



Council on American-Islamic Relations  
Philadelphia Chapter  
1501 Cherry Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
pa.cair.com | 267-515-6710  
info@philadelphia.cair.com

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

**February 6, 2016, 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM  
Driscoll Hall, Villanova University, Villanova PA**

This seminar brings together a number of scholars and activists to discuss some of the predominant issues relating to women’s access to mosque life in the United States. The panel will explore the major challenges women face in accessing prayer space in the mosque as well as leadership roles within their mosque communities. The seminar takes as its starting point the 2015 “ISNA Statement on the Inclusion of Women in Masjids,” which calls for a recommitment to the Prophetic ideal of mosques being open and friendly to women. The seminar attempts to elucidate the practice of the Prophet ﷺ in empowering and accommodating his women companions within the sacred space of his mosque and supporting their holistic place and endeavors within the community. Scholars on the panel will explore the legal questions related to women’s mosque attendance, highlighting that the Prophet ﷺ allowed and welcomed women in his mosque. Attention will also be given to the negative psychological effect of the marginalization and exclusion of women from mosques on young Muslim women. The panel will discuss best ways for addressing these challenges and implementing positive, healthy, and sustainable change within our communities.

**Agenda**

Registration and Networking	9:00 AM – 9:30 AM
Session I: Conversation with Seminar Speakers	9:30 AM – 12:45 PM
Dhuhr Prayer and Lunch	12:45 PM – 1:45 PM
Session IIA: Facilitated Break-Out Session	1:45 PM – 2:45 PM
Session IIB: Read-out by groups to all participants	2:45 PM – 3:45 PM
‘Asr Prayer	3:45 PM – 4:00 PM

## **Session I: Conversation with Seminar Speakers**

**9:30 AM – 12:30 PM**

**Sofia Ali Khan**, MC, will moderate a discussion with the panelists. Each panelist will be asked to provide remarks responding to the questions below.

**Dr. Sarah Sayeed** (20 minutes)

Generally speaking, what is the state of mosque access for women in the United States? What are some of the biggest issues and challenges facing Muslim women seeking access to and inclusion in mosque activities?

What are some of the challenges—whether actual restrictions based on mosque rules or social difficulties—women face in gaining leadership positions on mosque boards? How does the lack of female presence in leadership affect mosque life?

Please summarize the “ISNA Statement on the Inclusion of Women in Masjids.” Please also include what support the statement has received from religious scholars and community leaders.

How effective has the “ISNA Statement on the Inclusion of Women in Masjids” been in affording women greater access to mosque space and leadership positions?

What are some of the social, religious, and economic factors that make it difficult to provide greater mosque access to women even where there is a will and desire to do so?

In your experience on the ground, have you come across women who say that they prefer for their space in the masjid to be separated from men by a wall or barrier? How should we understand and accommodate this need while still providing women access to the main hall of the masjid?

**Donna Auston** (20 minutes)

In what ways does the marginalization and exclusion of women from mosques have a negative psychological effect on Muslim women, especially those of the younger generations?

Please discuss the phenomenon of “unmosquing.” How has the state of mosque access for women influenced the rise of this phenomenon?

Are there significant differences in gender equity in majority immigrant mosques vs. majority African-American mosques? If so, why? Should American Muslims in general look to American concepts of equality and civil rights in configuring their mosques and organizations? Why or why not?

**Dr. Jonathan Brown** (20 minutes)

What textual or architectural evidence is there for inclusion of women in the main prayer halls of mosques during the Prophet' life صلى الله عليه وسلم and in the generations immediate following? If possible, please discuss the rise and history of the balcony space and separate rooms for women in mosques. What, if any, are the Prophetic precedents for these developments?

Please define the concept of *fitna* as it applies to gender relations, and explain how and why *fitna* may be cited as a primary reason for women's marginalization in or exclusion from mosques.

What were the most prevalent legal viewpoints on women's mosque attendance in the earliest period of Islamic history? What does the Prophetic tradition tell us about the Prophet's (s) understanding of *fitna* and women in the mosque?

Broadly speaking, what are the social, religious, and political factors that have led to the marginalization and/or exclusion of women in mosques?

**Dr. Mustafa Ahmad** (20 minutes)

Please discuss the meaning, context, legal import, and authenticity of each of these two *ḥadīths*. How should we understand them in relation to one another?

لا تمنعوا إماء الله مساجد الله

Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from (entering) the mosques of Allah.

صلاة المرأة في بيتها أفضل من صلاتها في حجرتها ، و صلاتها في مخدعها أفضل من صلاتها في بيتها

It is more excellent for a woman to pray in her house than in her courtyard, and more excellent for her to pray in her private chamber than in her house.

**Iman Sultan** (10 minutes)

Please discuss your own experience as a young Muslim woman in your community masjid. How has the marginalization of women affected your willingness to participate in mosque life?

How does the issue of the marginalization of women in mosques translate into the marginalization of women in the MSA?

**Dhuhr and Lunch Break**

**12:45 PM -1:45 PM**

## **Session IIA: Facilitated Break-Out Session**

**1:45 PM – 2:45 PM**

During the second half of the seminar, participants will be gathered in groups to deliberate on the questions below with the assistance of a **facilitator**. Participants will discuss the questions below, formulate answers to the numbered questions, and elect one participant to present back the answers at the end of the day.

1. What can we do to bring more women into mosque life, including prayer space, leadership positions, and programming?  
Use the following to guide your discussion:
  - Why are women currently so underrepresented in mosque activities?
  - What can be done to address those specific issues, for example, should there be a quota for women in mosque leadership positions?
  - What can we share about what does and does not work to create inclusive spaces based on our own experiences?
2. What are the steps we need to take to make mosques more woman and girl-friendly?  
Use the following to guide your discussion:
  - What can we do in the context of existing mosques and floor plans?
  - What new, woman and girl inclusive options can we begin to imagine or to plan?
3. How can younger community members shift ideas about women and girls in the mosque given the power held by current mosque leadership and their commitment to the status quo?  
Use the following to guide your discussion:
  - What are some different cultural and generational ideas about gender roles at the mosque?
  - How should the proponents of change use proper *adab* (behavior/manners) to address these differences?

## **Session IIB: Readout by groups to all participants**

**2:45 PM – 3:45 PM**

Answers from each group will be presented back to the seminar participants in this final session of the day. All proceedings from the seminar will also be provided in electronic format within a few days after the seminar.

## **'Asr Prayer**

**3:45 PM – 4:00 PM**