

Wang, Yuting. 2017. "Muslim Women's Evolving Leadership Roles: A Case Study of Women Leaders in an Immigrant Muslim Community in Post-9/11 America." *Social Compass: International Review of Sociology of Religion*, 64(3): 424-441

Abstract

Based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork in a multi-ethnic immigrant Muslim congregation in a Midwestern city in the United States, this paper scrutinizes the intricate process through which women use traditional gender roles and expectations to legitimate and operationalize women's leadership. This study found that de facto congregationalism has made it possible for Muslim women to translate their "traditional" responsibilities for food preparation and socializing children into greater visibility and voice in both the mosque and broader society. This study provides an in-depth examination of the nuanced processes of women's empowerment in American Muslim congregations.

Key Words: *immigrant Muslims; post-9/11 American society; Muslim women; women's empowerment*

Résumé

Ce texte, basé sur un travail de terrain effectué pendant trois ans dans une ville du Midwest aux États-Unis, analyse le processus à travers lequel les femmes musulmanes utilisent leurs rôles traditionnels afin de légitimer la place des dirigeantes femmes au sein de la communauté musulmane. Cette étude montre que l'assemblée de facto congrégationalisme a permis aux femmes musulmanes de faire valoir leurs responsabilités traditionnelles dans la cuisine et avec les enfants dans la mosquée et au sein de la société musulmane. Cette étude fournit un examen détaillé des processus d'émancipation des femmes dans les assemblées musulmanes aux États-Unis.

Mots-clés: *émancipations des femmes, femmes musulmanes, immigrés musulmans, société américaine après le 11 Septembre*

Introduction

The status of Muslim women has stimulated heavy debates among scholars, in such aspects as Muslim women's perceptions and experiences of veiling (Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2014; Read

and Bartkowski, 2000), mate selection (Zaidi and Shuraydi, 2002), marital relationships (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001), and other family-related issues (Sherif, 1999). These studies contribute to our understanding of the roles of Muslim women in Muslim-minority societies and the complex processes of identity formation. However, only a handful of scholars have paid attention to Muslim women in public spaces, such as schools and workplaces (Aswad, 1994; Read, 2002). Almost none specifically consider women's roles inside mosques and various faith-based activities, such as inter-congregational and inter-religious dialogues (except Predelli, 2003 and Hammer, 2013). This neglect may be largely due to the cultural practice of gender segregation in many mosques that can lead to a general lack of women's participation in public events and restrictions on their role in places of worship.

In this article, I illuminate the strategies by which Muslim women claim leadership roles in their mosque as they initiate and participate in both religious and secular activities by drawing from observational and interview data gathered during three years of ethnographic research in an immigrant Muslim congregation. Ironically, while the events of 9/11 caused a spike in Islamophobia, it also opened doors for women in this particular congregation to acquire important leadership skills and consequently assert more substantial influence in both the Islamic and broader communities. The Muslim women participants in this research actively used religion to reinvent their roles in a manner that reflects their deep commitment to faith in a world that has become increasingly hostile to their religion. In particular, their traditional role as caregivers has been expanded well beyond the limits of the domestic sphere and into their mosque, neighborhoods and larger society. Their benign status as mothers and nurturers further facilitates their participation in various community services and inter-faith activities. It is through mundane activities, such as food preparation and tending to their children's religious educations, that these women demonstrate their religious commitment, earn respect from Muslim men in their community, and actually achieve visible progress in gender-related issues within their community. This paper contends that Muslim women's empowerment is a complicated and nuanced process. The absence of women in leadership *positions* does not necessarily mean the absence of leadership *roles* played by women.

Women's Status in Religious Spaces

During both the earlier waves of feminist movements, religion was attacked as a major institution that discriminates against women and subjugates them to male control, both

theologically and organizationally (Daly, 1975; Weaver, 1986; Wallace, 1975, 1992; Chaves, 1997). Meanwhile, studies demonstrate the ways in which women use religion and religious institutions as tools to fight for equality (Charlton, 1987; Daly, 1973). Some research further argues that religious institutions, as both a symbolic and physical space, can create opportunities for women to network with other women and build a feminist consciousness (Ammerman, 1997; Wuthnow, 1994). In addition, women achieve informal power through their practices of unofficial and domestic religion (Diaz-Stevens, 1993; Dougherty, 1978; Neitz, 1995). The roles of women in formal and informal religious spheres are therefore complicated, which calls for careful analysis of the conditions and processes by which religion can *both* reinforce the lower status of women and empower women to achieve more rights in their communities.

In this ongoing debate on the role of religion in defining women's status, Islam is often singled out as not only a patriarchal religion, but also the foundation of a civilization espousing a set of values and norms that are essentially in conflict with mainstream Western rhetoric of gender equality. Consequently, Muslim women have been depicted as traditional, secluded within the home, and having no voice in public spaces. Such evaluation of Muslim women is not unfounded. Cultural practices continue to place Muslim women in subordinate positions in many Muslim societies. However, Islamic feminist scholarship (Badran, 1999, 2001; Barlas, 2002) has clearly affected individual Muslims in their everyday lives. Despite the persistence of discrimination against women in Muslim contexts, the images of Muslim women as inferior, subordinate, and passive have been challenged as Muslim women achieve greater visibility and prominence in the public sphere (see Haddad et al., 2006).

In addition, studies on immigrant religious congregations also contribute to our understanding of the changing roles of women in religious communities. The fact that more than half of the Muslims in the United States are immigrants or children of immigrants makes it appropriate to examine the experiences of Muslim women within the framework of immigrant religious congregations (Pew Research Center, 2011). In their research on veiling among Muslim women, Bartkowski and Read (2003) pointed out that the marginal status of women in both Muslim communities and the Christocentric cultural mainstream in the United States creates a strong sense of sisterhood among Muslim women, regardless of their racial/ethnic and social class differences. This sisterhood empowers women as they navigate gendered spaces in their mosques. In addition, based on their study of 13 religious congregations, Ebaugh and Chafetz

(1999) concluded that other than reproducing cultural traditions by preparing and serving ethnic food and socializing the second generation, women also assume new roles through active participation in community affairs that become required due to the structural alteration in immigrant religious congregations. The authors admit that, in situations where men suffered status loss in the process of immigration, they try to “recoup” by taking prestigious congregational roles. As a result, women are mostly left with roles men do not traditionally take. However, Ebaugh and Chafetz did not further analyze whether these seemingly insignificant roles that are left by men, and then subsequently assumed by women, have any implication for women’s empowerment and possible achievement of leadership status. In this paper, I seek to fill this gap in the literature by demonstrating how Muslim women use traditional gender roles and expectations to legitimate and operationalize women’s leadership, and more specifically, how Muslim women translate “traditional” roles into opportunities for leadership and voice in their immigrant mosque.

Data and Methods

Participant observation and in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted in an immigrant Muslim community in a mid-sized Midwestern city, Riverside¹, between August 2004 and December 2007, with follow-up fieldwork in Summer 2011. I closely observed and interacted with Muslim women who attended Riverside Mosque² with varied levels of regularity and took extensive field notes on various events that occurred both inside and outside the mosque, through which these women incrementally developed leadership roles. To complement the observational data, I also conducted face-to-face unstructured interviews with 23 women—more than half of whom required multiple interview sessions—who were active participants in various congregational and community activities. These data are further supplemented by a number of documents obtained from the community, including the Mosque Constitution and monthly newsletters. As a Muslim woman researcher, I had almost unlimited access to women. I interacted with them on a weekly basis by attending Friday *Jumma* prayers (congregational prayers). I attended their monthly committee meetings, and participated in the women’s Qur’an reading group and Sunday school, where most teachers were women. I was also frequently

¹ The names of the place, research site, and other related information have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of my research subjects. Pseudonyms are used throughout the entire research and writing process. Some identifiable background information about certain individuals has also been modified for this purpose. However, these changes do not have perceivable effect on research findings and conclusions.

invited to their houses on different occasions, such as *Eid* celebrations, family gatherings, bridal showers, baby showers, and other events that typically include only friends and family members. My close interactions with these women and face-to-face interviews provided valuable information on how they increase their visibility in Riverside community and negotiate gender-relations in the mosque in light of the changing structure of their immigrant congregation in post-9/11 America.

The Ethnography Site: Riverside Mosque

Riverside is a mid-sized Midwestern city in the United States with a population of about 200,000. Whites make up 65 percent of the population; African Americans make 25 percent; Asians 1 percent and others 8 percent. Most African Americans reside in the south and west side of Riverside, while Whites live mostly in the quiet outskirts north of the city. The median household income of Riverside in 2013 was just above \$34,000, and per capita income was about \$19,000.³

The earliest Muslim congregation in Riverside—Downtown Islamic Center—was established at the end of 1960s, when a small group of African American Muslims followed Imam Warith Deen Muhammad⁴ and adopted mainstream Sunni Islam. The earliest Muslim residents in Riverside, however, were Muslim immigrants arrived in the early 20th century from the Greater Syrian region in the Middle East. Following the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, a growing number of South Asian professionals have relocated to the city. Over the past two decades, the Muslim population in the city and surrounding areas has been growing quickly and robustly. From the approximately 20 or so families in the early 1980s, the Muslim community of Riverside now consists of more than 200 families, most of whom are immigrants and their offspring. It serves Muslims from an array of racial/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and Islamic schools of thought.

The largest Islamic center—Riverside Mosque, where most of my research was conducted—was completed in 1994 and has been expanded in the following years to accommodate the needs of an ever-growing community. Since the construction of Riverside

² Riverside Mosque is the biggest immigrant mosque in Riverside.

³ Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Links are not provided in order to protect the anonymity of the location of Riverside, and by extension, the research subjects.

⁴ Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (born Wallace D. Muhammad) is son of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam from 1933-1975. See Sherman Jackson's *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Mosque in the early 1990's, more Muslim families have moved to the surrounding areas and become regular participants in the life of the mosque. The growth of the South Asian population has been especially noticeable, making it the most visible sub-ethnic group in Riverside's Muslim community. More Arab families, from a variety of nations, moved to Riverside during the 1990s, and African families from Uganda, Somalia, Algeria, and South Africa also continue to trickle in. There is also a small yet visible growth in the number of White converts, mostly women who married immigrant Muslim men. Finally, a sizable Bosnian community was formed when Bosnian Muslims began to arrive during and after the war in the former Yugoslavia during the mid-1990s. Like other predominately Sunni mosques in suburban areas in the United States, Riverside Mosque accommodates a small number of Shi'a families, mostly from Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq.

Respondent Sample: The Women of Riverside Mosque

Women in Riverside Muslim community are mostly first-generation immigrants from South Asia and the MENA region. There are also a growing number of those who belong to the 1.5-generation⁵ or are American-born. African American Muslim women and White female converts make up a small yet important part of the sisterhood. Among the more than 30 women with whom I closely interacted, most were first-generation immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as adults, while five were members of the 1.5-generation, in that they arrived as children and were raised in the United States and four were White converts. Just about half of the women wear some sort of head-covering. While many Arab and Indo-Pakistani men in this community are physicians or other highly-skilled professionals, the women are often stay-at-home mothers. Some Arab women are informally employed in their family businesses. The main exceptions to these patterns are the Bosnian women and more recent immigrants from Africa—many came as refugees and experienced economic downward mobility as a consequence of forced migration. This sub-set of women needs to help support their families by working outside of the home. Regardless of these differences, all women maintain close ties with their heritage cultures.

Findings

In the following section I first discuss how the changing organizational characteristics of the immigrant mosque contribute to changes in traditional gender roles. I then focus on how women

⁵ The term "1.5-generation" refers to immigrants who arrived in the United States before adolescence. This term has been used to further understand the varied migration experiences (see Rumbaut 2004).

leverage their roles in food preparation and mothering for greater visibility and voice in the mosque. Observational and interview data show women not only gain respect and support from their male congregants, but also acquire essential leadership skills, which not only enables them to challenge gendered space in their mosque, but also prepare some of them to achieve leadership status in a male-dominated congregation.

De facto Congregationalism and Changing Gender Roles

For generations of immigrants in the United States, religious organizations often function as safe spaces for those who suffer from mistreatment in the larger society. In the process of adapting to the American way of life, immigrant religious institutions typically become congregational in terms of organizational structures and assume new functions (Warner, 1994; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). For immigrants, temples, churches, synagogues, and mosques are no longer simply places of worship, but are also community centers, where they enjoy co-ethnic or co-religious companionship and reproduce ethnic identity and religious cultures. Such structural changes have fundamentally re-shaped gender relations in religious spaces. Since women traditionally dominate activities that directly impact the continuity of both ethnic and religious culture, such as food preparation and the socialization of children, women's contributions to immigrant religious congregations should not be ignored (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 1999).

In many Muslim-majority societies, women may be mostly invisible in mosques due to the cultural norm that does not require women to pray in the mosque and the narrower function of mosques in those societies as a place for worship or religious education. As mosques gain new functions as an all-purpose community center in Muslim-minority contexts, not only do more women choose to attend the mosque regularly for religious services, but their presence and participation have also become indispensable in the maintenance of mosque. Riverside Mosque has clearly achieved this "de facto congregationalism." First conceptualized by Warner (1993) in his studies on immigrant religious communities, "de facto congregationalism" refers to "a structure modeled on the reformed Protestant tradition of the congregation as a community that gathers voluntarily." (Yang and Ebaugh, 2001) Like many other religious institutions in the United States, Riverside Mosque has become an extended family for which women provide particular forms of care. Birthday parties, weddings, funerals, Sunday school, and various meetings take place in the mosque regularly. In addition, the voluntary characteristic of American religious institutions and unstable financial situation of the mosque make it difficult

for the community to hire additional full-time administrative staff. Thus, women, especially middle-aged housewives, are essential to mosque maintenance and other operational tasks. In order to better take care of this “extended family,” several women played instrumental roles in the formation of Riverside Mosque’s Women’s Committee in the wake of 9/11. Having been actively involved in community activities in the past, these women saw the urgent need to organize and mobilize their “sisters” to help build a more meaningful relationship between the Muslim minority and non-Muslim majority in Riverside. Extending this relationship beyond the confines of individual households and gathering at the mosque helps them bond with other women who share the same sense of sisterhood⁶. The monthly meetings of the Women’s Committee also enable women to socialize and practice the basic religious rituals together. While working together in the mosque, these women brainstormed ideas to mend the shattered images of Muslims since 9/11. They have led multiple fundraiser events to alleviate the financial burdens of the “male heads” of their “extended family,” i.e. the board of directors of Riverside Mosque. Ideas that emerged from brainstorming sessions of the Women’s Committee eventually become translated into fruitful projects.

Traditional Roles, Untraditional Skills: Accumulating Leadership Experience Through “Nurturing”

One of the most important roles women traditionally assume is related to food preparation. Food has long been regarded as an important cultural symbol. Although often viewed as simply another aspect of everyday life, many studies clearly show the central role that food plays in reinforcing community, ethnic, and religious identities (Dodson and Gilkes, 1995; León, 1998). In Riverside Mosque, food is essential for community events. Therefore, women’s dominance over food preparation creates opportunities for them to take a central role in congregational events and acquire organizing skills.

One of the important fundraising programs conceived and maintained by women at Riverside Mosque is a lunch sale program that takes place on Friday afternoons. Friday *Jummah* prayer is one of the most important congregational rituals for Muslims. In Riverside Mosque, more than a hundred men and women regularly attend the prayer service on Friday afternoons,

⁶ Muslims tend to refer to one another as “brother” and “sister.” The language of “sisterhood,” therefore, emerged from how research participants themselves describe their relationships with other Muslim women in the mosque. This term is also widely used in scholarly writings.

which start in the early afternoon and typically last for about an hour. Since Friday is a workday for most people in the paid labor force, many use their lunch breaks to attend the prayer service, which means that they may have to skip lunch in order to return to work within the hour. To solve this problem, the women initiated a fund-raising lunch program. For some women at Riverside mosque, to make lunch available after *Jumma* was “an instinct,” rather than “a plan.” Noreen, an Indian woman in her thirties was one of the organizers of the lunch program and a member of the Women’s Committee. She confessed, “We thought that we have to feed our husbands anyway. So why not do something more meaningful?”

Noreen was born and raised in Detroit by immigrant parents from India, who arrived in the 1960s. After receiving her Bachelor’s degree in economics, she married a physician from India arranged by her parents and became a stay-at-home mother. She told me that her experiences growing up in a large Muslim community in the Detroit area left her with valuable insights to contribute when she moved to Riverside more than 10 years ago. She immediately saw the urgent financial needs of the mosque. With the help of some friends, she quickly organized a group of volunteers who were willing to cook and sell food after Friday *Jumma* prayers. This lunch program was immediately a success and has since remained a key fundraising activity for the mosque. Every Friday afternoon, boxed lunches donated by local Muslim families are sold for five dollars each and bring in about 200 dollars each week⁷. Profit made through the sales goes to mosque maintenance funds. While the mosque also generates revenue through on-going voluntary donations, an annual fund-raising funfair, and two Eid banquets each year, the lunch program is the *only* year-round fund-raising program in the congregation. Although the revenue generated through this lunch program is small, in this young and growing immigrant Muslim community, every financial contribution makes a difference.

The success of this lunch program also attracts male volunteers. Families take turns to complete this task every Friday afternoon. Men help carry trays, serve food, and clean up tables afterwards. Food preparation and serving, traditionally household duties done exclusively by women, have now been extended into public space. As the founders of this program, the Women’s Committee gained respect from their male counterparts. Over the course of my study at Riverside Mosque, I observed mosque board members repeatedly acknowledge the essential

⁷ This number is based on observations on Friday afternoons and interviews with members of women’s committee during my fieldwork period.

roles of the Women's Committee at many occasions, both formal and informal. During one of his sermons, the well-respected Imam of Riverside Mosque who has been serving the community since 1994, applauded financial contributions to the mosque as a means of religious devotion to Allah's house, called the Friday fund-raising programs an exemplar of these kinds of efforts, and praised the women for being role models for the entire community. Not only did this lunch program increase the visibility of women, it also established the irreplaceable role of women in sustaining the mosque, placing them in a position that their mothers and grandmothers have never enjoyed.

Another noteworthy effort initiated by women in the mosque is a cookbook project, which was born during one of the brainstorming sessions at a monthly meeting of the Women's Committee. Their goal was to use a tangible example to educate non-Muslims about the diverse cultures that co-exist in Muslim communities. Although only 20% of Muslims worldwide are ethnically Arabs⁸, many Americans tend to equate Muslims with Arabs and vice versa. Titled *Global Cuisine in Our Community*, this cookbook is a collection of ethnic foods from the many parts of the world represented in the ethnically diverse mosque. Women in the Riverside Muslim community, both regular mosque participants and women who were not as involved in the congregation, contributed original recipes of homemade foods from their own kitchens and kitchens of their mothers and grandmothers. The Women's Committee also successfully sold more than one hundred copies to local churches, nonprofit organizations, and schools. Sales continued to trickle in during subsequent years on the occasion of annual fundraiser events and Eid gatherings. Based on the belief that food always brings people together, the Committee thought that a "Muslim cookbook" would highlight the shared humanity of Muslims and non-Muslims, and therefore serve as a useful tool in inter-faith activities, where *Global Cuisine* is often gifted to participants. Moreover, the sales of this cookbook, cumulatively totaling about six thousand dollars at the time of my interview with the key organizers, all went to the mosque expansion project to accommodate the ever-growing Muslim community in Riverside.

The publication of this cookbook has generated much respect for the women in the mosque, which was clearly felt during several Friday *Jumma* prayers when the Imam publicly praised women for their contribution, with praise such as, "Our sisters have done a lot for our

community. They worked very hard to create a recipe book. We should all thank them for all of their hard work. May Allah *Subhana Wa Ta'ala* give them the best reward,” for example. More importantly, to recognize the important contributions of women and, possibly, to encourage women’s continued participation, the Mosque Administrative Board invited one of the most active women to become the first-ever female board member in the mosque. Although critics are quick to call the woman board member a mere “token,” it is nevertheless an important milestone on the way to women’s empowerment. As the need for outreach programs continues to grow in the years after 9/11, women frequently work side-by-side with men on these efforts, and even some of the most “traditional” women have been venturing outside the boundaries of individual households and the mosque. Their traditional roles, in which women nurture interpersonal bonds and reproduce ethnic and religious culture through food, have allowed them to develop untraditional skills, such as event planning, organizational administration, and fund-raising, which in turn facilitates their further involvement in core areas of congregational life, such as the Sunday school and youth programs.

Mothering and Empowerment at the Mosque

Raising a Muslim child in a non-Muslim society is no easy task. Widespread Islamophobia poses a huge challenge to Muslim immigrants in the United States, and studies have shown that most Muslim children face difficulties in schools, workplaces, and mate selection processes (Basit, 1997; Ahmad and Szpara, 2003). Compared to their parents, young Muslims often have very different ideas about what Islam is and what means to be a Muslim in American society. Many of them do not simply take religion as a family tradition; rather, they choose to maintain and embrace religious commitment after careful considerations (Peek, 2005). However, some also face the risk of losing, or weakening, their faith while growing up amidst peers of many or no faiths in the religiously diverse American society.

The Muslim community in Riverside had established “Sunday School” long before Riverside Mosque was built. It began as a two-hour program on Sundays held in the clubhouse of a residential complex. At that time, there was no full-time Imam serving the community. Women were the teachers from the very beginning. After the construction of the mosque and hiring a full-time Imam, a more structured Sunday school program started taking shape, while

⁸ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. 2009. *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population*. Accessed on June 18, 2014,

women remained at the center of the curriculum development. The Sunday school has had three principals since 1994, two men and one woman. Fatima, a first-generation Lebanese immigrant schoolteacher, served two two-year terms as the principal of the Sunday school. During her term as the principal, more than 100 children from surrounding areas were schooled and benefited from the program.

While interviewing people at Sunday school and other occasions, I learned that women at Riverside mosque have overwhelmingly been the primary caregivers of their children. However, this “traditional” role has taken on a changing significance as the overall Muslim community in Riverside grows and the social contexts shift. Sarah, a white convert in her late forties and chair of the Women’s Committee and a mosque board member, pointed out that women’s role as primary caretaker of their children has facilitated their movement into more visible participation in the mosque:

In this mosque, women have become so important. Some sisters are very involved in the Sunday school. Some are giving children Arabic lessons. ... Some sisters have also organized extracurricular activities for the kids during holidays and school breaks. For example, in the past, we have taken youngsters on camping trips to the lake and attend various Islamic conferences and events in [Large, nearby city name redacted]. The kids came back and told me how much they loved it and how this is the best way to learn their religion.

It is important to further note that women’s traditional role of child rearing has grown beyond the household (private space) and into the mosque and larger society (public space). Such unparalleled functions played by women enable them to create new programs and instill important values and norms in their children. The “untraditional” skills women gained while performing traditional gender roles have prepared them for greater involvement in mosque management. The congregational discourses in the mosque that applaud women’s contributions would later encourage women to challenge some patriarchal practices in their community.

Assuming Leadership Roles through Inter-faith Dialogue

Although women at Riverside Mosque have expanded their traditional roles in food preparation and child rearing from individual households to the mosque and beyond, their influence in the Muslim community is still limited to roles men do not traditionally take. This phenomenon is

also observed in other immigrant communities (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 1999). Only when women walk out of the mosque and voice their opinions in the larger society can they truly be recognized as independent.

For many years, the middle-class Muslim immigrants in Riverside had not been active in socializing, communicating, and interacting with their non-Muslim neighbors. Many of them were apparently content with life in the tranquil and affluent suburbs. The events of 9/11 were a wake-up call. Several cases of vandalism around the mosque after 9/11 made the need for civic engagement more salient. Community members realized that they could no longer neglect the negative perceptions and hatred toward them. In the following years, representatives of the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) paid frequent visits to Riverside, providing guidelines and tips for organizing interfaith activities and fighting against discrimination in workplaces and everyday life. Collaborating with several local and national NGOs and faith-based organizations that seek to promote inter-religious understanding, the Riverside Mosque organized mosque “open house” events, international food-tasting events, inter-faith dialogues, solidarity fasting day, and various seminars and lectures across the years following 9/11. While women became core facilitators of many of these events, they were especially instrumental in the founding of an inter-faith dialogue group where women translate their skills of “talking across the fence” to their neighbors into discussions of important and sensitive religious topics.

With the support from the mosque’s Women’s Committee, a local Catholic church, and a women’s organization based at a local college, Sarah, a White convert, took the initiative and organized the only interfaith dialogue group for Muslim and Christian women in the city of Riverside. This interfaith dialogue group meets once a month, and invites women from local Catholic and Protestant churches⁹ for exchanges and dialogues. Rather than dealing with dogmatic theological discrepancies among different faith traditions, the women take a more practical approach to building mutual understanding. Frequently discussed topics include how to raise children in a secular society, how to transmit ethnic cultures to the younger generations, how to solve family problems, and other issues that women often face regardless of their

⁹ During my research period, there was no Jewish woman involved in the inter-faith dialogue group, although there was a small Jewish community and a Synagogue in the city. This is probably due to the social network and background of Sarah, the key organizer of this group, who was born Catholic, and later converted to Islam after marrying a Palestinian immigrant.

religious affiliations. The women's inter-faith dialogue group, founded within several months after 9/11, has since become well-known among local inter-faith organizations. Participation has also continuously grown since its founding. For example, by the end of my fieldwork period, the number of women who regularly participate in the monthly meetings had grown from a handful to about twenty. Both Christian and Muslim women express excitement when they learn that Christianity and Islam share many commonalities. Women from both faith communities believe that there is genuine benefit from speaking to real people rather than perceptions formed based on limited information sifted through media reports. One woman writes¹⁰,

I have been verbally assaulted many times by strangers because it's obvious by looking at me that I am Muslim. In this group, there has been respect on both sides from the very beginning, which has certainly been refreshing. I had to overcome a bit of wariness because of the past experiences to be a positive contributor to the group...I live in a community where my family is virtually the only Muslims, we are often the target of people who wish to "run their own agenda" on us. The Riverside community is much more diverse, and has been for some time – Muslims are not new to the area. This difference perhaps made my attitude more jaded than was necessary at the beginning, and to my delight I have found that the Christian women have been open, curious, and respectful. They have demonstrated a sincere desire to learn and understand.

The inter-faith meetings, to these women, are immensely empowering and inspiring. Muslim women participants have become highlighted as role models in the community, and this effort in seeking knowledge is applauded both inside and outside of Riverside Mosque. Sarah, for example, Chair of the mosque Women's Committee, parlayed the respect she earned in Riverside Mosque for her interfaith community work into her election as the first woman on the Riverside Mosque Administrative Board. During her term as board member on the Mosque Administrative Board, summer camps became better structured, more women became involved in outreach programs, and the number of seminars and lectures also increased.

Certainly, it would be an exaggeration for the Women's Committee to claim *all* the credit for these positive developments, but their continued efforts to meaningfully participate in the

¹⁰ An open-ended anonymous questionnaire was distributed following one of the group meetings. Participants were asked to evaluate their experiences in this inter-faith dialogue group.

mosque and broader civic realm was undeniably essential. Dr. Abdulla, a well-respected Islamic scholar who teaches at a university in Riverside and an active congregant at Riverside Mosque, applauded the women's initiatives and encouraged them to continue exploring new opportunities. During one of our conversations on women's status in Islam, he said,

Women are so important in Islam. They are the first teachers of our children. That's why in Islam, we celebrate when a girl is born. Our sisters [in Riverside Mosque] are, *mash'allah*, so committed to the welfare of our next generation. I applaud what they have done for our community. They should be encouraged to do more.

The inter-faith dialogues not only broadened the horizon of participants, but also created new social networks for greater engagement with the local non-Muslim community. The Women's Committee played an instrumental role in organizing volunteers, both men and women, to distribute food at the local homeless shelter and soup kitchen, to provide assistance to newly arrived refugees, to provide care at hospitals, and to teach about Islam in prisons. The Mosque Administrative Board began holding town hall meetings regularly since 2005, and both women and men were encouraged to share their opinions on the affairs of the mosque itself, as well as its role in the broader community. Although Sarah sometimes feels that some male members on the board intentionally ignore her voice, her position is an encouraging sign of the progress women have made in this community that continues to be dominated by males.

Exercising Leadership Roles: Contesting the Gendered Space in Riverside Mosque

With these experiences gained through both mundane and religious activities, women in Riverside Mosque began to exhibit a greater desire to challenge some age-old practices in the mosque. However, since most of the women participants in this research continued to play roles that are complementary to the roles of men, it would take much more for them to learn how to skillfully deal with controversial issues. Sometimes, these women leaders faced traditional beliefs and practices that were supported by *both* men and women.

Gender segregation is a hot-button issue in immigrant Muslim communities, and Riverside Mosque is no exception. The issue of gender separation in the mosque emerged as a point of contention during my fieldwork at Riverside Mosque. The women leaders in Riverside Mosque had realized that they must first become more "visible" in their mosque before achieving greater gender equality. For them, the belief and the practices of gender separation have

reinforced the “invisible” status of women in their own mosque. The physical barrier that separated men and women’s prayer spaces in the mosque reflected gender inequality in other aspects. To elevate women’s status, the women leaders were beginning to realize, it had become imperative to remove the barrier and change the status quo in a tangible way.

Designed by an Iranian architect living in Riverside, Riverside Mosque is a two-story yellow brick building, located near a church and its elementary school, in a quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of Riverside. The mosque is built along the slope of the hilly landscape typical in Riverside, half on the ground and half on the hilltop. The architect placed a door on the hillside facing the passing traffic and another on the ground level facing the parking lot, with the intention that these two doors would provide separate entrances for men and women. However, the envisioned strict separation has never been fully achieved in this mosque. While the hillside entrance leads to the women’s prayer area, the parking lot entrance also leads to the kitchen and dining area located on the lower level. The mixing of both genders is not unusual. In fact, community members mostly do not practice gender segregation during social events. Nevertheless, the prayer hall is strictly separated into men’s area and women’s area using several large mobile panels, conforming to the practices common in many American mosques, as 66% of U.S. mosques practice this form of gender segregation (Sayeed, Al-Adawiya, and Bagby, 2013:4).

Progressive Muslims¹¹ tend to single out this practice as their main target of gender inequality. When asked what they think about the practice of gender segregation, these women did not hesitate to express their frustration, saying that they felt “excluded and marginalized”:

I sometimes want to ask questions [after the sermon]. But it is impossible to ask, simply because I’m behind the screen! How can I feel engaged if the Imam doesn’t hear my questions and doesn’t know who’s asking the questions?

On the contrary, conservative Muslims indicated that they truly believe in this practice as sacred. A middle-aged Syrian American woman believed that there is a reason why gender segregation is practiced in all Muslim societies: “It is dangerous to always ask the ‘why’ questions. We should have faith.” Still others seek to validate the practice by emphasizing its social functions.

¹¹ The term “progressive Muslims” is often used to refer to Muslims who take a liberal stand on a wide range of issues, such as gender roles in Islam and the relationship between Islam and the West. This term is closely associated with the liberal movement in Islam and the concept of progressive Islam. For more discussions of the concept, see *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, edited by Omid Safi (Oneworld Publications, 2003).

One of my interviewees, a Pakistani man in his late twenties is convinced that segregation is for the benefit of both genders. He argued that the separation only helps both genders to concentrate more on their prayers without becoming distracted by the opposite gender. This opinion is also shared by many women, who strongly oppose the mixing of both genders and instruct their daughters and other women to “dress up properly” when they are in the House of God.

Despite the resistance from the conservative members, a small group of progressive women have been trying to remove the panels in the prayer hall that separate women and men. They first persuaded their husbands to propose removing the panel at mosque administrative board meetings. After their proposal was rejected by the board, some women contemplated the possibility of removing the panels without going through the board. One evening during the Ramadan of 2007, several women removed the panels before the congregational prayers and suggested that women should just stand behind the men. Contrary to their expectation, many of the women who came to the mosque that evening did not appreciate this change. Some were surprised; some were upset; and some were outraged. As soon as the *adhan* was heard, two women started moving the panels back to their original places and a few joined to help. That evening, the progressive women were dismayed and disappointed as they prayed behind the screen.

After several failed attempts at the sort of direct action described above, the women at Riverside Mosque began to realize the importance of negotiation and consultation. A few months later, Sophia, an outspoken Pakistani immigrant woman in her mid-twenties, began collecting signatures for a petition letter advocating the removal of “the wall.” Collaborating with several like-minded women, she also planned to distribute questionnaires to find out what other community members think about the issue of gender segregation, how they would like to address this issue, and whether they would like to see changes in the community. Although she collected only about forty signatures and the survey research did not materialize, her approach clearly won much empathy. Even some women and men who were strong believers of gender separation agreed that some kind of arrangements could be made to accommodate different opinions. A second-generation Syrian American woman said, “We are in America now. We can negotiate anything and everything. We as a community should figure out how to make, I wouldn’t say everyone, but certainly most people, happy.” Another Indian woman in her thirties suggested that the president of board or someone else should research how other communities deal with this

division and then find the best solution for the community.

As these comments and suggestions reached the board members through different channels, the board decided to put the issue on their meeting agenda after long attempting to ignore it. After two years and multiple sessions of intense discussions, the board finally decided to make a change. Although the solid side panels remain in the middle of the prayer area, thereby safeguarding a gendered space, two tinted glass panels have replaced the old solid screens in the front so that women can see the Imam during his sermons. Women played key roles in this process of change at Riverside Mosque, and they were empowered to do so by skills and social capital acquired while organizing activities typically perceived to be embedded in “traditional” womanhood.

The growing public attention to gender roles in Islam and a desire to correct popular stereotypes of Muslim women encourage the progressive women to tackle spatial segregation as a gateway to contesting male domination. Their effort also greatly benefits from the gradual institutionalization of immigrant mosques into a democratic polity. As this immigrant mosque acquires more characteristics of a Protestant congregation in the United States, just like other immigrant religious organizations, women engage the protocols established and recognized by the mosque administrators when formulating their action plans. They then execute these plans as conditions become more favorable to their concerns.

In grappling with the issue of gender segregation in the mosque, women leaders extended traditional roles in a way that facilitated the development of non-traditional skills, such as the ability to self-advocate in response to perceived problems, and mobilize resources in support of their goals. Although they did not succeed in challenging the spatial arrangement inside their mosque, they gained valuable experience in evaluating the meaning of leadership and assessing the many controversies on women’s status in Islam. They were also able to built confidence regarding their ability to assert their opinions, even controversial ones, about the state of the Muslim community and the future of Islam in American society.

Conclusion

Given the importance of religion for immigrants and the changing structure of immigrant religious organizations, women in many, if not most, American mosques have become increasingly visible and indispensable in what are now not only places of worship, but often community and outreach centers as well. As Muslim Americans establish more mosques, it is

increasingly evident that immigrant Muslim women are engaging these religious spaces as sites of not only religion, but also civic engagement. While it remains true that in some contexts women's growing visibility in their religious congregations merely reflect an extension of their traditional gender roles, it is also the case that women are increasingly translating "traditional roles" into sites of greater authority in their broader communities. Throughout my fieldwork in the Riverside Muslim community, I have been able to observe firsthand how a group of Muslim women innovatively use their subordinate roles as wives and mothers to assert bigger power in the public sphere. Although it appears that they are only able to pick up the traditional roles that men are not interested in, in reality, these Muslim women have become far more influential than conventionally assumed. By engaging the social and cultural capital that traditional reproductive roles are able to generate, these women broaden the domestic sphere to include the mosque and build networks with non-Muslims in the larger community. Their visibility and irreplaceable position empower and facilitate them to address gender-related issues in their male-dominated community.

More specifically, this paper argues that, despite restraints and limitations, women's roles have expanded beyond private households into much broader public realms. Their traditional roles in the reproduction of culture and socializing children have enabled them not only to participate in activities in the mosque and broader community, but also to initiate and lead new projects. These women demonstrate a high level of creativity in using religion as an agent of empowerment in the religious space and public arena. The negative effect of religion as a patriarchal institution on women has been offset as immigrants adapt to the social and cultural context of American society. Both changes in congregational structures—*de facto* congregationalism—in the process of resettlement, as well as the increasing public interest in Islam after 9/11, provide Muslim women with crucial opportunities to experiment with leadership skills and gain experiences from both successes and failures. Desire, experiences, methods, and contexts are all important factors that may facilitate or obstruct women's pursuit of leadership roles. The social environment that favors gender equality in American society may unite or divide the Muslim sisterhood. As women activists and leaders put forward changes in their community, they will continue to both encounter obstacles *and* build bridges.

Moreover, it is important to note the influence of social class as women develop their leadership roles. In Riverside Mosque, it is clear that all of the women who actively participate in

the mosque, and engage in leadership at the mosque, are both well educated and from relatively well-off families. This is partly due to the characteristics of the Muslim community in Riverside. Although there are a number of refugee families and low-income working class families in the mosque, the majority are either professionals or businesspeople. It would be useful, therefore, to compare the Riverside mosque with another mosque with a more working-class congregation to see how social class may affect social interactions in the community and gender relations. Nevertheless, the case study presented in this article offers important insights into the nuanced process of women's empowerment. It contributes to the discussions on women's status in Islam and immigrant Muslims in the West. Further studies are needed to make comparisons that take into consideration the demographic characteristics, geographic locations, as well as socio-economic status of different immigrant Muslim community, so that we can better understand Muslim women in American society and their evolving leadership roles in their mosques and beyond.

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