

worldview that thrives on communalism. Women in the Muslim world, just like men, have been taught that at the bottom of any ladder the African American sits. Only since 1990 have immigrant Muslim women discovered the knowledge and resources that African American Muslims can bring to the Islamic world.

SOURCES: Texts and articles on African American Muslim women are few. Thus, this essay used a variety of source materials on African Islam such as Allen Austin's *Muslim Slaves in Antebellum America* (1997), and Sylvaine Diouf's *Servants of Allah* (1998). Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* (1992) provides an examination of the Qur'an's view of women, while Aminah McCloud in *African American Islam* (1995) explores African American Muslim women culturally. African American Muslim women are often directly addressed in Muslim community literature such as the texts of the Nation of Islam—*How to Eat to Live* (1972), *The Message to the Blackman* (1965), *Our Savior Has Arrived* (1974), and the texts of the Moorish Science Temple, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple* (1968). Additional information was obtained through interviews with women from some of the communities.

WOMEN, ISLAM, AND MOSQUES

Ingrid Mattson

ONE DAY, AFTER a particularly frenzied day of driving her children between home, school, and the mosque, I heard an American Muslim mother exclaim, "Sometimes I wish women were forbidden to drive in *this* country." With this tongue-in-cheek reference to the prohibition on women driving in Saudi Arabia (an uncommon edict in the Muslim world), this woman was clearly implying that such a restriction would be impossible in America. Indeed, urban planning and the exigencies of modern life not only force most American women into their cars many times a day, but they also require women to be involved in the public sphere to a greater extent than was true in the premodern West or is still true in many traditional Muslim societies. Significantly, the complexity of contemporary American life has also forced, and permitted, Muslim women to enter the public spaces of the Islamic community in numbers perhaps unprecedented in history.

The mosque has always been the center of Islamic communal life and religious practice. The first mosque established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina (Saudi Arabia) in 610 C.E., was alive with the presence of women. The Prophet's wives and unmarried daughters lived on one side of the mosque. Another side was home to a number of poor and needy men and women, including a slave woman who had escaped an abusive master. Between these two sides of the mosque was the prayer space, where women could be found joining con-

gregational prayers, performing individual acts of worship, or engaged in group discussion and learning. At the same time, there is evidence in the Qur'an and from reports about the Prophet Muhammad that women were discouraged from being too visible in the public sphere. The streets of Medina were not always safe, and young women in particular could attract unwanted attention. Consequently, women, especially young women and those who did not live near the Prophet's mosque, were encouraged to pray at home. In any case, women were not required to attend Friday congregational prayer, nor was it considered better for them, as it was for men, to pray the obligatory five daily prayers in the mosque. Over time, as Islam spread throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe, Muslim authorities increasingly stressed the threat posed to chastity by the interaction of men and women outside the home, including the mosque. By the premodern period, it became unusual for any woman, other than very elderly women, to frequent the mosque.

This situation began to change after the European colonization of the Muslim world. In the twentieth century, as secular, Western ideologies began to spread in the Muslim world, men and women who were interested in Islam "as a complete way of life" began to consciously organize for worship and to discuss strategy for changing society. With the spread of modern media, it also became increasingly unlikely that women who remained in their homes were better protected from temptation than those who went to the mosque. Perhaps most important, given that more and more women were seeking secular education and employment, some argued that discouraging them from coming to the mosque made them more vulnerable to secular trends. By the late 1960s, increasing numbers of women were worshipping in mosques in the larger urban centers of the Middle East and South Asia, although in most areas women still generally stayed out of the mosques.

This change also affected Muslims in the United States and Canada, where immigrant Muslims had established mosques as early as the 1920s and 1930s (earlier African American Muslim slaves joined together in prayer when possible, but the secretive nature of these meetings did not normally permit the public performance of prayer and the transmission of religious practices to the young). In these mosques, activities rarely exceeded Friday congregational prayer; consequently, there was minimal involvement of women. The fact that these communities often did not pass a strong faith commitment to their children was a lesson to later generations. Muslims who came to America in the 1960s therefore had learned about the threat to religious commitment posed by the general secularizing trends of modernity "back home," as well as the threat to a distinct Muslim identity from assimilation pressures in their new

does not have enough information about basic tenets & practices of Islam to be useful for students of no prior knowledge of Islam.

homeland. The increased participation of women in public, organized religious activities, including those held within the mosque, have been seen by some as a solution to these problems.

In the last few decades, one of the most important functions mosques have undertaken has been the religious education of children. Most Muslims, like most Americans of other faiths, need or want to enroll their children in the public school system. This leaves weekday evenings and weekends for religious education. As a result, although the Islamic holy day of congregational prayer is Friday, "Sunday School" has become as much a part of the average American Muslim child's education as it has for American children of other faiths. Again, as is true in other faith communities, it is normally the mothers of these children who organize and teach in weekend schools. Although some Muslim communities now have separate facilities for teaching children, and a growing number have opened full-time religious day schools, most religious education is conducted within the mosque. This necessitates the regular presence of women, a necessity that has been somewhat problematic because, according to many Islamic traditions, men or women in a state of major ritual impurity (because of sexual intercourse or menstruation) should not enter the prayer hall. For this reason, many communities have renamed their main building an "Islamic Center" and have designated a specific place within that center that is the *masjid* or *musallah*, that is, the "place for prayer." Within the other areas of the center, ritual purity is not a requirement for entrance.

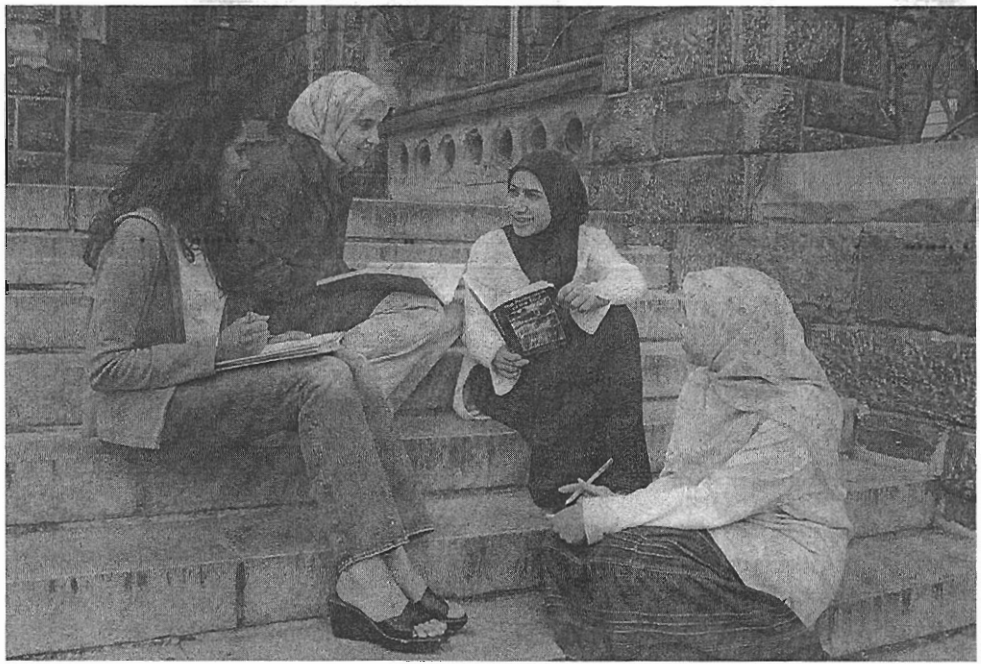
This need to have women provide religious education to children opened the door to women's presence in the mosque more than anything else. Even women who were not accustomed to praying in the mosque found themselves in the building at prayer time and so joined the congregation. Sometimes limited space made this difficult, since men and women form separate lines for prayer. Although a woman can be the prayer leader (the "imam") in a group of women, a man always leads the prayer of a mixed-gender group; consequently only a man can be the official prayer leader for the entire community. In a mixed-gender group, the usual arrangement for prayer is that men form parallel rows behind the imam, and women form parallel rows behind the men. Muslim scholars trace this division to the normative practice of the Prophet Muhammad (the sunna), and many say that the wisdom behind it is to preserve the dignity and modesty of the women, since ritual prayer involves prostration. Unfortunately, because many mosques are converted houses, or quickly become too small for the growing Muslim community, women often find themselves squeezed into less-than-desirable spaces for prayer. This tendency has been vigorously resisted by many Muslim women and has even motivated

some who were previously "apolitical" to question male domination of mosque leadership. When men have expressed surprise or claimed ignorance about the problems women have with the spaces assigned to them in the mosques, women have pointed out that it is precisely this inability of men to be aware of all their needs that necessitates their representation among the leadership of the mosque. This is particularly true in American Muslim communities where many women, unlike women in traditional Muslim societies, do not have male relatives to represent their concerns.

Increasingly, Muslim women are insisting on having more space designated for them in the mosques. How this space is delineated is another concern. Although there was no physical barrier between men and women in the Prophet's mosque, over the centuries, many Muslim societies used walls or curtains to separate the two genders. In contemporary America, many Muslims seem to prefer a separate balcony where women can see but not be seen. Whatever the form, assigning permanent separate spaces for men's and women's prayer is a source of great controversy among Muslims, with an equal number of men and women, it seems, favoring or disfavoring such a partition. Some women like the private space where they can rest, recline, and even nurse children away from the gaze of men. Other women resent the barrier presented to their participation in lectures and discussions that frequently occur in the prayer space. To accommodate both demands of gender segregation in prayer and communication within the community, some centers, such as the Islamic Foundation of Greater St. Louis in Ballwin, Missouri, have built separate prayer spaces for men and women but also have an auditorium in which men and women can attend lectures and meetings together.

Although more opportunities have opened for women to participate with men in religious instruction in the American mosque, it is still more common for men and women to be instructed separately. Some imams offer weekly lessons just for women, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad who set aside one day a week to meet privately with the women of his community. Even more commonly, women have their own study circles in the mosque or in their homes. Although formal religious schools and seminaries were important in the traditional Muslim world, they never replaced the "study circle" (*halaqah*) as the most common means of transmitting religious knowledge. Study circles form when a group of people gather around an individual whom they recognize as having some beneficial religious knowledge. Throughout Islamic history, distinguished female scholars have transmitted the sacred sciences to male and female students in study circles held in their homes.

In Muslim communities across America, study circles



In many American communities, it is not uncommon for women to form study circles even when no one among them has more religious education or knowledge of Arabic than any other. In such cases women meet to pray, socialize, and discuss their problems. They may form a kind of Islamic "book club" or pledge to support each other in learning and memorizing passages of the Qur'an. *Used by permission of Rabia Bajwa.*

are normally held weekly but can spring up spontaneously anytime a learned person visits a community. There is no ordination in Islam; only the community's recognition of a person's religious learning and piety provides justification for authoritative interpretation. However, it is the duty of every Muslim, even those with little knowledge, to share what they know with those who know less. While the leader of one study circle might be a scholar, another might be an otherwise ordinary person who happens to recite the Qur'an better than anyone else in the group. In America an immigrant woman with no advanced religious education, but who speaks Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, might find herself in a position of leadership over a group of American or non-Arabic-speaking immigrant women. Similarly, in America, the wives of imams often assume the role of teacher, counselor, and adviser to the women of the community. Often this motivates the imam's wife to increase her own study of religious texts, in order to answer the women's questions more knowledgeably. On the other hand, in many American communities, it is not uncommon for women to form study circles even when no one among them has more religious education or knowledge of Arabic than any other. In such cases women meet to pray, socialize, and discuss their problems. They may form a kind of Islamic "book club" or pledge to support each other in learning and memoriz-

ing passages of the Qur'an (a highly recommended act of worship) from audio tapes and CDs.

Although there are women's study circles in many mosques, women often prefer to meet in their homes for a number of reasons. As mentioned previously, some mosques do not have comfortable areas for women to meet, and sometimes this is an indication that their presence in the mosque is not encouraged. Most women indicate, however, that meeting in their homes is more convenient, especially if they have small children. Further, in the privacy of a home, with no men around, women can remove their veils and relax. This reflects an aspect of traditional Islamic gender segregation, whereby no man is permitted access to the space in which women are meeting. One important consequence is that if only women are present when it is time to perform one of the five daily prayers, one of the women will lead the others as the imam of the congregation.

Most commonly, the home is also the location for celebrating female rites of passage. In Islamic law legal maturity commences with puberty, usually determined by the onset of menstruation in females. Traditionally, this is the age when a girl begins to wear the *hijab* (veil) and is required to perform all the ritual duties of Islam, such as prayer and fasting. Many Muslims in America do not adhere to the practice of veiling, which means that family and community support for a girl who veils

needs to be strong. This is especially true for Muslim teenagers in America who are a small minority in an adolescent culture that revolves, to a great extent, around what is "fashionable." This explains the origin of the "hijab party" among religious Muslim American teenagers, particularly Arab immigrants. At a *hijab* party, a newly veiled girl and her friends will style their hair, put on makeup, wear fancy dresses, and dance with each other. The *hijab* party allows girls to dress as beautiful as prom queens, enjoy music and dancing, yet maintain their public modest dress and adhere to the restriction on social mixing with males.

Among more learned families, girls might be feted not for having reached the age of puberty but for having attained a certain level of knowledge. Among South Asian Muslims parties are commonly held in honor of children who have completed the recitation of the Qur'an with a scholar. At these parties the child recites in front of guests, who invoke blessings on the child and partake in food distributed by the family. Religious occasions, like the two annual Eid festivals, are further opportunities for religious and social gatherings among women. Beautification, particularly in the form of applying henna designs on the hands and feet, is a common shared activity among women on such occasions.

Although in traditional Muslim countries such parties are normally held in the home, they are frequently held in Islamic centers in America. There are a number of reasons for this. One reason is that the homes of many Muslims in America are not spacious enough to accommodate entertaining men and women separately. For Muslims who observe gender separation on social occasions, the local Islamic center is often a more suitable location for such gatherings. In other cases, the Islamic center is considered the natural location for any social gathering that has religious significance, because in America that is where one finds one's Muslim "family." Universally, Muslims consider themselves "brothers" and "sisters"; in America, in the absence of extended family for most Muslims, brotherhood and sisterhood in faith acquires even greater significance.

Sisterhood forms the explicit or implicit ideological basis for many Muslim women's organizations in America. Most immigrant Muslims leave their extended families behind in their home countries, and most American Muslim converts separate emotionally and spiritually from their non-Muslim families to some extent. To compensate for these lost or loosened bonds, there is a need for close relationships to be formed with other Muslims. One occasion when sisterhood becomes especially evident is when a woman is suffering from an illness or recovering from childbirth. At such times, Muslim women in a community often coordinate efforts so that a different woman brings a prepared meal to their "sister" every day. Visiting the sick is not only a

highly meritorious act in Islam; from an Islamic legal perspective, an ill person has a "right" to assistance and visits from other Muslims. A Muslim also has a right after death to have his or her body prepared in a proper manner for burial. In Islamic law, this entails bathing the body of the deceased and then wrapping the body in plain white strips of fabric. Even in death Islamic modesty prevails, so that except in some cases where a man or woman prepares the body of his or her spouse, women prepare women and men prepare men. Larger mosques often have groups of volunteers on call for this purpose; in smaller communities, three or four family members and close friends prepare the body.

The sisterhood that binds Muslim women as they support each other in times of trouble can form the basis for more formal associations among women. On the local level, Muslim women have joined to establish assistance programs for refugees from Muslim countries, food pantries for the poor, and other kinds of social services. Another sphere of society that has attracted the attention of many Muslim women is the public school system. On an individual level, women often become involved with their children's schools when they become aware of discrimination there because of their religious or ethnic identity. In many cases, the mother's involvement with the school is limited to giving presentations about Islam on religious occasions. In other cases, more ambitious efforts have been made. For example, in the early 1990s, two young Muslim women, Ameena Jandali and Maha Elgenaidi, founded the Islamic Networks Group (ING) in the San Francisco Bay area. Initially focusing on public schools, the women gave formal presentations on Islam to teachers and students and addressed issues of bias and stereotyping in the curriculum. Later ING expanded their efforts to other public institutions, including police, corporations, and media. After less than ten years in existence, ING was sponsoring approximately 700 presentations a year about Islam.

All Muslims are vulnerable to stereotyping and prejudice in America, but Muslim women have a particularly difficult time. On the one hand, like Muslim men, they suffer from stereotypes of Muslims as violent, backward terrorists. On the other hand, Muslim women are often assumed (by "well-meaning" persons) to be oppressed by their religion. If they wear a veil, often the assumption is that they have been forced to do so by their male relatives. As a result, Muslim women who observe religious practices in general, and religious dress in particular, are constantly trying to find ways to express their own authentic experiences. The Internet is an especially rich resource for Muslim women's support groups, study circles, and creative expression.

American Muslim women have actively addressed international situations in which Muslims have been victims of violence and oppression. Muslim women have

rallied and lobbied, along with men, for the rights of Palestinians under Israel rule, Bosnians during the Serb assault, and Iraqis suffering from economic sanctions. The victimization of women in such situations has been an area of particular concern for many American Muslim women's organizations. For example, in 1992, after learning about the enslavement of Bosnian Muslim women in Serbian rape camps, a group of Muslim women established an organization called Women in Islam (WII). Women in Islam was based in New York City in order to establish a presence close to the United Nations. WII director Aisha al-Adawiya was present at the 1995 Beijing Women's Summit, and the group has won official nongovernmental organization (NGO) status at the United Nations.

Another Muslim women's organization established to address national and international issues of human rights is *Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights*. Founded by lawyers and academics Azizah al-Hibri and Asifa Quraishi, *Karamah* is particularly focused on abuses of women's rights perpetrated in the name of Islam. Al-Hibri and Quraishi have written critiques, for example, of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and Pakistani rape laws. The organization's priority, however, is to help solve Islamic legal issues that are particularly problematic for American Muslim women. For example, the group has written about the problems impeding a just interpretation of Islamic marriage contracts in American courts. Describing their agenda they write,

When we talk of human rights abuse, we often direct our attention to governments and institutions. We must not forget, however, that the most basic of our rights emerge within our private and our domestic spheres. KARAMAH is founded upon the idea that education, dialogue, and action can counter the dangerous and destructive effects of ignorance, silence, and prejudice.

The Muslim women lawyers and legal scholars of *Karamah* generally try to draw upon the methodology of traditional Islamic jurisprudence to argue for Muslim women's rights. A number of other Muslim women's organizations have a more secular orientation or draw upon controversial modern revisionist interpretations of Islamic law. Perhaps the most prominent of these organizations is the Muslim Women's League (MWL) of southern California, under the leadership of physician Laila al-Marayati. The MWL's publications convey a sense of urgency regarding the circumstances in which many Muslim women live. They decry the fact that religion is often used to justify a limitation on Muslim women's opportunities for education, economic independence, and simple self-preservation. They write,

To all those who are committed to the Islamic principles of justice and truth, we call upon you to join us in our efforts by organizing similar groups in your community, participating in Muslim as well as non-Muslim organizations that are part of this struggle, educating yourselves and others about Islam, and by working together without divisiveness and ill-will.

Dr. al-Mariati and the MWL have received a significant amount of support and attention from non-Muslim activist and political organizations. Whether they will be able to affect the Muslim community as deeply as they desire remains to be seen, given that their ideological approach to Islamic law and normative discourse is often considered unorthodox. There is no doubt, however, that American Muslim women in general are determined to join together and to join with sympathetic Muslim men and non-Muslims to realize their full humanity within the broad context of Islamic tradition.

SOURCES: See the following Web sites: Islamic Networks Group, at <http://www.ing.org/>; Women in Islam, at <http://womeninislam.org/>; *Karamah*, at <http://www.karamah.org/>; and Muslim Women's League, at <http://www.mwllusa.org/>. For the early history of Muslims in America, see Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (1998).

WOMEN'S ISSUES IN AMERICAN ISLAM

Jane I. Smith

AMERICAN MUSLIMS IN the United States and Canada comprise a rich, complex, and extremely diverse population of somewhere around 6 million. They are immigrants from a variety of countries as well as indigenous Americans, representing many races and ethnic/cultural groups, speaking a range of languages, and often choosing to present themselves in very different ways. The first Muslims to immigrate to America came from Syria and Lebanon in the late 1800s. By the early 1900s their numbers had increased, and they began to form small struggling communities across the country. Immigrant Muslims now represent over sixty nations in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Some are fleeing political oppression and come as asylum seekers, others are looking for economic or educational training, and still others are already skilled professionals who want to join the American workforce.

Many Muslims are not new to this continent but are African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, or Caucasian citizens who have chosen to adopt the faith of

Islam. Most American Muslims are Sunni, and about a fifth of the population is Shi'ite. Some who call themselves Muslim identify with heterodox, sectarian groups. American-born and immigrant Muslim women make up the most heterogeneous female Muslim population in the world. Some wear their Islam, both literally and figuratively, with pride and with overt zealotry. Others choose to practice the religion privately and in family settings rather than as part of the public arena. A significant number of Muslims, men and women, remain publicly and privately unobservant and do not participate in either Islamic practices or ritual occasions.

American Muslim women are notably freer than their sisters anywhere in the world. Because public education is mandatory, they are guaranteed opportunities for schooling. If they choose, and their families support it, women generally are able to find jobs, possible prejudice against the headscarf notwithstanding. Most women drive or use public transportation, have access to some kind of health care and other social services, and enjoy a degree of autonomy in determining how they will live both publicly and privately. On the other hand, many Muslim women need to learn what their rights and opportunities are and how to take advantage of them. In terms of religious practices, women have the chance to participate in the public observance of Islam in ways never available to them in a number of other countries. It is also the case, however, that many American imams and other religious leaders, including African Americans, are conservative in their views about women, sometimes making open and active participation difficult to achieve.

Identity Formation

The rhetoric of American Muslim leaders, and of many of its youth, celebrates the diversity of American Islam at the same time that it seeks to emphasize commonalities over distinctions. Spokespersons stress the interpretation of Islam as a social and religious system that does not distinguish on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, or national origin, a doctrine that has added to the appeal of Islam to many otherwise disadvantaged American citizens. Yet for practical purposes, the diversity of American Islam, and of its women, offers a range of challenges to the community at the same time that it represents a variety of individual and familial choices. Muslim women are learning that the transition from a mainly ethnic affiliation in which Islam is one component to finding primary identity as a member of a minority religion in which ethnicities are often divisive can be very difficult.

Given the range of identities and of potential choices, what are the kinds of issues with which Muslim women struggle to figure out who they want to be as members

of the equally diverse American public? For both immigrants and Americans who have chosen Islam, the task of discovering, or formulating, their sense of identity is crucial. Immigrant women must seek a balance among such factors as their sense of commitment to Islam as a common bond, the particularities of the cultures from which they have come, and the reality of now being resident in (or citizens of) the United States or Canada. To which of these affiliations do they feel the greatest affinity? Some decide to adopt hyphenated identities in which these several associations are acknowledged, but even then the order suggests choices. Is one a Pakistani-American-Sunni Muslim? An American who happens to be Muslim and happens to come from Nigeria? Different kinds of occasions tend to bring out unconscious allegiances that may affirm the sense of community of American Muslims or may serve to emphasize the differences and distinctions.

Here again the very fact of being able to choose how to think about who one "really is" provides an opportunity rarely found in other countries and cultures. In most Muslim societies definitions are confined by the general homogeneity of the culture as well as by the ideologies generated by the state. In America options are at least theoretically open, although the extent to which Muslim women are able to, or should, exercise those options varies greatly according to the expectations of family, subcommunity, and particular religious leadership. These choices are the subject of a great deal of private and public conversation and attention, both in local arenas and on the programs of national Muslim association meetings.

A large number of American Muslims find their primary identity not so much through membership in the Islamic community as by being Americans who happen to be part of an Islamic heritage. They have accepted the fact that they live in and operate out of the American context and do not worry about possible compromises. Women of this orientation often find themselves struggling to determine where to look for the appropriate guidelines as to their own identity and place in their families, their communities, and American society as a whole.

All Muslims, regardless of their origin or degree of religious observance, are aware of the dominant American attitude toward Islam and Islamic values. They know that the American public is generally unappreciative of what it believes to be the sexist and repressive attitudes of Muslims vis-à-vis women. A variety of influences have shaped American perceptions of women in Islam, including a long history of Western prejudice and misunderstanding, reports of current practices in regard to women in some countries of Asia and the Middle East, the often distorted images of oppressed Muslim women that are perpetuated by the media, mov-

