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As Barrier Comes Down, a Muslim Split Remains

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

SAN FRANCISCO, June 24 — During Friday prayers at San Francisco's largest downtown mosque, Sevim Kalyoncu, a young Turkish-American writer, used to resent that the imam never addressed the women, as if his message was not intended for them. But the sermons underwent a sudden change when the Islamic Society of San Francisco took the controversial step of tearing down the barrier separating male and female worshippers.

"He was always addressing the brothers during the Friday sermon," Ms. Kalyoncu said. "Now we hear 'brothers and sisters' because he can see us. Before, I felt very distant, but now it seems that women are part of the group. It's a first step."

Even after the slapdash, 8-foot wall across the back of the Darussalam mosque was demolished as part of a renovation last fall, however, the 400-member congregation remained divided.

After the demolition, a small knot of veiled women marched in brandishing a hand-lettered cardboard sign that read "We Want the Wall." Several men who pray at the mosque — on the third floor of an old theater in a particularly sleazy stretch of the city's Tenderloin district — are still grumbling, and some of them even decamped for a rival mosque. But the wall stayed down.

The norm in the United States and Canada — not to mention in the larger Muslim world — is to separate the women, if not bar them entirely. A small if determined band of North American Muslims, mostly younger women, have been challenging the practice, however, labeling the separation of men and women imported cultural baggage rather than a fulfillment of a religious commandment. They argue that while Muslims brag that Islam grants more rights to women than other religions do, the opposite is true.

"I am positive there will be an American Islamic identity that is separate from what you see in the Middle East and the rest of the Islamic world," said Souleiman Ghali, a founding member of the Islamic Society of San Francisco and the main force behind the wall's removal.

"We can discuss things that would be taboo in different countries," added Mr. Ghali, 47, a Palestinian who immigrated to the United States from Lebanon when he was 20 and now runs a copy business in downtown San Francisco. "Here we can challenge ideas or change them, and there is no religious authority to come in with the power of the government to shut us down, accusing us of being infidels contradicting thousands of years of the religious norm."

In Regina, Saskatchewan, Zarqa Nawaz was so incensed when her 200-member mosque shunted the women into a small, dark room behind a one-way mirror that she made a documentary on the

subject.

The film, "Me and the Mosque," was financed by the National Film Board of Canada and broadcast on Canadian national television in April. It will appear on two American satellite channels, Link TV and Free Speech TV, starting July 16.

Mrs. Nawaz said the issue had broader implications.

"The barriers have become a metaphor for keeping the women secluded in other ways, to having no role in running the community," she said.

In 2001, a survey by the Council on American-Islamic Relations of more than 1,200 mosques found that 66 percent of them required women to pray behind a partition or in a separate room, up from 52 percent in 1994. Another study, spearheaded by the Islamic Social Services Association of Canada, found that mosques generally "relegate women to small, dingy, secluded, airless and segregated quarters with their children."

Islamic scholars and women activists say they believe the trend has accelerated since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, attributing it to a newly pervasive insecurity on the part of North American Muslims who have counteracted it through a staunch adherence to tradition.

"There is a sense that there is a crusade out there against Islam, that Islam is under siege and we have to hold steadfast to our righteous ways more than ever," said Khaled Abou El Fadl, a law professor at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, and a prominent Islamic jurist known for his moderate interpretations.

Dr. Abou El Fadl said the practice began in 18th-century Saudi Arabia, where the austere Wahhabi sect of Islam started walling off or banning women from mosques. (He added that the modern spread of Wahhabism is one facet of the pervasiveness of Saudi financial support for Muslim institutions worldwide.)

Mrs. Nawaz's film takes an alternately light-hearted and serious look at the arguments on both sides.

"In Islam, mixing is not encouraged; there is no mixing between sexes, and there are all kinds of reasons for that," Ghassan Joundi, the president of the Manitoba Islamic Association, says in the film. In Dr. Joundi's mosque, the men first erected a barrier with shutters, then nailed them shut.

At the Darussalam mosque, the dispute over the wall was just one skirmish in a larger battle over the entire tenor of the mosque. Mr. Ghali and other leaders at the mosque fired an imam they deemed overly militant, not least because he wanted to make the barrier between the sexes even more pronounced. The imam went to court, winning more than \$400,000 in a wrongful dismissal suit, and then opened a competing mosque around the corner, where the women still worship behind a wall.

But Mr. Ghali and other mosque leaders say they believe North America provides fertile ground for

melding the best of all cultural traditions because the Muslim population is so diverse.

"You can't take a tradition in Pakistan, Somalia or Egypt and bring it to America and make it part of the law; it doesn't make sense," said Mr. Ghali, who resigned as president of the mosque's board in February. "It's one of those cultural things that many immigrants brought from overseas without giving it much thought. It's time to get rid of those bad habits."

That outlook incited an exodus by some worshippers, and some who stayed have complained that a clique of "ayatollahs" who brook no dissent now run Darussalam.

"I don't want to be distracted by ladies in the back when I am praying," said Adel al-Dalali, 40, a Yemeni cab driver who prays at Darussalam, noting that mosques in his homeland were built with a mezzanine reserved for women. "Even if it is more culture than religious tradition, we feel it's needed."

At the back of the mosque, some of the roughly 30 women worshippers agreed. "As a Muslim woman, I was more at peace praying behind the wall," said Zeinab al-Andea, a 50-year-old Yemeni who spoke only Arabic. "As a veiled woman, I don't want to mix with men. It's a beautiful mosque, but I wish there was a wall."

The mosque occupies the top floor of a building that was filled mostly with sweatshops until 1991, when the Islamic Society moved in. The recent renovations turned the mosque into one large room flooded with light. Broad green stripes on the red carpet show the faithful where to line up, and, in a nod to tradition, men and women still do not pray shoulder to shoulder.

The wall across the back was replaced with small printed signs reading "Sisters Prayer Area Only Behind This Sign." The aim of knocking down the wall was not for the sexes to mingle, but to have comparable access to the imam.

Outside, the neighborhood is rife with all manner of vice. Intoxicated men and women occasionally stagger into one of the many liquor stores. Across Market Street, a pornography store called Sin City exhorts passers-by to "See the Beauty, Touch the Magic."

Yet a dedicated group of women who support the change at Darussalam navigate their way to the mosque each Friday.

These women say they hated the wall. With it, they had trouble hearing the sermon and often fell out of sync with the prayer movements. Distracted, some say they gave up praying and instead just gossiped or drank tea.

Proponents of barriers in mosques tend to argue that the Prophet Muhammad's wives, who inhabited a series of rooms attached to the main mosque at Medina, spoke to the faithful from behind a tentlike curtain. They also say a distinct space for women assures they will not have to jostle with men.

Muslim rituals are guided by the Koran and the Hadith, tomes that detail Islam as it was practiced

in the prophet's time. Advocates and some religious scholars say the books support the women. Muhammad emphasized that the rules for his wives were distinct from those for other women, they note, and he never resorted to a barrier, despite similar debate in the seventh century.

Some early adherents of Islam showed up late for prayers so they could stay in the back and ogle the women's behinds, even penning bawdy odes to the sight, said Dr. Abou El Fadl, the U.C.L.A. scholar, so Mohamed recommended that all men pray at the front of their mosques. None of Islam's three holiest mosques — Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and those in Mecca and Medina — originally had barriers between the sexes.

"Men try to justify it now by creating arguments that are ludicrous, like saying that men back then were more moral," said Mrs. Nawaz, the filmmaker, a 38-year-old mother of four. "This is completely bogus. The men were exactly the same back then when it came to being distracted. The prophet didn't deal with it by separation, he dealt with it by education."

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