

Egypt fights extremism by allowing women leaders at mosques

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CAIRO (RNS)—Four years ago, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi called on state-supported Muslim clerics “to improve the image of Islam in front of the world.”

In response, Islamic religious authorities are allowing Muslim women to be heard. Over the past three months, the clerics have announced women can now serve as preachers in mosques and schools, serve on governing boards and sing in choirs dedicated to liturgical music.

“These measures show that Islam can grow in an open encounter with other faiths,” said Wafaa Abdelsalam, a 38-year-old female physician appointed by the government’s Ministry of Religious Endowments to give two sermons a week at a pair of influential mosques in the Cairo suburbs.

A place for women to ask questions

“The audience for my Ramadan talks has been mostly upper-middle-class women who until recently have felt they have had nobody to talk to about how Islam fits into their lives.”

About 70 percent of mosques in Egypt have separate prayer areas for women, the Endowments Ministry reported. But the move to introduce women preachers—*wa’ezzah* in Arabic—marks the first time females have addressed worshippers formally in these spaces as officially sanctioned clergy.

“Religious education here is a chance for women to ask me questions about personal matters, including marriage problems, and to debate the merits and drawbacks of the choice to wear or not wear the (hijab) headscarf,” said Abdelsalam.

The *wa’ezzat* are following sermon guidelines set by the Endowments Ministry, she added.

Part of fight against extremism

The push to promote women in Egypt’s religious sphere is backed by scholars at Al-Azhar University, the traditional seminary of mainline Sunni theology, and arises from Egypt’s fight against extremism. El-Sissi has challenged Islamic theologians to examine texts that have been used to justify terrorism.

The Endowments Ministry, which gives out religious financial grants and appoints clergy in more than 110,000 mosques in this country of 90 million Muslims, is at the forefront of the crackdown on extremism. In May, it moved to ban unlicensed male preachers from delivering homilies in more than 20,000 storefront mosques known locally as *zawyas*.

Zawya preachers have been suspected of propagating fundamentalist views among women as well as men to advance extremist beliefs.

“We can’t leave the field of Islamic women’s education to nonspecialists,” said Youmna Nasser, a female preacher newly appointed by the government.

The Endowments Ministry has trained about 300 female preachers in public speaking, as well as in interpreting the Quran and other Muslim texts. It also plans to name two women to the governing boards of each mosque next month, with the aim of boosting attention to issues related to

women, children and the family.

“The steps we are taking now to affirm women’s rights are based on principles recognized by Islam in the past but were neglected over time,” said Abdul Ghani Hindi, a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. Officials are in the process of training 2,000 more female preachers, Hindi said.

“True Islam strengthens women’s status, which is why we started training courses for female preachers and are trying to find out more about women’s views about how mosques are run,” said Hindi.

Another important shift toward expanding women’s voices is happening at Al-Azhar University, which has grown beyond its original role as an Islamic seminary to provide general education in fields including medicine and engineering to more than 45,000 students in Cairo and at seven satellite campuses.

Mixed choir performs Islamic hymns

Bucking conservative fatwas that prohibit men from even listening to the sound of women singing, Al-Azhar leaders have formed a coeducational choir that performs Muslim hymns on and off campus.

“My dad was afraid that people’s views of me as religiously observant would change, and that neighbors would see me as deviating from the traditions of Islam,” said Umniah Kamal, a 21-year-old business major and choir member at Al-Azhar. “But my mom encouraged me to join the chorale and even suggested some of the religious songs we are performing.”

University officials insist including young women in the choir will make Islam more relevant to a new generation.

“Those who say the chorale reduces Al-Azhar’s image of piety are wrong,”

said Ibtisam Zaidan, the university's artistic director. "We are using the performing arts to bolster Al-Azhar as a beacon of Islamic life and learning."

"There is no text in the Quran that prohibits singing these songs. The young ladies dress conservatively, wear headscarves and stand separately from the young men during the performances."

Opposition from traditionalists

While Al-Azhar's choir captured second place in an April competition hosted by Egypt's Youth and Sports Ministry, the mixed-gender performances and government appointments of women to leadership roles in mosques have stirred up opposition among traditionalists.

"Drafting women as public representatives on mosque directors boards, encouraging them to issue fatwas and the outrageous formation of that mixed-gender musical team at Al-Azhar are all ideas imported from the West," said Sameh Abdul Hamid, a Cairo preacher from the Salafi movement, a strictly traditionalist branch within Sunni Islam.

"It's all part of an effort by Arab governments to erase our Islamic identity and is disrespectful of our belief that the way to strengthen the status of women is to safeguard their position in their homes," said Hamid.

Government officials insist enhanced visibility and targeted programs for women in Egypt's mosques are not about gender equality but rather education and outreach to reinforce tradition.

"Women on boards will act as a link between the female faithful and the mosque administration and greater attention will be given to family issues that were not strongly represented before," said Shaikh Jaber Taya, the Endowments Ministry spokesman.