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***What If Khadijah Did Not Work and Aisha Did
Not Speak?***
**Reflections of a Young Indo-Trinidadian
Muslim Woman**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer for discussion my experiences and negotiations as a young, Muslim, Indo-Trinidadian woman and former Board Secretary of a community masjid in Trinidad. My life revolved around masjids (aka mosques). I went to a Muslim primary school with a masjid in the compound. I attended Maktab (classes that teach Arabic and Islamic studies after school/weekends) in every one of my neighbourhood masjids from toddler to adulthood. There is one particular masjid, however, that I consider myself a true member of and that is my first and current community masjid. It is my relationship with this masjid in particular that I will be discussing in this article¹.

I have prioritised my relationship with my community masjid for over a decade because of my childhood connection to this place and what it signified in my life. My parents separated in 1994, and subsequently my father took my sister and me to live with him until early 1998 when I returned to my birthplace to live with my mother. Within this four-year period, I moved more than 12 times, shuffling around between approximately six different locations in the triangulated area of Sangre Grande, San Juan and my birthplace in the St. Augustine constituency. Despite my constant relocations and the access to masjids within my new neighbourhoods, this masjid was **the single** constant in my life: no exaggeration.

There is a hadith¹ by Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.)² that “the world is a masjid”. I take this to mean that practising Islam is not limited by space or designated places and that the earth is a place dedicated to the practice of Islam and serving Allah. My community masjid, however, exemplified that a masjid can be a school, a shelter, a doctor’s office, a playground, a safe haven and a true home away from home. Needless to say, I have a bond with this place that I constantly feel but cannot fully grasp and truly articulate at times. Yet, the events that have taken place within the last six years have affected me so deeply that I currently question my sense of belonging and purpose within my community masjid and even my purpose as a Muslim woman.

My shift from being an active, young community member to being a member of the masjid’s then Management Committee occurred in July 2005 with a phone call from the Imam who was newly appointed at that time. He was one of my former Maktab teachers but I hardly ever spoke to him outside of the masjid setting. I was honoured that he thought I was mature enough and capable to sit on the Committee but I was stunned beyond belief that he wanted me to act as Secretary. The significance of being a masjid’s secretary is that the Secretary is the go-to-person when one cannot contact the Imam; contrary to any gendered stereotype that secretaries are usually female, I request of you the reader to do a simple background check or even ask the next Muslim you see if masjids’ secretaries are male or female. I am very interested in this because I once had an official letter rejected by a recognized Muslim organization because they do not recognize female secretaries from masjid boards. Despite my desire to assist in the growth and development of this masjid, deciding whether to accept this role was truthfully one of the most complicated, difficult and downright scary decisions I have had to make in my life.

The first reason was my age. I was 20, which is relatively young. Growing up in this masjid, I knew almost all of the regular members of the masjid. Most of them had taught me at some point in Maktab. Apart from one woman, all of the members of the Management Committee were male. My father even served in various positions at different times. These people were my Maktab teachers at some time and they were all my “uncles”. They knew me from when I was a toddler and I was being asked to sit and

¹ Hadith is a compilation of the acts, sayings and approvals of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s)

² This is an abbreviation for *sallalaahu alaihi wa salaam*, which is a salutation of respect that is mandatory for all Muslims to make when the Prophet is mentioned.

discuss masjid issues as a colleague? To put myself in that situation was intimidating to say the least.

Secondly, my life was becoming more hectic. I was a full-time student at the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine and I had just started driving, and my responsibilities and duties at home had increased significantly. Living with my mother, who did not drive and was self-employed, meant that my time was just not my own. Where and how I spent my time outside of my classroom was dictated by the needs of the family. At that age, one is involved in self-discovery, adjusting to adulthood and balancing between independence and the fulfilment of duties and responsibilities. I knew being Secretary would mean sacrifice, commitment and even more responsibility and to take on the role was a prospect that scared me.

Ironically, the above were also some of the reasons why I chose to accept the position. One of the benefits of growing up in this masjid was that I learned that sex, age, race and status are not obstacles in performing one's duty as a Muslim and that community activism and participation were encouraged by my teachers. I also drew inspiration from two significant Muslim women in Islamic history. They are Khadijah and Aisha, the Prophet Muhammad's (s.a.s) first and last wives, respectively. The story goes that Khadijah was the Prophet's employer, his senior, his first and only wife during her lifetime. During the time of the first Revelation of the Qur'an (Islam's Scripture or Book), it was Khadijah who supported and encouraged her husband to accept this new role as Allah's Messenger. She was an astute business woman and a prominent member of her society.

Approximately a quarter of all ahadith (plural of hadith) were narrated by Aisha. Aisha is recognized as a major source of many Hadiths and, due to her, large amounts of Islamic knowledge are available, along with the efforts of those who spent their lives researching and compiling the Prophet's (s.a.s) Hadith and Sunnah³. She was brilliant, had an excellent memory and was a spirited leader. In other words, the actions, efforts and contributions by these women have been recorded throughout Islamic history and it is mainly due to these women that I found myself accepting the role of Secretary to my community masjid. I thought to myself that this was an opportunity to show that the understanding and practice of Islam had evolved and progressed. Yes, it was a sign of progress. And though I did not choose to be "mover and shaker", I thought that my presence on the Committee and my representation as a young, educated, Muslim woman would be interpreted as a symbol of progress in gendered understandings of Islam from a local perspective.

I believe that some members of the Committee did share this view. They expressed that the inclusion of a youth, another Sister, was a cause for celebration and an act of progress. Others were clearly disappointed that someone of my "credentials" was a replacement for the outgoing "Permanent Secretary". Before my appointment, there were very few members who held the position of Secretary and one person in particular held it longer than most. He was the outgoing Secretary and soon after my appointment excused

³ Practices of the Prophet (s.a.s)

himself from the Committee altogether. I do not say this to offend or attack any person(s), but I assumed that everyone from the masjid would have perceived the appointment of a younger member of the Jamaat (masjid membership) as a means to enhance the feelings of inclusivity among the younger members of the Jamaat as well as to create an opportunity for the younger Muslims, males and females, to gain some experience in the managing of the masjid.

Overall, the request to be Secretary erased any notion of a “glass ceiling” I may have had about the political and managerial participation and contribution of women in a masjid. I do not know enough of the management of other masjids in Trinidad to know if this is a shared feeling among Muslims, but on a personal level I believed this meant that this new role in a masjid was women’s right to choose, if they so desired.

I eagerly served as Secretary for six years. I would like to think that I performed well, but I will admit at times I felt that I was thwarted in carrying out some of my duties. Two incidents in particular come to mind.

The first was the unauthorized substitution of my signatures on official outgoing correspondence. As Secretary, I was expected to write or review and sign any official documents. The Imam is the only person who can supersede this duty and even he was not consulted on the issue. The board members in question explained that it was an “urgent” matter, but considering the advances in communication technology, I found this reasoning very suspect and disrespectful.

The other major incident was the scheduling of an important meeting at 5:15 am (after the first morning Salah/prayer performed at masjids). The other female board member and I openly objected to this for safety reasons since we would have to drive ourselves to the masjid and I had no one to accompany me at that time. No decision was made during the discussion, but I later learned that a meeting was held at that time without us (the female members).

The highlighted situations made me question the motivation behind these actions. Was it personal, sexist, anti-feminist? To this day I am uncertain. Like any other critical issue there can never be one reason. Do I think I faced objection and difficulties because I was female? I do not believe so. One of the main reasons is that one of the first members of the Committee was female and she had served the masjid for approximately two decades. Her input was well received and her recommendations and contributions can be noted in many of the masjid’s programmes and activities. But I cannot overlook the other Board members’ disregard for our presence at the previously described meeting. I know now that a high-status position such as masjid Secretary is one that the entire Jamaat holds in very high esteem and is a very coveted and contentious position. I personally believe that this was a play for power. During meetings, I sometimes could not tell the difference between members listening to and patronizing me. Sometimes I felt completely irrelevant. As time passed, however, I became more confident and vocal in my convictions and it was easy to realize that my support and my vote were generally and openly favourable to the Imam’s position. This, of course, did not bode well with those resistant to his direction. I also know that my participation in the youth group meant that I

could readily inform the younger Jamaat members. Strategically, therefore, I can understand their rationale for diminishing my involvement.

These setbacks were not the reasons for my resignation. I resigned after a new Imam was appointed. The Imam who offered me the secretarial position had resigned as leader, but continued to serve on the Board. However, when the public was not involved in an election for the new Imam, I removed myself from the Board because I could not support the ignoring of election procedure.

I wish to emphasize that growing up and attending the Maktab at my community masjid taught me to believe that all Muslims, male or female, have a right to perform any job or task at hand. I thought and I still believe that I was exemplifying all that I had been taught to believe. My teachers (and some of them are current members of the Board of Directors) encouraged me to face the world's obstacles and not to listen to people who wish to deny me opportunities. And I think that this is still the position held and taught in the masjid. Experience has taught me to understand that teachers and elders are people too, and I should not judge them too harshly on their feelings, personal positions and reactions to issues affecting them on a personal and perhaps an intrapersonal level. The circumstances I faced and differing levels of support and resistance from the other members to my being Secretary revealed another layer to the Muslim and feminist debate with respect to women in the public sphere. I ask myself, how do these men of authority see me and by extension other Muslim women? Are we not members of a culture where our heroes are Khadijah and Aisha as well as the Prophet (s.a.s)? We are taught to learn about these women but where are the opportunities to manifest and demonstrate these qualities? I believe that the Imam who sought me out saw this and believed this. And it is strange for me that in one sample of people I have examples that both support and contradict my beliefs and understanding about Muslim women in an organizational and political setting.

History taught me that women have held powerful, influential positions and are crucial to our understanding of Islam today. Contemporary facts about the Muslim world are that women are still forced to enter undesirable marriages and are unable to vote. So to be allowed to serve on a masjid Board among male and female members is an indication that Muslim relations in Trinidad are to be understood as a separate entity from other parts of the Muslim world. My appointment as Secretary was both feminist and Islamic. I have Khadijah and Aisha for two models of powerful Muslim women. I have mixed emotions regarding my departure from the Board. At one level, I felt secure knowing that I had a right to stay and fight or leave at any time. On the other hand, I felt defeated when the new Imam was appointed and not elected by the larger Jamaat. But I always had a choice and, for me, that made all the difference in the world.

None of these experiences has shaken my positioning as an empowered Muslim woman. I am a Muslim by choice. One of the first issues in Gender debates is the need for a distinction between Sex and Gender. I subscribe to this theory that one is purely biological and the other is socially constructed. I was born female but I grew into a woman. My ancestors were East Indian but anyone who knows me well would say and have said to me that my voice and my views are not representative of the traditional East

Indian woman. What does my experience in my community tell you about Indo-Caribbean feminism? For me, it indicates that Caribbean Indo-women have become a distinctive collective group within the feminist community. We are unique in our historical and cultural development and should be treated as a separate unit of study if we are to understand fully the developmental change of the Indo-Caribbean woman, especially in relation to social and cultural issues such as religion, political or organizational participation and expanding our understanding of gender relations in this geographical sphere of Trinidad and the wider Caribbean.

ⁱ The actual name of the masjid was not used because of legal issues of confidentiality.