

PRAYER

Combining prayer space with social and educational programmes, new women's mosque Al Mujadilah is helping Muslim women in Qatar reclaim their spirituality. Could this be the start of a wider movement across the region? MOJEH investigates

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When the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) started spreading the revelations of Islam in the 7th Century, the advancement of women's rights was a vital part of his teachings. In fact, an entire chapter in the Qur'an addresses the needs of one particular woman during his time. Al Mujadilah, which translates to "she who disputes," is the 58th chapter of the Qur'an and was inspired by the story of Khawla bint Tha'laba, whose husband divorced her through an unjust, pre-Islamic practice. She petitioned the Prophet and prayed to God, who then revealed Al Mujadilah, outlawing this method of divorce.

This chapter of the Qur'an was a revolutionary acknowledgement of women's wellbeing in early Islam, and inspired the name of Qatar's first-ever women's mosque, Al Mujadilah, which opened its doors earlier this year. Founded by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, Al Mujadilah aims to reinforce women's Islamic identity while cultivating a society where Muslim women actively participate and contribute to shaping contemporary Islamic thought and public discourse. Located in Doha, the exterior of the building resembles a wave, and its courtyard contains olive trees, symbolising Muslim women striving and growing together. There is an open and airy worship hall with a ceiling dotted with hundreds of light cones, a library specialising in books about women and Islam, numerous learning spaces and a garden designed for pause, privacy and reflection.

"Prayer is one part of what happens at Al Mujadilah, but there is so much more to discover beyond this," says Dr Sohaira Siddiqui, associate professor of Islamic studies and theology at Georgetown University in Qatar and executive director of Al Mujadilah. She tells *MOJEH* that launching this "much-needed space" has been exciting and fulfilling. "To be able to make research more accessible to a public audience, to support female scholarship and create wider and broader platforms for their work to impact women around the world — the possibilities are awe-inspiring," she says. "On a more personal level, as a Muslim woman and as a new mother, I understood the impact Al Mujadilah could have on the lives of my children and wider society." 

ANSWERED

The women's areas in many mainstream mosques lack the space and décor typical of the men's prayer halls.



Although some present-day mosques discourage females from attending prayers, women were active members of the early Muslim community.



Both a social and educational centre as a well as a place of worship, Al Mujadilah was conceptualised and created over the course of two years — and is the first known mainstream mosque for women in the contemporary Arab world. Orthodox mosques usually feature one main room, dedicated to male worshippers, with a smaller room at the back, side or lower or higher floor of the building for women. Because there is culturally more emphasis on the importance of men attending the mosque, they have been designed primarily addressing the needs of males, explains Islamic educator at Dubai College Sara Alikhan. “Women’s prayer areas are often a fraction of the size of men’s prayer halls and at times they are also less aesthetically pleasing,” she says. “The lack of ornamental décor, be it chandeliers, arabesque designs and even natural light at times, leads to a less inspiring space.”

A 2018 report in British newspaper *The Guardian* found that 28 per cent of mosques in the UK did not offer facilities for women — an issue the Open My Mosque campaign is still working to rectify. Some mosques in India have recently come under fire for banning female worshippers entirely — a custom completely at odds with the spirit of Islam preached by the Prophet Muhammad, whose wives were religious figures both during and after his lifetime. Shahla Haeri, associate professor of anthropology and former director of the Women’s Studies programme at Boston University, traces the rich tradition of female religious scholarship and leadership in early Islam in her book *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender*. “It is remarkable, at a time when women are not allowed to enter mosques in some contemporary Muslim countries, let alone speak publicly, that not only were they not barred from attending mosques at the dawn of Islam, but they participated actively in public events,” she writes, emphasising that Muslim women — particularly the Prophet’s wife, A’isha — were renowned transmitters of religious knowledge.

“Having a place where Muslim women gather and share their knowledge and experience is not a new concept in Islam but a fundamental one,” says Dr Sohaira. Al Mujadilah is the latest in a long-standing history of centres for female Muslim scholarship and piety — a tradition that in contemporary times has often been eclipsed by patriarchy and uniformity. In China, Wangjia Hutong Women’s Mosque of Kaefeng was first established in 1820, and the Maldives has also been home to women’s mosques — in 2005, there were over 250 estimated to be spread out among the inhabited islands, yet these all reportedly closed by 2010, with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs claiming they were expensive to maintain. Mosques for women have recently begun taking root in Europe and North America, offering more inclusive experiences for female worshippers in the West.

Societal circumstances have traditionally dictated women’s roles as homemakers, caretakers and mothers, and Sara points out that those with small children often stay behind and miss the opportunity to visit the mosque and experience the sense of community kinship that their male family members are exposed to regularly. “Women are intrinsically spiritual beings often looking for outlets to connect with their faith on a deeper level,” she says. “Sometimes they are new mothers who need guidance on how to raise their children in an Islamic environment, or young women needing guidance on how to foster their newfound spiritual awakening, or simply women in need of a spiritual recharge.” Since its opening earlier this year, Al Mujadilah has

offered a variety of social, religious and developmental programmes in both English and Arabic. In addition to courses centred on reading and reciting the Qur’an and learning Arabic calligraphy, there are talks about Islamic law, women in Islamic history, parenting and even women’s psychology. Mentoring and nurturing female Islamic scholars is also on the agenda at Al Mujadilah, which will host an annual summit called *Jadl* — translating to ‘debate’ in English.

When Dubai-based paediatrician Dr Aseel Abudayya visited Al Mujadilah for the first time while visiting her parents in Doha, she was struck by the fact that it felt more like a holistic women’s community space than a traditional mosque. “I felt so many emotions when I walked in, but first and foremost was pride. I felt so proud that an institution of this kind exists to cater to Muslim women who want to come together not only in prayer but to discuss different topics pertaining to their faith,” she tells *MOJEH*.

The birth of Al Mujadilah points to the growing empowerment of Muslim women within religious spaces. In 2022, Saudi Arabia announced that women are no longer required to travel with a male relative for the Hajj pilgrimage, which is underway this June. In the UAE, women may now hold the position of *mufti* (a qualified religious scholar) and in 2021, the UAE’s first mosque designed by a woman — architect Sumaya Dabbagh — opened on Umm Suqeim Road (although its female prayer space still pales in comparison to the much larger, more ornate men’s hall). In May 2024, executive director of the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) Daisy Khan released her book *30 Rights of Muslim Women: A Trusted Guide*, which emphasises that gender equality is at the core of the faith, and encourages women to reclaim their sacred rights.

Reforms and resources such as these can help challenge the status quo and prevailing masculine monopoly on religion that often marginalises Muslim women. And while some might be inclined to categorise concepts such as Al Mujadilah

as ‘feminist’, it’s not a label that the space claims for itself. Feminism, in Middle Eastern contexts, is often viewed as a Western concept, and Al Mujadilah is restoring women’s spiritual empowerment from within the Islamic tradition, rather than being inspired by a secular feminism.

UK-headquartered news outlet *The New Arab* described Al Mujadilah as a “blueprint” for Muslim women across the globe, which begs the question — could this Doha establishment trigger a wider movement across the Middle East? “I love the idea of a women’s mosque,” says Sara, who believes that the very idea for such a space may not have even crossed women’s minds before, due to it being rare and unconventional in the region. “If presented with this idea, however, I definitely think there would be great demand,” she adds. A poll of 75 Muslim women on Instagram revealed that 80 per cent believed there is a “need” for women-only mosques in the region, and 68 per cent envisioned it becoming a wider trend across the GCC.

Those running Al Mujadilah may hesitate to call the space ‘groundbreaking’, but as a Muslim woman who has had her fair share of feeling sidelined at mosques, I can’t help but emphasise how thrillingly game-changing this centre is for females of faith in the GCC. The downside? It’s only accessible for those physically in Doha. “We need more spaces like this, for women to feel comfortable and at ease to come together and practice their faith,” agrees Dr Aseel. “Hopefully other countries in the Middle East will follow suit.” ^(N)

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DR ASEEL ABUDAYYA