

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

SHOULD WOMEN LEAD MIXED PRAYER CONGREGATIONS AS RELIGIOUS LEADERS?

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Much controversy has been generated by this subject recently which has been fuelled by cases such as Amina Wadud who have lead mixed prayer congregations over the years.

This is not strictly a 'deen' (religious system) related matter and certainly open to debate.

However, some observations in practice and from the Quran's narratives need to be noted.

From the time of the Prophet, men have led central positions as spiritual / religious leaders in their communities. This tradition has been followed.

In relation to religious leadership, a plausible question arises as to the 'hikmah' (wisdom) behind the fact that there is no mention in the Quran of any woman ever being sent as a Prophet.

This might prove an uncomfortable question to consider for some, but the fact remains that **religious leaders** chosen for God's **Prophetic** ministry **have always been men**. This is not an accident or the result of skewed probability. Prophets have also functioned as religious leaders and have led their congregations (4:102).

Given some of the difficulties that may arise with managing men in congregations or possible disputes in the community that may arise from them, maybe men were / are more appropriate for the task of religious leadership. This would not make women inferior but would recognise the most appropriate gender for a particular task. Women can be expecting mothers; they can be engaged in crucial household matters, weaning their young, undertaking crucial roles which provide the bedrock of stable homes and **working in wider society**. One needs to appreciate and recognise the different roles men and women play in maintaining the stability of different societies rather than whittling it down to a mere matter of gender competition or comparison.

Mary, the mother of Prophet Jesus ^(pbuh) is mentioned in the Quran as '**chosen over all women**' (3:42) and was given up by her mother for God's special cause (3:35). However, even she has **never** been mentioned in the capacity of 'religious leadership' or 'leading a congregation'. She has simply been told to '**bow with those that bow**' (3:43). This indicates participation not religious leadership.

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"O Mary! Be obedient to your Lord and prostrate thyself, and bow down (in prayer) with those who bow down (Arabic: raki-een)"

Societal and cultural norms usually develop as a consequence of the sentiments of a community (right or wrong).

The Quran neither instructs nor prohibits women leading prayer explicitly. However narratives may **'imply'** a lean towards favouring men in the capacity of a religious leadership role within a given community. **This wisdom needs to be understood and not skirted.**

The responsibility of leading a prayer normally comes twinned with other roles of an Imam (religious leader) which can involve intricate discussions with other men, resolving societal problems, temperamental male youngsters etc. These roles also need to be taken into account and leading a prayer congregation in the capacity of a religious leader should not be seen as an isolated duty which it usually is not.

However, I do find it unnecessary to go out of one's way to '**prove a point**' as some do when they invite women to lead prayer, which may run against the grain of societal sentiments and cause dissension, especially when the Quran is generally neutral on the matter.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It was noted above that women leading mixed congregations in the capacity of religious leaders was not strictly a 'deen' related matter. However, prevailing customs need to be appreciated in light of the Quran. References to Prophethood and Mary's example were cited with a view to consider any underlying 'hikmah' (wisdom).

Causing undue turmoil and to upset community sentiments is not in line with the spirit of the Quran's message unless an established practice or belief clearly conflicts with it.