



Acknowledgements

Jazakum Allahu Khairan

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The purpose of this booklet is to initiate dialogue, educate our communities and to promote healing. May Allah accept our collective and individual efforts and grant success to this project through the creation of many more women friendly masjid and community centers (Ameen).

*Note: It was important for Islamic Social Services Associations Inc, and Women In Islam Inc to seek guidance and feedback from numerous scholars and individuals. Errors that remain are the sole responsibility of the editors and may Allah swt forgive their shortcomings.



A Call to Action for Masjid Leaders

Muslims are answerable to *Allah* in every sphere of their life, including their personal and public relations. Human relations and gender relations in Islam are an amanah, a sacred trust that we must guard and make manifest in our interpersonal interactions and institutional arrangements. Islam demands that women and men be spiritual equals. It defines relations between women and men as mutually complementary, and indeed, this mutuality is itself a sign of the Divine (Qur'an, 30:21). Both women and men have been entrusted with the charge of preserving the social order and establishing a just and moral society. Both have been given the guidance to inspire goodness in each other, and thereby, the goodness in all of society.

The respect, compassion, and mutuality that *Allah* has placed between women and men must be visible in not only our family life, but also in how Muslims conduct public transactions. Women and men, girls and boys should have equal access to and must feel equally welcome to participate in schools, the *masjid*, and other civic and cultural institutions.

An important challenge facing Muslims today is the need to revitalize the *masjid* as a center of the community. In the time of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, the *masjid* was a place where all were welcome, all participated, and all contributed regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity and status. The *masjid* was a central place of worship, education, political discussions, and social interactions. In short, it was the place where community life happened.

Living in a non-Muslim society and struggling to maintain our Muslim identity and values and to further instill them in our children requires spiritual and communal support. Muslim women are therefore seeking a dignified place in their *masjid* – a place where their spirits are nurtured, their intellect satisfied and their skills and contributions are appreciated and utilized. To their credit, some mosques in North America are becoming more inclusive. By implementing changes such as inclusion of women in main prayer halls, in managerial positions, and on boards, these mosques have created an impetus and mechanism for community transformation.

However, according to data from the national survey of mosques conducted by CAIR (discussed below), the trend towards inclusion is not as widespread as the standard demanded by Islam. There are confirmed reports that many mosques relegate women to small, dingy, secluded, airless and segregated quarters with their children. Some mosques in Canada and the United States actually prevent women from entering. There are also some Islamic centers and mosques that discriminate against women by denying them the rights of membership, voting, or holding office.

These practices are unjust and degrading, and they contradict the teachings of our Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. It is urgent that they are corrected. Preventing women from full participation in the *masjid* is a disservice to the institution and the community. First, the capacity and growth of the *masjid* is stunted when the full human potential of all its members, women, men, youth, cannot be harnessed. Women who encounter discrimination when they enter the *masjid* do not find it a place of solace and spiritual renewal, and they are despondent about *masjid* leadership. When their efforts to contribute their talents to community development through their *masjid* are circumvented, they work independently, which, over the long term, may reinforce divisions between leaders and communities.

The alienation that women feel also has profound consequences for younger generations of the *ummah*. When children are taught that Islam treats both men and women as spiritual equals, and that Islam has accorded women rights that are unprecedented, and then observe that the practice contradicts the principles, their willingness to adhere to the faith is challenged. Without early and continued exposure to the *masjid* in their early and formative years, children, both boys and girls, are less able to integrate into the *masjid* as they become older. The secondary inclusion of women will surely keep the *masjid* at the margins of community life.

Muslim women are working to be fully included in the *masjid*, at every level. They want to participate in governance as well as the development of educational programs and other activities that benefit the community. They are calling for their input and ideas to be respected and seriously and fairly considered. The *masjid* should also welcome and encourage non-Muslim women to enter, inquire, and learn from Muslim women. In the spirit of upholding what is just and forbidding what is wrong, Islamic Social Services Association, Inc. of Canada, Islamic Social Services Association, Inc.-U.S.A. and Women In Islam, Inc., USA urgently call upon Muslim leaders to address these issues in their communities.

Now is the time for community leaders to seize the opportunity to create vibrant mosques and Islamic centers that honor the contributions of both women and men. Leaders must promote and demand a higher level of competence in the serving of all functions associated with running professional Islamic institutions, which must include the full participation of women. This is so that no one in the constituents that our institutions serve – especially our women and youth – will ever have to find themselves asking the question: “what are we fighting to be a part of anyway?” By transforming women’s access and participation in the *masjid*, we will show by example the liberation and gender harmony that Islam holds for all.

Below we discuss the inclusion of women from a religious and social point of view. We highlight Islamic sources and pronouncements on women’s access to the *masjid*, and discuss how current practices of Muslims are lacking. We then offer some practical suggestions to remedy the problems of women’s access, participation, and governance.

Women and the Masjid in Qur'an and Hadith



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 established the spiritual and moral equality of men and women in explicit and unequivocal terms:

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

Both men and women, the Qur'an stresses, have the obligation to develop themselves morally and spiritually, 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 concern to Muslims, and to respond to challenges facing the Muslim community. The Qur'an is also clear on the equal responsibility of both men and women for developing 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 the common 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 outline strategies to promote public good.

During the formative years of Islam, women participated in public services, and shared the *Masjid* of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and shared the main space with men. 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. For example, when the second Caliph Umar bin al-Khatab 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.

The argument against women sharing the main prayer hall is based on the principle of guarding against corruption (*dar' al-mafasid*). The principle states that “whatever leads to haram is haram.” The principle, though not widely accepted by Islamic jurists, has been extensively used to limit Muslim actions that are otherwise lawful under shari’ah. It was invoked by some jurists to reject the use of radio, TV, the press, and other inventions because these have also been used to promote corrupt practices. Indeed many good practices and devices could be declared unlawful, including the use of internet and democratic governments.

Preventing women from exercising established rights, or undertake moral duties and social obligations, cannot be justified on the basis of “guarding against corruption.” The prevention of corruption argument was used at an early stage, but was rejected by eminent Muslim scholars. Abdullah bin Umar rejected this same argument against preventing women from going to the *masjid* at night to guard against potential corruption:

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

Women were active in public life and regularly attended the prayer at the *masjid* at all times, including Fajr and 'Isha, during the time of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.¹ Children and babies accompanied their mothers to the *masjid*.² The Prophet, peace be upon him, explicitly stated that men should not prevent the female slaves of *Allah* from entering the *masjid* of *Allah*³, even at night⁴. At the same time, the Prophet, peace be upon him, did not make it a rule that women must pray in the *masjid*. Therefore, there are hadith examples where he encouraged some women, depending upon their needs and inclinations, to perform their prayer at home⁵.

Given the Prophet's advice and example, peace be upon him, there should never be a *masjid* 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 *masjid* activities, and she must have open access to the *masjid*.

In addition, Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, practiced an adab or etiquette for women attending the *masjid*. His guidelines about where women stand relative to men during prayer (in rows behind) indicate that his practice was for women and men to pray in the same room. Out of his compassion for women and children, the Prophet, peace be upon him, would shorten his prayer when he heard a child crying. After the compulsory prayers, he would remain seated for a few moments along with the men in congregation, to allow women to exit the *masjid* first⁶. Also, he asked women to attend the *masjid* without wearing perfume⁷. In addition, recognizing that some subjects were more easily discussed in separate gatherings, he, peace be upon him, occasionally taught women separately from men⁸. Muslims should rush to emulate his flexibility, openness, and respect for women's presence in the *masjid*.

¹ This hadith is also agreed upon. Some references include, but are not limited to Bukhari, 899, 900; 81:826, 83:831; Muslim, p. 327; Ibn Hanbal 2: 167, 49, 98, 143, 145; Abu Dawud: 568; al Tirmidhi: 570.

² This hadith is also agreed upon. Some references include, but are not limited to, Muslim, p. 343; Ibn Majah #989.

³ This hadith is agreed upon. It is narrated by both Imams Bukhari and Muslim. See for an example, Muslim, #442.

⁴ This hadith is also agreed upon. See for an example, Bukhari, 80:824 and 84:832.

⁵ Ibn Hanbal 2: 76-7; 2: 297.

⁶ Bukhari (81: 826, 83: 831).

⁷ This hadith is agreed upon. See for an example, Ibn Hanbal, 2:438, 2: 475

⁸ This hadith is agreed upon. See for an example, Bukhari (36:101).



The Current Situation for Women's Access and Participation

There is an urgent need for action, across the majority of communities in North America. Below, we discuss results of the CAIR 2001 Report from the Mosque Study Project (MSP) and our own qualitative interviews with many women. The MSP shows a general picture of practices across mosques. The interviews capture women's experiences of *masjid* practices.

Masjid 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%).

Women's Experiences and Perceptions of Masjid 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 *masjid* 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 *masjid* and at community centers.

Of course, women recognize that some *masjid* 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 *masjid* practices that affect women in particular and the community in general.

In presenting the concerns we have heard, we are motivated by deep concern for community cohesion and development of future generations of Muslims. We are also aware that unfortunately these experiences are not isolated incidences but mainstream practices in our communities. Some of the key issues are noted below, with a hope that open discussions and a commitment to change will allow communities to heal and thrive over the long term.

Experiences and Perceptions Related to Access

- Since education in Islam is not only a right but 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 *masjid*, hear or see the speakers, or they were not given an opportunity to ask questions. Some reported that they were discouraged from and even rebuked for entering the *masjid* library!
- A younger generation of women and men who have professional training and are yearning to contribute these talents to improve *masjid* programs and governance felt that they are not encouraged or facilitated to do so, and at times actively discouraged or obstructed.

- 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.

- Women who may be interested in exploring Islam for conversion, or recent converts/reverts feel inhibited to enter the *masjid* and ask questions; without women's regular participation in *masjid* activities, recent reverts/converts have a more difficult time identifying sisters who may be able to befriend them and support their transition into the *deen*.

- Some reported problems with entryways and exits. Surprisingly, in some mosques, women are told to use fire exits rather than to enter with men through the front door. Not only does this practice endanger their safety and the safety of their children, but it is also discriminatory.

Experiences and Perceptions about Masjid Governance and Masjid Participation

- Although more women participate in *masjid* activities, some also simultaneously felt that the dignity and honor given them by Islam is not reflected in the treatment they encounter at their community *masjid*. For example, women who have tried to approach *masjid* leadership have sometimes found them dismissive of women's ideas and concerns. When women are invited to take managerial roles in *masjid* 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 can do more to include women in *masjid* 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 *masjid* 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 *masjid* and find it harder to maintain contact and integrate with the wider community. These women have a right to special community buffering and support.

- Women felt that standards of modest dress are not applied consistently for men and boys as they are for women.

- Lastly, 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.

Because of the above limitations in current *masjid* practices, many women go to the *masjid* 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 masjid* or rules of attending the *masjid* and congregational prayers. In addition, an entire generation of women (and children) is moving away from the *masjid* and finding other avenues for their intellect and training. *Masjid* leaders who do not attend to women's 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.

Surely these experiences are not in accordance with Islam. The practice of our beloved Prophet, peace be upon him, was to encourage active learning and questions by all members of the community. In addition, a *masjid* and other facilities, such as libraries, belong to the community, and therefore must be accessible to all community members, including women and the physically challenged among us.

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



What You Can Do

Women in North America seek a meaningful role in Muslim community life. As Muslims of North America are increasingly under attack and youth are subject to growing pressures to conform, women's participation in the *masjid* is a critical step to empower our communities. A *masjid* that is open to women's access and participation is a *masjid* that welcomes present and future generations of Muslims. As noted in the Qur'an,

"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).

Your decisions to welcome and improve women's participation and engagement in your masjid will positively affect generations of Muslims! Of course, implementing changes will always involve a commitment of will power, resources, time, money, and a variety of skills. Below are some suggestions on how to modify physical access, participation, and masjid governance. Some of these changes may be more difficult to achieve than others, depending on your community's resources but nonetheless important.

We believe that each community leader must make an explicit and proactive long-term commitment to change, recognizing that the change may happen incrementally. To begin the process, we suggest that *masjid* leadership initiate community dialogue about these issues. In addition, each *masjid* should conduct a systematic inventory of its current practices in terms of women's access to *masjid* space, program planning and participation, and *masjid* governance and management. Then, using the suggestions below, leaders may develop short-term and long-term plans to make *masjid* practices reflective of the esteem that women have been given by our honorable heritage.

Access to Masjid Facilities

- If your *masjid* already does not do so, make dignified accommodations for women to attend Friday services.
- Make available designated space for women in the main prayer hall.
- If resources permit, also provide a separate space for women who need or prefer greater privacy.
- Check that both separate and shared spaces allow people to hear speakers properly, such as by investing in and maintaining the sound and video systems.
- Provide a safe entrance for women.
- For women who may wish to leave after the compulsory prayer, give them enough time to exit first. This will also increase the community's sensitivity to proper *adab* regarding sharing the *masjid* space.
- Announcement boards and *zakat* (charity/alms) and donation boxes should be accessible to women. Many women are independently wealthy and able and willing to make their own contributions.
- If there are several rooms available in a *masjid*, hold lectures outside the main prayer area as a way to promote participation. Throughout the world, the *kursi*, or scholar's chair, for regular lectures is at the side of the *masjid*, and the front is reserved for prayer, indicating that the *adab* for prayer is different than the *adab* for other educational sessions. If lectures are held in the *musalla*, or prayer area, the lecturer can stand or sit at the side of the *musalla*. Since the rules for standing behind men are specific to prayer, educational programs at the *masjid* can seat women in rows parallel to men, with appropriate separation in between.
- Make sure that shared and separate spaces are clean, comfortable, and aesthetically pleasing. Encourage men, women, and children to participate in the upkeep of spaces.

Program Planning and Participation

- Offer regular education programs for women of all ages on all aspects of Islam
- Design and offer such programs for female and male youth that are sensitive to their needs across age groups.
- Invite appropriate women scholars and community activists to give seminars at the *masjid*.
- Invite women to organize community programs, introduce speakers, offer opening and closing *dua* or prayer during educational programs, moderate panels, and direct question and answer sessions.
- When the *masjid* offers educational programs to the community, encourage everyone, including sisters to ask questions.
- Where resources permit, offer play areas or child-care facilities so that women with children are not prevented from participation.

Masjid Governance and Management

- Develop governance structures that allow women and youth to have an input in decision-making, such as through the use of suggestion boxes, bulletin boards, or meetings that allow them to provide feedback to *masjid* leadership.
- Ensure that women are represented on governing boards, that mosque constitutions indicate that at least two seats are designated to be held for women, and if your *masjid* is already doing so, collectively strive for greater equality and quality of representation.
- Advocate for and be a leader in implementing women's rights to vote in matters that affect the *masjid* and the community as a whole. Stand up for and implement women's right to have official membership in the *masjid*. Your active support and commitment to this issue will set an example for other leaders, and help others take up the cause.

Of course, as we noted earlier, an agenda for change at each *masjid* must keep in mind the local community's resources, and leaders should encourage solutions to emerge organically in community discussions. Practical steps should be taken to implement the plan and monitor progress on this issue. *Masjid* leaders should expect and promote that women of the community collaborate in this inventory, planning, and implementation.

If dress and *masjid* etiquette are of concern, the *masjid* should provide its community members with education sessions and informational material on these subjects, highlighting the need for modesty by **both** men and women, rather than focusing only on women's modesty. Since our communities are multicultural, dominance of one particular culture in this aspect should not be encouraged. What should be encouraged are Islamic guidelines and not a particular style or pattern of dress. We strongly recommend that this issue be resolved through education and patience rather than coercion and compulsion.

It is also important to note that we do not advocate that women lead a mixed gender congregation in prayer at a *masjid*. To promote women's spiritual leadership and cohesion, we suggest that women pray in congregation with a woman leader when they gather as an all-female group. The Islamic concept of leadership entails service, management, stewardship, accountability, and responsibility, and these ideals ought to be exercised by women and men, in the private, public and community spheres and especially in our Muslim organizations.

To operate as one *ummah* or Muslim community, we must treat all its members with respect and accord each person dignity as a human being. Women will value the right to pray in the main prayer hall. They will value the opportunity to have their views represented in the way that the *masjid* is run and to have an active role in programs. They will enjoy the full benefits of learning about Islam. These changes will enhance women's participation and nurture their souls and empower them as equal members of the *ummah*. When we empower women, we will empower future generations of Muslims and fortify their Muslim identity. Insha Allah.

In closing, we urge our leaders to seriously undertake a commitment to educate their communities regarding these issues and to initiate changes in masjid access, participation, and governance. Leaders must honor and promote the right of female servants of *Allah* to assume full inclusion in affairs of the community and to worship and supplicate in peace and dignity in their places of worship- their *masjid*, without fear and anger.

As Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) noted in his last khutba, "The rights of women are sacred so see that they are maintained."

Resources



Insha Allah, both ISSA, Inc and WII, Inc. are ready and capable partners in your efforts to make your masjid more inclusive of women. Please feel free to contact us for further assistance.

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The Islamic Social Service Associations (ISSA) are non-profit organizations. ISSA-Canada is a registered charity and ISSA-USA is a 501c(3) organization. ISSA's mission is to promote awareness of the mental health, social welfare and general family issues impacting Muslims and the larger society. ISSA provides education, training, and consultation services for local Muslim communities and mainstream organizations. ISSA offers workshops to those requesting information to make their *masjid* or Islamic center more women-friendly.

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Women In Islam, Inc. is a non-profit (501c(3) in process) educational organization focused on human rights and social justice. WII, Inc., organizes public forums and discussions about Muslim women, human rights and social justice issues. It is dedicated to the empowerment of women through knowledge and practice of our religion. Women In Islam, Inc. is available to conduct workshops on making your *masjid* and Islamic center more women-friendly.