

## US Muslim women seek active faith role

By Robert Pigott  
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### **See the Akhtar family at a weekend lunch, and the renewal of Islam in America seems inevitable and irresistible.**

Shahid and Mino Akhtar were born in Pakistan and, like their son and three daughters, they are devout Muslims who attend the mosque regularly.

Meeting them at their house in a quiet tree-lined street in Emerson, New Jersey, it soon seems clear that they, and their progressive Islam, are as perfectly adapted to life in modern America as their Christian neighbours.

Shahid is a hands-on dad. While his wife pursued a career as a lawyer he took charge of raising the children. His son Reza, a hospital doctor, is following his example by being the one who cooks dinner and does the dishes as his wife, Amna, also works.

The Akhtar daughters are pursuing careers as a lawyer, businesswoman and dentist. Their emancipation has not diluted their sense of being Muslim, but it has changed it.

Sheema wears shorts to play soccer, but sees no conflict with the duty to behave modestly. They feel bound by the duty to pray, for example, but not at five set times each day.

Mino Akhtar says connection with God is what counts.

"In terms of the daily practices, when I travel on business I don't get to get to pray five times a day," she says. "It's my connection with the creator that's more important than how I do it."

"Absolutely," says her daughter Sheema. "We're just adapting to the surroundings. As long as you have the basic principles, and you abide by them and remember Allah every day."

### **Women 'reclaiming Islam'**

American Muslims' determination to grasp the basic principles of their religion - rather than the sometimes harsh rules contributed by other cultures during its long history - grew out of the wreckage of the World Trade Center towers.

**We've been working with a variety of organisations on really taking the teachings of Islam and delivering them without the baggage of tradition**

Lena Alhusseini

Shahnaz Taplin Chinoy stands on Brooklyn Heights and surveys the southern tip of Manhattan. She recalls the events of 11 September 2001, and the moment she made it her mission to reclaim the Islam of her childhood.

"I was bombarded by questions from friends," she says. "They kept saying, 'why does Islam suppress women? Why does Islam condone violence?' I was flabbergasted at the Islam of the hijackers which was so disconnected with the Islam of my youth - which was not extremist at all."

### **'Baggage of tradition'**

Lena Alhousseini, whose origin is Palestinian, runs a family support centre for Arab-Americans in Brooklyn. She says women are leading the renewal of Islam because they have the most to gain.

"Oftentimes we get women who are illiterate. They come from tribal societies and in their understanding of Islam it's okay to be beaten by a man. Their role is to be subservient and that's the mark of a good Muslim woman - which is very different from what Islam teaches.

"So we've been working with a variety of organisations on really taking the teachings of Islam and delivering them without the baggage of tradition. And telling them this is what Islam is all about - Islam gives you rights, Islam doesn't allow you to be treated this way."

Laleh Bakhtiar is a Muslim scholar who has translated the Koran, making controversial changes in standard translations which she says more accurately reflect the original spirit of the religion.

Dr Bakhtiar's English text has removed derogatory references to Christians and Jews. It changes many of the most important words, even substituting the word "God" for "Allah", which she says is more inclusive. Most controversially, her Koran rejects the idea, in Chapter Four, verse 34, that men may beat their wives.

"The word for "beat" has 25 meanings", she says. "We need to look therefore at what Muhammad did. He didn't beat but walked away. So why are we saying 'beat' when we can say 'go away' - which is what he did."

### Modern mosques

Muslim women have also been demanding changes in the way mosques are run. Daisy Khan was among the designers contributing to the plans for Long Island Mosque in Westbury, a suburb of wide roads, trees and clap-boarded houses. She quickly discovered that the draft design confined women to a basement.

"Women were out of sight... the design was done in such a way that women were supposed to be downstairs with no access to the main prayer space," she says.

**You're talking about a country [the US] which is based on the principles of freedom and democracy, equality, justice - all these are Islamic**  
Imam Shamsi Ali

Now women worship in the prayer hall behind the men, a step that seems radically modern to some new immigrants.

"There's no provision in Islam which says women can't pray in the same space," insists Ms Khan. "These are just traditions we've adopted over the years because of the practice in certain countries."

Among the Sufi Muslims of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi order at their meeting in Yonkers, men and women mix freely. The spiritual director is a woman. Shaykha Fariha occasionally leads both men and women in prayers, an act which has scandalised traditionalists but which she says is appropriate in America.

"In the West I'm more free about leading prayers" she says. "I think the tendency against it is mainly a cultural one."

At the New York Islamic Cultural Centre, a group of high-spirited girls is studying alongside boys on a Saturday morning. The mosque's imam, Muhammad Shamsi Ali, says educating girls is vital to developing Islam in the West, and is true to Islam's original purpose.

"Prophet Mohammed stated clearly that women must learn - they must be equal to the male intellectually, they have to improve themselves intellectually," he says.

Imam Shamsi Ali says he sees no incompatibility between the US and Islam. "You're talking about a country which is based on the principles of freedom and democracy, equality, justice - and all these are Islamic."

Shaykha Fariha says that apart from these shared principles, Islam has what the founder of her order

described as the ability to behave like water - taking on the shape of the vessel into which it is poured.

She says Muslims in many parts of the world are shedding the cultural restrictions inherited from male-dominated and conservative societies.

"Islam is undergoing a huge reformation and self questioning, and certainly 9/11 has [led to] people looking at their religion and asking what has led to this," she says. "So I think what we're seeing today within the Islamic tradition is comparable to the Christian reformation in the sense of the dimension of its impact on the religion, its impact on individuals and its impact on the world as a whole."

Traditionalist critics say those who seek revolutionary change in Islam are diluting its teaching. They say that adapting the religion to contemporary mores progressively undermines its ability to give moral guidance to society.

But the Akhtar family insist that their modern lifestyle in secular America does not stop them practising what they call "the beautiful values of Islam".

Mona Akhtar, a lawyer, bubbles rose-flavoured smoke through an after-lunch shisha, and contemplates her emancipated sisters.

"We're living examples of the importance of women taking a more active role in Islam," she says. "We're following the spirit of the Koran."

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