

# Elgin Muslim leader admits sex abuse of minor and woman, gets probation



Imam Mohammed Abdullah Saleem is wheeled into court in Rolling Meadows on Aug. 22, 2016. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

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**A** suburban Islamic leader accused of molesting an underage girl and a female employee pleaded guilty Thursday afternoon and was sentenced to 24 months probation.

Mohammed Abdullah Saleem, 77, who founded the Institute for Islamic Education in Elgin, must also register as a sex offender for the rest of his life. In addition, he is forbidden to be in the presence of females of any age, except relatives, without another adult female present. He also cannot be within 500 feet of any school — including the one he founded 27 years ago, except to worship at its affiliated mosque.

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"Mr. Saleem thought it would be in the best interest of the Islamic community to accept the plea agreement and avoid a trial," his lawyer, Donna Rotunno, said following the hearing.

Saleem was accused of repeatedly fondling a young woman who worked for him at the school, as well as a student who was a minor at the time, in some cases while forcing them sit on his lap. Cook County Assistant State's Attorney Jaclyn Lantz said the student was 14 when Saleem began to abuse her in 2001. The following year, the girl reported the abuse to a school official, "but nothing happened," Lantz said.

No one at the school could be reached for comment Thursday.

The arrest of the conservative scholar on sex abuse charges was especially shocking given Saleem's stature in his community made up largely of Islamic immigrants from India and Pakistan. He is said to espouse a code of separation between genders and discourages even hand-shaking. The institute, which provides boarding to some students, runs separate programs for girls and boys.

At the hearing Thursday, Lantz reiterated the allegations against Saleem and explaining how his inappropriate conduct toward both his victims escalated over time.

Beginning in late 2013, Lantz said, Saleem began to request to his office manager that she not wear her veil, and then began removing it himself. Lantz said Saleem repeatedly locked the door in his office while the woman was there and touched her breasts and buttocks, tried to massage her ankles and tried to force her to massage his ankles, despite her resistance. In April 2014, the imam forced the woman to sit on his lap. After she was able to free herself, the woman noticed a spot on her pants that was later found to match Saleem's DNA profile, Lantz said.

After that, the woman quit her job and alerted a family member to what had happened. The imam told her he would not touch her again if she returned to work, but the woman refused and moved out of state, Lantz said.

The younger victim, now an adult, went to authorities about Saleem's past abuse of her after learning he was being investigated for the later allegations.

The prosecutor said Saleem touched the younger victim's genitals outside of her clothes and fondled her breasts dozens of times between 2001 and 2003, until she too moved out of state.

Judge James Karahalios had earlier ruled that, had Saleem gone to trial, he would have allowed testimony from two other women who also claimed the imam groped them. Four women have also filed a civil suit claiming sex abuse by the imam. In some cases the claims date back decades.

Lantz said both victims chose not to attend the plea hearing but were satisfied that the imam took responsibility for his actions. She said they were not seeking orders of protection against him.

The elderly, white-bearded imam had appeared to be close to accepting a plea bargain in recent days, and had made two earlier court appearances this week as lawyers negotiated in private in the judge's chambers. On Tuesday, Karahalios gave Saleem until Sept. 2 to accept the proposed plea deal.

Saleem, in a wheelchair and in religious garb, did not speak during the hearing except to tell the judge, "I plead guilty" and to acknowledge that he understood what he was pleading to, which was two counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse. After the hearing, he was taken for his first appointment with a probation officer in Cook County court's Rolling Meadows branch.

Afsar Ali, a Muslim who attended the hearing but is not affiliated with the institute's mosque, said he was "happy for the victims and hope this will provide some sort of closure for them."

Ali said the women set a good example in the Muslim community by coming forward with their allegations.

"I wish our community was more open to talking about this so that if our children are violated in any way, they can come forward without fear," he said.

*George Houde is a freelance reporter.*

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