

Women Leaders in Southern California Muslim Community Nonprofits: The Road Ahead

© Field Study and Report by Duaa H. Alwan

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1. Introduction

There was a sense of reassurance at the start of each interview for this field study. *“I’m glad we’re talking about this;” “We can’t move forward if we’re not having these conversations;”* and *“No one ever asked me!”*

When the topics of leadership, women, and Muslim are discussed, those conversations tend to be sporadic, informal, and disjointed. As the first female president of the largest and oldest mosque in my county, I knew first hand that what I learned during my term, was not being taught in a class or found in a book. On one side, I had peers and mentors with whom I was able to passionately compare notes and exchange advice and support. My constituents --the mosque’s congregation, on the other side, had much broader and often contradictory perspectives. Even though I was fully aware of my community’s diverse ethnicities, political ideologies, and religious practices, that was not enough to navigate their commonly opposing demands and expectations. Within my first week, two different women handed me proposals regarding the women’s prayer area. Each woman advocated that her’s was the best for women in our mosque. I could not help but wonder if these women had ever sat together and shared what they believe so passionately. Regretfully, I learned that they had not. As the weeks and months of my term went by, I observed that it is rare for our community members to engage in civil discourse about the governance of their own mosque, especially with those they disagree

with. It was not until after I joined the board of the Shura Council, an organization representing over 70 local Muslim nonprofits, that those same conversations with female community members also continued at the full scale of SoCal. Across the spectrum of women's voices, most saw the need for culture change and strict accountability within mosques leadership. This study therefore offers an in depth look at what is working, what has to change, and where do we start.

This first of its kind field study in Southern California offers a starting point for correcting course by building on decades of work of Dr. Ihsan Baghby (1)(2) and Dr. Ingrid Mattson.(3)(4) Their writings laid out the landscape and the foundational concepts on which we can build organically-Muslim, locally relevant solutions. In fact, participants in this study reached beyond only helping those currently in or seeking leadership roles to the much broader demographic of non-leader community members whose participation is stifled because of their young age or simply because they are female.

Regardless of perspectives, the growing concerns over the marginalization of female participation and female leadership inspires optimism. It reveals a sense of confidence in our ability to do better. American Muslims are becoming more savvy in differentiating between oppressive cultural practices and divine teachings. This also includes increased awareness of how our issues compare to those of our greater American society. For example, a 2016 study identified that only four women had ever served senior leadership roles within the nine major national Christian and Jewish organizations in the US -- with only two of them in office that year. (5) Another study of the for-profit sector found that women represented only 22% of Fortune 500 board members in 2017. (6)

Inspired by their faith, American Muslims are uniquely positioned to lead the way for women's education, contributions, and leadership. They are anchored by Islam's assertion that men and women are different and are meant to complement one another while preserving gender identity. Recognizing that men and women think differently, feel differently, process conflict differently and thereby also lead differently --will frame our mindset on how we value women's contributions to their community. Our mosques are direly in need of women's perspectives and will benefit from their leadership qualities.

**Barring Muslim women from education and religious authority
is akin to the pre-Islamic custom of burying girls alive (7)**

Dr. Mohammad Akram Nadwi
Founder, Cambridge Islamic College
Former Research Fellow at Oxford University

2. Methodology

The foundation of this field study is a questionnaire designed to go beyond only data points by compiling qualitative feedback from women leaders in Southern California Muslim community nonprofits. Leveraging the Shura Council's directory of member organizations, women leaders who had served or are currently serving on the executive boards of member nonprofits were contacted. Through one-on-one, in-person and telephone appointments, 45+ minute interviews were conducted with each participant while documenting their experiences, their assessments, and their recommendations for moving forward.

3. Objectives

This field study was designed and conducted to accomplish the following goals:

- Understand women leaders' experiences within our faith community.
- Identify positive and negative actions and attitudes in our leadership practices.
- Create an environment that promotes awareness of how men and women can work together without compromising their faith while reaping benefits for their community.
- Offer solutions that are flexible and fit the individualized needs of member institutions. Examples include, facilitate community discussions, create focus groups to educate on mosque governance, conduct board training, identify mentors (both men and women), and create sustainable platforms for leaders development and mentorship.

4. About the Participants

"How are you going to find enough women?" was one of the earliest concerns following the Shura Council's announcement of this study. The inspiring reality of our vibrant Southern California Muslim community was however, that the long list of women leaders was more than what could be accommodated within the timeframe of this study. As such, efforts to connect with the expansive number of SoCal Muslim women leaders remains underway in order to keep moving forward with solutions for own local institutions.

The experiences of 26 women leaders interviewed for this study covers 187 years of combined service across 65 nonprofit board terms over the past three decades. The youngest participants are leaders within SoCal's largest high school MSAs (Muslim Student Association campus clubs) while the oldest participants had served on the founding boards of several of Southern California's largest Muslim institutions.

Half of the women interviewed had served on a mosque board, while the other half had served on a variety of non-mosque boards such as educational, relief, service, or civic nonprofits. Women leaders' positions on executive boards covered the full spectrum ranging from

President, VP, Secretary, Treasurer, Committee head, to Member-at-large. The women who served on mosque boards expressed a heightened concern for mosque governance that marginalizes women, failing to recognize the need to hear their voices. “Our mosques are the refuge of our community from Islamophobia.” “The masjid is our social support as individuals, young and old, we come to the masjid for meaningful interactions and to feel we belong.” “Our masjid leadership was the main reason many women stopped coming, who will answer for that?”

60% of the participants reported being approached and nominated into leadership roles, “I accepted my nomination because I know I can make a difference.” The remaining 40% say that they sought leadership, “I see what’s broken and I know I can help.” A sense of obligation was the main reason stated by participants as their motivation to serve in leadership. Both groups expressed that they accepted a leadership role based on (1) the need for female representation, and (2) a strong match between the work needed and their credentials.

5. In One Word

Participants were asked to describe their experience serving in leadership with the first word that comes to their minds. Responses were overwhelmingly positive. In the order of most common responses, SoCal’s Muslim women leaders said:

1. Growth
2. Rewarding
3. Challenging
4. Blessed
5. Fulfilling
6. Eye-opener
7. Disappointing
8. Humbling
9. Exhilarating
10. Natural

As women explained their choice of “one word” to sum up their experiences, two common themes emerged:

(1) Leadership is an opportunity to get to know the community we are serving: “You think you know your community well, wait until you serve in leadership to really learn how multifaceted our community is.” Most community members surround themselves with people who are like-minded in their approach to life, their values, and their religious practices, however, leaders do not have that luxury. They have to attend to all those they are serving, learn what are the issues important to them, and understand their needs.

(2) Leadership is an opportunity to develop deeper knowledge of complex issues facing our community, especially our mosques: “Governing people who come from opposing religious views, varying political ideologies, while facing financial, cultural, and security concerns, is not easy and will not be done successfully without a thoughtful plan.”

6. Valued and Respected

The American Psychological Association defines respect as, “an attitude of, or behavior demonstrating, esteem, honor, regard, concern, and other such positive qualities toward an individual or entity. ***Respect can serve an important purpose in interpersonal and intergroup relations by aiding in communication...***”

Respect is therefore a prerequisite to productive, healthy community building. A culture of respect is protective of our individual dignity and is mindful of our inherent differences. Respect enables full participation, and increases one’s potential and productivity. Since people naturally vary in how they experience and perceive respect, participants were asked to provide specific examples of verbal and non-verbal, intentional and unintentional conduct they consider respectful:

I am respected when...

1. “I’m greeted and asked about my family, work, and life outside the board.” Some participants considered this as a way to set a respectful tone and attitude as one does being courteous with others.
2. “I’m operating in a professional work environment.” Examples included: leaving professional distance, appropriate level of eye contact, ensuring everyone around the table had a chance to participate, being on-time, using appropriate language, following through on action items.
3. “I’m heard and understood without assumptions.” Women leaders often had several examples that would stress the importance of listening with courtesy and a genuine desire to reach a consensus or a solution. “Assumptions are often based on stereotypical ideas about women, and it can be very damaging to any work environment.”
4. “I can express my ideas fully,” without the fear of being interrupted, cut off, or misunderstood.
5. “My perspective is acknowledged and considered in discussions and solutions.” Further on the listening scale, another participant articulated, “while listening is the first step, acting like what I said matter is equally important.” When we brainstorm for solutions, we benefit from diverse ideas because often the best solution is one that combines multiple perspectives.
6. “I am given credit where credit is due.” While this may be unintentional at times, it still happens often. Being attentive and giving the right person credit is part of the obligation of a leader. If leaders are not fulfilling that requirement at the board level, rest assured that the rest of their community will be suffering from this exact problem. People notice and it matters to them when crediting the right person happen consistently, regardless of their age, gender, or background. Giving credit can also come in the form of allowing

a person to speak about his/her own idea and not speaking on someone else's behalf. This also encourages community members to take initiative on new projects, activities, and solutions to existing problems.

7. "My disagreement is not taken personally." Walking into a meeting with a clear expectation that people hold various opinions on any given issue is a healthy start to focus on negotiating points of views, reaching consensus, and conflict resolution. "Please don't keep a tally of who disagreed with whom and who's ideas "won" because I'm not here to compete." Women leaders who elaborated on this issue expressed a concern that while this might be the attitude of one person on the board, yet it trickles down and affects the culture of the organization.
8. "Fellow board members act like my presence is normal, and that I belong here." "I do not need special accommodations, just being courteous is sufficient." Belonging is a common theme that women leaders discuss. They described how this can start by acknowledging and understanding that the board is a "team" in which all team members are there to accomplish the same goal. "I'm not there to be the team mom!" "I'm not here to make anyone feel uncomfortable." "I want to be trusted and get work done."
9. "Other board members address me or refer to me by my name or position when introducing me or talking about me." Several women leaders have expressed feeling less valued when not properly introduced or addressed. For many, this extends to regular board meetings as well. For example when a male board member, the Chairman, or the President refers to the women on the board as "the ladies," "the moms," or "her."
10. "My contributions are validated and I get positive feedback." Another basic human need to motivate and further productivity. "It gives a sense of harmony and productivity when people you work with are not acting like they are threatened by you."
11. "My authority, my decisions, and my directives per my job duties is respected." A common distinction made by several women leaders who felt respected as a woman but not as a leader.
12. "I'm afforded opportunity for growth." While articulating the same point, examples women leaders gave varied based on their own backgrounds, personalities, and experiences. For example, opportunities for growth to some meant networking and trainings, while for others, it meant meaningful tasks and new goals. Two women who were serving on their mosque's board at the same time expressed being content with setting up for events, cleaning up, ordering food, and taking care of babysitting, "we don't mind," they said, "we do a better job and our masjid needs it." When I asked if the rest of the women in their community would agree with them, they agreed that it was not the case. These two women further stated that, even their own daughters do not find these tasks fulfilling and that they struggle to motivate them to volunteer or attend regularly at the mosque.
13. "My questions and my messages are answered." Some women expressed that being courteous, professional, and a team player is to get a reply when you ask a question,

assign an action item, or simply have a suggestion. For others, this is also how they feel they belong and that their participation is a normal part of the work. Regardless if this is typically an intentional or unintentional act, women leaders agree that they are more likely to be ignored when they make a request or have a concern.

14. "I can make mistakes." It is often that women feel that their mistakes are held against them and is attributed to their gender or personality. "Wait until you make a mistake, everyone acts like they're infallible." Acknowledging our mistakes and shortcomings as leaders is critical. It keeps us in check and allows for transparency. "Have you ever heard your masjid board member apologizing for something he did or said?"
15. "We acknowledge that women are not all the same," yet women who serve on boards with other women are often put inside the same box. They are addressed as a monolithic body, as if they have the same interests, same skills, and same characteristics. "It shows how uncomfortable some men are when it comes to working with women." "I do not understand how anyone can have such mindset when the Prophet (pbuh) set clearly a very different example." The reality of course, is that all women do not hold the same opinion on issues, are content with the same type of work, or excel at the same skills.
16. "When another man on the board steps up to call out disrespectful behaviors and attitudes, I know I'm not alone." This scenario is one of the hardest realities we face. Even though women leaders were supported by their community through the nomination and election process, they still reported feeling alone when confronting prejudice and disrespect. "I know many people wanted me in this position, yet very few will speak up in solidarity when I need it the most."

Among other benefits of course, delineating these vantage points enables us to interact with the full range of how respect is experienced on a personal level. The details matter because **all members** of our community need to **take this personally** --not only as a women's issue but as the individual responsibility of every male and female, old and young, for their actions, words, and attitudes. While these positive real life examples reinforce Islam's regard for human dignity in general, they also function as a reminder that Islam prescribes holding leadership to higher accountability, especially within our faith-based organizations.

7. Unacceptable Conduct

Cataloging unacceptable conduct revealed that (1) the majority of participants expressed the same dreaded realization that they believe the men who mistreated them are most often **not** deliberate in their conduct and have **not** questioned their actions, **nor** thought out their consequences; and that (2) immigrant vs US-born and age are not the main predictors for unacceptable conduct.

Muslim women leaders who worked with the younger US-born demographic for example,

experienced negative attitudes as those who worked with immigrant or older demographics. While the forms of unacceptable conduct may be different, the absence of self-awareness as well as the mindset of disrespect towards women appear to pervade culture, education, and age. Women leaders shared the following examples of behaviors, attitudes, and words that made them feel disrespected and hindered their work:

1. **Use of religion to justify mistreatment:** “Pulling his chair far away from me like I am a disease,” “acting like I’m invisible,” “telling me I cannot use the microphone,” and “expecting me to bend to pressure when deciding on a certain matter.” It was common for women to cite at least one of these examples from their personal experience in leadership. For many participants, not being heard or seen is “the reason more women, young and old, are pulling away from the masjid.” Women expressed concern that many immigrant Muslims draw from their home country’s tradition that mosques are for prayer only and for men only. Conversely, mosques during Islam’s earliest years through its golden-era served both men and women as vibrant centers for social, political, legal, educational, and spiritual fulfillment.

Even outside of the physical mosque, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) purposed decision to set up his wives’ residences quite literally at Madina’s city center is a testament to Islam’s insistence against marginalization of women. Living in the focal point of their city’s life, Islam’s most revered female role models --the Mothers of the Believers, each became an integral part of their community’s growth above and beyond their status in marriage. Their interactions spanned from consulting, teaching, counseling, as well as hearing out the needs of the city’s local residents, meeting out of town guests of other faiths, business leaders, political delegates, scholars, and students, etc. “We say Prophet Muhammad is our role model,” a study participant explained, “yet, can we act upon that and empower women to build their communities?”

2. **The extremes when it comes to eye contact:** SoCal’s Muslim women leaders expressed discontent with both the complete lack of eye contact under the guise of Islamic *hayaa* (modesty) as well as excessive or inappropriate eye contact. “How does anyone feel when they notice someone staring at them? I’m no different, it’s creepy and distracting.” Additionally, participants who shared experiences of men staring at them, also reported more instances of violation of their personal space. Participants explained that both extremes in eye contact are rooted in cultural practices that undermine Islam’s regard for women as equal partners in society. “Whether we’re talking about Arab culture, Indo-Pakistani culture, or American culture for that matter, they all have their form of patriarchy and most of behaviors and attitudes about women are learned.”
3. **Treating women as less capable, lacking knowledge, or slow to understand:** “Having things explained to me like I’m a fourth grader is insulting.” “He didn’t even notice he

was talking down at me until I turned and asked another board member if he typically talked to them that way too?" One study participant with over a decade of leadership experience was able to put it in practical terms, that "if he talks to his boss or his coworkers the same way he talks to me, then at least I know it's not me, sometimes a person is condescending like that with everyone." Another participant explained that "it's like a second-nature to act that way." The point being, that women and not only men hold equal accountability against normalizing behaviors that are dismissive of women's intellect because it ultimately erodes the effectiveness of all women --which in turn derails the full potential for a balanced, vibrant Muslim organization. Factually speaking, there are more women than men around the globe, Muslims believe that God created men and women to serve the same purpose, and that He will hold them equally responsible for their conduct. Therefore, intentional or not, all forms of condescension towards women must be called out, questioned, and actively corrected by both men and women.

4. **Sexist and inappropriate jokes:** An unfortunately common thread expressed by the majority of participants was the extent to which men comfortably joke about the women in their lives. "Sometimes you only hear about someone's wife when they're telling jokes about her." Whether it is how she overreacted when she was upset, her shopping, her mothering, or even about her lack of understanding his sacrifice when he's at the board meeting past midnight. These scenarios commonly play out with escalated cringe-worthiness when a second male board member tries to playfully top off the first's sexist remark. One study participant shared that these repeating episodes were, "agonizing to listen to. If he is so comfortable making fun of his wife in a professional setting, I'm not surprised by his belittling attitude towards women in general." The deeper problem is that "it is not likely to hear another man objecting." If mocking women is truly outside of our Islamic code of conduct, then it should be equally offensive to everyone.
5. **Supporting women leaders is not a luxury because the life-balance struggle between competing responsibilities is not unique to women:** The challenges that must be juggled by women leaders with families, jobs, friends, personal and professional interests when they chose to take on community service is not much different than male leaders who do the same. For both men and women, it is not generally possible to fulfill one's responsibilities without support, yet "the difference is that most men take that support for granted." Our faith-community still assumes that a man who volunteers to serve in a leadership role has a wife who willingly sacrifices in support of his success. Those same men, however remain uninfluenced by our faith-driven values which oblige them to do the same for their wives, daughters, or sisters who serve their communities. "A man who limits his wife's participation in Islamic work, is not going to be just fine with other women participating in that very same work along his side," explained a

study participant. She further clarified that the pre-existence of this cultural construct makes it simply “not her problem” when some men cannot deal with Muslim women as coworkers: “I’m here to do a job and fulfill a responsibility, so yes, sometimes I have to pick my battles and move on.”

Another participant vented while setting up for a large event at her mosque on an early Saturday morning, that she is not willing to accept undermining of her time and talent. “I have a job, I have kids at home, it’s my day off too but I’m here and none of the men on the board will come early for set up, yet they will show up when they welcome people from the podium. This is a large event and it’s a reflection of our mosque and our leadership, but I’m the only one here! It’s disrespectful of my time and my sacrifices.” Visibly upset, she added that she had spoken up and requested of her fellow board members to take turns working the logistics and related errands, however, her request was ignored.

Being supportive does not mean that men should make excuses for women or expect less of them. A study participant relayed how casual remarks from her male peers reflected one-sided values when for example, a male board member arrives late, no one tells him, “it’s ok it must be your family.” However, when the participant walked in 10 minutes late and opened with, “I’m sorry, I’m late,” a male colleague replied, “it’s ok, it must be your kids.” The participant added that “at least I acknowledge when I’m late and I apologize for it, and no it wasn’t my kids!”

Beyond the balancing of responsibilities, supporting women in their personal growth and in their community building efforts is critical. “Sometimes I wonder what would the leaders of our mosques ideally want? Would they be satisfied if all the women just stay home? The Prophet’s wives didn’t! They joined him even on the battlefield. I think we need to ask ourselves what would happen to our community if women are not actively participating in building it? Would our mosques survive the test of time, or are we only serving our interest for today?”

6. **Token appointment of women into leadership roles is packaged with restricted participation and low expectations.** Some women interviewed reported being recruited or asked to accept leadership roles expressly as the “token female” needed to promote their organization’s inclusive image. Others were more subtly encouraged to accept leadership roles but quickly realized that they are simply the face-saving gesture in an otherwise entirely male board of directors. Both groups shared how their initial enthusiasm of serving to make their voices heard and their perspectives appreciated turned into an “an uphill battle when you’re expected to *not* fully participate.”

Several participants stated that in the course being pressured into accepting a

nomination or a new position, she was told, “just say ‘yes’ and then you don’t have to do anything.” Once confirmed in her leadership role, this attitude continues such as when the men select an inappropriate meeting location or time, or when they directly ignore her questions and concerns. “When the meeting passes midnight,” a study participant reported, “I get reminded that ‘if you have to leave, please do.’ Should I be expected to walk out of my own meeting?” It is true that some men may be attempting to be considerate and acknowledge how late a meeting is running, however, singling out a female board member suggesting that she can leave before the job is done translates to lowered expectations.

Yet another female community leader was brought to tears as she shared an incident involving a disagreement during a meeting. A male colleague shut the discussion down by sarcastically proclaiming, “I’m praying for my brother...” and named her husband --a double insult of implying that no man could bear her bullishness, and also that mocking her husband’s apparent misfortune is an acceptable way to invalidate the point she was arguing. The insult was pushed deeper as she paused and looked around the room, “no one said anything.” The strongest expression of support in fact, came from two board members who silently shook their heads in disagreement with the man’s comment. Reviving our authentic Islamic values however, must go beyond just a lip-service of support of women to actively normalizing that women’s personal and professional successes cannot be achieved through inactivity and silence --from both men and women alike.

7. **Undermining women leaders’ authority:** Women who led their boards or headed a committee have experienced being undermined, either by a fellow board member, a community member, or both. A study participant explained that “in a board meeting, all it takes is one person who cannot deal with the fact that I’m his boss, to breakdown communication and halt the work.” Women leaders described being undermined not as a feeling or negative sentiment, but rather as actions or words directed at them. Examples of undermining a leader’s authority include, holding an unauthorized private board meeting without the female leader’s knowledge, unsanctioned lobbying to overturn a decision made by the female leader, replying to the female leader’s directive with a joke, and insubordinate refusal to cooperate or follow directions.

The above examples were experienced by study participants equally from men of immigrant backgrounds as well as US-born. The mindset of being dismissive towards women appears to transcend generations and cultures. For example, women who served as presidents on boards comprised of younger US-born men expressed disappointment when their fellow board members speak directly to the male VP or only accept directives from a male board members --even though the female president is at the same table. “I know that American culture doesn’t exactly have high regards for

women but I was still shocked because many of these young men are double doomed, they have their American culture and they have the back-home culture mentality too, and it's really hard to work with," explained a President of a college MSA. "I know we're not expected to be perfect in any way, yet why is it so hard when we claim that we are 'Muslim' to actually take to heart the example of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), especially when we know of a contentious issue that is causing serious problems in our community?"

8. **The superiority complex serves no one:** "Making demands," "bullying others to follow your commands," "using your title to end a conversation," "refusing to accept criticism," "walking into a room and assuming a man is in charge," "shaming others for having shortcomings," and "acting like you will be here forever," were examples shared by women leaders. For some, this sentiment is amplified when a male board member also lacks the understanding and skills of how to work with Muslim women as colleagues. "I do not appreciate when I'm singled out to defend my decisions, as if someone is waiting for me to make a mistake." "I'm put on the spot, either to be tested or embarrassed, not really sure." "My credentials are questioned." The women described how operating from a place of superiority is not something that is subtle or disguised; it is blatant. "Men with a superior attitude fail to see how obvious their behaviors are to those on the receiving end. It is unfortunate that they don't realize that it's the reason they actually lose respect." It is equally important to note that men acting superior often demonstrate superiority over other men, not just women. While this attitude and accompanying behaviors are learned, they can also be unlearned.

These experiences are a far cry from the woman who spoke back at Omar ibn Al-khattab during an open community forum. Omar, who was known for his strong character and commanding temperament, paused and announced, "This woman is right, and Omar is wrong." This incident occurred in setting and culture in which a woman, not only had the knowledge to correct her leaders but also had the confidence to do it publicly. Additionally, the woman had confidence in her leader's acceptance of feedback and accountability to correct course. In contrast, women in our community today who are knowledgeable and confident hold back doing what this woman did fourteen hundred years ago either because they fear backlash, fear being insulted, or may lack the courage to stand up in the first place. The caliph Omar however, set the tone in his community that knowledge and character rank superior over titles and gender. Conversely, when our conduct does not match what our faith teaches, we will become accountable as community leaders, for every person who is silenced because of our leadership culture.

9. **Losing control physically, verbally, and emotionally is not what our community needs of their leaders:** A study participant shared details of a common scenario, where the hardest thing she had to learn was maintaining composure while she felt attacked and

undermined. “You have to learn to not take things personally.” said one participant, while another added, “In the beginning, I struggled holding back my tears when I felt unwelcome. At my first board meeting, I was a wreck emotionally I couldn’t pass the fact that one board member made it clear that I make him uncomfortable. But you know what? You learn to move on and focus on the work.” While losing control may manifest itself differently in men and women, it is more detrimental when board members resort to yelling, throwing objects, or storming out of a meeting when things do not go their way. “I have to be strong for all the young girls who count on me to make space for them,” said a young participant serving on her first board term.

10. It is not a competition: While some participants admit that they are pulled into a gendered strife, the majority of participants stated that they are not interested in competing. “It’s like someone keeping a tally of who got their way and who voted for what?” “It’s so difficult for some to admit that women are generally better negotiators, better at consulting, and better listeners.” These women promoted an ethos of identifying each individual team member’s skills and character strengths, then creating room for them to complement one another --as far more productive than always aiming for that “win.” Furthermore, a heightened sense of competition was felt when there was more than one woman serving on the same board. “Regardless of what I’m trying to discuss or explain, they jump to the conclusion that I must agree with the other women on the board, it was frustrating and it took a while to know us as individuals.” In many of the examples shared by women leaders in this study, realizing that with some awareness, this sentiment can be avoided because “we create conflict when we place ourselves on opposing teams! In the long run, no one wins.” Competitions are exhausting and drain our time and talent that is supposed to be channeled into our community; it is unhealthy and counterproductive.

The driving force of gendered competition draws from stereotypes which deplete purpose and thoughtfulness from the task at hand. One participant explained, “it’s true that each person is entitled to their own personality, interests, and skills but that doesn’t mean we cannot all pitch in when it comes to mundane tasks.” The assumption here is that just because some women volunteer for certain tasks, then any remaining help needed to complete those specific tasks naturally defaults to the other female board members. “We need constant reminders that we’re on the same team!” It nevertheless remains equally true that male and female leaders of today have been handed an opportunity to revive our Islamic culture of cooperation, kindness, and concern for one another.

8. Serve again

Despite all the challenges and missed opportunities that this study documented across 65 nonprofit board terms inclusive of 187 years of combined experience --not one participant said “no” when asked if she would serve again. Every woman interviewed stated that she would consider serving in a leadership role again.

A few study participants added color to their replies explaining that, “it’s healthy to take a break and then come back even if your masjid doesn’t have such a rule,” and another added jokingly, “for an organization, I say, ‘sure,’ however for a masjid board, it depends!” Regardless of the variety of their experiences, women leaders viewed their participation as crucial for the future of the Muslim community, and that their contributions are still needed. “If anything, I’m more qualified and more prepared the second time around,” a participant confidently affirmed.

9. The Quota Debate

When participants were asked if there should be a pre-set number or percentage of men and women on nonprofit boards, only three stated the quota must be written into the organization’s bylaws. The rest of those who answered “yes” disagreed with codifying quotas, but explained that quotas should be informal targets that are achieved through community-driven advocacy efforts. Examples include mentoring women, educating current leadership, and community forums discussions. “You will not have unanimous buy-in at first, some might jump at the opportunity to correct course while others might wait until they have some success stories” a participant reflected on the importance for change to be organic and gradual. Other participants in the “yes” camp shared that non-bylaw-driven quotas “bring positive change,” “produces leadership that reflects the community at large,” “meet expectations of what the community is asking for,” “empower women to participate and know that they belong in that space,” “force us to think creatively for solutions,” “focus on finding the right person for the job,” and “allow us to grow as a community.” Last, participants voiced concern that the consequences when codified quotas are not met become difficult to enforce and create litigation exposure for the organization.

The “no quotas” group, representing 50% of total participants, had a similar grass-roots focus but without formal or informal quota targets. These women stated that while they want to see more women on SoCal’s Muslim nonprofit boards, a pre-assigned number or percentage is not a grassroots, sustainable solution. These participants focused on the ultimate community-wide goals to upgrade everyone’s understanding that such efforts are not solely to promote women in leadership, but other roles too. These participants stated that “communities are different,” “it’s limiting to women since it’ll never call for more than 50% even if more women are available and qualified,” “no real consequences/enforcement if women do not step up,” “not base our decision on gender but on qualifications,” “use women to manipulate and drive

agendas,” “it’s not a competition,” and, “we need to open minds and hearts, not to come up with rules.”

10. Advice From Women Leaders to Women

Study participants were asked to share recommendations for potential women leaders. This is what they said:

- If you want to see change, then be courageous enough to act.
- Women tend to underestimate their own qualifications -- don’t fall for it.
- Take the time to spell out to your peers specific expectations you have, such as board meeting locations and times, tasks, interests, etc.
- You can maximize what you offer if you seek online training and reading about nonprofit management, conflict resolution, outreach, etc.
- Uplift other women, support other women. Seek out and offer mentorship.
- If you’re hesitant to take on a leadership role, make a pros and cons list for serving in a specific organization/mosque, join the board with another woman, and/or identify your support system.
- Set personal goals and reflect on what you’re learning regardless of the outcomes.
- You owe it to your children and grandchildren to build a stronger community.
- Do it for your daughters.
- Balancing is not hard if you’re passionate about what you do.
- Don’t take things personally, unacceptable conduct is a reflection of the person exhibiting them.
- Call out misconduct but pick your battles.
- Reminder that you join to serve God by serving your community.

11. The Road Ahead

Moving forward to build a stronger, more resilient, and vibrant community rooted in faith starts with every one of us --men and women of all ages. There is a role to play for every community member who wants to be part of the solution, however, keep in mind that a commitment to “change our condition”⁽⁸⁾ requires only a small segment of the community to be persistent and push forward. Our organizations and mosques cannot flourish when our leaders are not listening to community members, empowering them to act, and altering their own actions when necessary. Similarly, our organizations and mosques cannot flourish when their constituents resort to complaining, making demands, or giving up on their own institutions. The impact of mosques, however, in shaping our future, is unlike a business or other nonprofits, because a mosque by definition is inseparable from our Muslim identity.

To the Women in Our Community: Whether you are a student who is passionate about your MSA, a working professional finding fulfillment in your local non-profit, a stay-at-home mom who appreciates opportunities to teach her children by example through being active in her community, a senior who has time and wisdom to share, and/or a regular under-appreciated volunteer in your local mosque, your community needs you:

- Hold on to higher expectations for our community. No matter where your mosque stands on women inclusion, there will always be room for improvement. If your local mosque has women on the board, think of how you can help sustain the presence of women in leadership and increase the number of women invested in the success of the mosque outside of leadership.
- Offer solutions to expand the options for meaningful participation of women within your mosque. This requires us to think creatively, work with a focus group, and align ourselves with scholars who can guide us towards correcting attitudes and behaviors while grounding us within our Islamic principles.
- Seek support. Connect with individuals within your community as well as across other mosques and institutions in the region who realize the importance of women stepping forward and being an integral part of community building. Aim for small, achievable goals that will motivate others to jump on board and organically support your efforts. Do not give up nor resort to complaining as neither produces results.
- Mentor, consult, seek advice, and offer feedback. Thinking long-term will help overcome disagreements, focus on the goals, and be committed to the success of your mosque. To frame our mindset and drive our actions, look at the 7-10 years old children running around your mosque and think, who amongst them will be invested in our institutions in 2050, what qualities are we modeling, and what legacy are we leaving them with.

If you would like to join this effort within your local SoCal mosque, [let us hear from you](#). We will work with member organizations to schedule trainings, facilitate discussions, create platforms for mentorship, etc.

To the Men in Our Community: Whether you have been instrumental in supporting women in your community, or you would like to see more women take on meaningful roles, or you are uncomfortable addressing this issue within a community setting, or you are resistant to the inclusion of more women in community spaces --you have a role to play:

- Hold on to higher expectations for our community. No matter where your mosque stands on women inclusion, there will always be room for improvement. If your local mosque has women on the board, think of how you can help sustain the presence of women in leadership and increase the number of women invested in the success of the mosque outside of leadership.

- Offer solutions to expand the options for meaningful participation of women within your mosque. This requires us to think creatively, work with a focus group, and align ourselves with scholars who can guide us towards correcting attitudes and behaviors while grounding us within our Islamic principles.
- Seek support. Connect with individuals within your community as well as across other mosques and institutions in the region who realize the importance of women stepping forward and being an integral part of community building. Listen and negotiate perspectives to better understand the challenges facing women in your community. Identify how your individual strengths can be leveraged towards shifting your community's culture into alignment with Islam's authentic values.
- Mentor, consult, seek advice, and offer feedback. Thinking long-term will help us overcome disagreements, focus on the goals, and be committed to the success of our mosques. To frame our mindset and drive our actions, look at the 7-10 years old children running around your mosque and think, who amongst them will be invested in our institutions in 2050, what qualities are we modeling, and what legacy are we leaving them with.

If you would like to join this effort within your local SoCal mosque, [let us hear from you](#). We will work with member organizations to schedule trainings, facilitate discussions, create platforms for mentorship, etc.

To the Scholars and Religious Directors in Our Community: Whether you are preparing for a khutba/sermon, a family program, or a class, your role is instrumental in aligning our community with authentic Islamic models and principles. Please consider the following recommendations as a starting point:

1. Create new conversations with your community regarding the Islamic code of conduct between men and women working together. For example, reinforce Islam's balanced approach that neither requires total isolation/separation of men and women nor promotes unrestricted interactions.
2. Leverage existing State mandated sexual harassment trainings as a positive yet minimal starting point to reinforce the underlying Islamic guidelines for interactions between men and women.
3. Educate your community on the gravity of using religion to justify incorrect actions, just as good intentions are not enough when the action itself is wrong.
4. Guide your community to distinguish between authenticated Islamic standards and oppressive cultural practices regardless of being rooted in Eastern or Western cultures.
5. Explain patriarchy and how it limits gender roles compared to documented firsthand accounts of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) conduct, his household, and direct teachings. An example engraved into Islamic history is how Khadija's (ra) financial support never diminished our respect for her husband and his value to humanity, nor granted her

additional status for her wealth. Similarly, we have an example in Aisha who never bore a child, yet remains an influencer through today. For generations after Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) passed away, she led classes for both men and women. Aisha was never restricted to work only with women, nor did she ever lead men in prayer nor set up her own space. She was the mother of all believers. Islamic history as well as contemporary Muslim lives are rich with practical models of how women elevated through Islam's core values are expected to- and have been- essential builders of society. Putting these values into practice starts with you.

6. Convey knowledge of how men and women complement each other whether in their inherent differences or in their individual characteristics. Provide reminders that men and women were created for the same purpose of servitude to God alone. For men and women alike, their servitude to God obligates seeking knowledge, enjoining good, and preventing evil. Gendered assumptions on the other hand, are detrimental because marginalizing half of society results in limiting the growth and potential of our entire society.
7. Skip the stereotypical examples about women and girls. Consider how the 16 year old listening to you process your words, formulating her purpose and potential in life. These examples are offered to drive this point home: A Friday khateeb intending to remind the community about the importance of being good to our families rhetorically asked, "what would make your wife happy? Buying her diamond perhaps or better yet let her go shopping." Another Friday sermon included a remark the khateeb made about a young girl (possibly his daughter) who overreacted because her friend was mean to her, "she was crying and sobbing and wouldn't stop..." Consider how would the young girl attending Friday prayer internalizes your tone and choice of words. Frustrated glances exchanged by women and especially the youth of our communities quickly settles in to disappointment.
8. Foster female youth's love for the mosque, they comprise the largest volunteer base in our mosques. Remind the community of the value they bring and our responsibility to recognize their strengths, afford them more opportunities, mentor them, and treat them with respect.
9. Leverage your unique access to the community to promote expectations of servant leadership, that no one is above self-improvement, and reinforce "not walking in insolence." Our early Islamic history as well as through Islamic Civilization, Muslim leaders expected and sought feedback about their governance. Work on reviving the value of "gift to me my shortcomings" within our mosque leadership.
10. Provide direct access for young women to learn, ask, and seek feedback. More specifically have routinely scheduled check-ins with regular female volunteers and women leaders to ask if there is anything you can do to make their experience more positive.
11. Create opportunities for healthy intellectual exchange between men and women in your community to promote scholarship and higher standards of conduct.

12. Insist on physical improvements that make mosques more welcoming, improved signage, friendly spaces, greeting each other, “merciful to one another,” exhibiting of care, harmony, and kindness. Ask women in your community to report back to you if there is a community member who is disrespectful to them in any way. To “change our condition” is to be able to correct behaviors.
13. Acknowledge and promote the women in your community that you may be depending on for setting up, cleaning up, or arranging for food as many of them are wise, talented and capable of so much more.
14. Discuss specifically with your mosque’s leaders what their mosque will look and feel like within their own lifetime. Engage them in formulating a 50 and 100 year vision. Be equally ready to hear from all segments of your community as they participate in building their future.

As a scholar or a religious director, you are commonly the reason people show up at the mosque. Your guidance is critical to reviving and instilling Islamic scholarship. Your leadership inspires your community to live by its principles. If you would like to join this effort within your local SoCal mosque, [let us hear from you](#). We will work with member organizations to schedule trainings, facilitate discussions, create platforms for mentorship, etc.

12. Conclusion:

“Islam’s current cultural insecurity has been bad for both its scholarship and its women,” Dr. Mohammad Akram Nadwi explains, “our traditions have grown weak, and when people are weak, they grow cautious. When they’re cautious, they don’t give their women freedoms.” (9)

Acknowledging our challenges and their root causes is just as important as the wisdom and creativity required to forge workable solutions. The question remains however, if we have the will to “start with ourselves,” so that our condition will change? Mosques are not the place to seek control, power, titles, or to spite those we disagree with. A one-size-fits-all solution does not exist because every institution has its own players, history, and needs. Therefore, the more collaboratively each institution customizes its own starting point, the more effectively it will navigate down the path of reform. At the individual level, we face the realization that no solution will be comfortable, convenient, or single-sided so if you do not like how things are run in your mosque, what are **you** willing to do differently?

This field study took a closer look at a sample of women who have served or are currently serving on nonprofit boards within Southern California. Future studies are needed to delve into the experiences of women who are not allowed to serve in leadership capacity within their mosques, the experiences of women who are employed and work directly under the very same leadership, and those who remain engaged as general volunteers in spite of being unwelcomed or undervalued.

Our conduct as men and women inside a boardroom and outside are a reflection of our entire community. Good character, humility, wisdom, and vision all transcend gender, age, and culture. This study has offered a glimpse into our current state and proposed actions for improvement, yet the only verdict that matters is the model of governance that we hand off to the next generation.

References and Additional Reading:

- (1) [2011 The American Mosque Report](#)
- (2) [Women-Friendly Mosque Initiative](#)
- (3) [Interview with Prof. Ingrid Mattson: Women and men as allies](#)
- (4) [The Perseverance of Historical and Modern Female Muslims \(40:43\)](#)
- (5) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/02/women-relatively-rare-in-top-positions-of-religious-leadership>
- (6) <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/fact-sheet/the-data-on-women-leaders>
- (7) <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/magazine/25wwlnEssay.t.html>
- (8) (Quran 13:11) "Surely, God does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves."
- (9) <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/magazine/25wwlnEssay.t.html>

[Women Friendly Mosques: Reclaim Our Heritage](#)

[Women in Islam, Inc.](#)

[The Oxford Handbook of American Islam](#)

[ISNA Statement on the Inclusion of Women in Masajid](#)

[ISPU Reimagining Muslim Spaces](#)

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For contact, please email: SoCalMuslimLeadersMentorship@gmail.com