

Forum

Woman and the *Masjid* between Two Extremes

Louay Safi

The *masjid*, better known in North America as the Islamic center, is the center of spiritual, social, educational, and, most recently, political activities of the American Muslim community. The *masjid* is also the place where Muslims of diverse cultural and ideological backgrounds meet and interact. The diversity of interpretations of Islamic sources and practices has created tensions, particularly in Islamic centers where the tendency is to impose strict interpretations about the appropriate place and role of Muslim women in the *masjid* and the community.

An increasing number of young Muslim women complain of restrictive arrangements and practices, impeding their ability to fully participate in educational and social programs. Many *masjids* today restrict the main prayer hall to men and assign women to secluded quarters. Women are asking out loud: “Is this the place Islam assigns for us, or is it the imposition of cultural traditions?” Some have even gone to the other extreme of rejecting all traditions and discarding all limits.

For Believing Men and Women

The *masjid* is a place for spiritual growth and development for all Muslims, and should be equally accessible for both genders. The Qur’an has set the spiritual and moral equality of men and women in explicit and unequivocal terms:

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Allah has prepared forgiveness and great rewards 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; 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. (Al-Ahzab 33:35)

Both men and women, the Qur'an stresses, have a moral obligation to develop themselves spiritually and morally, and to fulfill their social responsibilities. The *masjid* is, and has always been, the center of moral and spiritual learning and growth.

Likewise, the *masjid* is a public place for discussing issues of public concern and to respond to challenges facing the community. The Qur'an is also clear on the equal responsibility of both men and women for developing the 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. (Al-Tawbah 9:71)

Promoting public good and opposing evil are public duties equally required from men and women, and the *masjid* is the place where Muslim men and women can meet to plan community development and devise strategies for promoting public good.

The Prophet Affirms Equal Access

During the formative years of Islam women participated in public services, and shared the main hall of the Prophet's *masjid*. Sharing the main prayer hall allowed women to fully engage in public debate and influence decisions affecting their lives and the life of the community. When the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, wanted to put a cap on dowry, he was challenged by a woman, who stood up in the middle of the *masjid* and pointed out that his proposed policy violated Islamic law. He conceded and the proposed policy was never carried out.

Although the Qur'an is clear on the spiritual and moral equality of men and women, the Prophet, recognizing the tendency of some men to be over-

protective of their female relatives, cautioned the Muslim community against preventing women from frequenting the *masjid*:

Ibn Umar narrated: The Messenger of Allah, peace be with him, said: “Do not deprive women of their share of the *masjids*, when they seek permission from you.” Bilal said: “By Allah, we would certainly prevent them.” Abdullah said: “I say that the Messenger of Allah, peace be with him, said it and you say: ‘We would certainly prevent them!’” (*Sahih Muslim*, Book 4, Number 891)

Ibn Umar also narrated: The Prophet, peace be with him, said, “Allow women to go to the Mosques at night.” (*Bukhari*, Volume 2, Book 13, Number 22)

Sidestepping Established Principles

The argument against women sharing the main prayer hall is based on the principle of “corruption prevention” (*dar’ al-mafasid*). The principle states that “whatever leads to unlawful practices (*haram*) is in itself unlawful.” The principle, though not widely accepted by Muslim jurists, has been extensively used to limit actions that are otherwise lawful under the Shari`ah. It was invoked by some jurists to reject the use of the radio, the television, the press, and other inventions because these were used to promote corrupt practices. Indeed, by invoking the principle of “corruption prevention,” many good practices and devices could be declared unlawful, including the use of the Internet and popular governance, as both are open to abuse.

Employing the “corruption prevention” argument, a number of *masjids* have decided to assign secluded quarters for women and have placed many restrictions on women’s use of the *masjid*’s facilities. In recent visits to three Islamic centers, several Muslim women complained bitterly to me about their experiences with community leaders. They complained of their inability to participate in general lectures and discussions, of the quality of the quarters assigned to them, and of their reliance on audio and video systems that frequently cut them off from the ongoing lectures or discussions.

Assigning women to separate quarters during lectures and discussions does not “prevent corruption,” but rather “prevents education and spiritual growth.” I have heard many accounts of women completely immersed in conversations about shopping and cooking recipes during public lectures. The seclusion gives some women the feeling of distance and separation, and some women conclude that the events that take place in the main hall do not concern them. In such instances, the women’s quarters become less

friendly to women who want to concentrate on learning and community issues.

Not all *masjids* embrace a mandatory seclusion policy. Many leading *masjids*, such as the Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS), ensure that women share the main hall, participate fully in learning and consultation, and take active role in running the *masjid*. Women serve on the executive board of ADAMS and on its board of trustees. Five of the 13 Board of Trustees members are women, and the ADAMS vice president is a woman. While ADAMS gives full access to women to use its main prayer hall, it still permits women who want privacy to stay in a separate quarter, thereby ensuring that those Muslim women with different needs and convictions have place in the *masjid*.

Preventing women from exercising established rights or undertaking duties cannot be justified under argument of “corruption prevention.” This argument was used at the formative stage of Islamic society, but was rejected by early Muslims. Abdullah bin Umar rejected this same argument of prevention:

Ibn Umar reported: “Grant permission to women for going to the mosque in the night.” His son, who was called Waqid, said: “Then they would make mischief.” He (the narrator) said: “He thumped his (son’s) chest and said: ‘I am narrating to you the hadith of the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him), and you say: No!’” (*Sahih Muslim*, Book 4, Number 890)

Problems with Women’s Seclusion

Assigning women a separate and secluded space does not only go against Qur’anic injunctions and the practices and directives of the Prophet, peace be upon him, but is detrimental to the spiritual and moral growth of women and the development of the community.

Preventing women from gaining direct access to the main hall of the *masjid*, where lectures and study circles take place, deprives them from taking active role in learning. In addition to the psychological and emotional feeling of not taking active part in the meetings, the ability to interact with the speakers, to ask questions and offer comments, is impeded.

Secluding women deprives the emerging Muslim community of a growing number of young Muslim women who do expect, and rightly so, that the *masjid* does not take away their right to take active part in serving the community. When legitimate expectations are not met, and when the customs

and cultural traditions are given priority, they often force women to stay away from the *masjid*, and hence from Islamic learning and activities. Elevating the cultural traditions and customs of immigrants works against the very mission of the *masjid*, as it becomes an impediment for educating people of other faiths about Islam. Historically, Islam found home in different communities throughout the world because of its ability to accommodate local customs and cultures, as long as they are not in conflict with Islamic teachings. Immigrant communities would be betraying their mission and trust if they insist on imposing their customs and cultural traditions.

Women and *Masjid's* Governance

Women's leadership in the community is another contentious issue. Women have assumed, in some Islamic centers, key leadership positions by serving on the executive boards and leading key committees, while they are kept at arm's bay in others. Although Islam recognizes the capacity of women to enjoy equal moral responsibility, as we saw earlier, many Muslim community managed, nonetheless, to curtail women's participation in public duties on social and rational grounds. The degree of limitations placed on women's ability to serve in public capacity varies across historical periods and *fiqhi* schools.

Early jurists disagreed as to whether women can assume public office; while Ibn Jarir al-Tabari placed no limitations on women's right to assume the post of judge in all legal matters, al-Mawardi contended that women cannot be allowed to serve as judges under any circumstances. In between stands Abu Hanifah, who allowed women to serve as judges except in cases involving commercial deals.

To their credit, early Muslim jurists recognized women's rights to serve in public capacity at times when many women had limited involvement in public life and limited exposure to public service. Contemporary Muslim jurists should ensure that the original Qur'anic position of equal spiritual and moral rights and obligations is respected and advanced in today's society. This is more pressing today as the question of women capacity to exercise leadership and serve the community is put to rest through impressive track record of Muslim women achieving in the academia, professional work, and community service.

Our *masjids* must reflect the leading role played by American Muslim women by ensuring that they are represented on the *masjid* board and join the ranks of leadership. The importance of women taking active part on the

executive board and in executive committees is further underscored by the need to represent concerns that cannot be expressed except by women, who feel the impact of decisions made by the *masjid* on the quality of life and participation of other women.

Swinging to the Other Extreme

Several feminist Muslims, supported by a network of progressive activists, have been pushing the pendulum to the other extreme. Their solution for limiting women to secluded quarters and their marginalization in ultra-conservative *masjids* is to open the *masjid* to a mixed congregation led by women. The Progressive Muslim Union has already announced a mixed congregation to be led by Amina Wadud this month in New York. It is unfortunate that Muslim feminists are following in the footsteps of their secularist precursors, breaking all traditions, and engaging in experiments that break with formative principles and values. For individuals and movements interested in reforming attitudes and practices to take the opposite extreme can only hurt the reform agenda already underway throughout North America.

The recent push to break with community and tradition goes far beyond any reform agenda. Reform requires that one articulate the foundational principles and then engage the larger Muslim community in dialogue to create a new awareness and to translate the articulated principles into a living tradition. Reform aimed at critically engaging Muslim traditions must stick closely to the Qur'an and prophetic practices in order to clarify Islamic injunctions and established prophetic traditions. The Progressive Muslim Union's leaders have apparently decided to push the envelope beyond all limits and operate in revolutionary, rather than a reformist, mode.

It is quite apparent that Muslim reformers, concerned with evolving the practices of the American Muslim community and ensuring the full and meaningful inclusion of women in community life, must navigate their way by maintaining a middle ground away from extremist tendencies and the extremely conservative tendencies that are obsessed with preserving cultural traditions even at the expense of distorting Islamic teachings, and from extreme liberal outbursts that want to break fully with all traditions and delve into an empty space with no directions and road signs.