



Profile: The Leadership and Legacy of Sister Clara Muhammad

Bio from [Sapelo Square: An Online Resource on Black Muslims in the U.S.](#)

Behind every great man is a great woman. Sister Clara Muhammad, or the First Lady of the Nation of Islam, was an extraordinary woman who supported two giants in the history of American Islam: her husband, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and her son Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. Without her, there would not have been a Nation of Islam or the unique Sunni community that evolved from it, one attuned to the concerns and aspirations of women.

Born Clara Evans near Macon, Georgia, in 1899, she experienced firsthand the injustices of the Jim Crow South. Like millions of African Americans who migrated north to escape its harsh realities, she and her husband Elijah Poole arrived in Detroit in 1923 with two infants. Hard times persisted up North as they struggled to support their growing family without full-time employment. Sister Clara described in a 1967 Muhammad Speaks article,

“With five children, there were times we didn’t have a piece of bread in the house, nor heat, water or even sufficient wearing apparel. My husband would walk the streets looking for a job daily, but would come home with no job. I would go out and try to help him, but with five children I could not work steadily. However, I was successful when I went door to door, asking for work.”

Clara, therefore, experienced the common reality of black women working as domestic servants in white homes where their humanity was insulted with scant wages and the risk of sexual violence. It made sense, then, that she found Fard Muhammad’s message of race and economic advancement attractive when she heard it from a friend in 1931: “My girlfriend told me there’s a man who’s saying some things about our people. . . .We once dressed in long flowing cloth and we were royal.” Upon her friend’s invitation to meet Fard, Clara’s first thought was her husband, who was haunted by hopelessness and despair. “Maybe this might help my husband,” prayed Clara. Elijah agreed to attend the next meeting, which proved miraculous as it marked the beginnings of Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam. According to Imam W. D. Mohammed,

“When the meeting was over, as they were walking out, my father told my mother, ‘Clara, when you go back home, we gon’ have to throw all the pork out of the ice box.’ Now that’s what one lecture, one speech did.”

As the Nation of Islam grew, so did Clara Muhammad’s contribution. After the disappearance of Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad contended for leadership against rivals who threatened his life. Between hiding from rivals in the late 1930s and spending time in prison for draft evasion in the 1940s, Elijah Muhammad left Clara Muhammad virtually a single mother of eight for over a decade. Added to this difficult situation, endured in the time of the Great Depression, Clara Muhammad took on the enormous task of carrying the organization in her husband’s absence.

Historian Ajile Rahman describes Clara Muhammad as an “interim leader” who carried Elijah’s orders from prison to Nation ministers. But she was more than a messenger, emphasizes Rahman. She must have been an irresistible force of inspiration and moral courage for Muhammad’s ministers and followers, encouraging them to continue the work of Nation building via regular meetings and recruiting through the duration of Elijah’s four-year absence. The fledgling group, far from the membership numbers it would boast in the 1960s, could have easily disintegrated without the leadership of a woman with vision, faith, and resourcefulness.

Once Elijah Muhammad returned to his family and the movement began to thrive, Sister Clara Muhammad's influence reached further. In 1931, she had pioneered the NOI's primary and secondary independent schools, established on a national scale by the 1950s. This was unprecedented in both black and Muslim communities. The Nation's school system, instituted by Fard Muhammad, was given the lofty title, "The University of Islam." The first classes were in Clara Muhammad's home, and she was the first teacher. She and her husband withdrew their children from the public schools in a time when homeschooling was illegal. Clara Muhammad never returned her children to public school despite harassment by law enforcement. It is reported that she told the police at her door, "I would rather die than send my children to the public school system."

Sister Clara Muhammad is a household name in American Muslim communities because of her son's vision to honor her legacy. In 1980, Imam W.D. Mohammed renamed the University of Islam after his mother. Sister Clara Muhammad School is only one example of Sister Clara's influence on the imam's thought and practice.

Though rarely highlighted, the advancement of women was central to the imam's work in the transition to Sunni Islam. In his first year, the imam appointed the community's first female minister and first female editor of the Muhammad Speaks. Muslim Journal editor Ayesha K. Mustafaa noted, "His appreciation for sisters could always be referred back to his appreciation for his mother. He spoke of her in such glowing terms."

Parts of this article were previously published in *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam*, co-authored by Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim.

It was through her role as a mother that Sister Clara most influenced Imam Mohammed's progressive gender philosophy. He used the concept of "mother" to discuss women's roles. In doing so, he honored another one of Clara Muhammad's important contributions, especially in the eyes of Nation women, referred to as MGT. Clara Muhammad served as the exemplar of feminine virtues instilled in MGT, short for Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class. The imam, however, rejected the MGT's narrow focus on the domestic realm and celebrated women's unique capacity and insights as mothers in a scope beyond the home, captured in his term "mothers to society."

Imam Mohammed saw from his own mother that women can and must contribute to the larger society while fulfilling their role in the family as supportive wives and educated mothers. Sister Clara Muhammad epitomized this ideal, making her a role model for women and men. Having achieved this status in the face of racism and economic exploitation, she stands in the ranks of great women in Black History.