

Assalaam alaikum warahmatullah wabarakatuhu,

I was asked for some input regarding the accommodations for women in our new Masjid. From visiting a vast number of Mosques, while living and working in the US and abroad (specifically Syria), and speaking to various women in this community and others, I think accommodations for women in our new Masjid must be carefully planned so that it fully welcomes and accommodates all Muslim women, including younger girls, college students, mothers with small children, older women, niqabis, etc.

THE MASJID, better known in North America as the Islamic center, or 'the mosque' is the community's center of spiritual, social, and activities: It is also the place where Muslims of diverse cultural and ideological backgrounds meet and interact. The diversity of interpretations of Islamic sources and practices has created tensions in the masjid, particularly where there is a tendency to impose strict interpretations about the appropriate place and role of Muslim women in the masjid and the community. An increasing number of young Muslim women complain of restrictive arrangements and practices impeding their ability to fully participate in educational and social programs. For example, some masajid restrict the main prayer hall to men and assign women to secluded quarters. Women are asking, "Is this the place Islam assigns for us, or is it the imposition of cultural traditions?"

Believing Men and Women are equal in worship and spirituality: The Qur'an (33:35) has stated the spiritual and moral equality of men and women in explicit and unequivocal terms. It stresses that both "believing men and women" have an obligation to develop themselves spiritually and morally and to fulfill their social responsibilities. The masjid is, and has always been, the center of moral and spiritual learning and growth. As a place for spiritual growth and development for all Muslims, it should be equally accessible.

The Qur'an (9:71) is also clear on the equal responsibility for developing the public good as "protectors and helpers of each other" who "(collaborate) to promote all that is good and oppose all that is evil; establish prayers and give charity, and obey Allah and his Messenger. Those are the people whom Allah would grant mercy..." Promoting public good and opposing evil are duties equally required from both, and the masjid is the place where Muslims can meet to plan community development and devise strategies for promoting public good. It is a public place for discussing issues of communal concern and responding to challenges facing the community and wider society.

Importance of making the *right* decision on how to accommodate sisters now: This decision is very important because once the Mosque is built changing the accommodations for women is impossible unless the Mosque is completely renovated or rebuilt. Once a certain standard is in place 'conservative' or 'liberal' it is just as impossible to change the mindset of people if we want to change the accommodations at a later time.

Importance of looking to the future: I suggest this decision should not just be made with the current population of Muslims in mind, but also the population of Muslims that will come in the next 50 years. This is not to marginalize older, perhaps more conservative brothers and sisters, but we must be visionaries as Islam says and look to our younger sisters, mothers with young children, young muslim couples etc and see what would be helpful and in their interests as well.

It is imperative for the future of our Ummah that we make sure the Masjid is a welcoming and open place for women: Women are the future of our Ummah in the United States according to many scholars, because it is they that will be teaching the next generation. It is they that are the mothers and teachers. It is they that influence much of family life and what goes on in a household. She decides much of the time whether or not to send her children to the Mosque. Women are half the Ummah (or more according to statistics), we cannot just leave them out of the loop and expect our Ummah to hobble on one leg. She must be educated Islamically, she must learn to love Islam for herself and her children.

Mosques must be women-friendly. If a Masjid is not welcoming, as a woman – even the most religious of women, I can tell you they will just not attend. If a woman would rather go to a shopping mall than the Mosque because they do not feel it is welcoming than we can just say our Dawah is over. The Mosques of today are not just prayer halls. They are Islamic centers, madrassahs, communication and news centers, social places, counseling areas, exchanges of information, support centers, learning places for our youth. We must make it open and inclusive for women. Women should have equal access to the Imam, to the Halaqas, to the prayer area, to the donation boxes, to the announcement boards.

Arguments against wall/onewayglass/separate room/closed-circuit television: The problem with partitioning off a sisters area to the back of the mezzanine is that the women are not able to see and sometimes hear the imam. This includes the prayer and also if he is to teach a halaqah or anything else. To just install closed circuit television or other technology is not useful because over time these things are not maintained very well and there are some women who find it wrong to pray in front of a television. (ie Albany mosque's television is off much of the time because the older aunties think it is wrong)

The problem with creating a room or installing a wall/or even glass that is see-through is that it forms an immediate barrier to participating in the Masjid. Women are enclosed in a separate area and are not seen or heard. This creates a psychological barrier for both the brothers and sisters. For example, if there is a halaqah, our only recourse is to somehow send notes through a young girl or come out to ask questions (who wants to do that?) or try to use a microphone that never works. In lectures, when the Imam cannot see the women we are mostly forgotten about. (Yes, I know from experience.) It creates a psychology that re-inforces the complete separation of men and women in a society where it is non-existent. We see each other when we come out to the parking lots, in our schools, in our jobs. To create this somehow charged atmosphere in the Mosque is just not right for the times and purpose we live in.

The tendency in blocked off rooms is that women become extremely loose. They begin to talk, lounge around and let their children run wild. I don't know if you can imagine trying to be in a jumah or a halaqah and the women all around you are talking, the children are screaming and crying, women are eating, etc. This happens with regularity because being closed off just does not give the same feeling as being in the same room as the session. Women are disconnected from the discourse because it just feels like a lecture being piped in.

Note the huge difference between the rooms at the Troy Masjid currently. The closed off room is always full of noise and kids and those who wish to listen come out into the second

room. This phenomenon is not unique to us. My sister who has attended a mosque in the Southwest with regularity and sisters I know at the MCA, Santa Clara Mosque (where both mosques have installed one-way mirrors) have attested to this over and over again. It just does not work. The women talk continuously during the khutbahs and sessions and do not respect the Masjid even after numerous admonitions and signs. We can say 'well it's their fault and they need to change their ways' but we must realize this is the *REALITY*. We must keep this in mind and DESIGN SOMETHING THAT WORKS.

Deeper problems with seclusion: Assigning women a separate and secluded space not only violates Qur'anic injunctions and the Prophet's practices and directives, but it is also detrimental to the spiritual and moral growth of women in particular and the development of the community as a whole. In addition to the psychological and emotional feelings associated with blatant seclusion and restriction, it deprives women of an active role in learning by impeding their ability to interact with speakers, ask questions, and offer comments.

Secluding women deprives the emerging Muslim community of a growing number of young Muslim women who expect-*rightly* so-that the masjid will not take away their right to actively participate in serving the community. When legitimate expectations are not met and when customs and cultural traditions are given priority, many women stay away from the masjid and, by extension, stay away from Islamic learning, Islamic activities, and the Muslim community.

Elevating imported cultural traditions and customs works against the very mission of the masjid, as it becomes an impediment to educating people of other faiths not to mention Muslims of different cultural backgrounds-about Islam. Historically, Islam took root in different communities throughout the world, accommodating local customs and cultures that were not in conflict with Islamic teachings. This process continues today, and no one cultural group can lay sole claim to Islamic authenticity. Muslims, of all diverse backgrounds, betray their mission and trust if they insist on imposing their customs and cultural traditions on others.

Equal access and the argument about the 'sunnah': I would like to mention that the "sunnah" of the Prophet (saw)'s mosque is that there was one wide space with the lines of men in front, followed by children and then the lines of women. If anyone would like to contend that we should "follow the authentic true Islamic way" then they should argue for this instead of walls/curtains/glass which are all new innovations.

During the formative years of Islam, women participated in public services, and shared the main hall of the Prophet's Masjid in Madinah al-Munwarrah. Sharing the main prayer hall allowed them to fully engage in public debate and influence decisions affecting their lives and the community. For example, the second Caliph Umar bin al-Khatib conceded and withdrew his proposal to cap dowry after being challenged on the floor of the crowded masjid by a woman who stated that his proposal violated Islamic law.

The Prophet, (saw) recognizing the tendency of some men to be overprotective of their female relatives, cautioned Muslims against preventing women from frequenting the masjid: Narrated Ibn Umar: The Messenger of Allah, peace be with him, said: 'Do not deprive women of their share of the masjid, when they seek permission from you.' Bilal said: 'By Allah, we would certainly prevent them.' Abdullah said: 'I say that the Messenger of Allah, peace be with him, said it and you say: We would certainly prevent them!' (Sahih Muslim

Book 4, Number 891).

Narrated Ibn Umar: `The Prophet, peace be with him, said: `Allow women to go to the Mosques at night' (Bukhari Volume 2, Book 13, Number 22).

The following is a Fatwa from the Permanent Committee of Scientific Research and Iftaa' (religious decrees) (PCSRI) Saudi ArabiaL

It is neither a must nor a Sunnah to erect a partition between the rows of men and women in the Masjid because the women used to pray in (Jamaa'ah) congregation in the Masjid at the time of the Prophet (SAAW), and he did not erect a wall or anything else between them, nor was this the practice of the companions. (Ad-Da'wa magazine #857 - the PCSRI.: See Fataawi Islamiya For A Group of Honorable Scholars (Sheikhs Ibn Baz, Ibn 'Uthaimen, and Ibn Jibreen. Unfortunately, the collector of the book did not mention the names of the committee members which issued this Fatwa.)

The argument of `preventing fitnah`: Many people may argue that a wall/curtain/partition is the only way to prevent fitnah. The argument against women sharing the main prayer hall is based on the principle of "corruption prevention" (dar' al-mafasid)"whatever leads to unlawful practices (haram) is in itself unlawful." Employing the "corruption prevention" argument, some have decided to seclude women and restrict women's use of masajid facilities.

Preventing women from exercising established rights or undertaking duties cannot be justified under "corruption prevention": Ibn `Umar reported that Abdullah bin `Umar advised: `Grant permission to women for going to the mosque in the night.' His son who was called Waqid said: `Then they would make mischief.' He (the narrator) said: `He thumped his (son's) chest and said: I am narrating to you the hadith of the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him), and you say: No!' (Sahih Muslim Book 4, Number 890)

This is another fatwa from the Permanent Committee of Scientific Research and Iftaa' (religious decrees) (PCSRI) Saudi Arabia which goes so far as to say that a permanent barrier is a bid'ah!

To our knowledge, there was no partition in the Prophet's (SAAW) Masjid during the time of the Prophet (SAAW) or during the time of the Rightly Guided Khalifas. Also there was no partition made from fabric. The Prophet (SAAW) never ordered it nor did any of his Rightly Guided Khalifas. This is supported by the Hadith from Sahl bin Saad when he said, "The people used to pray while tying their (izars) around their necks."

Because they were very short, it was said to the women to not lift their heads until the men were fully sitting because it was feared that the women would see the men's private parts. If there was a partition, this fear would not exist.

But if there was a fear of Fitnah, there would be no harm in erecting a partition between men and women that would not prevent the women from following the Imam in their Salaat. This would prevent corruption and enable them to perform Salaat in the Masjid, which is allowed for them. Allah's Grace and peace be upon our Prophet, his family and his companions.

The PCSRI members are Abdullah ibn Goud, Abdul Razaq Afifi, Abdullah ibn Ghedian, Abdullah bin Baz. Fatwa #2611, 20/9/1399 H. Majalat Al-Buhuth Al-Islamiyah. You can see from most of the answers of these most renowned scholars that the partition never existed in the time of the Messenger of Allah (SAAW) nor in the time of the companions - even though a motivation for it did exist.

Also, it was possible for them to do it - and they cared about their Deen more than we do. Thus, with all respect to all of the scholars who say it is ok, the answer is that yes, the partition is Bid'ah (innovation).

Preventing corruption can only be achieved by following the authentic Sunnah, teaching it to people, reminding them of Allah and encouraging them to fear Him at all times, as Allah did in regard to this very matter. Also, the Masjids need to be set up the way they were set up at the time of the Prophet Rasool Allah. (regarding the entrances, the lines, etc...)

The following narration relates to this matter. "Ibn 'Abbass said, 'A beautiful woman, from among the most beautiful of women, used to pray behind the Prophet (SAAW). Some of the people used to go to pray in the front row to ensure they would not be able to see her. Others would pray in the last row of the men, and they would look from underneath their armpits to see her.'" Because of this act, in regard to her, Allah revealed: "Verily, We know the eager among you to be in the front and verily We know the eager to be behind." (15:24). Narrated by Ibn Majah, Abu Dawud, Attayalisy, Baihaqi, Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Nasai and others. It was judged authentic by Sheikh Al-Albaanee in his book, Silsilat Al-Ahaadeeth As-Saheehah #2472, where he quoted many scholars who judged it to be authentic.

As you can see from this Hadeeth, there was a Fitnah, but the answer was not a partition, rather it was the reminder of Allah. What suffices for them suffices for us, and Allah knows best.

Arguments against 'sexual men' and 'invisible women':The premise that women 'distract' men from their spiritual endeavours and that they stimulate sexual urges rests on a certain understanding of what it means to be human, and a certain understanding of what constitutes maleness and femaleness.

This argument operates from the premise that our focus of control, and our focus of self as human beings, as Muslims, is outside ourselves, and that men have weak inner centres since, upon seeing and listening to women, they are overcome by irresistible uncontrollable sexual urges. By such reasoning we imply that man are incapable of taking moral responsibility for their behaviour and relations.

The solution is to manipulate the external environment - women must be invisible - to keep men's responses in check. This raises important questions: What does this say about man's capacity to take full responsibility for his spirituality? On what understanding of humanity are these arguments based?

In order that we believing men and believing women, God-conscious men and God-conscious women, can reclaim our full humanity, reclaim our Islam, we need to revolutionise our categories of maleness and femaleness. We must reject the idea of uncontrollable male sexuality and evil women.

Allah says in the Qur'an: "The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His apostle. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise." Qur'an (9:71)

For those men and women who view each other only as sexual beings, the mosque precinct - a holy precinct - can be therapeutic. On seeing women in the holy precinct, the depraved soul has to recognise that women are not just sexual beings but spiritual beings, members of the ummah, their sisters in faith. If women are invisible in this holy precinct his perception of women as just sexy beings will not be challenged and he will never be able to reclaim his full humanity, his Islam.

Need for a Women's Committee in the Mosque building process: Women must be included in the Mosque building process. I propose that a special committee of women be set up to be included in the process of building the Mosque. These women must have an input in how the Mosque is to be built. There are many things that brothers simply forget about or do not realize. Such as the fact that women's areas are different because they also must include children.

A perfect example of leaving women out of the building process, is one we will all recognize from our years at ICCD. When they built the women's bathroom they built it the same way as the men's. For years afterwards every time the women's bathroom is opened -- the way it is setup allows anyone passing by to see right in and see women making wudu even if by accident! This would have been obvious to women looking over the plans but not to brothers.

Our Masajid must reflect the leading role played by Muslim American women by ensuring that they are represented on boards and in leadership. The importance of women taking an active part on boards and committees is further underscored by the importance of giving voice and representation to concerns that cannot be expressed except by women, who experience the direct impact of decisions on the quality of life and participation of other women.

Just as an aside....The Other Extreme: Several Muslims, supported by a network of "progressive" activists, have been pushing toward the opposite extreme. Their goal is to open the masjid to an intermixed congregation, led in prayer by women. The recently formed Progressive Muslim Union organized such a prayer led by Dr. Amina Wadud. It is unfortunate that some Muslims are following in the footsteps of their secularist precursors, breaking all precedents and engaging in experimentations that break with formative principles and values. But we must recognize that this is a *REACTION* to what is happening in our Mosques. If our Mosques are not inclusive for women, and leave women out, where exactly can they go? They either must walk away or make their own way. If our Mosques were inclusive of women this extreme reaction to the other side would not happen.

Those concerned with evolving practices of the Muslim American community and ensuring full and meaningful inclusion of women in community life, must maintain a middle ground, away from both extremes: the extreme conservatism obsessed with preserving cultural traditions at the expense of Islamic teachings and the extreme liberal outbursts that aim to break fully with all traditions and delve into a directionless empty space.

IN CONCLUSION:

Women's complaints to seclusion include negative experiences with community leaders; inability to participate in general lectures and discussions; poor quality of the accommodations assigned to them; and reliance on audio and video systems that frequently cut them off from ongoing lectures and discussions.

Such segregation, however, does not "prevent corruption" but rather "prevents education and spiritual growth." Seclusion gives some women the sense that main hall events do not concern them. There are many accounts of women completely immersed in unrelated conversations during public lectures and discussions. Other women, who wish to learn and be involved in community issues, then find themselves doubly ostracized-secluded from main activities and submersed in an environment less conducive to learning and growth.

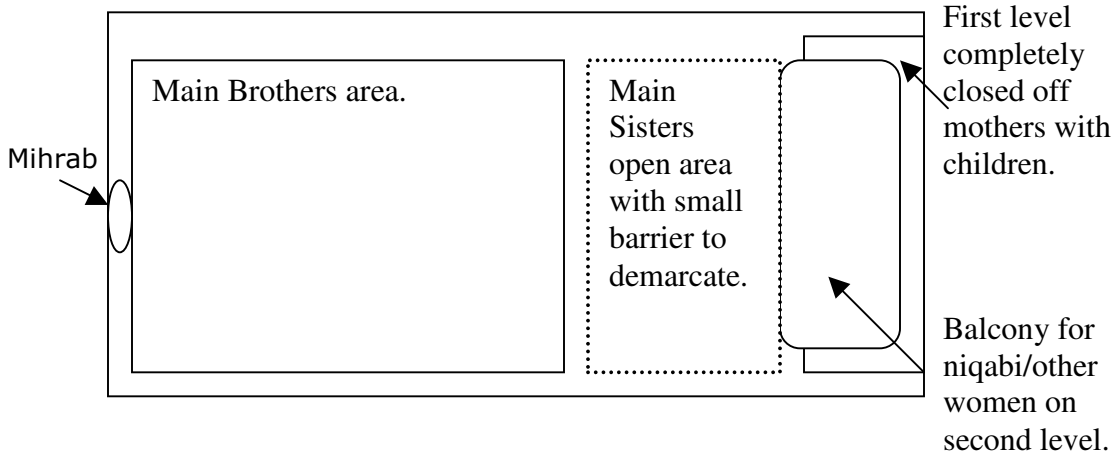
Not all masajid embrace a mandatory seclusion policy. Many leading masajid, such as Northern Virginia's All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS), ensure that women share the main hall, participate fully in learning and consultation, and take active roles in governance. Women serve on the Executive and Trustees Boards; 5 of the 13 trustees are women, and ADAMS's vice president is a woman. While ADAMS provides full access to women in its main hall, it also provides another space for women who want privacy, thereby ensuring that women with different needs and convictions are comfortable in the masjid.

The best way to do this in my opinion is to continue with the building of the balcony as a separate area for sisters who prefer seclusion, building a separate room for women with children and their needs and allowing clear free access to the main prayer area for open participation by the majority of sisters.

I am not supportive of anything 'temporary' like movable curtains or separators because even the sisters themselves will argue about what they want and force their views on others. It is best to create things to accommodate every view.

In speaking with many sisters, they all mentioned liking the set up of ICCD's main prayer area. The main hall has a small wooden lattice separating men and women and also a larger barrier behind that for women who would like to be completely separate. This is something that is viable but I would suggest instead that since we already have a balcony area for sisters who would like to be separate that the back area be a 'mothers with children room/area' and a clearly demarcated area be built in front of that for a main sisters area.

Ideally:



May Allah guide us and help us respect each other. Jazakamullahu Khairan for allowing me to add my views.

Walaikum salaam warahmatullah wabarakatuhu.
(name withheld)