

An analysis of women's access and participation in the mosques in the contemporary world

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Abstract. In Muslim countries, mosques that designate areas for women's prayer rarely allow women to line up directly behind men in the same hall, as was the practice in the Prophet's Mosque during his lifetime. In many Arab countries, it is common to separate men's prayer place from women's, particularly in smaller mosques. The distance between the two prayer areas vary from one mosque to another. The majority of mosques in Muslim countries house specified places of prayer for women, which take shape of small rooms in the basement, on the ground floor, in a closed balcony or in a small building attached to the mosque. This paper aims to analyze the accessibility, permeability and scope of participation of women in the Mosque in the current scenario of modern world.

1. Introduction

The mosque is a place where Muslims can come together for religious practices as well as it also serves as a social space, allowing the formation of an individual, social interactions and collective memories. Its spatial structure and location in any urban or rural area is formed to cultivate enduring practices, organize daily life and increase social interactions among different socio- economic groups. Earlier, people used the mosque not only for prayer but also for many other activities such as the mosque functioning as a 'school' where the community learned their religion or as a 'parliament' where the society discussed new laws and affairs of the state. It also served as courthouse where judgments were passed and as community centers where neighbors are able to meet with one another, share their problems and hold their celebrations. In short, it was the hub of public life for the emerging Muslim nation.



Regarding this issue, the present crisis is the seclusion of the female group of the community from the premise of the mosque. This unfortunate phenomenon did not prevail during the time of early Muslim generations. Reported by (Hamid, 1973), during the time of the Prophet (pbuh) and the earlier generation of Muslims, women attended mosques, as did men for all kinds of prayers and activities, but with the development of orthodox notions, women's participation in the mosque were being questioned by the teachers of morality.

2. Problem

The mosque is a place for spiritual growth and development for all Muslims, and should be equally accessible for both genders, but the present-day scenario is far from the ideal picture. According to the opinion of (Hamid, 1973) children, apart from receiving religious education, can even play inside the mosque. As Imam Ghazzali wrote, "For children, there is no harm if they enter the mosque and it is not unlawful for them to play inside the mosque. To remain silent at this scene is not unlawful provided that the mosque is not turned into a playground."

The same welcoming environment should be maintained for the women. As Spahic Omer said, the first generation of Muslims capitalized every opportunity to acquire and disseminate knowledge. Some of them were so devoted to it that they were ready to sacrifice some things of which they cherish. That is why the Prophet's (pbuh) mosque was always bustling with life. Study circles, intellectual discourses, meditation etc. made the mosque virtually never devoid of people. Neither women nor children have been disregarded in this process. Even the Prophet (pbuh) designated time of the week to exclusively teach the women and listen to their own issues in a comfortable manner secure from the intrusion of men. (Omer, 2013)

The statement illustrates the importance of incorporating women in the mosque as well as the children of the society to achieve the holistic manner of serving as a center of community development.

Unfortunately, the present situation is different to the ideal one. Reported by Svetlana Peshkova in an interview of an Uzbek woman who said, "We have a desire to go to the mosques, but in Uzbekistan only men go there. We [women] are not very upset because the Qur'an says that one needs to read within a group and we do just that at our meetings." (Peshkova, 2009). Similar situations have been reported regarding other countries as well where women are not allowed to enter into the mosque or participate in the activities therein. (Nawaz, 2005)

Women were allowed to pray along with men during the times of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Even though, it was a rule for men to go to mosques to pray five times, he was lenient with women stating that their prayers are as good as the ones in mosques even if performed from the home. Women were active in public life and regularly attend the prayer at the mosque including *Fajr* and

'Isha, during the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Children and babies accompanied their mothers to the mosque. The Prophet (pbuh) explicitly stated that men should not prevent the female slaves of Allah from entering the mosque of Allah, even at night. At the same time, the Prophet (pbuh) did not make it a rule that women must pray in the mosque. (Reda, 2015)

Given the Prophet's (pbuh) advice and example there should never be a mosque that tells women to leave when they want to enter and participate in prayers or other activities. It is a woman's right

to choose whether she wishes to participate in mosque activities, and she must have open access to the mosque. In accordance to the argument above, Islam does not forbid women from entering mosques or praying along with men shoulder to shoulder. However, it has become the norm in placing rules on women as such. This research will discuss the presented issue, the understanding of a women's role during the Prophet's (pbuh) time and how the space of prayer for women developed.

The Quran stresses that both men and women have a moral obligation to develop themselves spiritually and morally and to fulfill their social responsibilities. The mosque is, and has always been, the center of moral and spiritual learning and growth. It is a public place for discussing issues of public concern and to respond to challenges facing the community. The Quran is also clear on the equal responsibilities of both men and women for developing the public good but today the physical space and facilities available to women in our mosques are not always sufficient. Women are an extensive and imperative part of the population and can play an important role in the development of the community by participating in social activities. Activities can start from the mosque where women participate in social, educational, political, religious and economical purposes, as development can be rather more constructive with women's contribution in the society. Mosque should act as a primary area of where they can gather, interact and take part in social development along with prayer.

The present scenario does not mirror the ideal role of a women and her relationship with the mosque. Misconceptions on the entering of the mosque and attending activities within the mosque, whether in relation to prayer or other exercises, are scrutinized. The patriarchal driven mass have preferred women to perform prayers within the compounds of the home, cutting access to knowledge and cultivating ignorance. Adding to the problem are the proposed and built designs of current designs of mosques, which do not consider women's needs in the application of spaces. As a result, the allocated space of prayer and activity become desolate.

However, the majority of mosques in Muslim dominant countries do allocate specified halls or small rooms for women on the ground floor, in an enclosed balcony or in an extended space of the building, though seeming like an afterthought. Speakers are used to relay and communicate the Imam's voice when prayers and sermons are in session. The halls are smaller in comparison to the main prayer hall, are not properly equipped with basic facilities, poorly designed and sacrifices comfort and connectivity with the main prayer hall. As a result, the women naturally feel less welcomed and privileged in comparison to their counterpart. In other scenarios, the women are discouraged to enter from the main gate and alternatively forced to take a lesser entrance such as from the side or back of the building. This then gives way to the manifestation of negativity towards Islam in the eyes of the younger generation of Muslims. Non-Muslims will equally have a bad impression of what Islam really is. The idea of Islam marginalizing and isolating women will become prevalent catalyzed from poor spatial planning and consideration. Hence, why the inclusion of women within the mosque boundary is essential and encouraged and should be modeled and inspired after how women are treated during the Prophets (pbuh) time. In addressing

this pressing issue, the research will focus on the participation and activities held in a women's space for prayer during the Prophet's (pbuh) time.

3. Importance of women in Islam

Prof. Abdur Rahman I. Doi said in Islam there is absolutely no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to Allah is concerned, as both are promised the same reward for good conduct and the same punishment for evil conduct. The Quran says:

"And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women." [Noble Quran 2:228] He further stated in his book that the Quran admonishes those men who oppress or ill-treat women:

"O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry you have given them except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike something and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good." [Noble Quran 4:19]

The Prophet (pbuh) stated that women are 'twin halves' of men. The Quran emphasizes the essential unity of men and women in a most beautiful simile:

"They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them." [Noble Quran 2:187] On other occasions, the Prophet (pbuh) said:

"The best property a man can have is a remembering tongue (about Allah), a grateful heart and a believing wife who helps him in his faith."

And again:

"The world, the whole of it, is a commodity and the best of the commodities of the world is a virtuous wife."

Women were considered to have as much value as animals before the beginning of Islam and the Prophet (pbuh) wanted to stop all inflicted cruelties towards women. He told the Muslims: *"Fear Allah in respect of women."*

And:

"The best of you are they who behave best to their wives." And:

"A Muslim must not hate his wife, and if he be displeased with one bad quality in her, let him be pleased with one that is good."

And:

"The more civil and kind a Muslim is to his wife, the more perfect in faith he is."

In his book, he further describes that The Prophet (pbuh) was most emphatic in enjoining upon Muslims to be kind to their womenfolk when he delivered his famous *khutbah* on Mount of Mercy at Arafat in the presence of one hundred and twenty-four thousand of his *Sahabat*, who gathered there for the *Hajj al-Wada* (Farewell Pilgrimage). In it, he ordered those present, and through them all those Muslims who were to come later, to be respectful and kind towards women. He said:

"Fear Allah regarding women. Verily you have married them with the trust of Allah, and made their bodies lawful with the word of Allah. You have got (rights) over them, and they have got (rights) over you in respect of their food and clothing according to your means."

Dr. S. Ansiya Begum, Beena M.N (2010), also elaborately stated the importance of women in her research. She stated that in Islam, there is no sex based distinction in spiritual matters. The paradise and its blessings are meant the same for both men and women. The five tenants of Islam (belief, prayer, fasting, poor due, and the pilgrimage) do not differentiate men and women. To explain further, Islam encourages and asks that education of women be at par with men. The Quran condemned the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide, also women have right to property and justice; she has the right to maintenance, widowed or divorced, the women are eligible for remarriage. As clearly as this is stated within the Quran, it shows the importance and status of a female in the Islamic society.

According to Naveed Ahmad Lone, Hurmat Sumaiya Bint Bashir, Yousfi Karima (2015), the status of women in Islam is clear and unambiguous. The aptitude of Islam as delineated in the basic manuscripts, i.e. The Quran and Hadith bear witness to the fact that women is as important as men and that she is not inferior to him. The Quran and Hadith have discussed that women should be given her natural status and how Islam has empowered women from all aspects of life.

4. The Current Situation for Women's Access and Participation in Mosques

Despite the fact that Islam is a communal religion — a brother and sisterhood — making women feel unwelcome at the mosque is endemic in the Muslim world. Particularly, how many mosque prayer spaces are not child friendly, and when they are, the onus is placed on mothers to take care of the children while the men are free to worship. Naturally, when children are excluded, it means that women are excluded from religious communal worship. Islam does not forbid women from going to the mosque. In fact, it was encouraged by the Prophet (pbuh) when he said:

"Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from going to the mosque..." (Muslim, Abu Dawud).

The mosque is the center of the community of access to Islamic education and is key to fulfilling certain religious rites. The traditions of the Prophet (pbuh) tell us that any place on Earth is suitable

for prayer, any place except anything blatantly inappropriate. It is also in these traditions however, and particularly in the subsequent centuries of predominantly male interpretations of these traditions, that we find support for a whole slew of places for women to pray; behind men, above men in balconies, beneath men in mosque basements, or just not being allowed in the mosque. (Sana Fatima, 2016)

Women who are traveling, working, unable to be at home or another mosque to pray, the scope for them to find a suitable space in mosque for offering prayer is not easy. The majority of mosques all over the world do not have well designed prayer space for women. The prayer spaces are in either the basement or a left over spaces, which have insufficient area, poorly ventilated or derelict. There is a void in almost all the community and multitude of viewpoints, ideas, and energy have been eliminated. More than 50% of the local community is invisible and excluded. It is 50% because it is usually the case that when a mosque excludes women, it automatically excludes children as well.

It was not the face of the *Da'wa* (invitation) of the *Sahaba* (companions) and the *Sunnah* (way of the Prophet (pbuh)) of the Prophet (pbuh) to exclude women, not from the mosque and not from the community as a whole. Much is made of the *Hadith* (narration of the life of the Prophet (pbuh)) in which the Prophet (pbuh) told a woman that prayer in her home is better than prayer in the mosque. Religious teacher Ustaz Abdullah Adhami taught this *Hadith* in line with common sense and a traditional point of view where he discusses misinterpretations made of this *Hadith* to justify banning women from mosques. While the Prophet (pbuh) told the woman that the prayer in her home is better for her, he did not forbid her from coming to the mosque at all. In fact, we know that the contrary is true - that he forbade men from preventing women to go to the Masjid, as seen in the numerous *Hadith*. (Abdul Malik Mujahid, 2016)

In Muslim countries, mosques that designate areas for women's prayer rarely allow women to line up directly behind men in the same hall, as was the practice in the Prophet's (pbuh) Mosque during his lifetime. In many Arab countries, it is common to separate men's prayer place from women's, especially in small mosques. The distance between the two prayer areas varies from one mosque to another. The majority of mosques in Muslim countries contain special halls or small rooms for women in the basement, in the ground floor, in a closed balcony, or in a small building attached to the mosque. Speakers are used to communicate the Imam's voice in prayer. The problem in confining women to such halls is manifold. First, these halls are much smaller than the main prayer hall, usually overcrowded, especially during the Friday Prayers and other occasions the men's prayer areas and mosque halls are far from full. Women outnumber men in public occasions, especially in countries with Muslim minorities. Second, these halls are not properly equipped and furnished as men's halls are, in terms of carpets, lights and sound devices. Hence, women feel less welcomed and less privileged than men in mosques do. Third, the places assigned for children in these mosques are attached only to women halls, which cause much distraction for them. Fourth, women are not allowed to enter mosques through their main gates; rather, they would alternatively use narrow side entrances or secondary entrances through the back of the mosque. Due to the issues discussed, the design of the mosques leads to an impression from non-Muslims and the younger generation of Muslims that Islam marginalizes and isolates women within the religion as evident as the separation of women within the mosque itself. Noticeably the incommodious, poorly

furnished and noisy prayer halls assigned to women reinforces the sentiments that Islam does not approve of a woman's presence in a place of prayer and that a man in Islam do not share the burden of caring for the child and is the religion that upholds patriarchy as is claimed by some non- Muslims. (Jasser Auda, 2016)

According to Hind Makki (2012), in most Western Muslim communities today, women are not prevented from offering their prayers in mosques. They are even encouraged to attend, especially during Friday prayers and the nightly *Taraweeh* prayers that Sunni Muslims offer during the holy month of *Ramadan*. However, it often seems that the Prophetic tradition invoked in the story above is the only safety net women have. Too many mosques have inadequate spaces for female congregants; others have the space, but keep the doors locked. Still others have adequate spaces for women to pray, but assume the women's prayer hall as the space to be kept aside for late- arriving men to use, as according to the Islamic belief, God forbade the men to pray alongside with the women and children.

Yet, poorly designed spaces for women in Mosque space are continuously built. In every situation, believers use their conscience by giving importance to primarily, a guest's provision to pray rather than being judgmental over gender. For example, if the men's prayer hall becomes full and space remains in the women's, the remaining empty space should be utilized to ensure the arriving congregation a space of prayer, rather than be turned away from the Mosque and prevented from praying altogether - ("...who bar people from the places of worship..." {2:114}) - and understanding that prayer and serving Allah should be prioritized, rather than being prejudiced over gender. As the Quran, further states;

"It is not suitable that believers being friends and protectors of one another (9:71) ignore the need of the other but rather should be courteous in ensuring they have the place to perform prayer."

"Have you considered the one who prevents our servant from praying? Have you considered whether he is truly guided or not? Or commands (people) to true righteousness?" (Qur'an 96:9-12)

Many Muslim women are accustomed to finding themselves in a situation where it is prayer time, but the Mosque in front of them does not welcome female visitors. They are consistently in uncertainty and left wondering whether they should inquire, or skip prayer altogether. It can even be very daunting approaching a male worshipper for assistance, as they can be inhospitable. (Hasan. M. and S. Sayeed, 2014)

Islamic Social Services Associations and Women in Islam, Inc. have also discussed about the results of the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) 2001 Report from the Mosque Study Project (MSP) and their own qualitative interviews with many women on the status of women's prayer space in mosque. The MSP shows a general picture of practices across mosques. The interviews capture women's experiences of mosque practices.

5. Mosque Study Project Results

The MSP, co-sponsored by the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR), Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), 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 those who regularly participate in mosques are men. The MSP showed that on average, across most mosques, 75% of regular participants are male. Although 54% of mosques reported regular activities for women, a sizeable majority reported only occasional activity (27%) and 19% said they did not offer any programs for women. While 50% of mosques report that women have served at one time or

another on their governing or executive boards, a sizeable proportion of mosques still prevent women from serving on their executive boards (31%). Nineteen percent said they allowed women to serve, but did not have any women actually serving on a board 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 make prayers behind a partition or in another room, but that practice was adopted by 66% of mosques in 2000. Most regular participants are 36 years or older (53%).

6. 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 community institutions. Many women believe that cultural biases and mindsets, rather than principles of Islam, are at the root of how they are treated at the mosque and at community centers. Of course, women recognize that some mosque leaders may be well meaning, but are unable to harness the financial resources that are 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.

7. Experiences and Perceptions Related to Access

Since education in Islam is not only a right, but also a duty of all Muslims, women, too, are eager for religious knowledge, and enjoy learning from imams, scholars and other speakers. However, some felt their education was impeded when they were unable to attend the mosque, hear or see the speakers, or they were not given an opportunity to ask questions. Some reported they were discouraged from and even rebuked for entering the mosque library. Qualified women scholars and other professional and activist women are not invited to speak; women feel that they, their

children, and indeed their communities, would benefit tremendously from contact with such role models who are maintaining their *deen* as well as advancing in their fields.

8. Experiences and Perceptions about Mosque Governance and Mosque Participation

According to the Islamic Social Services Associations and Women in Islam, Inc., 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 the treatment they encounter at their community mosque. For example, women who have tried to approach mosque leadership have sometimes found them dismissive of women's 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 leadership could do more to include women in mosque consultation processes or meetings. They believed that it was cultural gender biases that limited their religious 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 support. Women felt that standards of modest dress are not applied consistently for men and boys as they are for women. Lastly, within the North American context, women perceive that the *khutba* (Friday sermon) must become more sensitive to the language and culture of North America and are not balanced in their content. Gender issues, when addressed in the *khutba*, must be discussed in ways that highlight the differences between culture and religion and recognize the diversity of Muslim women's experiences.

9. Suggestions for Overcoming the Problem and to Encourage Women to Participate in Mosque and Other Social Activities

A mosque that is open to women's access and participation is a mosque that welcomes present and future generations of Muslims. As noted in the Quran,

“And as for the believers, both men and women they are helping friends (Awlia) of each other, they enjoin the doing of good and just and forbid what is evil and unjust” (9: 71).

According to Yasmine Hafiz (2013), if the mosque space is truly very small, there are very easy ways to make it available to women who need to pray there, while opening up the entire space for the men when no women are present. Many home improvement and home decorating stores sell decorative screens (like the rice paper ones seen in Japan), for a relatively low price. It folds up and are easy to store when not in use. Office supply stores sell cubicle walls with wheels. It also

folds up for easy storage. If the mosque does not have enough budget for these items, then taking up a special collection and install an extended curtain rod across the intended space for women and put up floor length curtains. Tables or chairs can be used to mark the space reserved for women as mosques have been doing this for hundreds of years and that is enough to designate a space behind the men as women's space, without barriers or walls. However, it should also be kept in mind that some women and men might not be comfortable with this arrangement, since there are women who may need to breastfeed an infant or adjust their coverings in the course of a *Juma'ah khutba*.

If there is larger amount of space in the mosque, then the space should be reserved for the women and should be adequate. The floor should be clean. It must be heated in the winter and has air in the summer. The roof should not leak when it rains. And there should be copies of the Quran are on hand of women to read. The women's bathroom must have hooks for their hijabs (when they are making *wudhu*), paper towels for them to dry with, slippers to wear, and soap to wash with. The bathroom must be clean. Where there are Muslim women, there are bound to be Muslim children and the smallest of those children will need to have their diapers changed. Ensuring that women are included in the mosque means ensuring that the entire community has access to the teachings of Islam. It shows non-Muslims that Islam does not stand for the exclusion of women and children, that Islam is not a "man's religion." It shows non-Muslims that a woman can be modest, can be religious and still participate in community life. It shows the next generation of Muslims that cultural ideas about excluding women and keeping them in the home are not from Islam and following the teachings and example of the Prophet (pbuh). The understanding of pre- Islamic cultural idea of what a 'women's place' is defined as is slowly unraveling with the new dynamics of women within the Islamic society. The misconceptions and misunderstandings of the *Deen* (religion) is also changing with further studies of what Islam really stands for in terms of the role of women. The only way that we can be sure that the next generation understands Islam as it was truly taught by the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) is to be sure that women and children are fully included in the mosque. (Abdul Malik Mujahid, 2016)

According to the Islamic Social Services Associations and Women In Islam Inc., below are some suggestions for how to modify physical access, participation, and mosque governance. Some of these changes may be harder to achieve than others, depending on community's resources, but nonetheless important. In addition, each mosque should conduct a systematic inventory of its current practices in terms of women's access to mosque space, program planning and participation, and mosque governance and management.

10. Conclusion

Due to the above limitations in current mosque practices, many women go to the mosque with some trepidation, and some go only occasionally or do not attend at all. One of the unfortunate consequences is that women and their children are losing the knowledge about *adab al mosque* or rules of attending the mosque and congregational prayers. In addition, an entire generation of

women and children are moving away from the mosque and finding other avenues for their intellect and training. Mosque leaders who do not attend to women's inquiry and give 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.

These experiences are not in accordance with Islam. The practice of our beloved Prophet (pbuh) was to encourage active learning and questions by all members of the community. In addition, a mosque and other facilities such as libraries, belong to the community, and therefore must be accessible to all community members, including women.

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

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