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Woman leads mixed-gender prayers for city Muslims

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Despite a string of rejections by local mosques, the Muslim Canadian Congress went ahead yesterday with Toronto's first woman-led mixed-gender prayer service — in a backyard.

"There's no going back," said congress co-founder Tarek Fatah, who offered up his yard for the service. "If women can't find their place in Canada as leaders, do you expect them to find it in Iran or Saudi Arabia?"

The event coincided with the visit of American writer and activist Asra Nomani, who has organized highly publicized woman-led prayer services in the United States and who was in Toronto promoting her new book, *Standing Alone in Mecca*. But after repeated rejections from "the most self-professed liberal and progressive mosques," Fatah decided to host the event at his house.

"We're not doing this as a crusade," he said. "Surely if men and women can pray together in Mecca, which is the most orthodox, authoritarian and culturally conservative heart-belt of Islam, then in a liberal secular democracy like Canada the Muslim community should be open to having women as imams."

About 40 people — 30 men and 10 women — filled the small Cabbagetown backyard to hear the prayer service led by Raheel Raza, a local public speaker and interfaith advocate.

"What we accomplished was we made a bold statement that women aren't going to be silenced," said Nomani, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter-turned activist.

Nomani first began campaigning for equal rights for women inside the mosque of her hometown in Morgantown, West Va., after she returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca in 2003. Since then, she has received death threats but remains focused on her mission.

Raza, who called the sermon "tremendously powerful," agreed. "This will open the doors for many women who cannot find a safe space for prayer," she said, noting, "In the early days of Islam, the mosques were open to women."

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