women behind men, so as not to interrupt men's prayers, whereas the second affirms that women can pray in front of men. These conflicting reports reflect two distinct trends within the Muslim community. The people who transmitted or composed the first tradition can be seen as belonging to the pro-segregation group. One member of this group could be Abu Dharr, to whom the first tradition seems to be attributed. The people responsible for spreading the contrasting traditions, such as `A'ishah, can be viewed as opposing gender apartheid. However, the difference is not always clear-cut. For example, al-Bukhari reports both traditions. It is possible, therefore, that some transmitters did not belong to either group but were mainly interested in preserving the traditions.

Further traditions give a better picture of the liveliness of this debate. For example:

The **better** rows for men are the first ones, and the **worst** are the last ones; the **better** rows for women are the last ones and the **worst** are the first ones.⁴³

The above hadith seeks to place women behind men in prayers. However, there are problems associated with this tradition. The first problem is related to interpretation. For example, al-Fanjari interprets it not as preventing women from praying next to men, but as a means to organize congregants in crowded situations.⁴⁴ However, his interpretation is at odds with the example of the most crowded mosque of all: that of Makkah.

Among the evidence al-Fanjari cites is a tradition showing that a beautiful woman used to pray behind the Prophet and in front of other men.⁴⁵ The context of that hadith is meant to explain a particular Qur'anic verse: "To us are known those of you who hasten forward, and those who lag behind" (15:24). It does not seem to be purposely aimed at delineating a woman's place during prayer. I would argue that the tradition of the "beautiful woman" is not really aimed at legitimizing women praying in front of men, but seems to preserve a memory of them doing so.

Another problem is the “better than” formula. Perhaps the first hadith is expressed in the form of “better than,” rather than a clear prohibition because the memory of women praying in front of men during the Prophet’s time, as well as in Makkah, was too strong to be denied. The “better than” formula could be a means of introducing new practices and harmonizing them with the old practices. Since it is not a clear prohibition, it avoids the kind of thundering response seen above in some of the previously cited *ahadith*.

A third problem has to do with how the first rows were perceived in relation to the latter ones. Some evidence points to the fact that the first rows were perceived as superior, especially the very first one, for God and the angels bless the first row and the first few rows. The Prophet used to ask forgiveness for the first row three times and for the second row only two times.⁴⁶ Consequently, he urged the believers to move forward in the rows, fill them up, and not leave empty spaces.

To deny women access to the first row and the blessings of God and the angels seems unjust and not in keeping with the spirit of fairness that characterizes Islam. It is also in conflict with *Surat al-Nahl*, which addresses gender discrimination right from the moment a baby girl is born:

When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female, his face remains dark and he bottles it up. He hides himself from his people, because of the bad news he has received. Should he keep it in contempt or should he bury it in the dust? Alas, bad is their judgment. (16:58-59)

Those who keep women in contempt (i.e., a state of disempowerment) are *sa’ama yahkumun*. God criticizes their judgment and pronounces it “bad.”

There also may be a problem of misplaced context in this hadith. Nothing in the text places it within the context of prayers. In fact, the Qur’an associates “row” (*saff*) with battle rows: “God loves those who fight in his cause in a row, as if they were an ordered structure” (61:4), not with prayer rows. When reading this hadith together with the Qur’an, the first association would be with war. In other words, the Prophet encouraged women to stay behind the lines during battle. The connection with prayer (*salat*) comes at a later time, in the *fiqh* headings of the various Hadith compilations. The headings, which were used to categorize the traditions, are only organizational tools applied to the Hadith compilations, and thus stem from a much later date than the original hadith. Thus, one could argue that a tradition that originally arose in a context of war was later adopted for use in organizing prayers.

However, another tradition does place it in the context of prayer.

“Shall I direct you to that by which God grants remission from sins and increase in rewards?” They said: “Yes, O messenger of God.” He said: “To amply perform the ritual ablution over what is distasteful, the large number of steps to these mosques, to wait for the [following] ritual prayer after [having completed] the ritual prayer. There is not a man among you who goes out of his home, after having purified himself, and then prays the prayer together with the Muslims and then sits in the gathering and awaits the next prayer, but that the angels say: ‘O God, forgive him; O God grant him mercy!’ So when you stand up in prayer straighten your lines, complete them and fill the empty spaces, for I see you behind my back. When your leader says: ‘God is greater,’ then say: ‘God is greater.’ When he bows down, bow down. When he says: ‘God hears whoso praises him,’ then say: ‘O God, the praise is yours.’ The better rows for men are the front ones, and the worst are the last ones. The better rows for women are the last ones and the worst are the front ones. O women, when the men prostrate themselves, then lower your gaze, so you do not see the private parts of the men due to the tightness of their loincloths.”⁴⁷

The above version appears to be a composite hadith made up of smaller ones. If this is indeed the case, then the misplaced context belongs to the second time period.

Another tradition is also used to argue for women praying in the mosque behind the men.

The Prophet prayed in the home of Umm Sulaym. I got up together with an orphan behind him and Umm Sulaym [was] behind us.⁴⁸

But this tradition does not take place in a mosque and, as such, does not apply to women in the mosque. We do not know whether her position had anything to do with gender or if it was only because she got up after the others. In one version, she had invited the Prophet to lunch. Thus, she may have been clearing up. In another version, they were praying on a rug or a cover, so there may not have been enough room for her in the front row. One or even a few isolated incidents do not make a rule or a prescribed normative practice. It also is important to note that only a small group – four people – prayed that particular prayer, so the woman had access to the imam.

One of the rare mentions of women in a clan-type mosque is the Umm Waraqah tradition:

Umm Waraqah bint `Abd Allah ibn al-Harith al-Ansari had collected the Qur'an, and the Prophet, may peace and blessings be upon him and his family and his Companions, had commanded her to lead the people of her area (*dar*) in prayer. She had her own *mu'adhdhin*, and she used to lead the people of her area (*dar*).⁴⁹

It is unclear exactly what is meant by *dar*. According to *Bulugh al-Amani*, the commentary on Ibn Hanbal's Hadith collection, the apparent meaning included the *mu'adhdhin* (a man who calls people to prayer), a *ghulam* (a male slave), and a *jariyah* (a female slave). However, this is disputed.⁵⁰ The use of a *mu'adhdhin* indicates that a significant number of people were involved. *Dar* also could mean a larger territory (e.g., *dar al-Islam*, *dar al-Harb*, and *dar al-Madinah*).

The word *dar* appears in another tradition as well. It states that a woman, Umm Humayd, liked to pray with the Prophet in his mosque, but he responded to her as follows:

"I know that you like to pray with me, but your praying in your home (*baytiki*) is **better** for you **than** your praying in your house (*hujratiki*), and your praying in your house is **better** for you **than** your praying in your area (*dariki*), and your praying in your area is **better** for you **than** your praying in the mosque of your tribe (*masjid qawmiki*), and your praying in the mosque of your tribe is **better** for you **than** your praying in my mosque." So she commanded that a mosque be built for her in the furthest and darkest corner of her home (*bayt*), and she used to pray there until she died.⁵¹

The above hadith appears to outline a hierarchy of prayer areas, ranging from the most secluded to the most public. The smallest and most secluded place seems to be the *bayt*. Since Umm Humayd prayed in its furthest and darkest corner, most likely it was her home or her room. Judging by the homes of the Prophet's wives, they seem to have been comprised of one room each. So Umm Humayd's home also may have been comprised of one room. The next category, *hujrah*, could be the house in which several people, all belonging to one family, lived (e.g., the Prophet and his wives). This could have been a complex made up of several rooms surrounding a courtyard.

In the above context, *dar* probably refers to the area where the clan or extended family members lived. It also could have included several such complexes. The people inhabiting this area probably gathered to pray in the house of the person who led their group prayers. These could

have taken place in an enclosed area or a courtyard, which may or may not have included a roof, such as the Prophet's mosque, which seems to have been architecturally the courtyard of his house. The next category would be the tribal mosque and then the Prophet's mosque, which would have been the most public.

The above tradition seeks to keep women away from mosques altogether, not just to limit their space. This third trend within the Muslim community gained prominence over time.⁵² Notably, we can see the "better than" formula appears in this tradition as well. In addition, there are other problems associated with the above hadith, one of them being that of context. The above hadith could have come in the context of performing part of the prayers at home and the rest in the mosque. This also applies to men. An example of a hadith to that effect is as follows:

Allot your home some of your prayers, and do not turn them into graves.⁵³

A further problem is that this hadith is in conflict with a Qur'anic verse:

Those who commit fornication (*fahisha*) from your women, get four witnesses against them from among you. If they should testify, then confine them to homes until death claims them or God opens up a way for them. (4:15)

Confining women to the home was a legal punishment for fornication, provided that four witnesses testified to her guilt. Therefore, it can be argued that it would be illegal to implement such a punishment against an innocent woman.⁵⁴ This is also in keeping with the character of *Surat al-Nisa'*. From its very first verse, a theme is established, that of a close bond with one's kin (*arham*) and cautiousness in one's relationships with them in order to safeguard oneself from God's punishment (*taqwa*). Such hateful practices as polygamy, wife beating, and home imprisonment were severely restricted. The straight path was no longer wide open, but was narrowed down so that such practices could be used only in tightly defined, exceptional circumstances.

In the dynamic atmosphere of the interactive period, contradictory traditions certainly would be expected. For example, the following tradition narrates:

Do not prevent the female servants of God from the mosques of God.

This tradition is quite common in the books of hadith.⁵⁵ `Umar ibn al-Khattab and his family figure very strongly in the above tradition. `Umar seems to have disliked his wife's going to the mosque and to have told her so. She is reported to have insisted on going unless `Umar prohibited her. But since he would not do this, due to the above hadith, she continued to frequent the mosque until his death. His son `Abd Allah also figures very strongly as a transmitter of the above tradition. In addition, there are reports of a dispute between him and his son Bilal, who seems to have prevented his wife from going despite the above hadith.⁵⁶

Ibn Sa`d mentions that `Umar ordered Sulayman ibn Abi Hathmah to act as a separate imam for the women in the mosque, while men prayed behind another imam.⁵⁷ This report records the first time that segregation was instituted in the mosque. It is possible to conjecture that since `Umar did not like his wife to go to the mosque but could not legitimately deny her access, he chose to implement segregation instead. Thus he was not prohibiting her, but rather was limiting her access. He also prevented the Prophet's widows from going to the mosque in Makkah when he forbade them to perform pilgrimage. However, he seems to have relented before his death and allowed them to go.⁵⁸ Ibn Sa`d reports that when `Uthman came to power, he once again allowed women to pray together with men, but in a segregated manner: behind the men and held back until the men departed.⁵⁹

This information goes a long way in explaining the background for the debates over the place of women during prayer. If segregation was instituted so early in the Prophet's mosque in Madinah, then this would have provided an impetus for the pro-segregation group. Another factor could have been a sense of propriety or the need to assert male supremacy. The placement of women in the Makkan sanctuary would have been a very strong contrast, and could have provided an impetus for the opposing group. Also, the memory of the prophetic practice and loyalty to it could have been a driving force. It is interesting to note that no hadith seems to try to explain why the situation in Makkah was so very different. This would be left for later scholars to address.

By the end of the third Islamic century, the pattern of Islamic society, especially among the higher classes, had changed markedly from what had prevailed during the first period. The system of total segregation and seclusion of women had been instituted, and women no longer had the right to participate freely in public life.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In light of the above, both material and textual sources indicate that changes took place during the second period. The material record (based on textual sources) indicates that women may have used separate compartments in the Jerusalem mosque. Women also could have been using separate entrances at other mosques. Ibn Sa`d's report indicates that from the reign of `Umar, men and women were praying separately in the Prophet's mosque. The situation in Makkah however, seems to have remained unchanged, especially during the pilgrimage season.

From this examination, we can see that the Hadith literature reflects a variety of trends. The first trend, I would argue, attempted to institute gender apartheid and legitimize the practice through select prophetic traditions. The second trend strongly opposed gender segregation on the grounds that it was not the Prophet's practice. The third trend was an attempt to keep women from mosques altogether. Since it was phrased as a "better than" formula, rather than as a normative principle, it did not evoke a strong response. However, it did provide a basis for scholars to prevent women's access to any mosque. The interactive period saw the institution and proliferation of gender segregation in the mosque.

The second and third trends reflected further developments away from the Qur'an and the Prophet's normative practice. For example, it could be argued that if there were several rows between women and the imam, women could not engage in enjoining good and forbidding evil together with men, as outlined in 9:71. The mosque is the center of the Muslim community's religious, cultural, and intellectual activity, and, as such, it should be possible to conform to God's commands within it. However, by placing women behind men and erecting physical barriers, it becomes very difficult for both women and men to follow these injunctions. Therefore, it can be argued that segregation is an impediment to carrying out the *wilayah* of Muslims, as described in 9:71.

The importance of *wilayah* is illustrated by an incident that took place during the reign of `Umar. In a sermon at the mosque, `Umar wished to limit the amount of money (*mahr*) paid to women upon marriage. A woman publicly disagreed with him, stating that he had no right to do so, for a specific Qur'anic verse (4:20) stated otherwise. He admitted that she was right and that he was wrong.⁶¹ His idea of reducing the bridal money represented an injustice to women – one that was openly contested and challenged by a woman of that time.

The situation of women in the mosque toward the end of the first quarter of the tenth century contrasts starkly with that of the “ideal” period. The descriptions of the mosques’ layout and the Qur’an indicate women’s complete access and participation. Perhaps the Qur’an’s importance lies not only in the historical information it contains, but also in the authority that Muslims give it: As it is the word of God, it has precedence over any other source. Perhaps in it lies hope for the future of women in the mosque.

Notes

1. See J. Pedersen “Masdjid” *Encyclopaedia of Islam (EI)* VI:655a-659b, 649a-b, and Ahmad Shawqī al-Fanjari, *Al-Ikhtilat fi al-Dīn fi al-Tarikh fi `Ilm al-Ijtima`* (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Misriyah al-`Ammah li al-Kitab, 1987), 42.
2. See, for example, Dahlia Eissa. *Constructing the Notion of Male Superiority over Women in Islam: The Influence of Sex and Gender Stereotyping in the Interpretation of the Qur’an and the Implication for a Modern Exegesis of Rights*. (Gabrels, France: Women Living under Muslim Laws, 1999) and Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. M.J. Lakeland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
3. Nimat Hafez Barazangi, “Muslim Women’s Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right: The Action Plan,” in *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, eds. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse University Press, 1997), 56-57.
4. Nabia Abbott, “Women and the State in Early Islam,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, no. 1 (1942): 114-15. Leila Ahmad also has an historical perspective in her “Women and the Advent of Islam,” *Signs*, no. 11 (1986): 665-91.
5. See, for example, Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Min Huna Na`lam*, 5th ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Hadithah, 1968), 185-95; and *Turathuna al-Fikri fi Mizan al-Shar` wa al-`Aql*. (Herndon, VA: al-Ma`had al-`Alami li al-Fikr al-Islami, 1991), 158-168. Also noteworthy is Suhaylah al-Husayni’s *Al-Mar’ah fi Manhaj al-Imam al-Ghazali*, Intr. Muhammad `Umarah (Cairo: Dar al-Rashad, 1998), 19-44. Her first chapter deals specifically with al-Ghazali’s view of “Woman and the Mosque.”
6. Al-Fanjari, *Ikhtilat*, 42-46.
7. Abbott, “Women,” 114.
8. For a thorough description, see Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Muhammeds* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 8-24.
9. See, for example, Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Hadith* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1989).

10. See, for example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Kayfa Nata`amal ma`a al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyah* (al-Mansurah: Dar al-Wafa' li al-Tiba`ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi`, 1990).
11. Abu al-Walid, Muhammad ibn `Abd Allah ibn Ahmad al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makkah wa ma Ja'a fiha min al-Athar*, ed. Rushdi al-Salih Malhas (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1996), 56. Al-Azraqi's date of death is disputed, see *ibid.*, 11-13. He probably died during the last half of the ninth century.
12. The temple's existence is attested to in other textual sources, mainly the Bible. There are no known material remains of the actual building, and the site on which it stood is debated. For more on the temple's proposed layout, see Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1990), 375-76.
13. A projecting part of the original building that is semi-circular in plan.
14. See Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar*, 1:56, 81, and 312.
15. *Ibid.*, 2:68-69.
16. See Jawad `Ali, *Al-Mufasssal fi Tarikh al-`Arab qabla al-Islam* (Beirut: Dar al-`Ilm li al-Malayin, 1968), vol. 6:347-97, 429-48. For more on Makkah's history, see *ibid.*, 4:5-127.
17. *Ibid.*, 357-61.
18. *Ibid.*, 358, tr. by Nevin Reda.
19. *Ibid.*, 361.
20. Pedersen, "Masjdjid," (section by R. Hillenbrand), VI:678b-679a.
21. The translations from the Qur'an and the Hadith by Nevin Reda, unless otherwise stated.
22. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 3d ed., tr. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:674. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1979), 1118.
23. The *nifal* form of a verb can have a reflexive or passive meaning.
24. Koehler, *Hebrew*, 1:684.
25. *Ibid.*
26. G. Fehervari, "Mihrab" *EI*, 7:7b.
27. See `Abd al-Rahman al-Jaziri, *Al-Fiqh `ala al-Madhahib al-Arba`ah* (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqalayn, 1998), 1:406-7, including n. 1, 2.
28. L. Veccia Vaglieri, "Fatima," *EI*, 2:845a.
29. *Ibid.*
30. See Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar*, 1:56.
31. *Ibid.*, 2:68-69.
32. Pedersen, "Masjdjid," 647b-48a
33. *Ibid.*, 648b.
34. *Ibid.*, 661b-62b
35. Translation from Mernissi, *Women*, 64.

36. For al-Bukhari's hadith, see Ahmad ibn `Ali ibn Hajar al-`Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari bi Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyah, 1992), vol. 1, 8:102 and 105. This tradition's profuseness can be noted in A. J. Wensinck and J. P. Mensing, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari, 1988), 1:511. For a good overview of Ibn Hanbal's hadith collection as organized by topic, see Ahmad `Abd al-Rahman Al-Banna, *Al-Fath al-Rabbani li Tartib Musnad al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal al-Shaybani ma`a Sharhihi Bulugh al-Amani* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-`Arabi), vol. 4, 2:801-7.
37. Translation from Mernissi, *Women*, 70.
38. Al-`Asqalani, *Fath*, vol.1, 8:99, 103-8; al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 4, 14:873-77. For the counter-tradition's profuseness, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, 4:152.
39. Al-`Asqalani, *Fath*, vol. 1, 8:106; al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 4, 12:864-65.
40. Al-`Asqalani, *Fath*, vol. 1, 8:90 and 93.
41. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 8:90.
42. Al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 4, 2:801.
43. See *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 6:1455. For more, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, 3:317.
44. Fanjari, *Ikhtilat*, 46.
45. See al-Hafiz `Amad al-Din Abi al-Fida' Isma`il ibn Kathir al-Qurashi al-Dimashqi, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-`Azim* (Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-`Arabiyah), 548-50; and al-Fanjari, *Ikhtilat*, 46.
46. Al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 5, 7:1475-1480.
47. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 6:1454.
48. Al-`Asqalani, *Fath*, vol. 2, 10:164 . A variant is quoted in al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 5, 3:1446-47.
49. Al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 5, 3:1375.
50. *Ibid.*, 233-34.
51. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 2:1337.
52. By the end of the eleventh century, most scholars had prohibited women from going to the mosque altogether. See Othman, *Woman*, 92-93.
53. Al-`Asqalani, *Fath*, vol. 1, 8:52.
54. Compare *Surat al-Takwir* 81:8-9.
55. Al-`Asqalani, *Fath*, vol. 2, 11:13. Several variations can be found in al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 5, 1:1327-36. For the tradition's profuseness, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, 2:430.
56. Al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 5, 1:1331-36.
57. Muhammad ibn Sa`d, *Biographien Muhammeds: seiner Gefährten und der späteren Träger des Islams bis zum Jahre 230 der Flucht* [Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir], ed. Eduard Sachau (Leiden: Brill, 1905-), 5:16-17.
58. See Abbott, "Women," 114-15.
59. Ibn Sa`d, *Tabaqat*, 17.
60. Othman, *Woman*, 78.
61. Sayyid Sabiq, *Fiqh al-Sunnah* (Cairo: Maktabat Dar al-Turath), 137-38.