



Empowering Muslim Women in Sacred Spaces: Reviving the Prophet's Forgotten Sunnah

A Synopsis of the February 6, 2016 Event Produced
by CAIR-Philadelphia at Villanova University



ISNA Statement on the Inclusion of Women in Mosques

September 2015 statement endorsed by Fiqh Council of North America and numerous well-recognized Muslim scholars called upon masjids to ensure that:

- ◆ women are welcomed as an integral part of masjids and encouraged to attend,
- ◆ women have a prayer space in the main musalla which is behind the lines of men but not behind a full barrier that disconnects women from the main musalla and prevents them from seeing the imam; and
- ◆ women actively participate in the decision-making process of the masjid, best realized by having women on the governing bodies of masjids.



Event Summary

- ◆ Panel presentation by experts on women in American mosques and on the Prophetic tradition regarding women in the mosque
- ◆ Q&A by 100 attendees representing the diversity of American Muslims, including
 - ◆ immigrant communities
 - ◆ post-immigrant generations
 - ◆ African American communities
 - ◆ converts of European descent
 - ◆ students
- ◆ Facilitated small group discussions to develop recommendations for the empowerment of women in mosques



Panel of Speakers

- ◆ **Donna Auston**, doctoral candidate, Rutgers University. Research interests include race, gender, and Islam in America. Has written and lectured on African American Muslims. Coverage from NBC News and The Huffington Post. Editorials in Anthropology Now, Religion News Service, and The Washington Post.
- ◆ **Dr. Sarah Sayeed** Executive Director, Women in Islam, Inc., a social justice and human rights volunteer organization dedicated to the empowerment of women through knowledge and practice of Islam.

Co-author of booklet, “Women-Friendly Mosques and Community Centers: Reclaiming Our Heritage, and a survey report Women and the American Mosque.” B.A. Sociology and Near East Studies from Princeton University, M.A. and Ph.D. Communication from University of Pennsylvania.



Panel of Speakers (continued)

- ◆ **Dr. Jonathan Brown**, Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization, Georgetown University; Director, Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding.

Most recent book, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenges and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (Oneworld, 2014), named one of the top books on religion in 2014 by the Independent.

- ◆ **Dr. Mustafa Ahmad**, Director, Foundation for Islamic Education in Villanova, PA. Well-published on Islamic jurisprudence and verification of hadith. Lecturer on Islamic thought and Islam and modern science.
- ◆ **Iman Sultan**, Student Activist, Temple University (TU) B.A. pending Journalism and Political Science. President of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP).



Key Findings

- ◆ There is support in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (s) for the active participation and leadership of women in the mosque.
- ◆ There is clear authority which prohibits discouraging women from mosque attendance.
- ◆ Lack of women's leadership and accommodation results in the alienation of children from area mosques.



Key Findings

- ◆ Women are generally discouraged and sometimes prohibited from leadership roles and active participation in area mosques.
 - ◆ Notable exceptions include congregations associated with W. Deen Mohammed and a mosque in Delaware started by mothers as a stand-alone Islamic school.
- ◆ Women frequently have inadequate, inaccessible and poorly maintained entrances, restrooms, and prayer spaces in area mosques.



Recommendations on Women's Empowerment

How do we bring more women into mosque life, including prayer space, leadership positions, and programming?

1. Leadership

- ✦ Allocate board positions for women
- ✦ Elect, rather than appoint, board
- ✦ Create a women's advisory board to articulate women's interests, issues, and needs
- ✦ Provide non-profit leadership training to board and imam
- ✦ Provide training on gender equity to board and imam
- ✦ Employ best practices from model mosques (Masjidullah, Delaware Mosque run by women)
- ✦ Set guidelines for proper adab in the mosque including respect for women's contributions and voices



Recommendations on Women's Empowerment

How do we bring women into mosque life, including prayer space, leadership positions, and programming?

2. Space

- ✦ Create space to pray in the main musalla without a barrier, and a separate space for those who prefer it
- ✦ Consider side-by-side prayer spaces with a short barrier or children's space in between
- ✦ Create spaces for women to organize after prayer
- ✦ Provide child care during programming and meetings
- ✦ Maintain women's spaces and entrances, provide safe, well-lit front entrances for women
- ✦ Switch men's and women's entrance and prayer space to demonstrate the problems and build understanding
- ✦ Provide appropriate women's wudhu spaces, adequate restrooms for women with children
- ✦ Provide comfortable spaces for nursing mothers and women's hygiene products in restrooms



Recommendations on Women's Empowerment

How do we bring women into mosque life, including prayer space, leadership positions, and programming?

3. Programming

- ✦ Offer girls' and women's halaqas and study circles
- ✦ Women should get opportunity to study/discuss/ask questions from/with Imam
- ✦ Create committee of women to welcome female newcomers and converts
- ✦ Provide for congregants' basic human needs when necessary: clothing, food, and social services
- ✦ Provide ESL classes
- ✦ Value and make reference to Muslim women scholars and leadership in khutbahs and programming
- ✦ Create a women's mentorship program for newcomers, converts, or those who would like more connection
- ✦ Focus on intention; provide kind and appropriate opportunities to learn; avoid alienating or excluding others
- ✦ Hold service days and cultural days



Recommendations on Youth Engagement

How can we increase the participation of families and youth in mosque life?

1. Leadership

- ✦ Create a youth advisory position on the board and a youth advisory committee to the board
- ✦ Actively seek youth input on critical issues
- ✦ Create innovative youth leadership opportunities i.e. invite young professionals to share experiences, invite youth to create charitable programs (emulate Amana Foundation model)
- ✦ Create youth mentorship programs to develop community leaders
- ✦ Encourage youth to take turns shadowing the imam to learn to lead prayer, do the adhan, and lead dhikr (boys and girls)



Recommendations on Youth Engagement

How can we increase the participation of families and youth in mosque life?

2. Space

- ✦ Make space for young people to participate in arts, sports, and cultural activities
- ✦ Keep the mosque open and clean
- ✦ Create space where children can play, interact, and be children
- ✦ Create accessible restrooms and wudhu areas for children



Recommendations on Youth Engagement

How can we increase the participation of families and youth in mosque life?

3. Programming

- ✦ Create youth halaqas and book groups
- ✦ Have an open forum to address youth needs or interests once a month
- ✦ Have a youth khutbah suggestion box
- ✦ Employ a youth coordinator to help guide youth efforts



Next Steps

In recognition of the central position of the mosque in meeting the spiritual and social needs of American Muslims, Coordinators and Participants urge area Muslim Leaders to:

- ◆ discuss these recommendations to mosque boards, community leaders, and community members,
- ◆ advocate for the implementation of recommendations,
- ◆ record and share your activities to empower women in the mosque, and
- ◆ continue the discussion on how our mosques can better serve women and youth.