

A woman's place—at the mosque

How American Muslim women are transcending barriers to leadership.

by [Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue



Muslim women praying at the Women's Mosque of America in Los Angeles. Photo © REUTERS / Lori Shepler

When Zariah Horton stepped to the front of a mosque in Los Angeles last year and prepared to address a congregation of Muslim women, she was assuming a position she never imagined being in. She had attended *jumu'ah*, or Friday prayers, at mosques in the United States for decades, but the idea of leading prayers herself had never felt like an option, because she had only seen men in the role.

"It never occurred to me, I guess due to the gender factor," she said.

But when the Women's Mosque of America opened in Los Angeles in 2014, Horton's ideas began to change. The Women's Mosque is exclusively for women. Women lead all aspects of the Friday prayer service, including making the call to prayer, delivering the sermon, and leading the congregation in prayer—activities

traditionally performed by men. (According to most Islamic scholars, women are not permitted to lead men in communal prayer, but they can lead other women.) The Women's Mosque meets at the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles, transforming a room in the church by putting up banners emblazoned with the names Muhammad and Allah in Arabic calligraphy.

Last September, Horton decided to lead the prayer, an experience she said was initially scary, but ultimately important for developing religious leadership skills. "It's important that women put ourselves out there," said Horton, a psychotherapist and life coach based in Los Angeles.

The Women's Mosque is one example of the ways Muslim women in the United States are taking on new positions of religious leadership. Without challenging the tradition that only men can lead mixed-gender congregational prayers, women across the country are assuming all other aspects of religious leadership, including pastoral care and education, and expanding the idea of what Muslim authority looks like.

Zaynab Ansari, women's scholar in residence at Tayseer, an Islamic seminary in Knoxville, Tennessee, said that men's role as prayer leaders has long created the perception that women have no place in spiritual leadership. Women in positions like hers are challenging the community to think differently.

"All of a sudden a community can see that women can serve in some sort of capacity as a religious or spiritual leader," she said. "It's inspired people to think about the possibilities of women in leadership in different ways."

Women's leadership in the Muslim community is not really new, said Sylvia Chan-Malik, author of *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* and a professor of women's and gender studies at Rutgers University. In the early 20th century, she said, women were key to African-American Muslim groups such as the Nation of Islam, and women built many of the institutions that helped it thrive.

Within the structure of the Nation of Islam, Chan-Malik said, women's activities in the home and in teaching children were seen "as integral components of nation-building, of building a strong black nation that would liberate African Americans and give political, economic, cultural and social power to African Americans. So women were always central."

Muslim immigrants started coming to the United States in greater numbers following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which expanded the number of immigrants who could enter the country from the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa. As Muslim women entered the professions, they started forming professional groups, Chan-Malik said, such as associations for Muslim women doctors and lawyers. They also became leaders of Muslim nonprofits, charities, media, educational institutions, and interfaith groups, making them public figures outside the realm of the mosque. Perhaps the most high-profile example of such a leader was Ingrid Mattson, who in 2006 became the first female president of the Islamic Society of North America, an umbrella organization of Muslim groups.

Though not directly challenging tradition, women are taking on new leadership positions.

Securing official leadership positions inside mosques took longer. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, professor of the history of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations at Georgetown University, said a turning point for women's visibility was the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. When the rhetoric of war on terror emphasized liberating Muslim women from the oppression of Islam, she said, Muslim men in the United States combatted that idea by making space for women as leaders.

"Nine-eleven in a sense had men stepping back from leadership positions," said Haddad, author of the 2006 book *Muslim Women in America*. "The women were pushed forward to say, 'We don't need liberation, Islam liberates us.'"

For Ansari of Tayseer Seminary, the emergence of women as religious leaders has been part of the evolution of US mosques. As American Muslim communities grew in size and affluence, they expanded the types of activities and services that they offered—and that created new spaces for women to lead.

In the United States, the role of imam has expanded "far beyond what you might see in premodern or traditional texts, where the imam was just a prayer leader," Ansari said. "The imam's role has had to expand in the American context, and with that brings along roles for women."

Ansari has seen this change in US mosques firsthand. After spending a decade in the 1990s studying at Islamic seminaries in the Middle East, she returned to her home in Atlanta and found that her opportunities to teach were limited. "Teaching in the mosque wasn't really an option at that point," she said, because many mosques had

“very conservative understandings of women’s role in the public sphere.” Instead, Ansari started teaching in her home, the homes of female students, and online.

In 2014, the Muslim Community of Knoxville invited Ansari to serve as women’s scholar-in-residence, an endowed position that gave her a chance to teach locally and travel the country to give workshops and engage in interfaith dialogue. She accepted the position, and in 2015, when the mosque launched Tayseer, one of the first Islamic seminaries in the United States, Ansari’s position was shifted to the seminary.

“Usually women find themselves in supporting roles or volunteering roles or behind the scenes work,” said Ansari. In creating her position, the community “was very intentionally creating and endowing a position for a woman to have religious leadership,” she said. “It’s still quite a pioneering role. You’re not going to see lots of communities, even well-established communities, that have official positions for women at mosques or major institutions.”

Students at Tayseer are taught subjects such as Qur’anic recitation and Islamic spirituality. Ansari said there’s also great interest among her female students in subjects such as Muslim women during the Prophet Muhammad’s time, women in the Qur’an, and marriage in Islam. Keeping up with the demand for learning has been challenging.

“To see a religious leader who is a woman, who’s versed in the traditions of the Prophet, and who has gone to some of the traditional centers of learning in the Muslim world—that’s something that’s very appealing to the Muslim community,” she said.

Ieasha Prime, director of women’s programming at Dar al-Hijrah, a mosque in Falls Church, Virginia, said women’s involvement in the community and the demand for classes and events designed for women was so high that in 2017 she decided to create an entire department of the mosque dedicated to serving women’s needs.

Because Muslim women have been actively involved in Dar al-Hijrah since its inception, it’s not something new for women to take positions of leadership, said Prime, who spent seven years studying Islamic sciences in Egypt and Yemen. “It’s not something new for them to organize beside their male counterparts, nor is it new for them to address their needs. But it is new to say, ‘Let’s formalize the issue.’”

The women's department at the mosque offers pastoral care and counseling, hosts weekly classes on women's issues, organizes an annual leadership summit to train women as leaders in broader society, and puts on the annual DC Muslim Women's conference, which provides intensive training in gender-based social justice activism.

Prime, who in 2017 spoke at the Women's March in Washington, DC, said the religious education and training women receive in the mosque also helps them outside the mosque.

Religion is not something that's only practiced inside of the home. "It's the very basis for why we believe in positive engagement with the larger community," she said. "It's important that women have a sense . . . that not only is your voice important in the mosque, but it's important in all of society."

Some roles women now have in mosques mirror positions women hold in the Middle East.

According to Haddad of Georgetown, some of these new roles for women in mosques mirror the types of religious leadership women hold in the Middle East. In countries such as Syria and Jordan, she said, women preachers teach in homes and speak in mosques during nonprayer times. Because they serve an exclusively female audience, Haddad said, the women are not seen as pushing the boundaries of what is religiously permissible. "There are a lot of enterprising women looking for space to operate."

Tamara Gray, founder of the Minneapolis, Minnesota-based educational nonprofit Rabata, said because Islam is a religion without clergy, some of the challenges Muslim women face in attaining religious leadership are distinct from those many Christian women face.

"Not having a clergy is sort of a catch-22," she said. "On one hand, we can say things like, 'There isn't a hierarchy that can stop you, like a glass ceiling.' There's no particular body that's telling women, 'Oh, you cannot hold leadership positions or you cannot learn this material.' On the other hand, we also don't have a body that's a legitimizing force."

The path to leadership in Islam is through scholarship. Muslims can attend seminaries and study one-on-one with teachers in order to attain an *ijaza*, or

traditional certificate in a specific subject or text. An *ijaza* allows Muslims to teach that subject and, eventually, to write opinions on how to interpret Islamic law and tradition. “You can’t attain religious leadership without knowledge,” said Gray.

While there are no rules preventing women from pursuing this type of religious education, many Muslim women in the United States still face barriers. Islamic seminaries like Tayseer are few, and traditionally trained female scholars, such as Ansari, Prime, and Gray, are also rare. And female students may be reluctant to have a close relationship with male teachers to avoid impropriety, said Gray—a problem in a tradition in which relationships with teachers are a major path to spiritual and intellectual growth.

These barriers are something Gray has set out to change. After spending two decades in Syria and earning several *ijazas*, she returned to the United States in 2012. She was struck by the lack of opportunities that Muslim women in the US have compared to Damascus, where she had easy access to classes and female scholars to study with.

“When I came back to the US, I met all these Muslim women who were very well-educated as far as their secular life—they were engineers, doctors, businesswomen, had master’s degrees in education, all sorts of education—but when it came to basic religious knowledge, there was a real gap,” she said. “So I decided I could give Muslim women of this country what I had been able to access in Damascus.”

That same year, Gray launched a pilot course for what would become Ribaat, an online Islamic seminary by and for women. The idea was to teach the Islamic sciences in a traditional way but in a safe space for women anywhere in the country, or the world. Gray said that 150 women signed up for the pilot class. Since then, Ribaat has expanded to offer 24 subjects, such as the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Qur’anic recitation and memorization, Arabic, Islamic law, hadith, and theology.

For Gray, it’s “absolutely critical” for Muslim women to have access to religious education so that they can participate in the legal and theological debates that shape the religion. Women’s voices had been an important part of building the early foundations of Islamic law and theology, she said, but in modern times, they’ve largely been excluded.

“When women’s voices are there, it becomes a ruling, a decision or a discussion for everyone,” she said. “When it’s only men, as sincere as they are, as good as they are, they just don’t have the same life experiences as women.”

Gray said that she hopes to see more mosques hire women scholars-in-residence, to fill the leadership gap in Muslim houses of worship. Programs such as Ribaati, she said, are building a pipeline of women who can eventually fill those roles. “It’s important to have women ready to take those jobs once they open up,” said Gray.

While education and scholarship is the path to religious leadership for many Muslim women, for some, like Rabia Keeble, founder of Qal’bu Maryam Women’s Mosque in Berkeley, California, it’s communal prayer leadership that’s in need of reform.

After years of seeing women “intentionally segregated in mosques,” Keeble set out to create a new paradigm. In 2017 she opened Qal’bu Maryam, a mosque run by women, where, unlike most mosques in the United States, women aren’t restricted as to where they can sit or which rituals they can perform. But unlike the Women’s Mosque in Los Angeles, Keeble’s mosque is open to men and women, so women often lead men in prayer.

“I just let them naturally decide how they fit where they want to fit,” Keeble said. “If they want to learn to do the call to prayer, they can do that. I’ve had several sisters do that. They’ll say, ‘I want to learn how to do this, because I’ve always wanted to learn how to do this.’ And it’s like, ‘Cool.’ And I’ll help them find people who can teach them.”

Qal’bu Maryam builds on the work of Amina Wadud, an African American Muslim scholar who in 1999 published the book *Qur’an and Woman*, a gender-inclusive exegesis that says the Qur’an advocates for women’s equality and argues that any ideas of women’s inferiority come from the men reading and interpreting the sacred text. Her exegesis became the theological backing for Wadud leading a mixed-gender prayer service in New York in 2005, which was said to be the first of its kind in the United States. (Wadud previously participated in a similar event in South Africa.)

Wadud’s actions led to enormous media coverage, but—with the exception of Qal’bu Maryam—the idea didn’t catch on in US mosques. The idea that women should be able to lead men in prayer remains very much a minority view.

According to a 2018 poll by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a research institute for the American Muslim community, the top ways US Muslim women said mosques could be made more welcoming to them would be to have women's committees, appealing women's spaces, access to the main prayer hall, and equal resources for women's programs. Women's prayer leadership did not make the list.

"There is a reverence for the tradition as it relates to the teachings and the experiences of the life of the Prophet, and Muslims are very reluctant to tamper with things like ritual prayer and the way ritual aspects of worship are enacted," said Ansari. "While you might see growing demand within mainstream communities for the empowerment of women, it doesn't extend to having a woman at the front of a prayer line."

Chan-Malik, of Rutgers, said that while the idea of women leading men in ritual prayer is still outside the Muslim American mainstream, she has seen mosques across the country experiment with other forms of women's prayer leadership, which, like the Women's Mosque, fit into traditional interpretations of Islamic law. One such technique, she said, is to have a woman offer a *dua*, or supplication, at the end of each Friday prayer service.

"A lot of mosques and congregations are trying not to duplicate that power structure," Chan-Malik said. "So even just the act of having a woman standing in front of the congregation is symbolically saying, 'We understand that we need to do this.'"

But for Keeble, Qal'bu Maryam—which she said has about ten people attending Friday prayer services—isn't just about women asserting their spiritual authority. It's also about creating a sacred space where everyone feels welcome.

"They can be who they authentically are, whether they're gay, lesbian, trans, whatever it is," she said. "They certainly are not bound up by tradition anymore."

"It's hard to tell somebody you can't give a sermon but you can be in Congress."

Perhaps the biggest challenge for Muslim women's leadership is one that all women face. "Women are struggling to be seen as leaders because Muslims are used to imagining men as leaders, and we share that with our sisters and brothers in other Abrahamic faiths," said Gray. "Sometimes it's not about law or theology—it's about

custom and what people are used to. When you say to someone ‘religious leader,’ they imagine a man.”

Ansari said the problem isn’t just with men: some women may also have difficulty accepting the idea of a female teacher or leader. “I don’t want to say it’s internalized misogyny,” she said. “But I think it goes back to the role models women were presented with in their formative years. Women are looking at male scholars, the *shaykh*, as their path to spiritual growth and development, and they don’t see women as offering them that potential. And that is a problem.”

Still, Ansari sees change happening as women in positions like hers serve as a model for what women’s leadership in a mosque can look like. She said that in the future, she expects mosques to hire women as “assistant imams” to do all of the work that imams do (including pastoral care, counseling, and education), except leading Friday prayers. These types of roles for women may be theologically acceptable for most Muslims, but it’s often difficult to convince mosques to allocate the resources to fund women to do them.

“You have to convince the committee that it’s worthwhile to invest in,” said Haddad.

For Horton, who led the Women’s Mosque in prayer last year, the cause of women’s leadership is being aided by the many Muslim women making headlines outside the mosque, such as Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first US Olympic athlete to wear a hijab, who won a bronze medal at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil.

With this year’s swearing in of the first two Muslim congresswomen in US history, Ilhan Omar, a Democrat from Minnesota, and Rashida Tlaib, a Democrat from Michigan, Horton said the case for Muslim women’s religious leadership is stronger than ever.

“It’s hard to say you’re not qualified or capable when you’re doing something else that shows strength of character, shows faith, shows leadership,” she said. “It’s hard to tell somebody you can’t do something—you can’t give a *khutbah* (sermon)—but you can be in Congress.”

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