



Vibrant Scottish Mosques

Aspiring to improve representation of women



Executive Summary

HEAR MY VOICE

A Report on the Experiences of Muslim Women's
Engagement with Mosques in Scotland

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[VibrantScottishMosques.com](https://www.vibrantscottishmosques.com)

Registered Scottish Charity SC051103

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Vision

Working with mosque communities to nurture positive change.

About us

Vibrant Scottish Mosques is a community group established in 2018 with the aim of working collaboratively to seek the realisation of Scottish Mosques as vibrant Islamic centres that cater to the religious, educational and social needs of women in their communities with excellence. We are a registered Scottish charity SC051103.

Our key areas of work include

- **Prayer facilities**
Working with mosques to establish accessible and equitable prayer facilities for women
- **Belonging**
Support mosques to have a welcoming and inclusive attitude to their female service users
- **Education and Training**
Promote the advancement of knowledge, skills and training for women
- **Services**
Encourage mosques to offer a variety of services and activities that are appropriate to the local female community
- **Advice and scholarship**
Encourage mosques to provide an imam/qualified female scholar that is accessible to the service users
- **Leadership**
Encourage female involvement in decision making at operational and strategic levels.
- **Research, publications and policy**
Work with key partners to produce well researched resources to improve the experience of women in mosques
- **Standards and quality**
Promote good current practice of mosques and encourage mosques to follow best practice models



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FOREWORD BY CHAIR



Dr Sahira Dar
Founder and Chair of VSM

Vibrant Scottish Mosques started with a belief that Muslim faith spaces, primarily Mosques, embody the diversity, skills and resources present within Scottish Muslim communities.

The aim of Vibrant Scottish Mosques is to work with mosques to ensure that they cater for the religious, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing of the whole family unit by nurturing the needs of women as well as men.

Since its inception in April 2018, the project has gained local support and has begun to build positive relationships with mosques. We hope that through our work in Scotland we can inspire change and progress in the rest of the UK and in the global village we live in. We believe that Islam has always championed the cause of responsible citizenship and fosters tolerance and cooperation. It teaches us that the human rights of all are to be respected and that both women and men are responsible for the development of healthy societies.

This report is a unique piece of work which documents the experiences of Muslim women in Scotland and their engagement with mosques. It lays the first brick in the foundation of forming a body of evidence which has been understood anecdotally and as isolated experiences. As far as we are aware, the first-hand experiences of Muslim women's interaction with mosques are being documented for the first time in Scotland in this report.

Whilst acknowledging this report forms the beginnings of deeper lines of inquiry, what we have successfully learnt through hearing these voices is that barriers have been identified; positive experiences have been exemplified; solutions have been proposed and personal aspirations of Muslim women have been shared.

The Islamic tradition is not new to challenging societal and cultural norms that go against Quranic ethics. In fact, we are introduced to this concept in the Quran in Surah Mujadilah. The female disputant questions the Prophet PBUH, no less, when she receives his counsel to accept what she feels is an unethical cultural practice that allows her husband to treat her badly. She understood her agency in seeking the truth as completely compatible with her status as a believing woman and so questioned the normative practice. God replied through revelation and validated her ethical agency and perspective. What we learn here is that personal experience shapes communal experience and, in this case, the personal experience happens to be of a female.

In addition to hearing the voices of women in this report, we have had meetings and conversations with members of several mosques across Scotland over the last three years. We understand some of these challenges they face, for example female spaces are not being used to their full potential.



This report also reflects the positive experiences the women shared with us. Due to the scope of this report, we have not detailed the numerous examples of Scottish mosques that are actively engaging with female volunteers to utilise their advice and skills in the day to day running of mosques.

The next step for Vibrant Scottish Mosques is to explore the barriers and challenges mosques face and to document in detail good practice models so that the work mosques undertake is translated into a vision and aspiration for community cohesion.

Finally, although the project was undertaken before the Covid-19 pandemic, the last few years have highlighted the importance of faith spaces in promoting positive mental health and playing an integral role in our country's recovery. Women must be part of this journey as equal partners.

It is our sincere hope that the voices of Muslim women in Scotland are heard in an honest manner and that the issues they raise through their lived experiences, especially the most difficult ones to hear, can help better shape the communal experiences of women in the future in a way that enhances their religious and spiritual relationship with God in their everyday lives and allows families to view mosques as central to their communal and Islamic experience.

Dr Sahira Dar is the Founder and current Chair of VSM. She is a GP and Holistic Therapist working in Pollokshields, Glasgow. She has been involved in a variety of community initiatives with Islamic organisations in the last decade and is actively involved with the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA). She continues to pursue her Islamic education, having completed the iSyllabus Advanced course and completed two years of the Fiqh of Medicine course with Al Balagh Academy.



Shaykh Ruzwan Mohammed
Chair of VSM Advisory Board

There are a number of reasons why this current report may be hastily dismissed by some in the Muslim community.

Concerns over the congruence of Islam and modern activist culture and the underlying philosophical system that gave rise to it hold some credibility. Initiatives that seek to change the way a community sets its priorities and organises its religious spaces should be scrutinised, and in the current cultural climate around gender discourse, this should be even more the case.

However, I will make the case that such concerns are either misplaced in the context of this report or have little religious or theological substance in essence.

Compromised terms

The first reason for overlooking the content of this report would be to assume that it emerges from concerns that are alien to Islam. One of the most oft-repeated refrains that I hear from men when issues affecting females in Muslim societies are discussed is that these issues are the product of a foreign set of ideas and priorities. *'Isn't the call to change the manner in which a mosque operates, on the pretext of a lack of facilities for women, a feminist position?'* Indeed, can *feminism* as a term be used constructively when referring to voices that propose meritocratic reading of the sources while remaining true to commonly accepted Islamic teachings?

Some view the term *feminism* as useful in itself, as it brings together a body of work that challenges *'patriarchal'* readings of the text. Others see the term as unhelpful as it is coupled with an aspect of colonialism that justified incursions into Muslim lands on the pretext of *'emancipating'* Muslim women. It has further been argued that *'feminism'* is part of a wider project to weaken Muslim societies through an attack on the Muslim family, as referenced by Lewis in his now infamous essay *'The roots of Muslim rage'*.

Given the negative connotations of the word, some female Muslim writers shun any direct referencing of feminism as the inspiration behind their ideas. One leading academic has noted the jettisoning of the word by many female authors, and the main reason for the *'...avoidance of the term has been their ability to persuade Muslim communities of their views on the Quran; [...] the legitimacy of their readings may be undercut by Muslims' negative associations with feminism'*.¹

And so at a time when many feminist writers have made a livelihood seeking to demonstrate the oppressive nature of Islam towards women, an oppressiveness that apparently requires radical

1. . Hidayatullah A, *Feminist Edges of the Quran*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pg 42



reform of the religion, others argue that feminism is *'integral to Islam and responsive to the core Quranic call to Justice.'*²

The teachings of mutual respect between men and women in the social context can clearly be seen in the Quran as well as supporting prophetic narrations, and Muslim cultures in the past have managed to create a rich and thriving balance in gender relations. However, the individualism of the Western paradigm leaves unanswered question for many Muslims as to what equality or equity mean out-with the certainties of traditional Muslim cultures. Given that western feminism presupposes the primacy of the individual over family and society, it is not difficult to see how this may fit uneasily with Muslim civilisational sensibilities.

Yet if the term 'feminism' has now lost some of its allure amongst Muslims who argue for a return to the empowered situation women enjoyed in early Islam, conversely, I would argue that the contested nature of the term similarly bars it from being the grounds upon which to also reject the need for change. The term may be deemed surplus to requirements but, as is well known in juristic principles (*al-qawā'id al-fiqhiyyah*), *'If the concept is agreed upon, there should be no argumentation over the term used to refer to it.'*

Beware of Greeks baring gifts

The disconnect between the modus operandi of NGO's and the religious sensibilities of Muslim communities is the second area of concern when dealing with change related to gender and Islam. The predominate paradigm presented to Muslim women to gain their rights is either to discard Islam or else reform their Muslim culture. Such a call is understandably a source of concern for those working to retain the religious cohesion of the community.

What grants this concern traction is that interventions on gender issues, especially at an international level, are well documented: the West presents the case for the dearth of civic and democratic structures in the Muslim world and its associated diasporas in the West. It then moves to facilitate the creation of NGO's designed to create just the type of advocacy and narrative that mirrors the aspirations not of the host communities, but of the source funders with their own civilisational norms. Thereafter, interventions are suggested in cases where the directives or demands of an NGO diverge with the norms in a given society or community.³

What I would refer to as the *'parenting'* of Islam is apparent in the manner in which Western governments are increasingly moving to dictate the type of Islam that it deems acceptable. Faith-centred projects are wise to be wary of becoming co-opted into wider government policy agendas in the West, amongst which are the policing of ideas deemed out of sync with liberal values as well as the securitisation of their Muslim populations.

2. . Shaikh S, 'Transforming Feminism: Islam, Women and Gender Justice.' Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism. Ed. Omid Safi. Oxford, Oneworld, 2003, 2007, pg 155

3. . Massad J, Islam In Liberalism, University of Chicago Press, 2015, pg 139

The current report sets its own parameters for creating a vision of rejuvenated religious spaces and Vibrant Mosques has been both keen and willing to take on suggestions and criticisms, avoiding the pitfalls that affect many organisations that work in the Muslim community. This is hopefully a trait that will allow them to achieve their intention of working together with mosques and institutions in achieving a better outcome for the whole Muslim community.

Hearing the voice

This brings me to the report itself, and I will allow the voices therein to make its case. Many a time we need to hear the very voices that we would rather not listen to. Voices on the peripheries of ‘power’ centres identify collective blindspots, and are akin to the canary in the mine, indicating the first signs of the ailing state of a community. The Quran showcases the need to amplify the voice of the complainant, and records a whole chapter dedicated to amplifying the voice of a woman who complained to God directly of her plight. *‘God has heard the voice of the one who laid out her dispute with her husband to you, and who presented her complaint directly to God...’ [Quran 58:1]* The need for those in positions of authority to listen is therefore enshrined in the Quran as a principle.

At the same time, the Quran praises the one that seeks to listen to the needs of the community, those that take time and effort to look to see how they can be of benefit to those who feel neglected and overlooked. In a strikingly nuanced part of the Quran, God responds to those that had the audacity to find fault with the Messenger, saying *‘He is just all ear’*. The retort from the Quran is simple. *‘Say: “[Yes!] He is all ear. [Listening] to what is good for you! He believes in God, and holds the trust of the believers, and is [a manifestation of God’s] grace...” [Quran 9:61]*

This report is an anthology of voices from the congregation. It is an invitation to Imams, Scholars, Mosque trusts and management, and the wider community to continue the religiously valid steps to further increase access to religious spaces for women and families so as to secure a vibrant, strong and confident community that is ready to face the challenges that are increasingly threatening its survival.

Of course, there were legitimate discussions in classical sources over female attendance of mosques. This is not the place for a review of the extensive arguments on both sides. Those knowledgeable of the discussions will concede that those scholars who veered towards a more restrictive religious reading did so based on the change in social norms and circumstances after the passing away of the Messenger. Both positions, of those that encouraged and those that discouraged attendance, were always understood to be open to review in the light of a change in circumstances. That our current context requires all Muslims to develop a closer attachment to their places of worship, especially in the West, should however require little thought.

The individualism of the West stands in contrast with most of the rest of the world, which grants priority to the community over the individual. The mosque space in some way exemplifies the meeting point of both the individual and the community. On the one hand it is the individual who attends the sacred space, and the masjid is a place for individuals, both males and females, to



stand alone in front of God. On the other hand, there are the communal mechanisms protecting the space from the centrifugal forces of individualism that could pull at the cohesion of the community. The need for an Imam, the lines for the prayer, the acts done in unison and at set times all point to individuals becoming part of a greater whole. In seeking to be acknowledged as individuals, believers should be wary of actions that break the cohesion of the community.

The report should therefore be seen as an attempt to advise and work together rather than undermine and destabilise. The systematic and routine manner in which religious spaces are being marginalised and removed from the fabric of what were once proud Christian nations should be of concern to all people of faith and not just Muslims. The desire to create vibrant Mosques in the West is therefore not only an important need for the Muslims living there, but for society in general.

Shaykh Ruzwan Mohammed is a Sunni theologian and scholar from Scotland. A graduate in Geopolitics and Arabic from the University of Glasgow. In 1993 he left to travel and study with a wide array of leading scholars and theologians in various countries in the Muslim world. In the process, he studied the Turkish language at the University of Ankara and as part of his formal Islamic training, he graduated from the Fat'h Islamic Law College in Damascus, graduating from the prestigious 6-year program with a distinction of merit, achieving overall first position in his year of graduation from the college.

He is the author and educational director of the iSyllabus Islamic studies program and has been a regular contributor on national TV, radio, newspaper and magazines. Shaykh Ruzwan serves as an advisor to various Muslim educational organisations in the United Kingdom and is actively involved in interfaith work, as well as wider social issues. He was tasked with the responsibility of drafting the 'Edinburgh Declaration', launched in 2018, on the shared ethical values between Christianity and Islam in the area of finance and wealth creation.



FOREWORD BY AUTHOR



Maariyah Adam
Report author

The collective narratives and stories of Muslim women in Scotland are continuously being written and re-written with the shifting socio-political, ideological, and spiritual influences that affect their individual and communal experiences.

Nascent questions arise from, and are framed by a ‘Western’ lens, as well as by the fabric of diverse Muslim communities who have been established in Scotland for over half a century. These communities have built an array of vibrant social structures that has both bled into and become a part of a Scottish way of life, and simultaneously preserved a distinct Islamic identity.

The combination of an internal and external pendulum, swinging between scrutiny and positive affirmations has created a momentum for Muslim women to organise and define their own intersecting identities - a Muslim, a woman, a professional, a mother, a student, and a citizen among many others.

Muslim women are increasingly using the most powerful tool at their disposal, their voice, to take control of and shape their own identities, which are being defined by a heightened knowledge of the Qur’anic principles of gender justice and a vision of a harmonious society the Islamic ideal propagates for a collaborative society. These efforts are taking place whilst negotiating complex and difficult barriers that can sometimes lead to legitimate voices of concern left unheard. The resulting outcome is at best, a small push in the direction of solutions-based outcomes.

The mosque has traditionally acted as the space where the Muslim community gathers to engage in worship and experience social cohesiveness tied to their Islamic faith. It is the inclusion, or lack of, in this space that the women in this report are narrating. The normative existence of social media has seen a rise in the number of women sharing their personal stories. These platforms are spaces where stories are validated and affirmed by a global community of people with similar experiences. However, this kind of discourse can get lost in the dense haystack of social media and may not effectively reach the very institutions that it is being sought to influence. It may also be received in a negative manner by the defensive ears of the people who hold the power and discretion to make real change, and so hindering prospect for real and lasting change.



The aim of this report has been to gather and illuminate the diverse voices of Muslim women in Scotland and allow them to be the narrators and directors, so that they may be heard by the key actors necessary in carving out change.

The hope is that reading and reflecting on their stories and acting on the recommendations emanating from their voices will facilitate a movement for change and growth.

Maariyah Adam is part of the research and development team for Vibrant Scottish Mosques. She is currently at Rape Crisis Scotland and is also the founder of Sacred (body:mind:space) – a project dedicated to researching abuse in Scottish Muslim communities. She has a background in research and development and has been working and volunteering in community organisations, as well as an independent consultant for over twenty years. Her interests have varied from Muslim organisational identity, anti-racist strategies in learning and teaching, Islamophobia, gender justice and sexual violence. She holds a BA in Social Sciences, MA in Islamic Studies and MSc in Public Policy and is particularly interested in researching sexual violence in Muslim spaces to effect change on a community level.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All Praises are for Allah, The Most Gracious and The Most Merciful for giving Vibrant Scottish Mosques the ability and opportunity to undertake this work.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Vibrant Scottish Mosques Advisory Board for their insightful suggestions and support. A special appreciation for Shaykh Ruzwan Mohammad and Dr Khadijah El-Shayyal for drawing on their immense experience and knowledge to provide thoughtful and critical contributions in the development of this report.

To the women who helped facilitate and support the listening workshops - Nasim Azad, Shazia Durrani, Sara el-Awaisi, Katlin Hommik and Dr. Sahira Dar, thank you. A particular acknowledgement for Firsila Shah and Dr. Aman Durrani for all the hours they spent carrying the extra weight of editing the report, and to Frances Hume for proofreading the final draft.

The Vibrant Scottish Mosques team consists of talented and passionate people, all of whom deserve thanks for their dedication and continued voluntary support for the project.

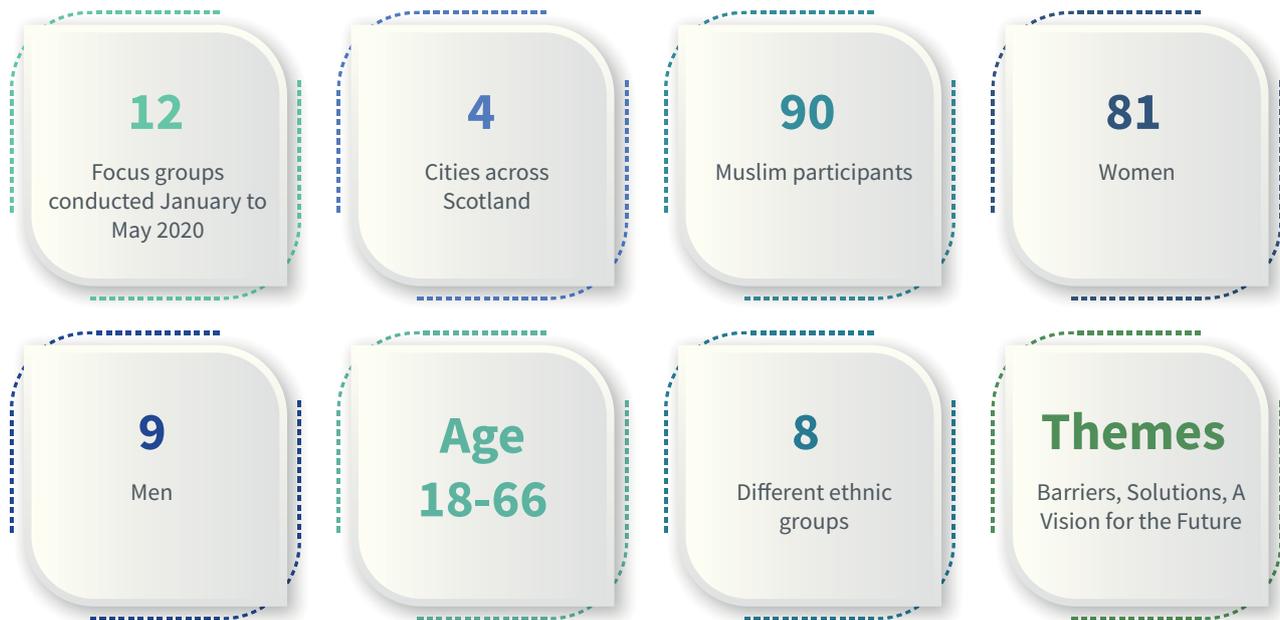
Lastly, this report would not be possible without the time and trust given to us by the women and men who candidly shared their experiences with us.



The image shows a long, narrow hallway with a series of overlapping arches that create a sense of depth and perspective. The floor is covered in a patterned tile, and the walls are light-colored. At the end of the hallway, there is a double door with a decorative lattice pattern. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text "EXECUTIVE SUMMARY" is centered in the middle of the image.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Report

- This project was undertaken by Vibrant Scottish Mosques (VSM) to understand the experiences and needs of Muslim women in Scotland in relation to their engagement with their local mosques.
- This report sets out to raise women's voices, in order to collaborate with mosques and institutions to help build their capacity to affect change where necessary.
- The Muslim Council of Britain and Cardiff University's Islam-UK Centre's *#WomenInMosques Conversation Toolkit* was used as a guide to structure listening workshop questions.
- A total of 90 people (81 women and 9 men) took part in the listening exercises.
- The report is inclusive of some male voices which provide a much-needed insight into how Muslim men understand the barriers and experiences of women.
- Affording Muslim women in Scotland a platform from which their voices can be propelled into the public sphere is the primary objective of this report.
- VSM sought to listen to the experiences of Muslim women's engagement with mosques in Scotland and present the findings in an honest and constructive way.



Inclusivity

- The overwhelming majority of women reported that they felt the mosque was a male-dominated space and one in which they can be made to feel unwelcome and unwanted.
- Cultural baggage and 'back home' mentalities were seen as added reasons for the dominance of males.
- *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) issues were not fully understood by the participants in their academic or legal sense, but as a mentality or a 'just the way it is' approach. It was felt that *fiqh* may be used to keep women out.
- The women themselves expressed that staying at home felt better for them, either because they have been taught their whole lives that a woman's prayer is better at home, or that they just found it easier not to battle with the barriers they experienced.
- Women advocated their desire for the mosque to be a natural place to gather with other families, both for social and spiritual contentment.

Leadership and Decision making

- The notion that mosques are a male space runs parallel to the understanding that mosque leadership is also an exclusively male arena.
- The mosque governing bodies featured heavily among participant discussions.
- Nearly all the participants believed many Board of Trustees and Management Committees were inherently broken and not responsive to the needs of Scottish communities.
- Some felt that the mosques had become reduced to a battle for ownership, control and influence among traditional older men, essentially an 'old men's club' of sorts.
- Others highlighted that a lack of accountability in general allows for the status quo to remain as it is.
- Some of the participants perceived that mosque 'culture and mentality' was dictated by their source of funding, for example foreign financial backing.
- Mosques rely heavily on private donors and public fundraising. There was a perception that donations could lead to undue influence and appointment to key positions of leadership.
- There was a consensus that fundamental motivations and modus operandi of the people who run the mosques is deeply rooted in the need for position and power. It was felt this is perhaps the single foundational cause responsible for many of the negative situations experienced by women.

- Representation of the female voice, as well as a physical presence on a leadership level, was reported as scarce and confined to a few mosques.
- Where there was representation, it was often via a proxy committee or individual. Involvement of women was either tied to male approval through 'female committees' or individual females who acted as go-betweens. These were reported as usually being informal, unstructured, and inconsistent. These were not embedded within the constitution or other operating structure, thus there lacked an official strategy for the representation of women in a leadership capacity.
- Some of the younger women were passionate about wanting to carve out a positive and enriching experience and they were concerned about the future of young Muslim women in Scottish mosques.
- Many felt there was an acute lack of skills across the governing structure of some mosques. For example, upskilling Imams in social and interpersonal skills that include leadership training and counselling would enhance the quality of their output significantly. The same was true for Board of Trustees and Committee Members. It was felt the people in those positions needed to possess the correct skills and qualification to be able to run an institution like a mosque.
- Participants also highlighted that there was an issue with a lack of diversity in the make-up of mosque leadership, as well as attendees. Some went further and relayed personal experiences of bias and intra-religious racism they had encountered at their mosque.
- Women were passionate about becoming involved in their mosques to have the ability to make or suggest changes. There should be a spectrum of platforms available to engage women - from female-only committees to presence on Management Committees. There should also be specialised groups working on single issues, such as developing a Ramadan plan that includes women and children.
- Some women felt that women themselves can often be the barriers to progress. The overriding consensus was that women need to work together to ensure mosques are equitable in their inclusion of the whole family.



Physical Access

- The biggest problem for some women is that their local mosque may not even have a space for them.
- Where female spaces do exist, the spaces allocated to women are usually small, lack windows, lack basic hygiene at times and are often commandeered by men when they require extra space.
- It was highlighted that in one mosque women did not have access to toilets inside the main building and had to use port-a-loo style toilet outside the building.
- Many women communicated that the female prayer areas they were using were not equitable to male prayer spaces in terms of access. They were often closed or restricted, making women feel unwelcome. The women reported locked doors, lack of lighting and lack of access to anyone who would open the door for them. When they were accessible, some spaces felt unsafe.
- There is the issue of lack of baby changing and sanitary disposal facilities.
- Women felt there was ineffective and little to no communication with women congregants. There was a lack of feedback procedures that would allow them to privately highlight their needs.
- It was indicated that quite often women can only hear lectures and *khutbas* and that the sound system is often ineffective or not working. Women reported not being able to see the Imam as most spaces are closed rooms or on a different level.
- As young children were predominantly cared for in female prayer spaces, the quality of learning and interaction taking place is very poor. This highlighted the opportunity for mosque committees to actively provide facilities and services that engage in the religious, spiritual, emotional, and social development of young people and promote their attachment to mosques.
- There was a real and raw desire to be able to walk into a mosque and pray, without issue.
- Women who felt the most content were those whose mosques had accessible and fit-for-purpose space, of which there are several across Scotland.
- These women highlighted the need for Scottish mosques to work together and find solutions to ensure that women and their children have enough access and space to be able to fulfil their Muslim obligation of performing prayer when they need to.

Communal Worship & Spirituality

- Key occasions like Ramadan, Eid and *Juma'ah* (Friday) prayers were cited as the times women felt the most need to access adequate space in the mosque, and also as the times they face the most challenges that result in loneliness and a feeling of not belonging.
- Ramadan was a time when women had the least or no access to the mosque, especially for the *iftar* (sunset meal to break one's fast). Where they were catered for, they faced obstructions and difficulties making the experience stressful when it did not need to be.
- Again, those women whose mosques had a strong female involvement spoke about having positive and enriching experiences during Ramadan.
- There was a deep sense of loss of a familial connection to the mosques spiritually – a direct result of hindered physical access and space.
- The women we spoke to were passionate about wanting their children to have the mosque be the communal space in which they feel a belonging.
- Despite the existence of Islamic organisations and initiatives catering to the Muslim communities in Scotland, the centrality and focal point of prayer within the mosque felt like a missing part of the communal religious experience.
- This was in stark contrast to the experiences of participants with connections to non-South Asian countries. They described having a close connection to the mosque in these countries, loved going to the mosque and were encouraged to do so. It was normal for these women to frequent the mosque and partake in mosque activities. It is this ease and normalcy the women we spoke to desire the most.

The Exemplary Scottish Mosque

Women advocated that a vision of an equitable mosque is underpinned by several distinctive characteristics.

- Firstly, that Muslim men need to stand openly and vocally as allies to create change and reform in existing Scottish mosques.
- Secondly, every mosque should be aligned to its unique community needs and be able to change and adapt accordingly.
- Thirdly, that mosques create systems that ensure they are preventative, rather than reactionary in dealing with community issues.
- Further, that the mosques are driven by principles of social welfare and equity.
- Lastly, that mosques are a welcoming and friendly place for everyone who enters.



Conclusions

- In summary, these women's voices revealed an array of barriers and frustrations they have experienced and continue to experience in their engagement with their local mosques.
- Whilst not at the forefront of the conversation, there were several positive and enriching accounts from women whose local mosques are at the front of the line in championing equality of access, as well as inclusion, for women and by extension families.
- So, whilst the reader may be left dismayed at the many negative experiences expressed in the main report at large, it is important to be mindful and hopeful of the immense efforts being carried out by several prominent mosques in Scotland.
- The hope is that these mosques become good practice champions that mosques across Scotland can learn from and model themselves on.
- The overarching picture revealing itself through the detailed accounts from Scottish women affirms what has been inherently understood by the Muslim community for a long time – we need to roll up our sleeves and put in the effort required to affect change for Muslim women in Scotland, who more than anything want to be able to pray freely in the house of God.

Section A: Barriers

1. A Male Space?

2. Leadership

Culture and Mentality

- Governance
- Money Matters
- Accountability
- Representation
- Skills
- Women as Drivers, not Barriers

3. Physical and

Operational Barriers

- Space
- Access
- Toilet and Ablution Facilities
- Ability to See and Hear
- Feedback and Communication
- Children

4. Ramadan

5. Spiritual Needs

6. Overseas Experience

1. A Male space?



- Participants reported some mosques were mindful of the needs of women and cater for their needs, wherever possible.



- Female participants did not feel welcome or lacked a sense of belonging in some mosques. This often led to women preferring to pray at home.
- Mosque spaces are mainly orientated towards males.
- There is a perception that Islamic scholarly positions are largely misunderstood or misapplied to exclude women from mosques.
- Women are made to feel attendance at a Mosque is a privilege, and not a right.
- Women themselves differ in their expectations as to what role women play in mosques.
- There is an impetus to maintain the status quo and not challenge Mosque institutions due to wider issues affecting the Muslim community in the UK.
- When appropriate, gender interaction in mosques does not promote inclusivity, respect, and collaboration.
- Women are sometimes seen as 'distractions' in mosque spaces.



2. Leadership



- There are mosques that are dynamic, relevant, and responsive to the needs of their community.
- There are excellent examples of effective leadership structures which are diverse and have established processes in place to enable them to function well. In these mosques, women are active members of mosque committees, and their voice is heard.
- The Muslim community is very generous in financially supporting mosques leading to less reliance on external donors.
- Some mosques regularly facilitate social and religious gatherings for women.
- Participants recognised that there is a variety of different approaches to ensure women are engaged and active within mosques and will be largely dependent on the distinct needs of the community that the mosque serves.



- Mosque leadership structures are seen as static and focused on maintaining power and control. Whilst recognising these issues are beyond the focus of this project, it was felt that these barriers disproportionately affect women more than men in mosques.
- Leadership is often resistant to change.
- Factors that inhibit dynamism within mosque leaderships include:
 - **Culture and Mentality** – Many mosques lack the ethnic and ideological diversity that would make them representative of the communities they serve.
 - **Governance** – Some participants felt that mosque governance bodies lack transparency and processes expected of institutions serving the community. This impacts on the involvement of women on these governing bodies.
 - **Money Matters** – Women are actively involved in donating to mosques but can feel their needs are unmet.
 - **Accountability** – Participants described a lack of clarity of mosque management structures and a perception that management are hidden and unapproachable. This leads to women feeling they do not know who to approach to suggest ideas or raise issues, resulting in frustration and disillusionment.
 - **Representation** – Women in mosque leadership positions is rare. Where women are involved, it is often via a proxy-committee. Participants differed as to what the most appropriate model may look like and recognised this may vary depending on the needs of each mosque. Male participants felt that change should be gradual and non-threatening to existing male-majority committees.

2. Leadership (continued)



- **Skills** – Participants were concerned that in some mosques, management committee members did not have the sufficient skills, knowledge, professionalism, and expertise to run a community organisation. Their positions were not necessarily merit based. There is also confusion regarding the role of the Imam as the spiritual leader of the community, and the management body, who employ the Imam, and can make decisions which lack coherence. Issues facing the Muslim community such as drug abuse, domestic violence, mental health, and youth issues are complex in nature and require expertise and collaborative working. There is a real opportunity for mosques to become community hubs that address community issues. Women should be at the heart of such initiatives.
- **Women as Drivers, not Barriers** – Participants highlighted the issue of differing expectations and approaches amongst Muslim women as to the role of women in mosques. Some advocate an active and engaged approach whilst others believe a passive and deferential approach is more appropriate. Many participants, particularly younger participants, felt that now is the time for women to be given the opportunity to be active leaders in Scottish mosques.

3. Physical and Operational Barriers



- There are excellent examples of mosques that have the physical space and facilities for women. This is often due to the involvement of women in the planning and design stages of mosque construction.
- Some mosques were accommodating and open to suggestions and activities for women and families.
- Several mosques provide innovative and creative female prayer spaces that are welcoming and enhance the spiritual experience for women.
- There are examples of high-quality audio and visual equipment to facilitate the experience for women congregants.
- Participants highlighted a mosque that has been at the forefront of providing child and family-friendly facilities that involve the whole family.
- Participants identified a strong desire for mosques to remain relevant to their congregants due to their own positive and enriching experience as children.



3. Physical and Operational Barriers (continued)

- There were several recurrent themes highlighting the restrictions and limitations of mosques. These include the following:
 - **Space** – Many participants felt the Prophetic model of communal worship was not implemented – in particular during prayers. There can be a lack of space for women to pray their obligatory prayers leading to anger and frustration. Where space is made available, there are major concerns regarding the quality of these spaces resulting in women feeling devalued and unwelcome. During busy times of the year, it is often the women’s space which is impacted to accommodate the male congregants.
 - **Access** – Women’s spaces can be restricted in terms of access, in contrast to the access for men. This includes locked doors and reliance on male relatives to request mosque management ‘open-up’ female spaces when required. It was felt that this was the ‘culture’ in some mosques rather than logistical or security considerations. There are also views amongst some males that women attending mosques is a fitna (discord) and should be discouraged.
 - **Toilets and ablution facilities** – The location and quality of women toilets was a concern in some mosques. It is unclear how many mosques provide sanitary disposal facilities.
 - **Seeing and hearing the Imam** – Often due to the physical location of the women’s area, there is no direct line of sight with the Imam delivering the sermon. Audio quality can be poor and there is usually a lack of visual media e.g. projector or TV screen resulting in a poor experience for female congregants.
 - **Feedback and communication** – Participants felt that mosques primarily directed their interaction and communication to males in the household and it was assumed that they would then communicate this to females. This disadvantaged women who were not part of traditional family structures and disempowered women. There was also a distinct lack of opportunities for women to provide feedback or raise issues with mosques, whether constructive feedback, suggestions, or complaints. There was little consideration for disadvantaged groups such as those without access to emails or social media to communicate with the mosque. Feedback processes were not seen as robust or effective.
 - **Children** – There is an assumption by some mosques that children should be accommodated within women’s areas, particularly so that men are not disturbed. Mosques were seen to be inflexible in facilitating the varied parenting styles across wider society. A family approach is essential to cater for the needs of Muslim families.



4. Ramadan



- Ramadan is the highlight of the Muslim year, presenting both opportunities and challenges due to the increased attendance at mosques during this holy month.
- Muslim women desire a closer relationship with their mosque during this month.
- A number of mosques cater for the iftar and tarawih prayer for males and females.



- Mosques are not always cognisant of the experience of women attending mosques during Ramadan. This includes food preparation and service, as well as space for tarawih prayers.
- These experiences particularly disadvantage those women who are socially isolated including students, converts, single-parent households, divorced, widowed and travellers.
- Many women feel their male relatives have the opportunity for an enriching spiritual experience during Ramadan while they are 'left at home to look after the kids'. There is a real opportunity for mosques to provide a positive well-rounded family experience.

5. Spiritual needs



- There is recognition that mosques are managing varied challenges on a day-to-day basis and that those dedicating time and resources are doing so with sincere intentions and the desire to serve their community.
- It was suggested that mosques appoint competent representatives whose role is to engage the community and provide a conduit with the management committee.



- Women are often made to feel that facilities and services in mosques are a privilege, more so than men, and it would be inappropriate to question, suggest or demand anything in addition to what is provided.
- Participants felt strongly that they must have access to Imams and female scholars who are approachable, accessible, and experienced.
- Many Muslims, particularly young people, are seeking Islamic education and knowledge outside traditional mosque structures. Women participants felt that mosques should be a key community hub providing education for all sections of the community.



Overseas experience



- There are numerous models of well-run and accommodating mosques around the world who adhere to mainstream religious ideology. Scottish mosques should take best-practice examples and adapt them for Scotland.



- Women participants with a vast experience of mosques in other countries felt some Scottish mosques were less welcoming and accommodating to women.

Section B: A Vision for a Vibrant Future

A description of The Exemplary Scottish Mosque based on four areas,

- The Building
- Leadership and Governance
- Mosque Services
- Outreach Programmes

RECOMMENDATIONS

Scottish mosques and institutions have a great opportunity and responsibility to do more towards developing a female and family-friendly inclusive environment.

Vibrant Scottish Mosques has identified **9 key areas of work** and proposes the following recommendations. We will collaborate with mosques to achieve the following:

A. Prayer spaces

Establish accessible and equitable prayer facilities for women

	Recommendation	Action
1	Ensure provision of accessible, equitable, fit-for-purpose and welcoming prayer spaces for women.	Mosque Management Committees
2	Where female prayer spaces are in separate rooms to male spaces, ensure there is a video of the khutbah (sermon) and high-quality audio.	Mosque Management Committees
3	Female spaces should have appropriate lighting, heating, ventilation so that women are made to feel welcome.	Mosque Management Committees
4	Access to female areas should be equitable to male-spaces.	Mosque Management Committees
5	Involve women in the planning, development, and refurbishment of mosques.	Mosque Management Committees
6	Explore facilities and service that welcome young children to the mosque and allows the whole congregation to experience a spiritual and uplifting place of worship.	Mosque Management Committees

B. Belonging

Support mosques to have a welcoming and inclusive attitude to their female service users

	Recommendation	Action
7	Tackle the negative perception that women attending a mosque are a fitna (tribulation) and distraction for others.	Mosque Management Committees Imams and Islamic scholars
8	Improve communication between mosques and women instead of relying on other male household members, as it excludes women who are not part of traditional family structures eg. Divorced, widowed, convert women.	Mosque Management Committees
9	Consider Ramadan as an essential communal experience for men and women to become closer to the mosque and God. Ensure the experience for the whole family is enriched during this month, in particular iftar, tarawih and daily prayers.	Mosque Management Committees



C. Leadership

Encourage female involvement in decision making at operational and strategic levels.

	Recommendation	Action
10	Develop and encourage more female representation in management committees, especially in relevant key decision-making processes and affairs. This should not be restricted to areas that may be perceived as 'women-only' issues.	Mosque Management Committees Umbrella mosque-affiliate organisations
11	Ensure mosque management structures are representative of the communities they serve.	Mosque Management Committees
12	Improve governance procedures and transparency of decision-making within mosques.	Mosque Management Committees
13	Ensure current Mosque management and committee members are easily accessible to the public as this will help the congregants know who to approach for relevant issues.	Mosque Management Committees
14	Provide clear information to the public as to how individuals are appointed to management committees and actively encourage women to be involved in ensuring the best people are appointed.	Mosque Management Committees
15	Implement the most appropriate management structure that includes women.	Mosque Management Committees
16	Recognise that Muslim women may differ in their views as to how women should engage in leadership positions. Mosque structures should facilitate the involvement of women who wish to take an active role in the running of their mosque.	All

D. Education and Training

Promote the advancement of knowledge, skills and training for women

	Recommendation	Action
17	Invest in the diversification and upskilling of Imams, teaching staff as well as Committee Members and Board of Trustees.	Mosque Management Committees Umbrella mosque-affiliate organisations
18	Explore the experience of women in mosques around the world and from our rich Islamic history.	Mosque Management Committees Umbrella mosque-affiliate organisations

E. Services

Encourage mosques to offer a variety of services and activities that are appropriate to the local female community

	Recommendation	Action
19	Review how mosques organise social gatherings and activities to ensure the inclusion and participation of women and children, paying particular attention to communal gatherings centred around obligatory worship throughout the year.	Mosque Management Committees

F. Advice and scholarship

Encourage mosques to provide an imam/qualified female scholar that is accessible to the service users

	Recommendation	Action
20	Improve the provision and access to male and female Islamic scholars for women. This may include the use of technology.	Mosque Management Committees Imams and Islamic scholars
21	Address the misunderstandings of the <i>fiqh</i> (Islamic legal jurisprudence) position that is used to exclude women from attending mosques.	Imams and Islamic scholars

G. Policy

Work with key partners to improve the experience of women in mosques

	Recommendation	Action
22	Maintain and enhance the relationships between mosques and local and national stakeholders including local authorities and Scottish Government.	Umbrella mosque-affiliate organisations

H. Standards and quality

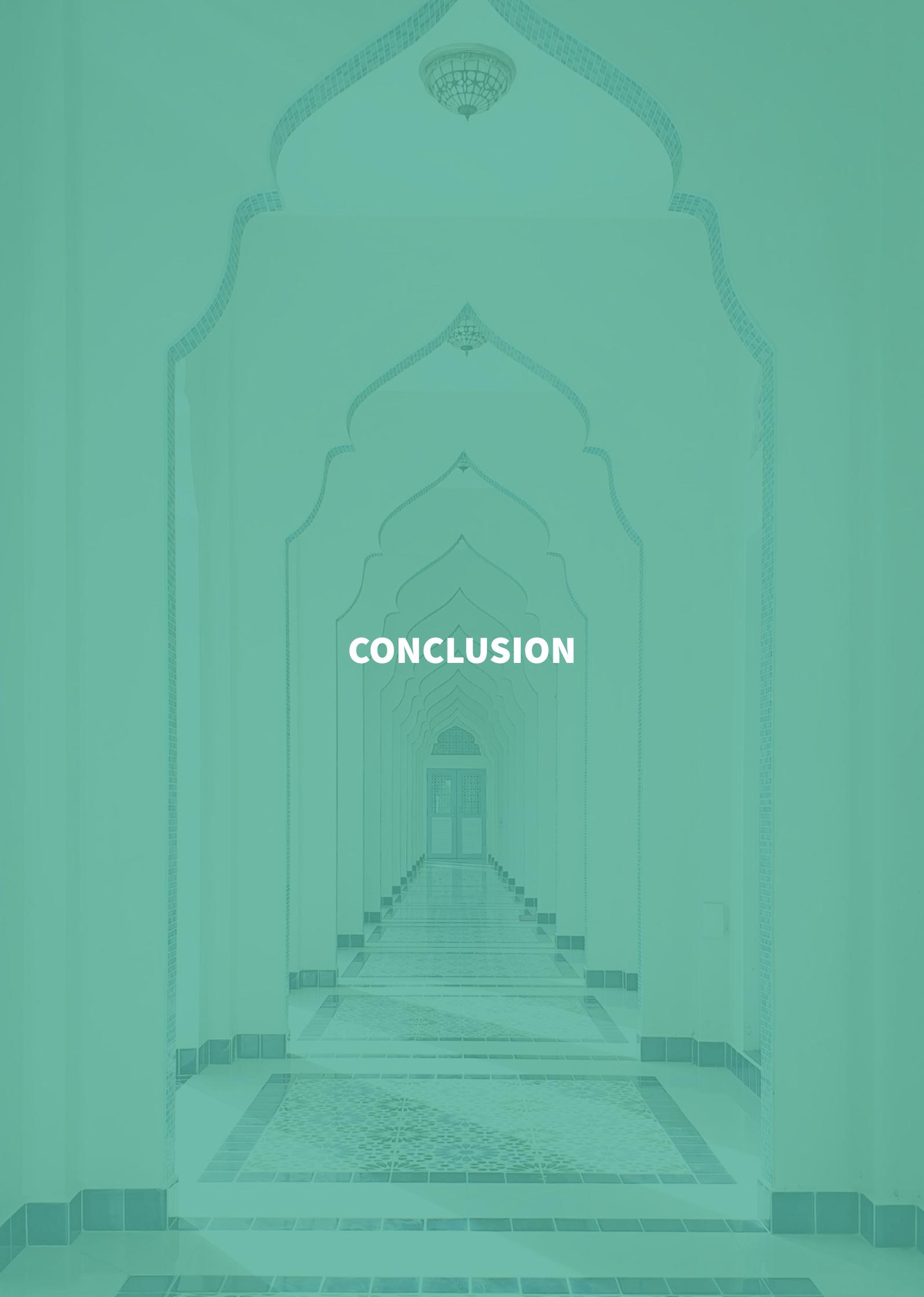
Promote good current practice of mosques and encourage mosques to follow best practice models

	Recommendation	Action
23	Developing effective feedback systems that allows for continuous growth through assessment and critical feedback.	Mosque Management Committees



I. A vision for the future

	Recommendation	Action
24	Consider how The Exemplary Mosque model suggested by participants may be relevant to mosques across Scotland.	Mosque Management Committees Umbrella mosque-affiliate organisations



CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

This report has shown through the voices of the participating women themselves that their desire to attend the mosque is a result of seeking spiritual satisfaction, socialising, engaging in community activities, obtaining emotional support, and a place of learning for not just themselves but also their whole family.

More than anything, it is because the mosque represents a unique space where they can express their religiosity in an environment that is safe and aligned to their spiritual world view. They reported wanting a sense of belonging in an institution that is synonymous with their religious and social identities. Many articulated that their lived experiences do not match with what they are taught, read, or know about the female engagement of women in mosques both in the Prophetic Sunnah but also in their experiences outside Scotland.

The listening exercise revealed the deep-rooted inequality based on gender that is experienced by women in Scotland. The feeling of not belonging and unwantedness prevailed against a backdrop of feeling powerless to create change and living in the knowledge that change will be excruciatingly slow. It was clearly communicated that there was little to no representation of women across the breadth of mosques in Scotland.

Whilst we have seen examples of positive engagement and good practice models, most women reported lack of, and often substandard, space and access to pray. Men, and more specifically inflexible 'elders' were seen as the protectors of a status quo, or an 'old boys club' – one in which power and control of finances remain the central issues. 'Culture and mentality' were cited as some of the reasons why women were pushed out of the mosque. Culture and mentality also overlapped with a perception that ideological or *fiqh* positions denying or restricting women to attend the mosque played a role in ensuring that mosques remain male-dominated.

We hope that 'hearing' the voices of Muslim women in Scotland through this report has fulfilled the purpose we set out to achieve – to give a safe space for Muslim women in Scotland to articulate their personal experiences interacting with their local mosques. A space that is non-judgemental and protects people's right to anonymity which is seldom available, as those women who are vocal are often dismissed and marginalised affirming the perception that saying something leads to social ostracisation and does nothing to make real and lasting change. Therefore, this report hopes to offer a small but significant insight into the stories and experiences of Muslim women in Scotland.

The inclusion of male voices has been useful and discerning in teasing out not only differences in perception, but also in understanding that men also desire a change, albeit a change largely confined to governance related issues.

What we see in this report is what existing research and initiatives on the subject have already alluded to – that change and reform is needed.

