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## American Muslim Women: Feminism, Equality, and Difference

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**American Muslim Women:  
Feminism, Equality, and Difference**

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Abstract

American Muslim women face constant surveillance, stress, and pressure to change and adapt to mainstream society. In the United States, Muslim women find ways to negotiate their identities, express their concerns, and learn through their faith by means of Islamic scholarship, Islamic feminism, and reinterpretations of the Quran. They are reconciling their multifaceted identities with better understanding of sacred text as well as solidifying their desired gender roles within their communities. They are challenging norms and creating new spaces for themselves within the ummah as well as the United States. American Muslim women find courage, strength, and autonomy through Islamic feminist traditions, solidarity with like-minded men and women from their own and other faith traditions, and community-based outreach programs fueled by their faith and compassion. There is more to understand about these women than just their Muslim identities, or just their American identities.

Key Words: Islam, feminism, intersectionality, gender segregation, inequality, Quran

American Muslim Women:  
Feminism, Equality, Difference

Historically, women of many societies, races, and religious groups have been subjected to marginalization and inequality. *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World* reports that women are still the most disenfranchised as well as the poorest group in the world (Seager 2003:7). In western nations, people tend to overlook the inequalities faced by women in a global perspective. This is due in part to how mainstream media focuses on showcasing western women's improvements in social, political, and economic spheres as seen against those women portrayed as backward or belonging to the developing world. This takes attention away from the fact that many women face similar challenges across societies regardless of cultural differences of places of origin.

The kinds of marginalization faced by American Muslim women reflect those encountered by women on a global scale but have their own distinct contours. Based on ethnographic monographs, scholarly accounts, and documentaries, this paper analyzes the different views of American Muslim women about their role and status within their religious communities. I focus on the role of American Muslim women in the mosques they attend; the establishment of the first women-only mosque in America, opinions about Muslim women leading prayer, and the intersections among race, ethnicity, and religion in determining community norms. I also explore different reinterpretations of the Quran about women's roles by Islamic scholars as well as everyday practitioners and what these new interpretations mean to American Muslim women personally as well as for the ummah. I use anthropologist, Jamillah Karim's, definition of the ummah as a

simply as the “Muslim community” in its ideal form being a Muslim collective whole that consists of all men and women globally, regardless of ethnic differences (2009:3).

Across the world, women’s marginalization takes place in many different arenas. For example, it can look like limited access to community resources, whatever those may be. In Muslim communities, these resources may include equal space for women in the mosque, shared prayer space with men, the ability to lead prayer, or physical access to the mosque. Women are often separated from men within their mosques either by one-way glass, whole walls, partition structures, or they are placed in entirely different rooms or floors within the mosque. This separation makes some forms of involvement in the mosque difficult and limited as well as making some women feel ignored and disrespected. Some American Muslim women perceive that they have been experiencing marginalization of this kind for decades within their communities. Muslim women have referenced different feminist traditions, including Islamic ones, to push back against their marginalization. Feminism here is not just the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes but also the religious equality of the genders, and definitions of feminism vary.

In her ethnography, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah*, Jamillah Karim defines Islamic feminism, as a strategy used by Muslim women to analyze and identify gender justice and to negotiate their roles within their Muslim communities with reference to Islamic scriptures such as the Quran and Hadith traditions. Islamic feminists differ from other feminists to the extent that Islamic feminists place utmost importance in legitimating and justifying their gender ideologies within Islamic scriptural traditions (Karim 2009:92-93).

In this paper, I discuss how some American Muslims women believe that gender separation within the mosque is degrading, limiting, and unnecessary with regard to religion. I show how these women are using different feminist models, including Islamic feminism and other feminist traditions, to seek gender equality within as well as outside the mosque. They seek equal access to imams (prayer leaders), seminars, teaching opportunities, leadership, and physical space within the mosque. They sometimes gain support from other likeminded Muslim women and men as well as community leaders. In contrast, I also examine how some American Muslim women assert that gender separation is beneficial for the community. These women believe that gender separation allows them more control of their own space and roles within their faith. Like progressive feminists, these attitudes of more conservative Muslim women are also rooted in interpretations of the Quran. These views also stem from culture of origin, ethnicity, and length of time spent in the United States

### **Intersectionality: How Cultural Wombs Shape Muslim American Women**

To better understand the different ideologies, interpretations, and understandings of Muslim women in America, we must first understand the context in which these differences exist. These women are much more than Muslims and even after their misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and mistreatments by American government and mass media they are still American.

The United States is a mosaic of multiple cultures, religions, and languages. Therefore, intersectionality is relevant and real in the lives of most American citizens. Intersectionality is a sociological term coined to explain how every person has several

different identities that are intertwined and influence who they are. According to intersectionality theory, a person can be American and can Muslim, in addition to many other identities like a woman, mother, daughter, student, and worker and so on at the same time. These different identities do not exist independently of one another, but rather ebb and flow with one another to create a complex, multifaceted individual who is constantly growing through each of these overlapping identities.

Cultural geographic, Anna M McGinty, studies the complexities inherent in Muslim women's experiences in American in her article "*Faith Drives me to Be an Activist: Two American Muslim Women on Faith, Outreach, and Gender*" (2012). McGinty elaborates on the notions of intersectionality by saying that these women are not only influenced by their faith but also race, ethnicity, place of origin, education, class, age, and sexuality (2012:373).

American Muslim women's identities are molded and shaped by what anthropologist and activist, Zarinah Al-Amin Naeem calls "cultural wombs" in her book *Jihad of the Soul: Singlehood and the Search for Love in Muslim America* (2009). Naeem explains: "A cultural womb is a place/field/space that cultivates and nourishes human development while preparing individuals for life outside its borders (26)." According to Naeem, for many Muslims not just in America but also around the world, the first and most important womb is that of Islam. The second womb proposed by Naeem is that of America: as a nation, a cultural influence, and as a place that values individualism (2009:32) Fatima, a Pakistani-American who was featured in Naeem's ethnography, says:

I'm Muslim first. So there are things that I can't do that are normal here: drink, dance with guys, have sex. After that there are things in the American

culture that if they don't contradict any religious beliefs I can adapt. That's how I think about the American culture. And the South Asian Culture? Same thing. I'm Muslim first, if there are things in my culture that aren't Islamic I can challenge them (like the idea of women being your chef and laundry maid). (Naeem 2009:31)

This quote from Fatima shows us that not only are there elements in the dominant American culture that do go against her faith, but that there are also elements of American culture that don't pose an obstacle to her religious identity. As she navigates American culture while to some extent adapting and to some extent contesting its dominant norms, she continues to assert that above all else she is Muslim first.

### **The Prayer Heard Around the World**

On Friday March 18, 2005 Dr. Amina Wadud gave the Friday khutba (Arabic for sermon) and led a congregation in prayer at the Synod House in Manhattan, New York. Even though this was not the first time a woman led the Friday prayer, this event was highly publicized and got the attention of supporters and critics from Muslim and non-Muslim communities around the world. This prayer was not only a physical form of activism but also was symbolic in that it showed Muslim women that they can find new directions for their faith. It showed women that they can take a different stand for their own religious authority and create novel spaces for themselves within their mosques.

Wadud's leading of the Friday prayer started a nation-wide debate about Muslim women's roles within their communities. In her 2012 monograph, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority and Activism: More Than a Prayer*, religious studies scholar Juliane Hammer discusses the meaning of Wadud's prayer in the context of developments taking place among Muslim women more broadly concerning women's



leadership, visibility, and space. In her analysis, Hammer explains that in her approach to the subject she considers each woman's experience with her own mosque as valid on its own terms (2012:6-7). Hammer also notes that the issues she discusses in her book are going to vary depending on the context of each mosque and that mosque's own community.

The issue of internal difference among Muslim Americans is important to keep in mind when considering the great diversity among Muslim women and men regarding their position on the role of gender in Islam. This balance of criticism and discussion is what makes the topic of American Muslim women and their mosque interesting, debatable, and relevant. There are cultural norms being tested and questioned. In scholarly and popular accounts, we find misrepresentations by dominant culture being discussed and changed, as well as religious traditions being interrogated by Muslim women who are looking for a change within their communities.

### **What Some Women Want: Space, Leadership, and Voice**

Space, leadership, and voice are important concepts and areas in which some American Muslim women are striving to gain equality. Hammer uses the word space to identify the physical and metaphorical boundaries women are expected to maintain within their communities and their mosques (2012:124-125). For some Muslim women, these boundaries are not a problematic issue because at their mosques, they have the ability to utilize the entire space in the same way as do their male counterparts. Other American Muslim women are part of mosques assign rigid boundary lines between men's

and women's spaces. Some women believe that these boundary lines make it difficult for them to excel in their faith and feel welcome in the mosque. Some women become so discouraged about gender lines at the mosque that they question whether they want to continue using the mosque as a place of prayer.

In her book, Hammer quotes Zarqa Nawaz, another Muslim feminist activist who has been working towards equality within the mosque through her documentary, *Me and the Mosque* (2005). In her documentary, Nawaz says, "Muslims always seem to be talking about the injustices done to them by the outside world. But I rarely hear Muslims talk about the unfairness that exists within our own communities." Here, Nawaz is talking about the recent gender separation within her own mosque. She now must pray behind a one-way mirror so the men in her mosque cannot see her. According to *Women and the American Mosque*, a report published by the Islamic Society of North America in March of 2013 66% of mosques surveyed used dividers to demarcate women's prayer space (Hartford, 2011:4). That is over half of the mosques surveyed that separate their congregation by gender with a wall, partition, or one-way glass.

Asra Nomani is a Muslim feminist activist, journalism professor, and founder of the Muslim Women's Freedom Tour (MWFT). As part of the MSFT, Nomani set out to (re)claim the physical and metaphorical spaces for Muslim women in American mosques (Hammer 2012:125). She organized several marches throughout North America where women would rally together and march into their own mosques through the main entrance and straight into the main prayer hall and pray as a form of retaliation and a symbol of equality. These protests occurred all across the United States and in several

different mosques Nomani marched on her first mosque for this project in June of 2005. She also was the lead organizer of Amina Wadud's woman-led Friday prayer in New York in March 2005 (Hammer 2012:15).

As detailed by Hammer, Nomani's idea for this project came from her experiences during her pilgrimage to Mecca (2012:130). During her hajj, a required and sacred trip for all Muslims to the Ka'ba in the holy city of Mecca, Nomani was encouraged and uplifted standing next to men and women at the Ka'bah to pray together. Her trip to Mecca coupled with the recent gender separation within her own mosque motivated Nomani to find Islamic scholarship to support her claims of equality. She could not understand how Muslims from all around the world could pray peacefully next to one another in Mecca, one of the most holy and pious places, but that men and women could not pray together in her home mosque due to issues of modesty and piety. She sought out historian Asma Afsaruddin at the University of Notre Dame and enlisted her help in finding Quranic support for her Women's Freedom Tour. Afsaruddin once wrote that, "women's present marginalization in the mosque is a betrayal of what Islam had promised women-" (cited in Hammer 2012:130).

Afsaruddin supports this claim with evidence of how women were treated and encouraged during the time of the Prophet. Many of the men and women who are searching for Islamic scholarship to advocate for women's rights in the mosque say that a lot of what is in place now is based on what has been interpreted, reinterpreted, or misinterpreted from early texts that provide information about the founding period of Islam.. For example, one of the Imams from Zarqa Nawaz's documentary told her that

interpretations of the Quran and Hadiths are always changing and that is why he was for women's rights in the mosque and his congregation was not separated (*Me and the Mosque* 2005).

The "Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque" (IBRWM) was composed by Nomani in 2004. It was created to resemble the US constitution in that it is a list of ten rights women should have within their mosques. The IBRWM states, "Women have an Islamic right to hold leadership positions as prayer leaders, or imams, and as members of the board of directors and management committees" (cited in Hammer 2012:135).

Out of the mosques surveyed for the *Women and the American Mosque* 87% reported allowing women to serve on their boards, but only 59% actually have women serving on their boards (Hartford, 2011:4). This statistic shows that in many contexts, women are still not allowed to hold positions of power within the communities. Not one of the mosques surveyed had women on the board at the time of this study.

### **Finding Strength in the 'Mother of Islam'**

Before Hammer delves into the contemporary movements that are compelling American Muslim women to branch out and find their own voices within their communities, she examines the past. She explains that although the separation of the sexes has been occurring cross culturally in Muslim communities for centuries. These gender separations have not always been in place. Islamic scholars draw from the founding period of Islam and on the Quran for support on many women's issues about autonomy, authority, and gender justice. Religious and scholarly women have been

searching for the silenced narratives of women in historical Islam as well as reinterpreting the narratives of existing women in Islam. These new leaders have been searching for examples of women, who like them, had a desire for authority, autonomy, and equality within their communities.

For example, it is common for Muslim women laypeople and scholars to draw from the story of Hagar, who is considered the mother of Islam, as an example of persistence, perseverance, and strength of Muslim women (Hammer 2012:95-97). Hagar was an Egyptian princess who married the prophet Ibrahim (pronounced Abraham among Christians and Jews) because he was growing older and worried that he would not have a son to continue his legacy. Hagar bore Ibrahim his first son, Ishmael (pronounced Ismael among Christians and Jews). After the birth of their first child, Ibrahim's first wife Sarah became jealous of Hagar and the infant and asked that they be taken away. Ibrahim looked to Allah for an answer, and Allah told the new father to take Hagar and their son into the desert towards Mecca and to leave them there. Sarah did not fear when Abraham left her, because she understood it was the will of Allah to take her there. In the desert there was little water, so Sarah had ventured out into the desert seven different times between two hills to find water. On her last voyage for water, an angel appeared to Hagar and told her that Allah would provide water for her and her son. A spring burst from the ground; this is still a holy well in Mecca today. Later in his life, Ishmael and his father constructed the Ka'bah, a holy site in Mecca that all Muslims are enjoined to pilgrimage to at one point in their lives. This is why Hagar is remembered and revered as the mother of Islam. Her courage and trust in God makes her an ideal woman and mother figure. In

her book, Hammer quotes Riffat Hassan, an interlocutor in her ethnography and practicing Muslim, saying

The story of Hagar is important not only for the Muslim daughters of Hagar but for all women who are oppressed by systems of thought or structures based on ideas of gender, class, or racial equality. Like her, women must have faith and courage to venture out of the security of the known into the insecurity of the unknown and to carve out, with their own hands, a new world from which the injustices and inequities that separate men from women, class from class, and race from race, have been eliminated. (2012:95)

Hassan is an activist and writer who focuses on the discussion of women's rights as human rights derived from the Quran. She attributes her Muslim perspective to the story of Hagar. This passage and its interpretation by Hassan and others like her shows how deeply the story of Hagar resonates with progressive Muslim women and how she has become a symbol of hope and encouragement, to no longer settle for the perceived inequalities they are facing within their communities. This passage also shows how important feminism is to Islam.

Importantly, for Islamic feminists, feminism is not just about women (Karim 2009:18). For Karim, Islamic feminism centers around the goal of reaching what she calls the "ummah ideal," which she defines as: the equality of all peoples in all spaces that can include social spheres, economic classes, and political groups as well as religious communities (2009:7). Nomani and Hassan talk about how Islam is meant to help eliminate boundaries, to make it so all peoples are equal and treated always. The idea Ummah, according to Karim, is a combination of commitment to brotherhood and sisterhood as well as justice (2009:7). Karim writes:

A Muslim is the brother of a Muslim. He neither oppresses nor humiliates him nor looks down upon him. Piety is here- and he [Prophet Muhammad] pointed to his chest three times. It is evil enough for a Muslim to hold his Muslim brother in contempt. All things of a Muslim are inviolable for another Muslim: his blood, his property, and his honor. (2009:7)

This passage demonstrates Karim's views that even the Prophet Muhammad knew that community understanding and justice was necessary for the idea Ummah. Thus we can see that some Islamic feminists trace gender justice to founding a goal that cannot be achieved by excluding women. (Karim 2009:181).

### **The Quran: New Interpretations and Personal Understandings**

With the increased conversation relating to women and gender justice within mainstream American culture, such as found in the Me Too movements and before that, such discussions are also happening among minority groups as well. For American Muslim women, these discussions start with the Quran.

Besides leading the famous prayer in New York, Dr. Amina Wadud is also a religious studies scholar known for her works on Quran interpretation. In her book *Quran and Woman* (1992), Wadud describes how women's perspectives can influence their own interpretation and the limits of interpretation around what the Quran says about women and their roles. Wadud writes: "The Quran was a political, social, spiritual, and intellectual catalyst for change in the lives of the immediate community of the people in the Arabian peninsula" and still guides millions of Muslims through their lives today (1992:iv).

Following Wadud's work the Quran's role within the conversation about women, feminism, and equality a range of contemporary American scholars have also written on this theme. As discussed below, this includes figures such as pathologist Asma Lamrabet (2016), political scientist Asma Barlas (2012), and education scholar Nimat Barazangi (2012). Muslim women academics such as these are leading the conversation towards reinterpretation as well as a deeper, more interpersonal understanding of the Quran for Muslim women.

When interpreting a sacred text such as the Quran different approaches as well as contextual understandings can be beneficial to those who are searching for new meaning. Wadud describes how previous interpretations of the Quran have left the woman's voice and understanding out of the context (1992:2). She points out that there have been three ways in which to approach the Quran: traditional, reactive, and holistic (Wadud 1992:1-3).

Reading the Quran in a *traditional* manner, implies reading the entire book, verse by verse, with certain preconceived objective in mind. These types of translations and interpretations have been done exclusively by men and from the male perspective (Wadud 1992:1-2). A *reactive* interpretation of the Quran is used to explain the poor conditions and statuses of Islamic women around the world and this interpretation is used as a justification for the way in which these women and opposers of the Quran react to these situations (Wadud 1992:2). A *holistic* approach to the Quran takes into consideration the historical context of the writings as well as modern circumstances like social, moral, economic and political climates (Wadud 1992:3).



Taking all these approaches into consideration, Wadud adapts a hermeneutical model that she uses to reconstruct interpretations throughout the Quran. This approach consists of three aspects: context in which the Quran was written, grammatical composition, and the text as a whole. Wadud adopts this approach from Islamic philosopher and reformer Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988). This ideology is fairly new and is constructed from the female perspective (Wadud 1992:3-4). Intersectionality plays a large roll in interpreting the Quran. Many scholars accept that each individual's experiences will help shape and mold their understandings. Our identities change our world view and help us shape out knowledge and understandings. Female scholars like Wadud take these aspects into consideration within their own work. Wadud once said:

Mercifully, the more research I did into the Quran, unfettered by centuries of historical androcentric reading and Arabo-Islamic cultural predilections, the more affirmed I was that in Islam a female person was intended to be primordially, cosmologically, eschatological, spiritually, and morally, a full human being, equal to all who accepted Allah as Lord, Muhammad as prophet, and Islam as din. (Hammer 2008:446)

Along with other feminist scholars such as Asma Barlas (2012), Wadud believes that her work not only represents women in Islam but her personal beliefs and understandings of what Islam is for women and to herself (1992:1).

In order to reinterpret a text holistically that was written several hundred years ago and in a complex language, it is important to take into consideration the way in which the text has been translated over time, grammatical changes, and the historical context of that language. Wadud (1992) makes an important stance in her book that prior knowledge, understanding, and cultural context of every individual reader is going to

alter their interpretation. This along with different languages and contextual settings of each rewrite into a new language can change certain meanings of certain verses. She does not see Arabic as a sacred language, but she does make the argument that the Quran was delivered in Arabic at the place and time that it was to make it more comprehensible to those who were receiving it. In Wadud's opinion "it is unfathomable that the Lord of all worlds is not potentially multilingual" (cited in Hammer 2008:452). By this she means that the messages of the Quran are meant to be understood and translated into many forms. Barlas also makes the argument that since we are able to translate the Quran into different languages than we should be able to interpret the Quran in those languages and in those contexts (cited in Hammer 2008).

Therefore, we can interpret the Quran in an English translation in relation to the American dominant culture for which some Muslim women live. These reinterpretations are important to men and women within Islam for many reasons. Barlas once said during her interpretative process "On the one hand, I am partly a prisoner of oppressive readings of the Quran by Muslim patriarchies, I say 'partly' because to some extent I've been able to free myself by rereading the Quran along the lines I've described" (cited in Hammer 2008:447-448).

According to Lamrabet's *Women in the Quran: An Emancipatory Reading* (2016), these new found understandings create new found forms of liberation for Muslim women. This is not liberation from men, but the liberation of women to seek spiritual strength, a strong sense of self, independence, as well as religious and individual autonomy over one's personal and spiritual affairs (Lamrabet 2016:8).

When Islamic scholars set out to better understand and reinterpret the Quran from their own female point of view, many of them, along with other feminist activists, look to beginning of creation for support in their claims for equality and feminism. The Judeo-Christian narrative of the creation of man and woman has plagued the stereotypes of women for centuries (Lamrabet 2016:9-10). The long-standing ideology that woman was made from man, in some traditions, has been interpreted in ways that have given rise to a intense hostility against women and a sense of their inferiority compared to men. Additionally, the fact that the blame has been placed entirely on the first woman for convincing Adam to disobey God and pick the fruit from the forbidden tree has also been used to support misogyny.

Interestingly, these two narratives of the first woman, her creation, and her role in the fall are told in a different fashion in the Quran. For many scholars who work with reinterpreting the Quran, the creation of humankind is an interesting story that speaks of equality and individual responsibility.

In the Quran, sura an-Nisa' 4:1, a verse that speaks about the creation of human kind says, "O Mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women" (cited in Lamrabet, 2016:10). The actual Arabic terminology used throughout this passage is gender neutral depending on how one reads the passage and translates the verbiage. Lamrabet and Wadud depict this verse as stating that man and woman, or Adam and Eve, were created simultaneously and equally in one moment out of the same divine energy. This means that the Judeo-Christian belief that Eve was

created out of Adam and for Adam is wrong, and that men and women have been equal being since the beginning of creation. This story also gives ways to one of the major themes of the Quran, dualism. Which is part of its weltanschauung (world view).

After the story of creation, the second most influential story is that of Adam and Eve and how they were banished from the Garden of Eden. The Judeo-Christian story places blame on Eve for the banishment of all humankind from this holy place which places emphasis on women being intrinsically evil and inferior to men. However, in the Quran it is both man and woman that are held accountable for their disobedience and the emphasis is placed on individual conviction and responsibility as opposed to resting on Eve's shoulders. According to sura al-An'am 6:164, "And whatever [wrong] any human being commits rests upon himself alone" (cited in Lamrabet 2016:18). These reinterpretations of the stories of creation change the dialogue in which women should be talked about when it comes to creation and sin.

The profiles described in the Quran, male or female, are used to show living examples of real struggles, strife, godliness, and holiness amongst humankind as shining examples of how humans are expected to live and follow Allah. Many female scholars have pointed out that if Islam were meant to be segregated and women inferior, women would not accompany the men in the Quran as strong leaders, scholars, educators, and examples of what a good Muslim should be. Many Islamic cultures view a women's sole purpose and most holy place within society is that of a mother, the nurturer. This is a noble position and role for a woman, but that is not all that woman consists of. As Wadud and Lamrabet point out in their books, before a woman is a mother she is still a woman

and in that womanhood is the complexity and intersectionality of all that she is. Women referenced in the Quran are mothers, diplomatic leaders, scholars, and keeper of the Quran itself. During the time of the Prophet, women held positions of power, led prayers, and let their womanhood shine in all that they did. Over time, the cultural, regional, and patriarchal interpretations of the Quran lost these diverse depictions of powerful, independent women in the Quran.

### **Ethnicity and Race: How They Affect Opinions and Ideals**

Karim has focused much of her work on the intersection between gender, race, and ethnic identities in determining people's identity and status. In her ethnography, Karim's main goal was to have a better understanding of the ummah that is found in large, racialized cities in the United States (2009:3-4). Her study focuses on how race, ethnicity, and culture of origin play into gender roles and create gender lines within the Muslim community. Karim studied South Asian and African American communities. In two large cities, Chicago and Atlanta, that were either dominantly South Asian, or dominantly African American. She collected her data moving from mosque to mosque and interviewing women to understand their ideas about ethnic lines, gender roles, and cultural borders.

Karim's research in Atlanta, Georgia, which consisted predominantly of South Asian immigrants, found that her informants' opinions on gender lines within the mosque varied upon ethnic background. Most of her South Asian interviewees didn't see the separation of gender in the mosque as an issue (Karim 2009:180-181). Auntie Asma, a

South Asian Muslim, attended the Masjid Rahmah in Atlanta, Georgia (Karim 2009:184). This mosque's population is primarily South Asian. When women started to immigrate from their South Asian countries of origin and attend the mosque in Atlanta, they were given the basement to use for prayer. Auntie Asma did not interpret this as women being lower or second-class citizens to men, or as a means of degradation or disrespect, instead she saw it as a blessing to have a space for women while they save money to create a new space for them. She came from a place where women were not allowed to attend prayers at mosques, which is why utilizing the basement was not seen as derogatory, but was appreciated (Karim 2009:184). In fact, some of the women preferred the separation because it allowed them to better concentrate on their own prayer.

During her research in a predominantly African American area in Chicago, Karim found that African American Muslim women did not share the same ideas about gender separation. Most of this was attributed to the ethnic and racial history of African Americans in the United States. Many of these women felt that to segregate men and women would backtrack many of the equal rights movements African Americans have been striving for, for decades in America. (Karim 2009:107-109)

Karim's research in Chicago showed her that gender lines and separation can be more fluid. Meaning that there were mosques in which men and women were separated and then there were mosques that were not separated. Karim and some of her informants in Chicago attributed this gender fluidity to the already existing separation of black and white races in America. Many of these individuals felt that the black community has been segregated and has suffered at the hands of separation enough and they would not want to

impose those feelings on themselves again when it came to their religion and religious freedoms. However, in spaces where gender separation did exist the women found alternate ways in which to form a community, leadership, and practice Islam in their own ways.

Like Karim's ethnography, Nawaz's documentary, *Me and the Mosque* (2005) also focuses on gender boundaries at the mosques. Nawaz traveled across North America, from mosque to mosque, to interview women and men about their ideas on gender segregation, feminism, leadership, as well as issues they face within the mosque, specifically dealing with gender lines (2005). Like Karim, she found that ethnic backgrounds did play a role in women's opinions. She was able to gain perspective from both men and women about gender lines throughout her research. Her research was sparked by the recent gender separation within her own mosque in Canada. She came from a mosque where men and women were originally allowed to be in the same space and would pray together. But through reinterpretation of the Quran and underrepresentation of women in the mosque, their council deemed it necessary to remove women from the main prayer spaces and to separate the men and women by one-way glass so that the men cannot see the women.

Nawaz found that many women, like Karim's informants, had mixed feelings about gender separation within the mosque. She found men and women that were both for and against separate gendered spaces. During the film, she interviewed one imam who had a barrier between the men and the women in the congregation. Throughout their interview, he refused to call it a barrier, but preferred the term partition. Some women in

Narwaz's documentary, similar to those Karim interviewed, reported that they appreciated the separation because they felt that it allowed them to better concentrate on their own prayer. Nawaz's mother, who is from the Middle East, also felt this way. Back in her country of origin women were not even allowed to enter mosques. Upon her arrival in North America she, like the South Asian women in Atlanta, felt a sense of welcoming and happiness from just being able to be in a mosque, separated or not.

Anthropologist, Garbi Schmidt, also studied Muslims in urban areas, including Chicago in her ethnography *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago* (2004). She found that women of gender separated congregations would still learn and grow in their faith together in their separate spaces away from men. There were several organizations that Islamic communities in Chicago had organized and created to keep everyone within the community engaged and fulfilled. These programs are geared towards women, children, and the community. They offer leadership positions, study time, Islamic scholarship education, and group activities for their respective communities. (Schmidt 2004)

### **Creating Novel Spaces: Opportunities for Space and Leadership**

Some American Muslim women are determining to push against the limited space, limited access to community resources, and limited access to leadership opportunities that were available in their congregations. For some of these women, the lack of physical space stemmed new ideas and new kinds of outreach. Among such initiatives are The Women's Mosque of America and the Muslim Women Organization.



In 2015, The Women's Mosque of America was founded by a group of Muslim women who felt that their mosques were not providing them with all of the resources and opportunities they needed to grow in their faith. The purpose of The Women's Mosque of America is to encourage, support, and welcome Muslim women from all walks of faith (The Women's Mosque 2018). American filmmaker and founder of The Women's Mosque of America, M. Hasna Maznavi, saw that there was a need in the Muslim community for women to have their own space and it was her dream to create this space. However, Maznavi wanted the rest of the onlooking world to understand that the creation of this mosque was not to escape oppression from men. In an interview conducted by Women in the Word and published in Groundbreaker, a journal, by Kristen Root, Maznavi says:

Instead of being seen as a celebration of Muslim women, The Women's Mosque of America was erroneously being framed as a "liberation" from Muslim men. As tempting as it may be to believe that we Muslim women are a monolithically oppressed group of Jasmines waited to be saved from big bad bearded Muslim men, this couldn't be further from the truth." (cited in Root 2015)

By this Maznavi means that Muslim women are not an oppressed collective whole that needed to create their own space to escape the overpowering grip of Muslim men. She is saying simply that there was not room for herself and other Muslim women to do what they desired and to live and to express their faith in the ways that they wanted, so they set out to create a mosque for themselves.

Hammer (2012) discusses the way that some Muslim women across the country yearn for leadership. This implies the ability to not only take control of their faith but to

also see Islam through the woman's perspective. At The Women's Mosque of America the khutbahs, or sermons, is always given by a woman. Although traditionally, the khutbahs have been restricted to men, there is nothing stated in the Quran against a woman leading the sermon. However, as Maznavi observes, like Christianity and Judaism and other religions that are culturally rooted in patriarchy, male leadership and dominance is imbedded in the essence of some of these practices according to tradition, not to the actual religious documentation within the Quran. Many view this mosque not as a new wave of feminist act, but as a way to delve back into traditional Islamic roots. In the time of the Prophet Muhammad, there were men and women leading prayer and women have been scholars and teachers of Islam since its creation. Maznavi recalls that in the early days of Islam, thousands of women were responsible for keeping the spirit of Islam alive and her hopes is to regenerate that passion within women in Islam today.

This organization's hope is to empower women to do more, be more, and expect more from their own communities. According to their website:

The Women's Mosque of America seeks to uplift the Muslim community by empowering women and girls through more direct access to Islamic scholarship and leadership opportunities. The Women's Mosque of America provides a safe space for women to feel welcome, respected, and actively engaged within the Muslim Ummah. It complements existing mosques, offering opportunities for women to grow, learn, and gain inspiration to spread throughout their respective communities. (The Women's Mosque 2018)

Not only is this representation of physical space but it also offers the ability to learn Islam through the female perspective. This mosque is for women only, and it has the means to always be a mosque for women only. Even though women are the only ones who are

allowed to attend sermons and prayers, when the mosque hosts special events and speakers the mosques does open its doors to any and all who would like to join. The American Women's Mosque is a non-profit organization that is completely run off donation and community support and it is the first successful women's mosque in America, although there are several others worldwide. Separating women from their own communities has forced and encouraged them to take their faith into their own hands in order to create an environment that is fruitful for all women, even if their home mosque does not give them what they require to excel in their faith.

One of the most beautiful things about The Women's Mosque is that it has been a collaborative effort between men and women. Again, this discredits the notion that this mosque was created as an escape for Muslim women away from Muslim men. According to Maznavi, the men of the American Muslim community have been positive and welcoming of the Women's Mosque. Scholars, imams, and the husbands, children, and family members of these women are encouraging and excited to be a part of an inclusive, women friendly environment. When Maznavi gave her first sermon, her husband really wanted to be there to support her and to hear what women have to say. She continues to say in her interview that:

We are coming up at the right moment. The overwhelmingly positive response we've gotten is a testament to the timing and the real need that exists out there, and certainly there are naysayers but there always are. I'm proud that we haven't let the naysayers define the conversation- they are the outliers. The supporters are the dominant voice." (cited in Root 2015)

When Maznavi talks about the right time being now, she is referring to the many advances women are making and striving for as a collective whole within the United

States. This is the right time for a dominant cultural shift and understanding that is empowering women to move forward and create their own space within the greater patriarchal society.

### **Islam: A Motive for Activism**

Then there were women like Ithra. Ithra was not just an Islamic feminist, but she also had a strong community and social feminist role outside of her mosque. As an activist, she had been pushing for equal rights for men and women both inside and outside of the Muslim community. She understands that American society has been founded on the oppression of women, and she is trying to change that. In Nawaz's documentary, Ithra says that she will start by changing the norms with the tongue, and then change norms with actions. By this she means to say that she is going to stand up for what she believes in and first try to change the way women are talked about and the ways in which women can or cannot speak within the mosque and then begin to fight for physical space within their communities.

The Muslim Women Organization (MWO) was founded in 1993 with a goal "to serve the community broadly, but also to present a positive image of Muslim women" (McGinty 2012:377). These women are professional, coherent, and many of them are covered. They set out to their local schools and other organizations within their community to counteract the misrepresentation of oppressed Muslim women. Nadra is one of the women who founded the MWO and she says that it is her faith that pushes her forward and how and why she continues her activism. In an interview she said that due to

the events of 9/11 and so many people attacking her and her religion, she did not have a choice but to be more visible and active within her community because “Islam says ‘you have to speak the truth...’ and we really have to dispel all the negative things that are being said about Islam. And I think, as a woman, I can do that so much better than a man” (McGinty 2012:379). She also says that zakat, or almsgiving, is one of the most profound pillars of Islam that lead her down this path of activism. Through her interpretation of this pillar, she feels like she has to share her wealth of knowledge and benefits with her community for what she possesses is not really hers, because it was given to her from Allah, and that this is Allah’s will. She says, “I’m a vehicle to do what Allah had really blessed me to do” (McGinty 2012:380).

As for Samira, she believes that any small task done to benefit a community can be seen as activism. She feels that there is no excuse for not contributing to making positive changes within you communities. Samira says that faith is what helps her advocate against acts of injustice. “It is a drive. It is what drives me. I believe it drives me. ...As Muslims we are taught that if one part of your body hurts, your whole body will ache. The same counts for the society... So for me, it becomes part of who I am, and what I really just feel I have to do” (McGinty 2012:382). Women like Ithra, Nadra, and Samira are on the forefront of activism, not just Islamic, not just women, but all kinds of feminist activism that looks to create a better experience for all of humanity.

Activism within one’s community can be triggered and influenced by things such as morality, compassion, or faith. For some Muslim women, activism is a positive outlet and outreach into their communities, and it is driven by their relationship with Islam and

their Quranic understandings. Some believe that after the attacks on 9/11, increased community outreach has opened the doors of opportunity for Muslim women to take action in the form of “public roles being adopted by Muslim women are vital in the process of defining, and redefining, the meaning of American Islam (McGinty 2012:374).

### **Conquering the Stereotype**

Now, all of this debate and information about women’s rights, gender separation, lack of female leadership, and racism may seem to fuel the rumors and stereotypes that we see day to day about Islam being an oppressive and sexist religion that intrinsically is against women. However, this is not true. All areas of power and leadership create dissonance between certain groups. Not all parties are equally represented, equally treated, or equally heard. This balance of power creates stratification in all communities that all members must learn to navigate. This holds true for things like politics, education, and of course religion. In her book, *Islam is a Foreign Country* (2014), Assistant Professor of American Studies and Religious Studies at Yale University and Director for the Center for the Study of American Muslims at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Zareena Grewal discusses how important Islam is to the women who practice it and how important women are to Islam. Grewal’s ethnography discusses how newly converted or young American Muslims are navigating their religion, exploring their own diasporic feelings, and how they are experiencing learning Islamic scholarship in foreign, dominantly Muslim countries outside of the United States. One of the greatest victories in modern day Islam, according to Grewal, is the conversion of white American women to Islam, without any prior exposure to forms of proselytization (Grewal 2014:

221). These conversions of white American women who have always had the freedoms and privileges that come along with being white in America show that Islam is welcoming to all women. Islam encourages women and promotes and advocates for women. If Islam was such an oppressive religion that is harsh to women, why are American women who have been born with all of the freedoms and rights in the world still converting to Islam?

By separating women and limiting their access to positions of leadership, women's voices have been nullified and muted. Hammer sees this as a problem. According to Hammer, a woman's voice has been associated with a part of her sexuality (2012:144). Therefore, to hear a woman recite the Quran or have her lead prayer could tempt men (Hammer 2012:144). The idea of a mixed congregation brings forth concerns that a woman's presence would distract men from their concentration on prayer and worship (Hammer 2012: 144). This is an interesting concept that has been debated throughout several different spheres within society. Girls in public schools, girls on university campuses, and now women in their sacred places of prayer are being taught through the actions and legislations of others that their bodies are a negative distraction when in the presence of men. Should we instead come from a place of understanding that any person, man or woman, can control their actions regardless of who is in their presence and what they are doing. This feminist thought that peoples of different gender are equal should apply here and to these spaces of prayer. A woman's body or voice should not be deemed as a temptation or distraction.

## Conclusion

On Friday, March 18h, 2005 a nationwide conversation was started. Some American Muslim women found guidance in Amina Wadud and her actions. These women started to question the norms of their communities and their mosques. By compiling the stories of these women and data collected about American mosques, we can see that American Muslim women are going to continue to find new avenues to gain equality within their communities. By finding a voice through feminism and support through Islamic scholarship, American Muslim women are going to continue to branch out in new ways in order to create the space, leadership, and voice they desire. Through the continued efforts of Islamic feminist scholars like Wadud, Nawaz, and Hammer Muslim women are going to be able to see real examples of women performing the leadership roles that they wish to hold.

By creating new spaces for women, like The Women's Mosque of America, women are going to continue to excel in their faith as well as learn more and more about Islamic scholarship and what it means to be a woman in Islam. The women who make up the diverse, intellectual, and ever present American Muslim communities are constantly reshaping the dialogue used to describe who they are and what they do. These women have directed this conversation to instead of being about them to being told by them.

As American mainstream culture continues to misunderstand and misrepresent these women, American Muslim women are committed to telling their truths and reshaping stereotypical Islamic narratives about women in Islam through means of direct



communication, interpretations of the Quran, and community outreach and activism.

These women will continue to find themselves through their faith and multiple identities within the social and cultural constructs of America.

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