

# A place for women

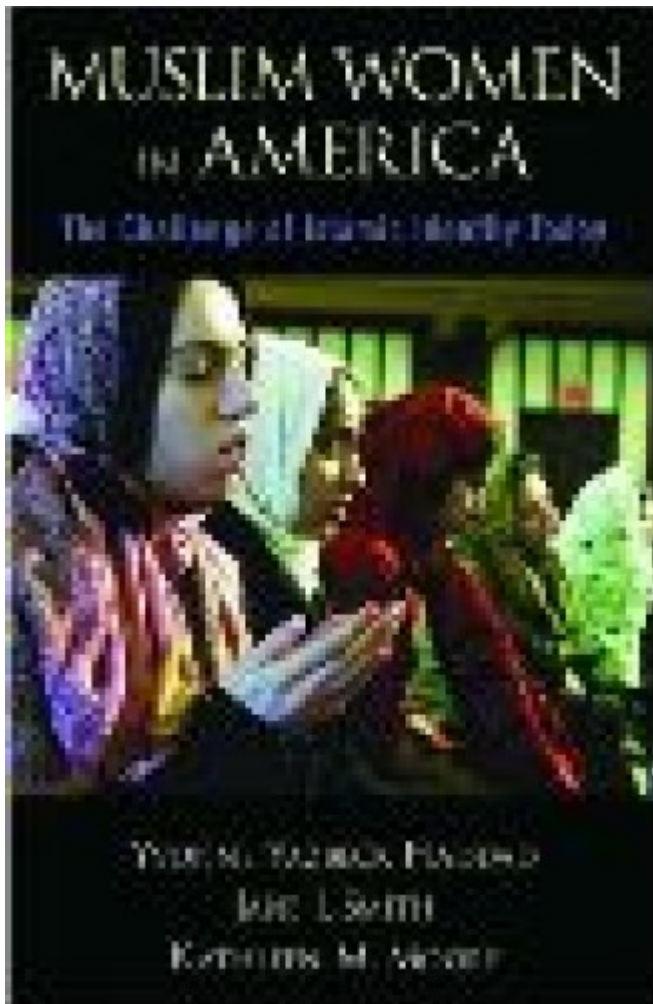
By [Trudy Bush](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## **Standing Alone: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam**

Asra Q. Nomani  
HarperSanFrancisco



## **Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today**

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith and Kathleen M. Moore  
Oxford University Press

When Daniel Pearl was kidnapped by Muslim extremists, he and his wife, Mariane, were visiting his *Wall Street Journal* colleague Asra Nomani in Karachi, Pakistan. Nomani, an American Muslim of Indian ancestry, and Pearl, a Jew, were close friends. In the weeks following the kidnapping, Nomani's house was command central in the search for Pearl, who was eventually beheaded, his execution videotaped and shown on the Internet.

During this traumatic time Nomani's Pakistani boyfriend deserted her, and she discovered that she was pregnant—a crime that could land an unwed Muslim woman in a Pakistani jail. These events catapulted Nomani into a journey to discover the

core truths of Islam and women's place in that faith. She was transformed from a quiet woman who passively accepted her religion to an outspoken leader determined to reform it.

Soon after her son was born, Nomani decided to make the hajj, the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia's Mecca and Medina that every Muslim who has the means is required to make once in a lifetime. This visit to Saudi Arabia, the most conservative and repressive of Muslim societies, further radicalized her—but not in the way one might expect.

In some ways Saudi Arabia was much as Nomani thought it would be, a place where a woman can get into trouble for letting a stray wisp of hair escape from her headscarf or for going out without her male protector. But other things surprised her. On the hajj men and women from all over the world pray side by side and have equal access to mosques and holy places. Why, then, she asked herself, are women closed off and segregated in the great majority of American mosques?

In Mecca Nomani followed the path Hagar took to find water for Ishmael, her child by Abraham. The pilgrimage became a meditation on the great women of Islam—especially Hagar, the prophet Muhammad's wife Khadijah, and his daughter Fatima. Through them she found the courage to be truthful about her unmarried state and to take pride in her devotion to her son. "I had come to Saudi Arabia thinking of myself as a criminal who needed to avoid detection and in the midst of a deep spiritual conflict over my son's conception," she writes. "I left having nursed my son on the sacred ground of the Ka'bah, having liberated myself with truth on the sands of Arafat, and having vowed to throw whatever stones I could at the forces of darkness in the world." She describes the process of finding her voice and gaining the courage to become a reformer, often comparing herself to Martin Luther.

In the years following the hajj, Nomani's stone-throwing has upset many American Muslims but has been a catalyst for change in the Muslim community. Her primary targets have been the unequal treatment of women in many mosques and the inflammatory rhetoric that issues from some pulpits. When she wrote an article defending Amina Lawal, a Nigerian woman who had been sentenced to death by stoning as punishment for having a child out of wedlock (and who was eventually freed), she discovered a worldwide network of Muslim women working to change women's position in Islam. Their support, she writes, helped convince her that there is a place for her within her religion. She decided that she would raise her son as a

Muslim.

Nomani sees herself as among those who are striving to create an American Islam. Moderate Muslims, she argues, mustn't sit silently by while extremists, militants and "puritans" declare themselves the protectors of Islam; instead they must take back the faith. An important way to begin is by freeing Islam from many of the culturally conditioned ideas about sexuality—for example, that a family's honor lies in the virginity of its unmarried women, that women must not speak in public because their voices are sexually arousing and that women and men must not pray together since women's presence distracts men from their prayers.

As she tried to become more active in her Muslim community in Morgantown, West Virginia, Nomani found that her battle for an equal place in the mosque needed to begin there. At Morgantown's new mosque, adjacent to the university campus, women had to pray in a small balcony where they could barely hear what went on in the main prayer hall. She requested that the mosque have "equity in access, accommodation, facilities, and services." In the course of her long and discouraging—but finally victorious—battle for women's access to the prayer hall, she met and was supported by a number of Muslim women, many of them academics. With them she also organized the first public mixed-gender prayer service in the U.S. led by a woman. It was led by Qur'an scholar Amina Wadud and held in a building in the Washington Cathedral complex, since no mosque would agree to be the venue.

As Nomani, her mother and her sister-in-law sat isolated in their Morgantown prayer hall—the only women who would venture there—she became alarmed at the content of the sermons preached by graduate students from other countries. These sermons urged Muslims to hate non-Muslims. "As far as I could tell, they were *not* espousing violence," she writes. "But they *were* on that slippery slope of dogmatism and intolerance that is extremely dangerous to democratic society." Though America has not always been a "paragon of tolerance . . . it is vitally critical that [American Muslims] nevertheless rise to the highest principles of America's and Islam's benevolent teachings." She discovered that the incendiary sermons came from the Web site of an imam in Saudi Arabia and protested against their use in her own and other mosques.

Nomani sums up her work as follows: "As Muslims in America, we are engaging in . . . a struggle for the renewal of the soul of Islam. We aren't trying to change Islam.

We are trying to question defective doctrine from a perspective based on the Qur'an, the traditions of the prophet, and *ijtihad* (critical thinking)." Through the hajj, "I was blessed to come to know the pulse of the true spirit of Islam. As a result, I was prepared to join the quiet tide of reform that is very much under way in U.S. Muslim communities. That movement eschews bigoted, sexist, and intolerant practices that betray Islam, the prophet Muhammad, and all of the good people who call themselves Muslims."

It's a goal with which many Muslims would agree, though they would not necessarily agree with Nomani's methods. The vehemence of her criticism and the publicity-attracting nature of her actions is likely to feed hostility toward Islam, they fear. Though many applaud her mining of the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* (the way of life exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad) and Islamic history for the "true Islam" that seeks justice and equity for everyone, including women, some might object to her use of a Western reformer of Christianity rather than a Muslim reformer of Islam as her model. As a journalist she is adept at drawing media attention to her activities, and the criticism that she likes the spotlight is not without reason. For example, she organized a women's march into the main prayer hall of the Morgantown mosque, with full media coverage, months after the mosque had agreed that women were welcome to pray there.

Nomani's objection to the hateful rhetoric occasionally heard in some mosques is important. Most American Muslims are upset by it and disagree with it, but they challenge it quietly within their mosques. Perhaps every reform movement needs its extreme figures, people who are willing to go to great lengths to articulate and publicize their cause.

A valuable context for understanding Nomani is provided by Yvonne Haddad, Jane Smith and Kathleen Moore's study of Muslim women in the U.S. These well-respected scholars of Islam—affiliated with Georgetown University, Hartford Seminary and the University of California at Santa Barbara, respectively—present the lives of observant Muslim women in all their diversity and complexity.

It's a time of ferment and change for Muslims as they face post-9/11 hostility—often toward women who wear Islamic dress—and work to define themselves as both loyal Americans and faithful followers of Islam. Recent surveys suggest that some 20,000 Americans a year are converting to Islam, with women outnumbering men by approximately four to one. And Muslim women—recent immigrants and native-born

Americans, lifelong Muslims and new converts, traditionalists and radicals—are claiming their right to study and interpret the Qur'an and are finding in it an affirmation of justice and equity for women.

The stereotyping of Muslim women has a long history in the West. In the past the image of the subjugated, ignorant Muslim woman was used as a pretext for colonial domination and for Christian missionary endeavors. In the present the liberation of Afghan and Iraqi women has been among the reasons cited for U.S. military actions in those countries. Yet the U.S. government's earlier support of the mujahideen contributed to the Taliban's power to impose extreme restrictions on Afghan women, and these women were already working for their own liberation before U.S. intervention. Iraqi women were free to practice the professions of their choice and enjoyed considerable freedom before the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Now, the authors point out, "in a political environment of increasing hostility toward Islam, the manipulation of gender to reinforce the so-called 'clash of civilizations'—portraying Islam as oppressive of women and the West as liberated—has placed Muslim women in Western societies in an extremely difficult position."

This is particularly true of the increasing number of women who are choosing to wear the *hijab*, or headscarf. Haddad, Smith and Moore present an interesting, though far from comprehensive, discussion of why many women—including the majority of converts—are electing to wear Islamic dress. Muslims cite modesty and protection against sexual objectification as primary motives. For many young professional women, Islamic dress is also meant to signal an identity that faithfully adheres to Islam but has nothing to do with being subjugated, backward or allied with terrorism. Women are choosing to wear the headscarf even though they know it may make them the targets of hate crimes and the victims of discrimination in the workplace, just as Christian women in different times and places chose to wear crosses or fish symbols even if doing so subjected them to persecution.

"Why any Western woman would choose to become a Muslim is quite beyond the comprehension of most Americans," begins the chapter "Embracing Islam." Yet many women find Islam compelling. For African Americans, Native Americans and, increasingly, Latinas, Islam seems a shelter from and challenge to white racism, a help in dealing with urban problems and a source of ethical strength. Islam's emphasis on the family and respect for elders resonates with Latinas and Native Americans. Some women become Muslim because they marry Muslim men (though Christian and Jewish women who marry Muslims are not required to convert), but

many convert for theological reasons, because they think Islam makes more sense than Christianity. Women who have struggled with the doctrines of original sin, the Trinity and the atonement are drawn to Islam's strict monotheism, and they "appreciate the action-consequences formula of Islam, whereby each person . . . is directly accountable for everything said and done during a lifetime." Islam's emphasis on community and on maintaining strong family units is attractive to many women, as is its insistence on the importance of raising children well and on men's responsibility to support women who want to make this their primary life's work.

The authors don't gloss over the difficulties many women face when they decide to convert. Many are afraid of hurting their families or becoming alienated from them, and they fear society's attitude toward Muslims. And, of course, not everything about life in the Muslim community is ideal. Converts vary in how public they are about expressing their new religious identity, but the majority begin or join study circles in their mosques and make their voices heard. "Far from rejecting their identity as Americans, they find in Islam a more valid way of expressing the values that they believe to be consonant with the America they love," Haddad, Smith and Moore write. In 2006 Ingrid Mattson, a Canadian convert to Islam and professor at Hartford Seminary, was elected to head the Islamic Society of North America, the continent's largest Muslim organization.

Incomprehensible though it may be to many, women converts insist that Islam is the best religion for women. They mine the Qur'an and the Sunnah to find the "true Islam" that insists on equity between men and women. They critique the patriarchal attitudes and practices that have overtaken Islam in many places and work to define a model of womanhood that gives equity and respect yet differs from how women are viewed in the West.

Muslims prefer to speak of equity rather than equality because they tend to see the roles of men and women as complementary rather than identical. Like the Europeans who colonized Muslim countries during the 19th century, many believe that women's sphere is the home, while men's is the public arena. Women have the major responsibility and power in the raising of children and in all things domestic. This viewpoint has not prevented American Muslim women from being as highly educated as their brothers, nor has it kept many from pursuing demanding professional careers and, increasingly, playing a visible role in the public world.

Though “Muslim feminist” may seem an oxymoron, that is how some Muslim women define themselves. They are quick, however, to distinguish Islamic from secular Western feminism. Muslim feminists want to find parity between men and women without insisting that men and women play the same roles in family or society. They refuse to see the nuclear family or motherhood as sources of women’s oppression. And, like Christian feminists, they believe that the equality and liberation of women is divinely mandated. They are convinced that “Islam is eternally valid at all moments in history but that it contains an inherent flexibility that allows it to be applicable to changing times and circumstances.” They question not the validity of the Qur’an but “its interpretation by male scholars,” and they challenge the “prescriptions of the traditionalists, the reactionaries, and the fundamentalists.” Nomani’s work is a good example of such an approach.

In contrast to the rest of the world, in which mosques are primarily prayer halls entered only by men and boys, in the United States mosques function more like Christian congregations or Jewish synagogues. Women play an increasingly active role in them, though in most they pray separately from men. Unlike Nomani, many Muslim women don’t object to this segregation. They like the freedom of praying and socializing with other women. The prostrations that are part of the ritual prayer make them feel uncomfortable about praying next to or behind men. About half of the immigrant mosques in America now allow women on their governing boards, though only a quarter actually have women in those positions.

*Muslim Women in America* discusses women’s practice of the five pillars of Islam—recognition of the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad, ritual prayer five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying the yearly alms tax, and going on the pilgrimage to Mecca. The authors point out that many women in the West choose not to follow all of these practices, finding, for example, that performing the ritual prayers at the prescribed times each day is too difficult, especially in the workplace. Many are, however, devoting themselves to study. Like Nomani, they “are convinced that by closer study of texts and traditions they can have a voice in the reformulation of an Islam that is truly gender inclusive and appropriate for living as Muslims in twenty-first century America.”

What is a Muslim family? How do young people find marriage partners in a religious culture that forbids dating and tends to segregate men and women from each other? Haddad, Smith and Moore devote a fascinating chapter to answering these and similar questions. For immigrant families the mosque community often becomes the

substitute for the extended family they've left behind. For women the problem of finding a husband is complicated by the fact that Muslim men are allowed to marry Christian or Jewish women, but Muslim women are permitted to marry only Muslim men. Many young people at colleges and universities simply ignore the restrictions on dating and mingle freely across gender lines, as other Americans do. Web sites, chaperoned singles evenings, newspaper ads and marriage brokers help those who try to do things the traditional way.

Chapters on the increasingly public role played by Muslim women, on the competing discourses of women scholars and on the ways American courts are handling cases involving Islamic family law round out the picture. Haddad, Smith and Moore pack an enormous amount of information into a relatively slim book—and for the most part they do so in a lively, compelling way. In the course of their research they have spoken with many Muslim women, and they often let those women speak for themselves. One of the book's achievements is that it gives a sense of the diversity of the American Muslim community and of its dynamism as its members wrestle with the problem of how to be both good Americans and good Muslims who have a valuable perspective to contribute to American society.

In this time when Muslim communities feel threatened, we need desperately to understand these increasingly visible Americans. These two books go a long way toward helping us do so.