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Egyptian women break new ground at the mosque

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CAIRO, Egypt -- Amira Khairy is mobbed by housewives kissing her cheeks in greeting as she arrives to give a lesson on reciting the Quran to women at the Al-Sedeeq mosque in a Cairo suburb. Students set up chairs for the class, and soon the hum of chanting female voices fills one of the building's larger chambers.

Up to a 1,000 women may show up for the Quran lessons or twice-weekly religious lectures by women. On any given day, several hundred women buzz around the mosque, organizing clothing drives, cooking meals for the poor or teaching women to read. Al-Sedeeq also has medical clinics and a day care center for children of women who do volunteer work at the mosque.

All the activities are organized by women _ not the mosque's male administrators. On one recent day, the only men seen in the building were workers doing renovations and worshippers who popped in to perform one of the five daily prayers required by Islam.

It's a startling sight in Egypt, where mosques have long been a man's realm. The few Egyptian women who appeared at mosques in the past had come to pray _ usually in small, partitioned-off corners _ or to make appeals at the shrines of holy figures, hoping for marriage, pregnancy or good grades for their children.

While men often socialize in mosques, women have traditionally been encouraged to practice their religion at home, where they can care for their children and husband.

"When I was young, we wouldn't even go to pray in the mosque," said Khairy, the teacher. "It was a place for us to tour on holidays, like visitors."

Now, with religiosity increasing in Egypt overall, more women want to engage in public prayer, increase their knowledge of Islam and do volunteer work in the community. Many Egyptian women already have had to balance their traditional place in the home with public roles at universities and jobs, so they tend to ask, "Why not a place in the mosque as well?"

These women aren't Western-style feminists seeking to change the faith's teachings on women. But their presence is challenging assumptions on women's place and turning some mosques into women-friendly social hubs.

While no statistics exist on the increasing number of Egyptian women praying outside the home, several religious scholars in Cairo say there's a clear trend of more women attending mosques and playing a greater religious role.

Khairy is typical of many of the new breed of religious women. She is in her 50s, studied engineering at university but rather than pursue a career, she married and stayed home to care for her children. About 10 years ago, she wanted to deepen her faith, so she and a group of women started meeting in each other's homes to memorize the Quran.

More women joined the study circle, and several years ago they began meeting at the newly built Al-Sedeeq mosque, near Cairo's international airport. They found a woman with an Islamic studies degree who volunteered to give lectures on how to pray and perform other rituals and on why women should wear the hijab, or head scarf.

As hundreds of women from across Cairo joined in, the charity projects multiplied. The women are now so organized that the volunteers wear a uniform _ white scarf and blue dress.

The Al-Sedeeq mosque's administrators expanded its women's section to accommodate the volunteers. But not all are so welcoming.

Egypt is one of the most progressive Middle East nations on the issue of women attending mosques. In the Persian Gulf, many mosques have no space dedicated to women, and more women can be seen at prayers or Friday sermons in Egypt than in many other Arab countries.

Still, Egyptian women are often told, even by some female Islamic thinkers, that they should stay at home.

"The best place for a woman to pray remains her house," said one of them, Souad Saleh, who teaches at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, the pre-eminent Sunni Muslim institution for Islamic studies.

"It is better spiritually and generally more appropriate, since she will always be distracted by her children. There is really no need for women to go to the mosque," Saleh said.

Mosque administrators are universally male and many still are reluctant to allocate greater space to women, saying more men attend prayers. At most mosques, women must enter through side doors, and women's sections are not

always air-conditioned or carpeted. Women often face complaints about the noise and distraction their children bring to the mosque.

But Abdel-Moeti Bayoumi, a theology professor at Al-Azhar University, says men must realize times are changing.

"I always tell men that the days of locking up women away from society and useful work or study is backward and dangerous," he said. "It is not permitted in Islam to prevent a woman from praying in the mosque."

Najah Naji, a 22-year-old woman who tries to visit different mosques around Cairo to pray and study, says she is often told the women's prayer section is closed or otherwise unavailable.

"Men feel like the leadership will be taken from underneath them," said Naji, who has memorized the Quran. "Even an educated man is raised with a mother who stayed at home and served his father, so he'd be worried I wouldn't be able to do the same for him. It's going to take a lot of time for that attitude to change."

The Al-Sedeeq mosque is one of the most dramatic examples of women taking a bigger role. More often, small groups of women make forays into modest neighborhood mosques.

At a tiny mosque tucked between apartment buildings near the Giza Pyramids on the outskirts of Greater Cairo, Hana Mohammed sits with a group of 12 older women. They cram into a small room every week to share stories, exchange news of grandchildren, vent about their lives at home and recite the Quran.

"The mosque is a softer place now that women have entered it," said Mohammed. "If a woman in need comes for help she'd never knock on the door if only men were inside."

Mohammed said she has taught women to read and to pray, as well as counseled young women about marriage.

"Women realized there was more to life than just cooking and taking care of a husband," said Mohammed. "Women wanted to understand how her faith really was a way of life _ why did she have to wear hijab, why were men allowed to marry four women."

Members of Mohammed's circle said a woman with several university degrees and a career shouldn't be told she can't enter a mosque. They said it's the education of women _ either in secular or religious studies _ that has emboldened them to demand change.

"Women started to force themselves on the mosque because they realized their faith allowed them to do so," said Mohammed. "It was a religious awakening. We understood we could do it, so we did."

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