

Strange as it may seem to many, women praying in Masjids is nothing new to Islam. In the early days of Islam masjids were just as open to women as it was for men because the masjid is for Muslims, men and women, to worship our Creator. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Do not stop the maid servants of Allah from going to the masjid of Allah.." (Muwatta of Imam Malik) and, "When the wife of one of you asks about going to the masjid, do not stop her." (Bukhari). So it's perfectly okay for women to attend prayers in the masjid if they wish to.

Today, owing to various reasons in many Muslim communities it has become the custom for only men go to the Masjid and women to pray at home, (except on special occasions such as Ramadan 'Tarawee' prayers and Eid festival prayers.) This may have being fine until recently. But inline with Prophet's Sunnah, due to the following reasons we need to make our masjids (mosques) accessible to women.

The most important reason is for the convenience of women who are traveling or working and are away from home and unable to get back home in time for prayers.

Secondly, it allows beneficial activities like Islamic classes, tajweed classes etc. to be setup for women. The modern world is so tantalizing it's very easy to forget the hereafter and get engrossed in this temporary worldly life. So in this environment it is vital our Muslim women and in turn our children are fully included in our masjids to ensure that our next generation understands and follows Islam.

It's also important to make our masjids women friendly because it's very helpful for dawah activities and helps new convert sisters to learn to pray and practice Islam.

It also helps new convert sisters and new Muslim families to the area to get to know the local Muslim community.

Making masjids women friendly also helps change negative stereotypes non-Muslims have about Islam.

Now, one might think we need to rebuild masjids. Actually for women to pray in the masjid they don't even have to have their own section. The only separation between men and women in the masjid is during prayers when women must stand behind the men. In Prophet's masjid women occupied the back rows and could be seen and heard by the rest of the congregation.

Ibn Abaas (ra) reports that, "Once the Prophet came out (for the 'Eid prayers) as if I were just observing him waving to the people to sit down. He then, accompanied by Bilal, came crossing the rows till he reached the women. He recited verse 12 of chapter 60 to them and asked: 'O ladies, are you fulfilling your covenant?' None except one

woman said 'Yes'. The Prophet then said: 'Then give sadaqah.' Bilal (ra) then spread his garment and said 'Keep on giving alms'. (Bukhari)

The Prophet's open main space masjid will be the ideal but I think due to privacy and other concerns it's best to have a women's area or at least some sort of a covering separating part of the praying area of the masjid for women.

Today in non-Muslim countries a masjid must definitely accommodate women, preferably with a women's prayer area and other facilities like washroom, toilets etc. However many masjids in these countries are small and converted properties so it is understandable if a women's area is not provided immediately for obviously maximizing the space for men is important because unlike women it's mandatory for men to attend Friday prayers (though at other times a movable curtain or panel would allow women to use the masjid). But a purpose built masjid must definitely include a women's area.

Fortunately many masjids, especially in western countries have begun to address this need. However I hear in some cases they are tiny rooms and basements with a leaky roof and a bad smell! I know this is not the case everywhere but this type of situations should never occur. For men or women the masjid should be a place of refuge where your mind can be at ease from worldly affairs.

If a Masjid has or plans to have a women's area it need not be as big as men's area but every step should be taken to ensure it is equal in facilities and other aspects to the rest of the Masjid and maintained accordingly. Getting the opinions of women in that community and making sure their requirements are met will also ensure pleasant and practical facilities are provided for women..

And when building a new masjid or making arrangements for a women's prayer area, it's important to have women's participation. This will make sure the best possible is available to women and avoid many difficulties and complaints later on. Also women must ask for masjid access and facilities and programs for women if they are not provided. Because sometimes it is unlikely anything will be provided unless there is a demand.

So if anyone knows of any masjid being built in their area or nearby, get involved with it (e.g. like helping raise funds etc.) This is a great rewardable action and at the same time puts you in a position to influence the decisions and push for a women's area. For existing masjids it would certainly help to discuss with the management and create awareness in the community for a suitable arrangement for women.

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