A modern-day visitor to Jami' Amr Ibn al-As mosque in Cairo during the month of Ramadan can not miss the overt female presence in the women’s quarter. That is not to say that this practice is universally accepted among all of the congregational mosques throughout the world. It is a fact that clearly contravenes a legal consensus arrived at during most of the period of Islamic history. After deliberation on the legality of women’s attendance at mosques for congregational prayers, the majority of jurists, both Sunni and Shi’ite, concluded that it is permissible but, intriguingly, attractive women should avoid mosques for fear of the social unrest (fitna) associated with their presence there.

The prescriptions of the legal consensus may not have been universally followed and have been modified and tempered by some jurists in the modern period. Nonetheless, it is important to revisit some of the early debates on women’s presence in mosques as they clearly reveal the social forces and mentalities that shaped one area of juridical discourse regarding women’s mobility in the public sphere. The jimar of major Sunni and Shi’ite schools, the Hanafis, the Malikis, and the Hanbalis can be grouped together as their reasoning is largely similar. They differ primarily in the severity of their prescriptions: the Hanafis emerge as the most restrictive, the Hanbalis as more lenient, and the Malikis as adopting a more moderate position. In general, all three schools are opposed to the presence of women at congregational prayers. Fitr-results from women’s presence at the mosque is the primary reason cited for this disapproval. Jurists of these schools further specify that young women, in particular, are to avoid jimar while older women can attend if there is no fear of fitna from their presence. Finally, in the case that older women do go to the mosque, they should do so at darker times of the day, for the Fajr, Maghrib or Isha prayers. During these times, the darkness provides a natural veil for women and their presence in the public arena is therefore less conspicuous than it would be otherwise. The various jurists referred to for this research focus respectively on the disorder that may result from women’s attendance at mosques and pay little or no attention to the duties that may prevent a woman from joining congregational prayers. Thus, they are more concerned with preserving a sense of public order or morality rather than with addressing how a woman may balance her religious and spiritual duties with her domestic, specifically domestic, obligations. The fourth main Sunni school, the Shafis, maintain a position – as articulated first by Al-Shafi’i (d. 204) himself – that is generally in keeping with the time of the Prophet, and that they were not dis- couraged from doing so. We are thus faced with what appears to be a discrepancy between the Prophet’s practice and Shari’a prescriptions.

The first indicator of Islamic Law, the Quran, does not directly address the issue of women attending mosques to perform the five daily prayers. In contrast to the ab- sence of Qur’anic references, a number of hadith either explicitly or implicitly deal with the issue of women’s presence in mosques. These hadiths can be arranged into the following categories: those indicating women’s presence in mosques, those indicating the time of the Prophet, those favouring permission for women to go to mosques, those prohibiting proper behaviour for women who go to mosques, and those dis- couraging women from praying in mosques. The hadith in the first three cate- gories – those indicating that women can and did attend mosques – outnumber those in the final category in which women are en- couraged to pray at home. Moreover, the re- ports in the last category do not occur with great frequency in the six well-known col- lections and are often narrated via problem- atic isnads. Nonetheless, the hadith in the final category have played a greater role in guiding and justifying early Sunni discus- sion of the weight of women’s par- ticipation in jimarat.

Various Sunni Stances

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