

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 or student 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 week-day 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.

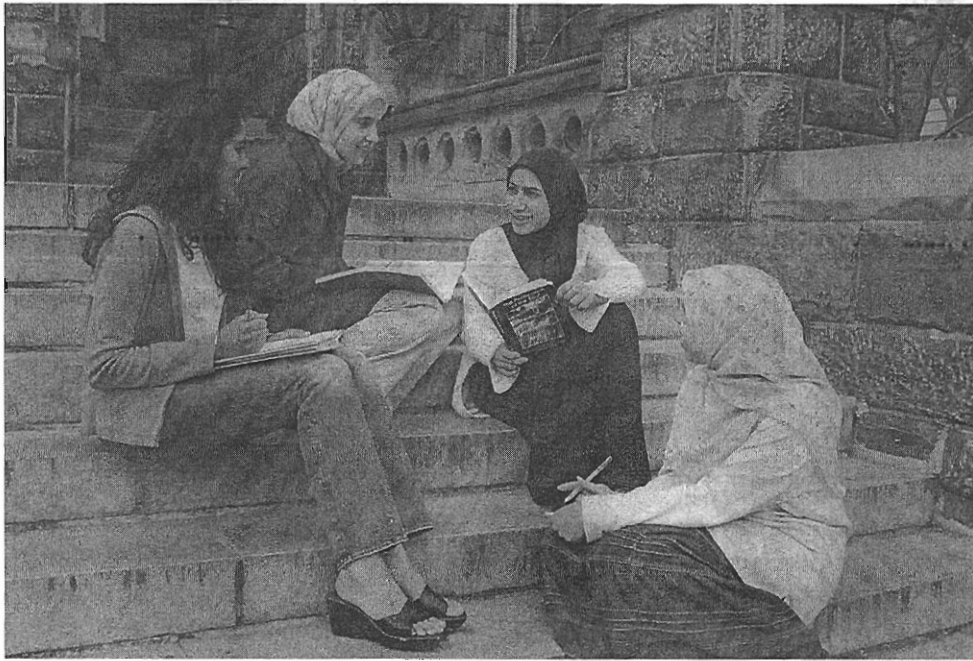
This need to have women provide religious education to children opened the door to women's presence in the mosque more than anything else. Even women who were not accustomed to praying in the mosque found themselves in the building at prayer time and so joined the congregation. Sometimes limited space 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.mwlusa.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-

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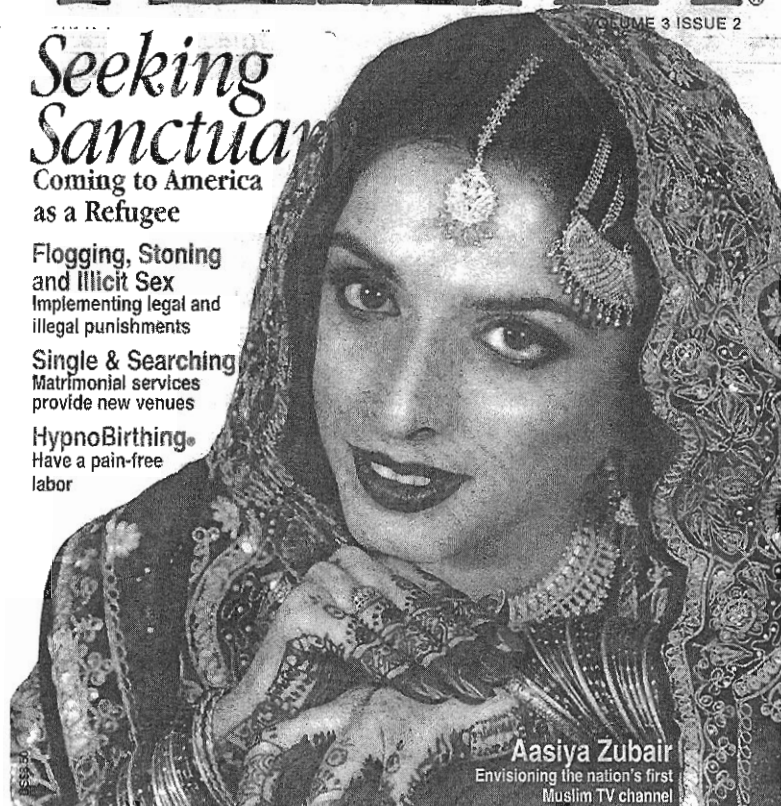
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Many Muslim women, and men, in America today are assuming the responsibility of publicly challenging negative stereotypical images. One such effort is *Azizah*, a magazine that describes itself as "The Voice for Muslim Women" and dispels many of the myths surrounding Muslim women's lives. Copyright © *Azizah* magazine.

ies, and pulp fiction, and even the choice of many Muslim women in America to dress in ways that seem to Americans inevitably to be the result of male attempts at subjugation. Many Muslim women, and men, in America today are assuming the responsibility of publicly challenging such negative stereotypical images.

Identity issues for Muslim women include the extent to which they choose, or are allowed to choose, whether and how to participate publicly in the practice of Islam. A great number of often competing ideologies, both imported and homegrown, come into play as Muslims deal with the challenge of living in a non-Muslim country in which the religion of Islam is often misunderstood and underappreciated. Some spokespersons for Islam from more conservative parts of the Islamic world, as well as some African Americans, want to keep the Islamic community as separate as possible from the rest of American culture. They fear that overly associating with the Western way of life will lead to the degeneration of the faith. In this interpretation women are discouraged from participating in activities outside the home.

Growing numbers of Muslims in America, however, are now persuaded that if Muslims are to gain a voice in helping shape American attitudes and policies, it is necessary for everyone to be more publicly active, including women. National Muslim associations such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) have moved from an original conviction that American society ought to be avoided to advocating participation for both women and men, although on strictly Islamic terms and by Islamic definitions.

To live in Western society without being influenced by it is difficult; thus the discourse about women's public participation inevitably is influenced, positively or negatively, by the claims of Western feminism. Some Muslim women choose to define themselves as feminists—but within an Islamic understanding. They may adopt certain of the feminist assumptions about freedom of access and opportunity for men and women. They reject, however, the common assumption that feminist formulations of equality are necessarily appro-

priate in the Islamic context and struggle to determine which ideas are most effective and consonant with Muslim values as they work to define their identity within their own family and communal settings.

Conversion to Islam in America

AFRICAN AMERICANS

The choice of many African Americans to adopt Islam as a religion and way of life has taken different forms over the last century, and numbers of converts continue to grow. Originally attracted to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, many blacks since the death of the Elijah have followed the leadership of his son Warith Deen Mohammed in identifying with mainstream Sunni Islam. Imam Mohammed's followers now call themselves the Muslim American Community. The Nation of Islam, now a small movement, continues under the primary leadership of Louis Farrakhan. Other Sunni movements are also part of the complex of African American Islam, as are a variety of heterodox movements, many only tangentially identified with the religion. For many blacks the choice to convert has centered on their hope that the egalitarian and nonracist doctrines of Islam will guarantee that they can be free of the forms of racist oppression they have experienced in America. African American women are important contributors to public efforts to formulate Islamic identity in the Western context, and they are increasingly vocal when they experience what they see as familiar forms of racial or gender oppression by their husbands or men of their community or by some Muslim immigrants, especially male leaders.

For many black women Islam truly has provided a vehicle for self-affirmation, participation in a welcoming community, and the practice of faith within a reasonable and manageable structure. They find the Islamic emphasis on the direct responsibility of the individual to God straightforward and refreshing. Some African American Muslim women are from very poor social and economic circumstances, are accustomed to being on welfare, and hope that Islam will offer them a better life. Others come to Islam from the context of black power groups, seeing in the religion a way of political participation as well as philosophical and spiritual satisfaction. Most Muslim women who are black choose to adopt Islamic dress and Islamic names and to participate as much as possible in Friday prayers and other mosque activities. Many are active in women's associations.

Life for African American women is not always as good as they may have expected. Certain Islamic restrictions, such as a general ban on most kinds of music, can be difficult to accept. In many ways African American Muslim women face a triple prejudice evident in

the society and culture: against women, against blacks, and against Islam. Often they have had a hard time explaining their choice of conversion to parents and family. The loneliness they experience with the breaking of those bonds may be exacerbated if they are not made to feel welcome by their immigrant Muslim sisters. The ethnocentricity of some immigrant communities may mean there is little tolerance for African Americans who are newly come to the faith. Many blacks experience difficulties in keeping their jobs when they appear in Islamic dress. Those who continue on the welfare system find that the already humiliating experience of being "on the dole" is made even more difficult if social workers respond in prejudicial ways to their being Muslim.

Still, almost all black women who adopt Islam believe that, despite the difficulties, it is far preferable to the racism and sexism of general American culture. As numbers grow and communities solidify, women are finding in their sisters a positive sense of support and solidarity. The strong affirmation of the family generated by Elijah Muhammad in the old Nation of Islam has been continued by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and provides a welcome change from the broken families and fatherless homes that many have experienced.

OTHER AMERICAN CONVERTS

Women from other racial-ethnic groups in the American context may also decide to adopt Islam, although their numbers are considerably smaller than those of African Americans. Many have been attracted by the movements of *da'wa* (educating about Islam and/or inviting others to accept to Islam) that are active in the United States and Canada. The reasons for their choice are many, including marriage to Muslim men, rejection of Christianity as ineffective in changing social structures, and attraction to what they see as the clear and straightforward structure of Islamic faith and practice. While conversion of non-Muslim wives to Islam is not mandated, a large number of women who enter into such marriages report obvious pressure to convert. Many indicate that they do so out of respect for their husbands and new families or because they do not want to raise their children in a household in which two religions are observed.

Some American women encounter Islam in the academic context and are attracted by the long history of Islamic culture and its holistic view of art, literature, science, and philosophy. Hispanic and Native American women are coming to adopt Islam, though as yet only in very small numbers, because they see in it elements that resonate with cultural characteristics common to their own ethnic associations such as respect for family and elders, appreciation of the rhythms of nature, and the integration of religious and spiritual beliefs with the whole of life. Increasing public efforts at *da'wa* are

bringing the faith to the attention of more women as well as men.

The spiritual practices of Islamic Sufism (mysticism) are attractive to many American women. Also appealing are what they see as the Islamic emphasis on community over the individuality of Western culture and the conviction that the family with its specific responsibilities for women and men is a significant alternative to what seem to be crumbling Western family structures. They feel welcomed and supported in the American Muslim community and form an active part in forming its definition. The Islamic ideals of family, dedication to God, and a disciplined life are appealing options to much of current Western society.

These converts, too, often experience struggle and pain as consequences of their choice of a new religion and identity. Some are shocked to discover that they are more marginalized in the Islamic community than they had expected. Less surprising, but nonetheless difficult to deal with, is the misunderstanding and sometimes rejection they experience from their own families and groups. Family tensions grow as new converts adhere to Islamic customs not understood or appreciated by those unfamiliar with the faith. The adoption of Islamic dress may cause stress and embarrassment to family members, and the disinclination to continue to observe Christian or Jewish holidays may make family gatherings difficult or impossible. The choice of Islam on the part of young Muslim women often appears to parents as a rejection of themselves and of the religious or cultural values that they had struggled to inculcate in their children.

Male-Female Relationships

Relationships between the sexes have always been of paramount importance in Islam, and they remain so in the American context. Notions of propriety are very important to most Muslims, often most obviously in the ways they determine what is and is not appropriate in terms of women's interaction with men, girls with boys. Some women prefer not to be in the company of men outside of their families at all, others feel that this is acceptable if they are appropriately dressed, and still others interact freely with members of the opposite sex within certain clearly understood boundaries. Some conservative Muslims feel that men and women shaking hands with each other is not proper.

Throughout most of the history of Islam male-female relationships have been characterized by the institution of patriarchy. Although it may take different forms in the American context patriarchy persists as a dominant theme. New opportunities for education and employment have gone a long way to change both the structure and the discourse about relative roles and opportunities for women, as have the pressures of Western secularism

and "equal opportunities" for both genders, much as that discourse has been resisted by many in the Muslim community. Within families major decisions generally are made by males. Few women choose to engage in activities or assume roles that are not generally approved by their husbands or fathers. Whether or not this will change in the near future is unclear, although Muslim organizations and councils are increasingly featuring conversation about the roles and functions of women in society at large as well as within the family.

An integral element in public discourse about Islam is the insistence that it is the first of the major world religions to truly liberate women and that the Qur'an guarantees parity with men in terms of both rights and responsibilities unparalleled in other scriptures. A few verses in the Qur'an, such as chapter 4, verse 34, that suggest men have authority over women are the focus of continuing discussion between male leaders of Islam and Muslim women who find traditional interpretations to be unreasonable and oppressive. If God is just, they argue, and the Qur'an is God's word, then what seems inequitable and thus apparently unjust in the Qur'an must simply be reinterpreted in a more evenhanded light. Some American women academics are arguing publicly that new interpretations must be suggested to challenge what they identify as the male bias of Qur'an interpretation and that women are the ones who must undertake this exegetical task.

Finding a Marriage Partner

In traditional Muslim cultures marriage is negotiated by families, though this is undergoing significant change and rethinking in many Islamic societies today. Some immigrant groups in both the United States and Canada still adhere to arranged marriages, although with subtle differences from traditional expectations. Such customs vary with the length of time that immigrants have been in the West. Many younger women refuse to accept such arrangements, insisting that they are capable of making their own choices or that God will lead them to appropriate unions. Popular Muslim journals are sometimes used by individual men and women, or their families, to "advertise" for a mate, with very specific descriptions of the characteristics desired in a mate—such as piety, age range, or special interests—and the qualifications of the available partner.

These journals also publish articles on the elements of a good Islamic marriage, what potential partners should be looking for, and the importance for both parties of a well-thought-out and reasonable marriage contract. Female advocates and others are prompting young women to be wise in their insistence on such a contract as an essential component of a truly Islamic marriage, urging them to see that a carefully crafted contract can

be an effective deterrent to future problems in the marriage. The importance of *mahr*, or dowry, as essential to a valid Islamic marriage contract is also stressed. Challenging the traditional understanding of *mahr* as a kind of bride-price, they insist rather that it is the element of the contract that makes clear the conditions by which a woman is willing to engage in marriage. Many young Muslim women, while accepting the importance of this contractual element, are using it as a way not only of providing security for themselves but of ensuring a fair and equitable basis for marriage by insisting that the amount not be more than the male can easily afford.

Socialization of young women and men is a very important issue for American Muslims. Some families do not allow either boys or girls to date or socialize with each other, within or outside the community. Others apply a double standard and allow boys freedoms not available to girls, often engendering feelings of frustration and anger on the part of the daughters. Some acknowledge that life in America involves a degree of capitulation to American culture and leave it up to their children to make wise and Islamically informed choices. When young people find the allure of American teen culture too appealing to resist, parents experience great consternation. Alternative means of socialization are being developed both locally and nationally, opportunities for youth to meet and get acquainted that do not involve the dating process *per se*. Mosques and Islamic centers feature activities for mixed groups of chaperoned youth, bringing them together through service opportunities or social encounter. Organizations such as Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA) and the Council of Muslim Communities of Canada (CMCC) invite youth to conferences, summer camps, and other activities in which they interact with members of the opposite gender but not in all activities and with carefully selected adult chaperones.

Muslim Marriages

According to Islamic law, Muslim men may marry Christians and Jews (the so-called People of the Book or those who have also been the recipients of God's revelation), but Muslim women may only marry Muslim men. Men naturally take advantage of this alternative more often in the United States and Canada than in societies where Islam is the dominant culture, putting an additional burden on young Muslim women who may find that the pool of available partners is very small. Marriage has been considered a sacred institution in Islam, despite the fact that it is not a sacrament in the Islamic understanding but a legal contract guaranteeing rights to both partners. Remaining single has not been an option for women in most Islamic societies but is

being entertained by a few Muslim women in America for whom finding a suitable partner is difficult, who resist the traditional practice of arranged marriages, or whose pursuit of vocation or career makes marriage a choice rather than an expectation.

Some Muslim women are even opting to contravene Islamic law and marry outside the faith. To the alarm of many families, the incidence of interfaith marriage is clearly on the rise, with Muslim women marrying Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and others. For more traditional Muslims in America, particularly immigrants from conservative cultures, not only are interfaith marriages totally unacceptable (often for men as well as for women), but even interethnic, international, and interracial Muslim marriages are to be avoided. Some young American converts are expressing their frustration that potential marriage partners are inaccessible to them because of the insistence of families that their children, especially their daughters, marry "one of their own."

The custom of marrying one's cousin is still followed in certain immigrant communities, although this practice fades with length of residence in the West. Other families view marriages between two Muslims as such a preferable alternative to an interfaith marriage, or no marriage at all, that they are supportive of almost any such union. Certainly Muslims who are born in the United States or Canada are more open to marriage outside the narrow restrictions of family or racial-ethnic identities. Some unions have taken place between Sunni and Shi'i partners, although neither community looks officially with much favor on them. In American culture where many Muslims do not consider themselves observant, and may even identify as secular, intermarriage between those who are practicing Muslims and those who are not is also increasingly common. There are very few instances of marriages between immigrant and African American Muslims.

The Qur'an allows men to take up to four wives on condition that they relate equitably to all. Throughout the history of Islam this permission has been interpreted as a sanction for polygyny on the part of those males who could afford it. Current exegesis of this Qur'anic permission, however, stresses both the particular conditions under which such a practice is supposed to be observed (e.g., a lack of males in the community and the concern that a single woman be outside a conjugal structure) and the acknowledgment also in the Qur'an that it is extremely difficult to relate with complete fairness to more than one marriage partner. American law also clearly stipulates that polygynous marriages are illegal. While it is not legally possible for an immigrant to bring more than one wife into the country, some have managed to get around this stipulation. In both Canada and the United States there are some instances of Mus-

lims in polygynous (usually bigamous) unions, but not more than is true for other American groups such as the Mormons.

In the early days of African American Islam, particularly in the Nation of Islam, polygyny was sometimes seen as appealing. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, since taking over leadership of most of the former Nation members, has spoken out forcefully against the practice as not consonant with the expectations and requirements of American society. A few African American groups still participate in polygynous marriages, sometimes with the justification that it counters the "absent father" trend in African American culture and helps create solid family units in which all females are provided for. Certain immigrant communities, particularly African, continue to engage in such marriages, although the practice is certainly not supported by the leadership of American Islam. While an imam might sanction polygyny if the partners are not U.S. citizens, and if foreign embassies approve, none will perform or honor such marriages if they are not contracted before entry into the country. Virtually all Muslim women in America as elsewhere oppose polygyny.

Family Disruption

Of greater concern to many Muslim women than the possibility of a cowife is the fact that traditionally divorce has been easier for men to effect than for women. The Qur'an stipulates that the *talaq*, or divorce decree, must be a three-month affair, assuring both that the wife is not pregnant and that the husband is serious in his intent. Islamic law does provide for the barely permissible possibility that the triple statement of intent to divorce can be said at one time. This has been an all-too-common practice in many Islamic societies. While many governments are acting to make it illegal, the threat still lingers in the minds of many women. Spokespersons for Islam in America are clear in their counsel to men that they should not resort to such an option. Divorce is also possible for women to initiate according to Islamic law, although generally the acceptable grounds for such divorce are much more specific than is the case for men. Muslim women, particularly those well versed in Islamic law, are active in helping Americans understand their rights according to Islamic as well as civil law.

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that there was nothing more hateful to him than divorce, and certainly the sanctity of marriage is a strong theme in Islamic culture and in American Muslim communities. Nonetheless, the traditionally low incidence of divorce in Muslim families is rising in both the United States and Canada. Although U.S. family law recognizes Islamic marriage without a civil ceremony as a form of

common-law marriage, it does not recognize Islamic divorce, which may lead to legal difficulties. Muslim leaders are active in calling for careful counseling for couples before they enter into marriage, as well as for those who are experiencing difficulties within their marriages or after divorce has been effected. While it is traditional for a Muslim father to take custody of both boys and girls at a relatively young age, divorced mothers in America are much more often allowed to keep their children. There is great concern that children of divorced parents are more likely than others to lose any active affiliation with Islam and to cease participation in Islamic activities, including holidays and festivals.

Violence and sexual abuse within the Muslim family, while formally condemned and certainly abhorred by women, is being recognized as an evil in the Islamic community that must be faced and addressed. The Qur'an verse that has been understood to grant men authority over women concludes with the injunction that men also have the right to beat them (however lightly) if they are disobedient (i.e., if wives refuse to acknowledge the conjugal rights of their husbands). Contemporary Islamic discourse in the West as elsewhere strongly condemns any such activity as wife-beating and favors a range of alternative interpretations of the real meaning of the verse. Whether done out of belief that it is sanctioned by scripture or simply part of a pervasive American phenomenon to which attention is increasingly being called, sexual abuse is being identified and addressed with candor in the Muslim community. Abuse of wives by husbands tends to be tolerated more by first- than second- or third-generation immigrant families and less by those who are educated in the principles of Islam and are aware of the campaign against spousal abuse in American society at large. Muslim leaders and agencies are working to eliminate this injustice that they argue has no place in Islam.

Women's Changing Roles in Family and Society

Many Muslim women in America are giving increasing attention to appropriate ways to relate to the wider contexts in which they find themselves. What does it mean to be Muslim in American society? The roles that women play in Islamic culture(s) are generally related to factors such as age, family relationships and responsibilities, and status in the community. In traditional societies it is very clear that expectations for females are specifically related to their movement from childhood through puberty, marriage, and aging. American Muslims are actively engaged in the effort to identify which elements of Islam are essential, mandated by Qur'an and Sunna (the way of life exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad), and which are cultural rather than religious.

Definitions of women's roles are clearly subject to cultural and ethnic variations that come to play as Muslims try to determine how closely they want to or are able to stick with traditional ways and what kinds of adaptations or changes are desirable or necessary in a new context.

Immigrants from more traditional cultures often find that opportunities available to them in American society are unacceptable or undesirable in terms of family and community expectations. Part of the struggle for women is to determine what they want in the new culture, what price they are willing to pay for it in terms of parental or conjugal disapproval, and what the implications of different choices may be not only for themselves but for their children. Often these choices are related to matters of education and employment.

While educational opportunities are often unavailable for women in home cultures, and education for women is sometimes frowned on or disallowed, the situation is markedly different in the United States and Canada. Muslim leaders are vocal in their insistence that education for all Muslims was part of the platform of the Prophet Muhammad and that the Muslim community cannot function if all of its members are not as well educated as possible. Nonetheless, some families prefer not to have daughters or wives continue with higher education, fearing that it will discourage them from fulfilling responsibilities at home or expose them to currents and trends opposed to traditional Muslim structures. In general, however, support for women's education in the American Muslim community is high.

The matter of employment is more complex. While traditionally many Muslim men have not wanted, or allowed, their wives to work, circumstances are changing in many places of the world and clearly are different in the American context. Some families look favorably on women's outside employment because it allows women to use their educational training, brings in extra income, and gives women an opportunity for professional fulfillment. Women who choose to work in the public arena are faced with a range of choices. Are certain professions more appropriate for women than others? If there is disagreement about employment, should a woman contravene the desires of her husband and family? Will a woman be compromised in any way if her work situation puts her into direct and constant contact with men?

The mobility of individuals and families characteristic of American society presents problems for women who want to work. Uprooted not only from their home culture but also from the aid and support of extended families, many women who worked full-time in their countries of origin cannot do so in America because they do not have other family members nearby to help take care of the children. In some instances women who have ad-

vanced professional training choose to take time away from their work to raise their families, often resulting in their inability ever to rejoin the workforce. When elderly parents are in the home, often experiencing loneliness and isolation, added pressures are put on younger women to remain at home rather than go out to work.

Islamic Dress

Many American Muslim women are convinced that public participation in employment, whether it is blue-collar or professional, is directly related to the way in which they dress. The issue of "Islamic dress," which in its most common form means covering the hair, arms, and legs, has many dimensions. Women often believe that if they are dressed modestly, they are free to enter any profession because there is no danger that the men with whom they work will make unwanted advances. Unfortunately the very garb that in her own understanding, or that of her family, allows a woman to work may mitigate against her professional advancement or even getting a job in the first place. Many employers look askance at a woman wearing a *hijab* or headcover, fearing that customers or other employees will think it strange or that it may indicate some kind of religious fanaticism on the part of the wearer. The headscarf is sometimes prohibited in the workplace as part of general regulations against clothing that attracts too much attention. Ironically, regulations that may have originated in response to clothing considered too skimpy, such as miniskirts, now may prohibit clothing that serves the opposite purpose.

In recent years organizations such as the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR) are working hard to expose cases of prejudicial treatment in the workplace. Instances where women are not hired because of the scarf, or where it can be proved that they are not allowed professional advancement because of their dress, are immediately reported and publicized in the Islamic press and over the Internet. Companies who practice such discrimination may be forced to apologize, to reinstate or promote a female worker, or even to undergo special kinds of antidiscrimination training.

In Canada some Muslim students have been sent home from school for wearing *hijab* on the grounds that it does not conform to school dress code. The issue is of particular relevance in Quebec, where the headscarf is often interpreted as a political statement. Francophone Québécois may accuse those who wear the scarf of being anti-French in light of the strong French response against Islamic dress since the early 1990s. Even though such dress fits with Canadian policies of multiculturalism, many citizens of Quebec interpret it as one more critique of the French identity of many citizens of Quebec. Both Canadian and U.S. feminists have been

articulate in describing the *hijab* as a symbol of subordination and oppression of women. Such arguments affect Muslim women in several ways. While some adopt certain elements of the critique and are themselves articulate in opposing Islamic dress, albeit in their own terms, others deeply resent such "interference" on the part of those who are not Muslim. Oppression comes in many forms, they argue, not least from those feminists who want to save Muslims from what many believe to be a commandment from God.

Most convert women, though far from all, do decide to wear a form of Islamic dress. Some immigrants are content to continue wearing a version of the dress characteristic of their home cultures, and others adopt Western dress completely. Still others decide to dress more conservatively than they would have done in the societies from which they came. Most Muslim women do cover themselves in one way or another when they attend the mosque. Within the Islamic community itself the issue can be divisive. Those who choose to wear the *hijab* are sometimes sharply critical of other Muslims who are not comfortable with it or do not feel that it is appropriate for them. Those who leave their heads uncovered may consider some of their sisters a bit foolish in the degree of their zealotry. On the whole, however, Muslims try to respect the right of a woman to make her own decision about dress, as about other things, and wish that the rest of the American public would do the same.

Practice of the Faith

While many American Muslim women choose not to participate actively in the mosque or Islamic center, others attend prayer services regularly and support the public practice of Islam. Some immigrant women find that they have the opportunity, and thus the desire for, greater public participation in religious activities than was true in their home cultures. More are attending Friday prayers, lectures, or functions. In some of the larger Islamic centers, classes are held for women in the study of Qur'an and the Arabic language, even providing special instruction for the elderly. Muslim women's home study groups are a growing phenomenon in America. Young Muslim women have begun to engage in exegesis of the Qur'an and to participate in discussions of religious texts that used to be strictly an arena for men. A few lone voices are now being heard on the American scene calling for the institution of women as imams or prayer leaders; but thus far they are not influential, and the function of imam remains the province of males.

Following to an extent the model of women in churches and synagogues in America, many Muslim women serve their mosque communities not only by organizing bake sales and teaching classes but in some

cases serving as fund-raisers, moderators of congregations, and primary spokespersons in the public profession of the faith. Women who formerly would have attended the mosque only for special occasions are now participating in Friday (or Sunday morning) prayers and other special services. Without the support of an extended family, many women find that the mosque or Islamic center itself provides community and a context for socializing. Such participation has become especially important for those Muslims who feel that social interaction with non-Muslim Americans is to be avoided or for whatever reason choose not to have women involved in the workplace. Mosque attendance, formerly primarily for males, has become a family event.

Non-Muslims find it easy to question why Muslim women participate in prayer in a different area from men. Women pray either at the back of the hall behind the men, on one side with the men on the other (often separated by a partition), on a second-floor balcony where they can see the men and the imam below, or occasionally in very conservative mosques in a separate room with the service broadcast over a speaker or through closed-circuit television. Not all women agree on the most appropriate form of separation, and some feel that "separate but equal" is not served by extreme segregation. Virtually all Muslim women, however, say that not mixing with men during the prayer service is helpful for them, as well as for the men, in concentrating on the ritual rather than on each other.

Following one of the Sufi or mystical religious paths has a particular appeal for some women. While Sufism in America often has been more a New Age movement than a truly Islamic one, more recently there has been a growth in adherence to more traditional Sufi orders, with leaders trained in the classical disciplines. Some women are particularly attracted to practices of dancing or chanting. Even women who do not choose to participate in Sufi practices are increasingly emphasizing the spiritual dimension of Islam in their teaching and writing, trying to help their sisters understand that the religion is more than rules and regulations about dress and behavior. Women are increasingly articulate about the importance of Islam as a religion of reason, moderation and spiritual achievement.

Growing numbers of Muslim women in America recognize that their work within the community must extend beyond the traditional context of family and neighborhood and even beyond the often newly discovered context of mosque and Islamic center. They are engaging in different forms of community cooperation and in public efforts to help educate the American public about Islam. Mothers are working with public schools to share elements of faith and practice with teachers and non-Muslim children. They are cooperating with other interested citizens to see that school curricula are free of

demeaning stereotypes and inaccurate information about Islam. During the month of Ramadan when observant Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, some high school girls are making it their special responsibility to visit hospitals and nursing homes for the elderly, helping non-Muslims understand what the "fast" means for them.

Networking and Organization

Networking with other Muslim women, while it carries different connotations in America than in traditional cultures, is a natural move for many immigrants who have always had strong bonds with other women in the community. The informal nature of this activity is now being replaced by more formal structures, such as women's groups and networks that often function as extended families. They are new in a number of ways, however, not least in the heterogeneous nature of their composition, sometimes including both immigrant and indigenous women. Gatherings differ widely in purpose, from religion to support groups to agencies for political action. Muslim women's centers can be found in most major cities of the United States and Canada. Women work with each other in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civic organizations, health and educational agencies. Many have grown up participating in Muslim youth organizations and are extending their experience and training by taking their place in the leadership of the American Muslim community.

The list of formal organizations for Muslim women, both national and international, grows daily, many dedicated to bringing about better understanding of rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women. Among the most prominent are *Karamah*: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights; Rahima Foundation, which pursues charitable activities for Muslim families; the North American Council for Muslim Women (NACMW), which initiates programs and provides services to women; the Sisterhood Is Global Institute, which works to improve women's rights; Sisters in Islam, which reinterprets Islamic principles and practices in light of the Qur'an; and many more. Some differences naturally exist between organizations that favor *da'wa* as a primary activity and those more interested in women's rights per se; women who choose to be involved have a great range from which to select.

Few groups have been more active than Muslims in making use of the Internet to stay in communication with each other both at home and abroad and in using electronic means to work for equity for Islam in the Western context as well as for propagating the faith. The proliferation of women's Islamic organizations in Canada and the United States reflects to a great extent the opportunity for access to instant information and com-

munication. Most Islamic journals have sections or articles about or for women, with clear instructions as to how to connect with other women or to find assistance with particular problems, and the number of journals specifically for women is growing. Many are available online.

A Range of Choices

As broad as the spectrum of American Muslim women themselves is the range of possibilities open to them for involvement, or lack of it, in the many structures of American society. As women differ in terms of place of origin, racial-ethnic affiliation, education and professional involvement, and observance of Islamic practice, they also differ in the degree to which they choose to identify with American life and culture. Some decide to relegate their Islamic identity to the private realm or simply ignore it in the effort to "belong" and to succeed professionally and socially. This decision is applauded by some Muslims and criticized by others. At the opposite extreme are those Muslim sisters who try to reject the norms of Western culture and to dress, speak, and live in as close adherence as possible with what they understand to be the dictates of Qur'an and tradition. Still others find themselves between these alternatives, clear about their Muslim identity and willing to publicly claim it, perhaps participating in mosque activities or at least Islamic holidays, but not setting themselves apart from other Americans by practice or dress. Subject to pressures from within and without the Muslim community, women struggle to determine what is possible, acceptable, and workable. Some might wish that they could be more open about their criticisms of certain elements of Islamic tradition but do not wish to be seen as participating in American prejudice against Islam. Others regret that they are not able to be more public about their affiliation with Islam, or to wear Islamic dress, but know that such a choice would have serious professional and social ramifications that they are not able or willing to assume.

However they may choose to frame their responses, Muslim women who are working for a contemporary reinterpretation of Islam in the West are struggling to determine a viable alternative to traditional structures that have served to repress women, on the one hand, and to the influences of Western secularism (and sometimes feminism), on the other. Many call for women to exercise their right of individual interpretation of Qur'an and tradition. They see Islam as a dynamic and flexible system, rather than a static and rigid set of rules and regulations, and want to open up avenues of participation in which women as well as men are the public faces of Islam. In the process they will be very important contributors to the definition of an American Islam that

flows directly out of its many contributing streams but that will have its own structures, definitions, and contributions to make to the complex picture of religious society in the United States and Canada.

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