



ISNA Statement on the Inclusion of Women in Masjids

In the name of Allah Most Compassionate Most Merciful

We, the undersigned Muslim scholars, leaders, organizations and concerned Muslims, voice our strong commitment to uphold and realize the Prophetic ideal of masjids being open and inclusive of women. Striving to realize the Prophetic model, we call upon all masjids to ensure that (1) women are welcomed as an integral part of masjids and encouraged to attend, (2) 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 (3) women actively participate in the decision-making process of the masjid, best realized by having women on the governing bodies of masjids.

The defining principle underlying this call is Allah’s description of the ideal relationship of men and women in the Muslim community:

The believing men and the believing women are *awliya’* (supporters, helpers, protectors, patrons) of one another: they (both) enjoin what is known to be good and forbid what is known to be bad; they establish salah and pay zakah; and they obey Allah and His Messenger. These are the ones on whom Allah will bestow mercy—indeed Allah is exalted in power, wise (9:71).

This verse clearly sets the general principle that believing men and women support one another in the great mission of Islam—striving for good, opposing evil, and establishing the pillars of salah and zakah. Thus Muslim men and women are partners in establishing the faithful Muslim community—both are needed, both are essential. There are also many other Qur’anic verses (e.g. 9:18, 7:31) which establish the general principle that it is the believing Muslims—men and women—who maintain and frequent the masjids.[1]

1. Masjids Should be Welcoming to Women

The active presence of women in the masjid during the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is clearly evidenced in numerous hadith. Hadith confirm that in the Prophet’s masjid women prayed salah regularly,[2] attended Jum’ah Prayer,[3] made optional prayer (*nawafil*),[4] did *i’tikaf* in the masjid during Ramadan,[5] and met in the masjid.[6] The Prophet ﷺ demonstrated the welcoming nature of his masjid, for example, by shortening prayers when children started crying.[7] To help facilitate a healthy environment and avoid *fitnah* (temptation), the Messenger of Allah ﷺ instructed both men and women to dress properly, lower their gaze and guard their modesty. Women received an additional instruction not to wear perfume when attending the masjid.[8]

The general guideline was set by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ when he ordered that women be allowed to freely attend the masjid: “If the wife of anyone of you asks permission to attend the masjid, he should not prevent her.”[9] When Ibn Umar’s son, Bilal, responded to this hadith by saying “We will prevent them,” Ibn Umar harshly reprimanded his son for the audacity of opposing the explicit instruction of the Prophet ﷺ .[10]

Thus we call on all our masjids to be welcoming to women—such that their experience at the masjid be uplifting and not demeaning. To realize the ideal of being welcoming to women, masjids should (a) ensure that women’s accommodations are comfortable, clean and well-lit; (b) support and facilitate women’s activities and groups; and

(c) proclaim clearly on the minbar and by other means that women are an integral part of the masjid.

The hadith that “the best prayer of a woman is in her house,”[11] cannot be taken as a general guideline, because the great female companions, including the Prophet’s wives, prayed in the Prophet’s masjid. If the hadith was supposed to apply to all women, the wives of the Prophet and the female companions would not have gone to the masjid. The best understanding of this hadith, therefore, is that an allowance exists for some women to pray at home depending on their circumstances (such as Umm Humaid who was instructed to pray in her home)[12], but it cannot be interpreted as a ruling for all women at all times.

In the same vein, Sayyidah Aishah’s remarks that “had the Prophet known what women were innovating, he would have forbidden them from attending the masjid,”[13] cannot be taken as a general guideline, altering the Prophet’s practice of including women in the masjid, because speculation of what the Prophet might have intended cannot be used as a proof.[14] Sayyidah Aishah in fact did not explicitly say, women should be prevented from attending the masjid, and it is known that the Rightly-Guided Caliphs did not prevent women, and that women continued to attend the masjid during the time of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs. This hadith in fact confirms the general principle that women are allowed to attend the masjid as long as they fulfill the instructions of dressing properly and avoiding perfume.

The underlying concern in these hadith and the opinion of many scholars is the avoidance of *fitnah* (temptation). However, in the American context, where society in many cases pulls Muslims away from Islam and where women and men have many choices of where to go and how to spend their time, the best choice to avoid *fitnah* for everyone is to spend more time in the masjid where they will hopefully become better Muslims and lend a hand to growing the Muslim community. When masjids provide women full access to prayers, activities and the decision-making process, the entire community will ultimately benefit.

2. Women Should Have Prayer Space in the Main *Musalla* without Barriers

The masjid of Prophet Muhammad and the masjids during the time of the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs did not have a barrier separating men and women. Men prayed in the front lines, children in the middle, and women behind the children. All the schools of Islamic Law, Sunni and Shi’ah, agree on this point. So why should we adopt any other ideal? When women are in the main *musalla*, they are naturally more attentive, more engaged and thus better able to fulfill their function as *awliya*’—supporters and contributors to establishing the Muslim community.

Some Muslims argue that the barrier is necessary to guard against *fitnah* (temptation). However the Prophet never stated that a women’s presence in the mosque in and of itself is a source of *fitnah*. The instruction to men to avoid *fitna* is to lower their gaze; not to put a physical barrier that blocks women from the main *musalla*. The benefit in the rule of having women engaged in the masjid outweighed some hypothetical possibility of *fitnah*.

We call upon masjids to ensure that women have access to the main *musalla* to perform salah, listen to the Jum’ah khutbah or attend and participate in lectures or discussions. This should be in addition to any separate area that currently exists for women. Recognizing that the architecture of some masjids may make it difficult to find a barrier-free space for women in the main *musalla*, especially for Jum’ah, masjids still have the duty to find a solution to realize the sunnah of including women in the main *musalla*.

3. Women Should Participate in the Masjid Decision-Making Process

Allah gave the general command to the Prophet and the Muslims to conduct their affairs by shura, and necessarily

shura includes women.[15] Being partners in establishing Islam, the voice of women must be present in the deliberations of the Muslim community. The Prophet did not have a formal shura process, but he did set the example of consulting with all segments of the Muslim community, including women. Masjids in North America, however, do have formal decision-making mechanisms, and it is, therefore, incumbent that women participate in all processes of formal shura, including serving on the governing bodies of masjids. Also from an American legal standpoint and a best practice perspective, masjid boards should be representative and gender inclusive. In addition masjids are encouraged to create positions of official authority and influence for women, whereby the community at large can benefit from their talents, expertise, moral example and experience.

We call upon all Muslims—in particular masjids—to sign this statement and then work to make our masjids more inclusive of women. Please sign onto this Statement by going to: <http://www.isna.net/isna-statement.html>

This statement was initially prepared by ISNA’s Task Force for Women-Friendly Masjids (a part of ISNA’s Masjid Development Committee), and then modified with the input of the Fiqh Council of North America and many other Islamic scholars.

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Footnotes

[1] 9:18 “The masjids of Allah are frequented and maintained by such as believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish salah and pay zakah, and fear none but Allah.” 7:31 “O Children of Adam wear your beautiful apparel at every masjid.”

[2] Al-Bukhari and Muslim. “Allow the women to attend the masjid at night.” Ibn Hajar in *Fath al-Bari* commented: “His statement at night is an indication that they did not prevent them during the daytime” (2:67). Imam Ali stated that women used to pray with the Prophet, and they used to be told not to lift their heads until after the men (*Wasa'il al-Shiah*, vol. 8, p. 343, hadith 10855).

For a Shia reference for the hadith about the Prophet shortening his prayer when he heard a child crying: *Wasa'il al-Shiah*, vol. 8, p. 421, hadith 11068). The Shia hadith the Prophet shortened the prayer "... so his mother can go to him.”

[3] Muslim. “Umm Hisham said that ‘I learned Surah Qaf only from the tongue of the Messenger of Allah (saws) who recited it every Jum’ah from the minbar when he addressed the people.”

[4] Al-Bukhari and Muslim. “Anas said, the Messenger of Allah (saws) entered the masjid and there was a rope tied to two columns. He said, ‘What is this?’ They said, ‘It belongs to Zainab. She offers salah and when she feels tired or weary, she holds on to it...”

[5] Al-Bukhari and Muslim. “Hafsah asked permission of Aishah to pitch a tent for her [for *i'tikaf*] and she allowed her and she pitched her tent. When Zainab bint Jahsh saw it, she pitched another tent...”

[6] Al-Tirmidhi who said the hadith is *hasan*. “Asma bint Yazid narrated that the Messenger of Allah (saws) passed through the masjid one day, and a group of women were sitting, and he waved his hand giving salam.”

[7] Al-Bukhari and Muslim. “Anas narrated ‘I never offered salah behind any Imam with a more brief yet complete salah than the Prophet. And if he heard the crying of a child he used to shorten the prayer so his mother would not be tried.” A similar hadith in *Wasa'il al-Shiah*, vol. 8, p. 421, hadith 11068 states that the the Prophet shortened his prayer when he heard a child crying so his mother can go to him.

[8] Muslim. “Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from the masjids of Allah, but they should not go out perfumed.”

[9] Al-Bukhari and Muslim.

[10] Muslim.

[11] Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi and Ahmad.

[12] Ahmad and Ibn Khuzaimah. “Umm Humaid, the wife of Abu Humaid as-Sa'idi, came to the Prophet (saws) and said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, indeed, I love making salah with you.’ He said, ‘I know that you love making salah with me, but making salah in your bedroom is better than making salah in your living room; and making salah in your living room is better for you than making salah in your courtyard; and making salah in your courtyard is better for you than making salah in your people’s masjid; and making salah in your people’s masjid is better for you than making salah in my masjid.’ So she ordered that a masjid be build for her in the furthers and darkest part of her room. And she prayed in it until she met Allah.”

[13] Al-Bukhari and Muslim.

[14] Al-Shawkani, *Nail al-Awtar*, “She [Aishah] said this [report] based on speculation when she said, ‘had he seen he would prevent women’ but he did not see and did not prevent [women from the masjid]. Her speculation is not a proof (hujjah) [for changing the ruling].” v. 3, p. 150. See also Ibn Hazm’s arguments in his *Al-Mahalla*, 2:167-176.

[15] 3:159 “Do shura with them in regards to affairs.” 42:38 “Their affairs are conducted by shura amongst themselves.”