



Vibrant Scottish Mosques

Aspiring to improve representation of women



HEAR MY VOICE

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

Author: Maariyah Adam



VibrantScottishMosques.com

Registered Scottish Charity SC051103

Report published: March 2022

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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.

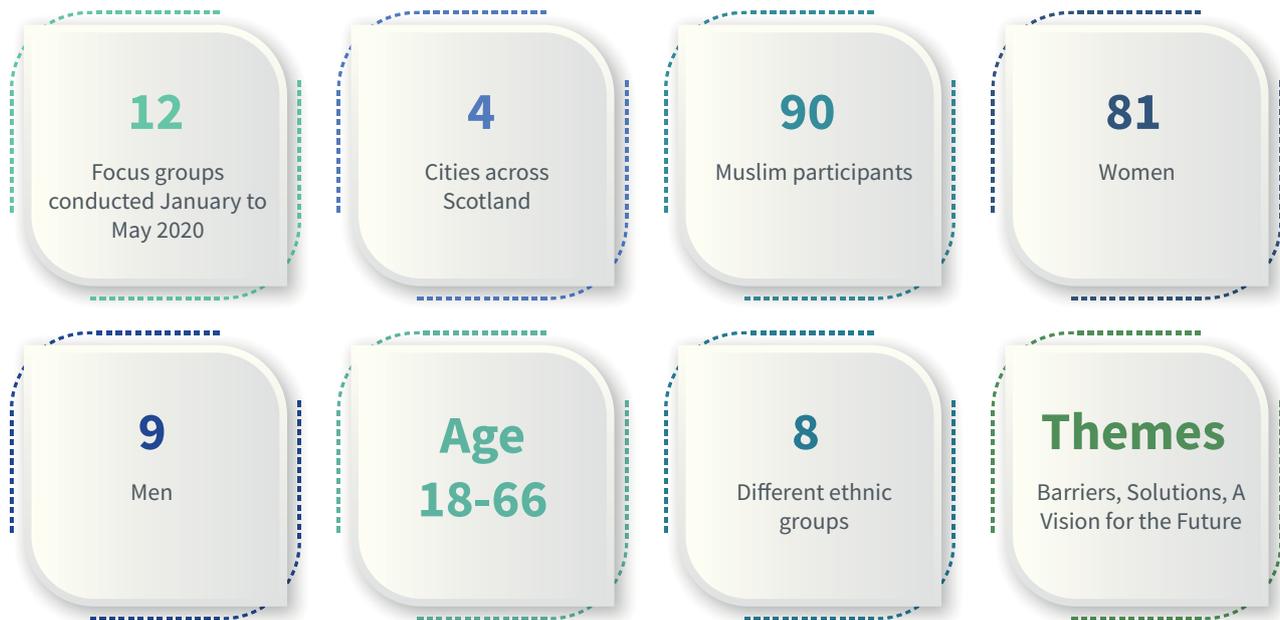
Lastly, this report would not be possible without the time and trust given to us by the women and men who candidly shared their experiences with us.



A teal-tinted photograph of a long, ornate hallway. The hallway features a series of repeating arches that create a strong sense of perspective, leading the eye towards a double door at the far end. The floor is covered in intricate, repeating geometric tile patterns. The walls are also decorated with subtle patterns and architectural details. The overall atmosphere is one of grandeur and symmetry.

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

The image features a decorative fountain with a patterned wall. The wall is covered in a repeating geometric pattern of diamonds and circles. The fountain has a central spout and two side spouts. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text "THE REPORT" is centered on the wall.

THE REPORT

OVERVIEW

The restriction of female access to mosques has featured as a visibly controversial issue for some time now. This is reflected in the rise of pockets of movements⁴, online campaigns⁵ and an increase in research⁶ surrounding issues related to women in mosques and leadership. The most visible and powerful element of this movement is that initiatives and projects have been instigated, led, and developed by Muslim women and they are the driving force behind creating a narrative for being heard and influencing change.

Established UK umbrella mosque-affiliate organisations such as The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and the Muslim and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) have in some way argued that mosques need to become inclusive and open spaces for women, with varied levels of success. In addition, it is the courageous collective of individual women and men across the country who are responding to their local challenges by working to influence change.

While Scotland remains small in comparison to other major Western countries geographically speaking, the sentiments of Muslim women are the same. The turbulent relationship between some mosques and their female attendees around the world has seen the establishment of independent female-run mosques of different styles in the United States, Germany, Canada, Denmark, France, and the United Kingdom.⁷ There is a distinction to be made between female-led mosques for women-only congregations, and the more controversial examples of females leading mixed-gender congregations which sits outside the orthodox mainstream opinion. One of the earliest examples of female-only mosques has been found to exist in the Hui community in China⁸. The oldest surviving female-only mosque, The Wangjia Alley Mosque, was built in 1820 and can be found in Kaifeng, China. One of the prominent examples here in the UK has been led by the Muslim Women's Council, 'The Women's Building', seeks to *"house a dedicated 'mosque' space specifically prepared for the purpose of offering the five daily prayers on a permanent basis and is devoted for that purpose. It will be an inclusive middle ground space that welcomes Muslims across the spectrum of beliefs and practices. We will work within Islamic orthodoxy, but also seek room for growth and flexibility, namely in the arena of women's fiqh and female scholarship"*.⁹

4. An example of this is the "Women in Mosques" (Kadınlar Camilerde) campaign in Turkey. Women, many of them young and university educated, gathered in various mosques in Istanbul since October 2017 to address concerns pertaining to women's use of prayer spaces in Turkey. Some of these concerns include lack of ablution facilities for women; a lack of prayer space for women to attend Friday prayers. Also see Oguz Alyanak; When Women Demand Prayer Space: Women in Mosques Campaign in Turkey. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1 March 2019; 15 (1): 125–134 <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-7273885>

5. The Open My Mosque Campaign; My Mosque Story; Side Entrance; View of a Woman

6. Bano, Masooda, and Hilary Kalmbach, eds. 2012. *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Leiden: Brill; Bhimji, Fazila. 2009. Identities and agency in religious spheres: A study of British Muslim women's experience. *Gender, Place and Culture* 16: 365–80; Brown, Katherine. 2008. The Promise and Perils of Women's Participation in UK Mosques: The Impact of Securitisation Agendas on Identity, Gender and Community. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10: 472–91; Cesari, Jocelyne. 2006. Mosque Conflicts in European Cities: Introduction. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31: 1015–24; Faith Matters. 2010. Meeting the Needs of Muslim Women: A Directory of Mosques in England; Muslim Women's Network. 2006. *She Who Disputes. Muslim Women Shape the Debate*; Shannahan, Dervia Sara. 2014. Gender, Inclusivity and UK mosque experiences. *Contemporary Islam* 8: 1–16; Woodlock, Rachel. 2010. The masjid is for men: Competing voices in the debate about Australian Muslim women's access to mosques. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21: 51–60; Mo Lehmann, Uta Christina. 2012. *Women's Rights to Mosque Space: Access and Participation in Cape Town Mosques*. In *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Edited by Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach. Leiden: Brill, pp. 481–506

7. The Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, Ibn Rush-Goethe Mosque, Berlin and the Qal'bu Maryam mosque in Berkley California

8. See, Jaschok, Maria, and Shui Jingjun. 2000. *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own*. London: Routledge.

9. <http://www.muslimwomenscouncil.org.uk/project/womens-building>

The multitude and varying ideological underpinnings have received mixed reactions ranging from acceptance to outright condemnation and are quite often seen as an ‘extreme’ reaction to female exclusion. The common thread driving the establishment of female-led mosques has been unanimous – women experiencing a lack of belonging and attachment and being excluded from existing mosques.

Whilst this is the basic commonality, other more complicated factors are at play here. The most prominent ones being the lack of leadership and scholarship of women in the Muslim community at large, as well as a battleground of ideas. These ideas are being debated, argued, and owned by a plethora of camps.

There is the Islamic feminist movement which seeks to deconstruct religious doctrine by highlighting the patriarchal context in which many laws and norms have been institutionalised and normalised in Muslim communal life. This is countered by traditional scholarship and its understanding of Islamic law which has been framed by *fiqh* canonised centuries ago. The tug of war begins at the point of understanding how much modern and contemporary life should be guided by laws or by cultural norms, such as the exclusion of women from mosques. Other women have accepted that women play a secondary role in the mosque through compliance of the norm espoused by the formal canonisation of religious doctrine that has evolved through the development of *fiqh* or Islamic law (namely through the main schools of jurisprudence).

More commonly though, there has been a drive and deep desire to eschew the status quo in favour of the Prophet Muhammad’s *sunnah (pbuh)*, arguing that the evidence is clear - women were an inclusive part of the mosque. Therefore, it is argued that there is a gap and dichotomy that exists between the Prophetic sunnah and the current attitudes many mosques have towards women.

The most significant change affecting the presence of women in mosques in recent times has been the global Covid-19 pandemic that has seen the world alter in ways nobody could have imagined. The data for this report was collected pre-pandemic, therefore the adverse effect of mosque closures, and their subsequent limited opening, has not been documented. It is, however, sufficient to note that women and children were the first casualties of the pandemic up and down Scotland due to social distancing rules only allowing a limited number of worshippers to attend.

The findings in this report provide an insight into the underlying reasons why some women were excluded, and men given priority in mosque spaces.



A Listening Exercise

This study sought to listen to the experiences of Muslim women's engagement with mosques in Scotland. Information was gathered through listening workshops held across Scotland. The Muslim Council of Britain and Cardiff University's Islam-UK Centre's *#WomenInMosques Conversation Toolkit*¹⁰ was used as a guide to structure listening workshop questions. The analysis is purely qualitative to capture the voices of the participants in the most direct way possible. The participants were asked broad questions about their personal experiences interacting with their mosques including any barriers they have faced. They were also asked to talk about what they consider to be the solutions going forward and how they envisage their solutions being put into practice. Lastly, they were all asked to describe their ideal Mosque and what it would look like if there were no financial, geographical, cultural, or spiritual barriers.

Listening Exercise Questions

Adapted from MCB and Cardiff University's Islam-UK Centre's *#WomenInMosques Conversation Toolkit*

- 1. What are the barriers to women accessing mosques, participating in them and leading them?**

Physical barriers, the social barriers, the cultural barriers, the religious / theological barriers or the geographical or structural barriers?

- 2. What are potential solutions to increase women's access to mosques, participation, and leadership?**

What are the physical solutions, social solutions, cultural solutions, the religious / theological solutions, or the geographical or structural solutions to overcome the barriers addressed in the previous question?

- 3. What would the ideal mosque for Muslim women in Britain today look like?**

- a. What kind of activities does it hold?
- b. How does it organise space internally for men and women?
- c. What kind of committee structure does it have?
- d. What kind of religious leadership is in operation and how to ensure it is relevant to both men and women?

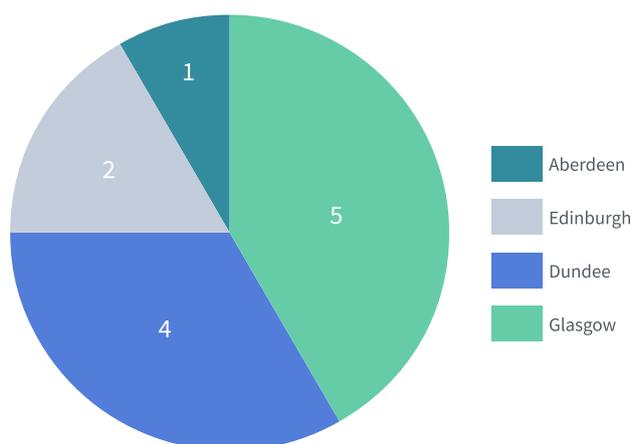
10. [Women in Mosques - Muslim Council of Britain \(MCB\)](#)

All the workshops were conducted by four members of Vibrant Scottish Mosques between January and May 2020. They were held in a diverse range of settings ranging from personal homes, community centres, the mosque or zoom.

The dominance in representation of the South Asian communities (63.5%) in this report is reflective of the Muslim demographic in Scotland ¹¹ which according to the most recent census stands at 65% South Asian and the age range of the participants was evenly balanced across the age groups.

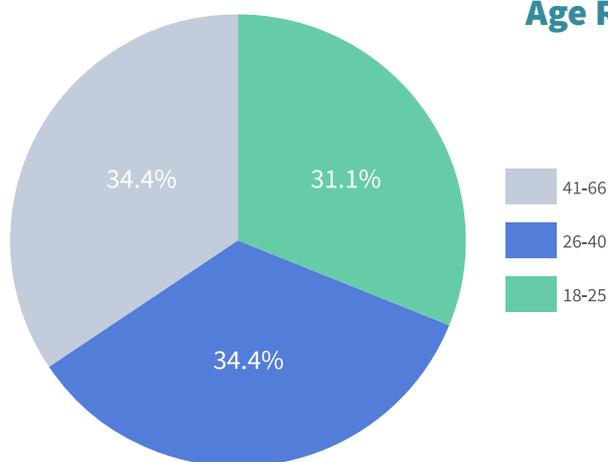
Most participants were from Glasgow, 42 participants (46.6%) which roughly corresponds to the census data that shows 43.6% of the Muslim population is concentrated in the Glasgow area. This was followed by Dundee, 25 participants (29.4%), Edinburgh, 14 participants (16.4%) and Aberdeen, 9 participants (10.5%). The percentage of participants from Dundee is recording higher than the national percentage of 11.8% for the Northeast of Scotland. This is explained by the willingness of participants to come forward and the availability of a facilitator to conduct the workshops. Edinburgh remains slightly less but close to the national percentage representing 19.0% of Muslims residing in Scotland.

Workshop Location and Number of Workshops Conducted



Glasgow	5
Dundee	4
Edinburgh	2
Aberdeen	1
Total number	12

Age Range

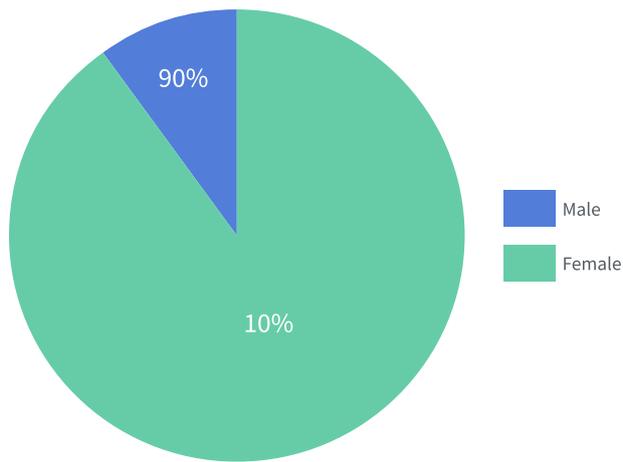


18-25	28 (31.1%)
26-40	31 (34.4%)
41-66	31 (34.4%)
Total number	90

11. Elshayyal, Khadijah, Scottish Muslims in Numbers Understanding Scotland's Muslim population through the 2011 Census, https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/scottish_muslims_in_numbers_web.pdf

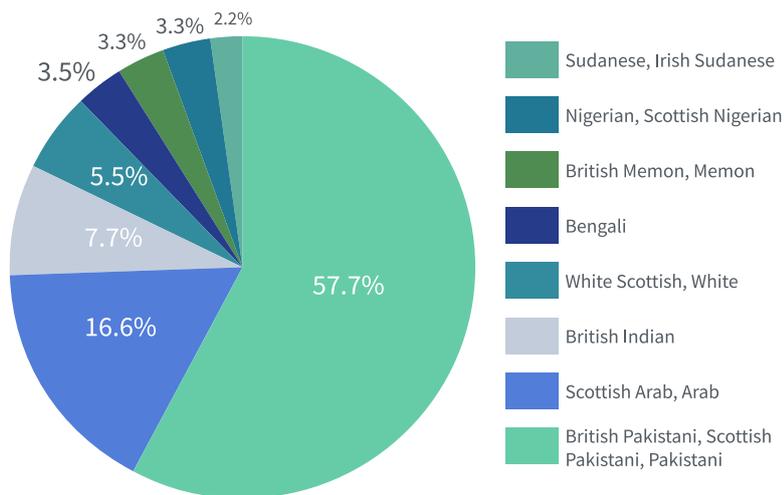


Participants



Female	81 (90%)
Male	9 (10%)
Total number	90

Ethnic Background



British Pakistani, Scottish Pakistani, Pakistani	52 (57.7%)
Scottish Arab, Arab	15 (16.6%)
British Indian	7 (7.7%)
White Scottish, White	5 (5.5%)
Bengali	3 (3.5%)
British Memon, Memon	3 (3.3%)
Nigerian, Scottish Nigerian	3 (3.3%)
Sudanese, Irish Sudanese	2 (2.2%)
Total number	90

Limitations

There are several limitations we need to be mindful of prior to reading this report. Firstly, this report does not purport to be a piece of research, but rather a written account of the experiences of Muslim women in Scotland. Therefore, we have not engaged in any sort of meaningful extrapolation of the theoretical context surrounding some of the issues and nuances emerging from the listening workshops. We felt it was important for the focus to remain solely on the voices emerging from the workshops. We have however cited a limited number of secondary sources where the context has allowed it to be necessary. The findings from this report do however present us with an opportunity to conduct wider research that can create the space for a deeper engagement with the themes emerging from these listening workshops.

Secondly, every workshop produced detailed notes of participant accounts, though not all were audio-recorded. This discrepancy means that while some quotes are a verbatim account, some have been paraphrased whilst others have been anecdotally presented in the text itself. In every instance, the workshop leaders were asked to corroborate accounts for accuracy as well as context.

Thirdly, the female voice remains the central focus of this report, but we have in addition included the male perspective on female engagement. Whilst acknowledging the limited nature of the injection of discourse, it is nevertheless enough of a snapshot to provide some balance to the conversation. However, it is not enough to qualify as a substantial reflection of the Muslim male experiences and opinions of engagement with mosques in Scotland.

Lastly, whilst we have been careful to be inclusive of everything shared with us, we have not included experiences of a sensitive or personal nature that may have been disclosed in an individual capacity outwith the main listening exercise. Where issues of safeguarding may have been relevant, individuals were supported to engage with the relevant support organisations, institutions, and authorities. It is important to acknowledge that safeguarding concerns and abuse occurs in wider society including civic and faith institutions, and Muslim spaces will not be immune. Uncomfortable as it is, it may be a truth nonetheless, one that requires dedicated work, attention and resolve to create a real and lasting awareness and change. The following comment made by a participant highlights the work ahead for all Scottish society. The participant was reluctant to approach the relevant authorities when there may have been inappropriate behaviour in a mosque because they did not want to bring further negative attention on the Muslim community and mosques in a post 9/11 world,

“I am very aware that mosques and Muslims are demonised, so we would not want to make it worse. I am reluctant in contacting outside agencies because of that”



FINDINGS

It is the quiet, silent voices and experiences of Scottish Muslim women we seek to highlight and validate in this report. It is hoped that, in some way, this helps to shed light on the current female experiences with mosques and open a conversation about how mosques can enhance their services going forward.

The women's voices that are in this paper will allow the reader to understand the important and salient issues that are the centre of why their voices need to be raised, heard, and acted upon. These voices convey that their religious and spiritual needs are tied to the centrality of worship and communal social experiences that are unique to the mosque. The communal experience encompasses family life, rooted in the deep and spiritual connection to prayer as well as religious identity.

Specific times of the year when worship brings together local communities was highlighted as an important time to have a connection to the mosque. Not only did the women speak about the barriers they faced, but they also highlighted positive experiences from the mosques in Scotland that are open and accessible for women and families. It is our sincere hope that raising women's voices can in some way begin to pave a way toward change and an open and honest conversation, whilst also recognising and documenting existing good practice models.

The discussions with women unearthed a breadth of emotional, spiritual, and reflective experiences and stories which have been carefully analysed and presented here to capture the essence of their voices in the best way possible. It is for this reason that the reader will see an abundance of quotes peppered throughout the discussion to give as close to an accurate account as we possibly can, within the limitations of a piece like this. The conversation has been structured to ensure that all the voices are included, whilst simultaneously extrapolating the main issues of concern emerging from the workshops.

Section A

Barriers

1. A Male Space?

2. Leadership

- 2.1 Culture and Mentality
- 2.2 Governance
- 2.3 Money Matters
- 2.4 Accountability
- 2.5 Representation
- 2.6 Skills
- 2.7 Women as Drivers, not Barriers

3. Physical and Operational Barriers

- 3.1 Space
- 3.2 Access
- 3.3 Toilet and Ablution Facilities
- 3.4 Ability to See and Hear
- 3.5 Feedback and Communication
- 3.6 Children

4. Ramadan

5. Spiritual Needs

6. Overseas Experience

1. A Male Space?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Participants reported some mosques were mindful of the needs of women and cater for their needs, wherever possible.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 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.

There was an overwhelming sense of feeling a lack of belonging to the mosque. Nearly every woman mentioned that the feeling of **“I am not welcomed here”**, **“What am I doing here”** or that **“I don’t belong here”** is a common occurrence in their lived experiences.

Often, this feeling of alienation resulted in the women preferring to pray at home – and not because of following a position of *fiqh*¹². While reflecting on this issue one participant mentioned,

“I’ve gone to very few mosques in Glasgow and I asked myself why and I realised it’s because I don’t feel welcome” (female)

The idea that the mosque is a male-space is not new, as Maqsood (2005) in her paper argued that mosques are widely perceived as male ‘prayer clubs’ that allow gender imbalances to exist in mosques, coupled with the lack of adequate facilities for women, leading to low attendance. In addition, Nyhagen’s (2019) account from speaking to women in Leicester and Oslo also found that women’s physical and social engagement with the mosque results in a cyclical process whereby ‘male power’ is both challenged but also reaffirmed at the same time.

12. “Usul al-fiqh is concerned with the sources of Islamic law, their order of priority, and the methods by which legal rules may be deduced from the source materials of the Shari’ah” Kamali, Mohammad Hashim (2003) “Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, The Islamic Texts Society

There was at least one participant in every listening workshop in every city that mentioned issues related to perceived 'ideological' differences. However, these concerns were raised in a way that indicated the *fiqh* 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 largely felt *fiqh* was used to keep women out of the mosque and territorial 'old men' in.

The reality is that most Muslim women who frequent the mosque, or who wish to do so, will not have had the exposure to academic debates surrounding the issue of women in mosques, let alone understand the delicacies of how isolated information can often be used to maintain a status quo which will inevitably go unchallenged by the women who it adversely affects.

One participant felt that mosques deliberately organise the space and activities to keep women out,

“mosques seem to be very male dominated and activities seem to be more male centred, ongoing activities are ones that appeal to males rather than females, which I think is done on purpose” (female)

One woman mentioned that she has lived for thirty years near a mosque in Glasgow but has never been inside as a direct result of “feeling like you don't belong there” and a lack of physical access. So, hearing things like “I feel like I am sinning if I enter the 'male space'” (female) and that mosques are very “male orientated and male-led this is off putting for me” (female) can feel deflating in a construct that remains inaccessible and difficult to challenge.

Revealing in itself was the disparity in thought among the women themselves about the mosque being a male space,

“we are better at home” (female)

versus

“It is a barrier that some women tow the party line and follow blindly...they think they [mosque leaders] are allowed to treat women that way” (female)

Whilst these differing positions exist, most women were simply stating what they know and have been taught with the realisation that the consequences of being encouraged to stay away from the mosque does not feel quite right,

“We have been brought up with the mentality that 'women pray at home'...we need to change our mentality, women as well as men” (female)

“We have been taught from childhood that women pray at home” (female)



**“The cause for all this is probably because it’s not compulsory for women to come and pray”
(female)**

**“The feeling that women shouldn’t be in mosques is common thinking...(it) feel(s) better to
just go home and pray” (female)**

The essence of what women reported was a sense of unease, nervousness, caution, and suspicion from the men who run and frequent the mosque. This leads to a feeling of unwantedness, or ‘awkwardness’ as one woman described it.

One incident was described by an older woman, a teacher, who entered an office to speak to someone about mosque related business. She relayed that the gentlemen proceeded to ‘hide under the table’ to ensure he was ‘not alone’ with her. Her motivation in recounting this incident was to impress on the group a good example of ‘piety’ and the following of religious rules which dictate that a non-related male and female should not be in the room together.

There are several issues to explore. Firstly, there are woman who may feel that this was an extreme reaction to have, especially because she was old enough to be the gentleman’s mother. Secondly, any number of behavioural responses would have sufficed that would be considered acceptable from a theological perspective. Thirdly, it is indicative of some of the behaviours that translate as ‘strange’, that are espoused by some men which and are shrouded in theological intricacies.

Some felt that there was an unreasonable focus on women being ‘distractions’ in the mosque,

“...once in Ramadan, the microphone stopped working and women went down and prayed behind the men...this also happened at fajr once...later, one of the workers said they were not happy with this. In a sense it might be distracting because when women walk in a place they might be a distraction to men” (female)

Whilst this sentiment remains the lived experience for many of the participants we spoke to, some women did report exceptions. For example, when women were unable to pray in the female space in one mosque, they prayed behind the men,

“no one had a problem with this - women prayed with men in the same hall” (female)



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 for 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.
 - **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 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.



The notion that mosques are a male space runs parallel to the understanding that mosque leadership is also an exclusively male arena.

Nyhagen (2019) observed this norm to be reflective of what we heard women articulate, that “Mosque boards and management committees only rarely include women, and if women are allowed any autonomy it tends to be confined to women’s own activities” (p.2). There remains a consensus within research literature that the leadership structure within mosques has been and continues to be a male-dominated space.

It was not lost on the women we spoke to that the exclusively male leadership is often composed of older, predominantly South Asian men - men who tend to perpetuate the same cycle by replenishing boards and committees through nepotism and exclusivity and are ultimately the ones who hold the power and influence to create a real and meaningful change.

This perception of leadership is perhaps the single foundational cause responsible for many of the negative situations experienced by women. 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 –

“they want to hold on to the power in the mosque” (male)

It was almost a casual, yet uncomfortable acceptance that this was the reality, a reality that rarely goes unchallenged because positive change is seen as having a negligible outcome. As one participant stated,

“It is at the end of the day about power. If there was a woman in charge, she would be able to say what women need, what changes need to be done. We have tried from bottom up, but there has been no change. This is going to take centuries” (female)

Both male and female participants were united in their condemnation of the existing status quo – more than this though, a frustration and almost outrage expressed that change is unlikely to occur. Embroiled in amongst these issues are a range of factors that were highlighted by the participants that act as a pathway to ensuring that the leadership of the mosque remains stagnant and at risk of irrelevance. These were:

- 2.1 Culture and Mentality
- 2.2 Governance
- 2.3 Money Matters
- 2.4 Accountability
- 2.5 Representation
- 2.6 Skills
- 2.7 Women as Drivers, not Barriers



2.1 'Culture and Mentality'

“I’ve been in (city X) since 2001, I’ve not felt any change in mentality. I feel like I give up. I used to drag my friends and family and my mother [to the mosque]. This is not back home, this is Britain, the 21st century! It’s because people who are in charge, their mentality is back home. They can’t advance to where the mentality should be there. There should be no Arabic Mosque, Pakistani mosque, there should be no barriers like this. If there was a woman on board, that would definitely make a change, but there are no women in charge” (female)

Culture is a term that has multiple meanings, usually dictated by the context in which it is being discussed. In Scotland, we know that the Muslim community is not one homogenous group - they are geographically, culturally, and religiously diverse. In the context of mosques in Scotland we can say that culture is an interplay between geography and the cultural norms that stem from it, the overall role women play in public and private spheres, and the practice of the Islamic legal school of thought which influences how integrated women are in different mosques.

What these discussions unearthed is that those Muslims who identify as ‘Scottish’, felt that when mosques are run by and funded by people who may not be fully cognisant of shifting identities and cultures, a less than desirable environment was created for women specifically and the community generally. The term ‘mentality’ was often used interchangeably with the term ‘culture’,

“No point in beating around the bush, it is inevitable that those guys have old school mentality. It’s Pakistani mentality, they have the money, so they run everything. I think they fear that the younger generation will change, and they are scared of change. That is always going to be the case, whether we will stand up against them or not. They will not step down” (male)

“I think the problem here is that most mosques are run by old South-Asian men and that is their mentality” (female)

“The mosque is not open to new ideas, they think their way is best” (female)

Included in the idea that ‘mentality’ dictates how the mosque is run and controlled is the shifting sands in so-called religious priorities that often translate into the lived experiences of Muslim women in and around the mosque. For example, female participants mentioned they felt there was a disparity between how men at the mosque behaved with them as ‘Muslim’ females, compared to how they behaved with non-Muslim women,

“you speak to men and say salam to them and they ignore you... outside they speak to other women in the name of Dawah...” (female)

“...the way they treated the non-Muslim women and men, but all together, they were welcomed, given food and treated like royalty...it’s good to show them our way of welcoming hospitality, but don’t treat your own like scum!” (female)



Some participants linked mosque ‘culture’ and ‘mentality’ to a specific Islamic School of Jurisprudence, namely the ‘Hanafi’ school of jurisprudence. It is the school of thought practiced by the vast majority of South-Asian Muslims¹³. However, one participant noted,

“It is just South-Asians here, because the rest of Islamic world following the Hanafi Madhab do not segregate like this” (female)

In addition, it was felt that the ideological and geographical differences that often exist between mosques are an added barrier to positive engagement. One participant expressed her dismay at being directly told to go to a different mosque that was run by people of the same ethnic and geographical background as herself,

“Now when I go to Juma’ah at (mosque X) I get told, “oh why do you come to our mosque!” (female)

Some of the participants mentioned that when there is a mix of diverse nationalities in a mosque, it creates a positive and enriching environment in which they thrived,

“Growing up, when it was Eid I would go to mosque and I loved it...the Arab ladies made all the vibes...they would prepare breakfast...it was so much fun. When (mosque X) was built they all left and it’s just never been the same...it’s really hard to make the atmosphere because we need permission from the mosque to be free to make the mosque a place to be, pretty much everything you want to do gets knocked back if it’s not their agenda it’s not going to happen, it’s a like or leave it kind of a thing” (female)

“You go to (mosque X)...it’s always buzzing there...the women are so mixed and they all bring something to the table” (female)

13. The Hanafi school is one of the four religious Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence. It is named after the scholar Abū Ḥanīfa an-Nu‘man ibn Thābit (d. 767),

2.2 Governance

“I feel so pessimistic when I think about (mosque X), it seems so unchangeable...it will always be the older generation...” (female)

The mosque governing bodies featured heavily among participant discussions. Nearly all the participants mentioned board of trustees and management committees were inherently broken. 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,

“Committee members portray that they “own the Mosque” and no one else is allowed a look in” (female)

Suggestions for change are often met with disregard as they are challenges to the traditional underpinnings of most of the mosques in Scotland,

“Being modern is seen as a bad thing in their eyes. They feel they have the tradition and that is the good way. The only way for a younger person to be accepted is that they will become older and think exactly as they do” (male)

The participants viewed committees as self-appointed guardians whose style of ‘regulation’ is narrow and exclusivist,

“the Committees shouldn’t think the mosque is theirs to run as they wish and get protective over who enters, it’s open to all” (female)

Considering this, one participant said,

“I’m for drastic solutions. The people who are in charge are male dominated, not born here, with back-home mentality. The people who are in charge should be elected! We should know who they are and why they are there. Ok, you gave money, but then you can be a funder, why in are you on the committee? But people deciding should be professionals and there should be women there in charge. If we want to organise something, why should we have to go through those old men” (female)

Therefore, initiatives¹⁴ led by MCB who have done some work to empower and train women to take up leadership positions in UK mosques are needed to begin to even the playing field and bring a sense of balance to how governing bodies are run and by default perceived.

Perhaps, the more worrying perceptions pertain to allegations of nepotism and favouritism that exist in choosing trustees and committee members,

14. <https://mcb.org.uk/project/women-in-mosques-development-programme/>



“I feel like women may not have a say in daily operations of the mosque as the mosque officials aren’t usually voted in and are chosen from a small group of men. So I think that women generally don’t have a chance to engage in the daily running of the mosque” (female)

A deep sense of frustration was aired by participants at the existence of favouritism and the instant barrier it creates for women,

“...You need an outsider to come and judge fairly because they’re all friends and family. They said you can come as a volunteer, but not part of the committee” (female)

and

“There should never be “best friends” or “family members” running the mosque alone” (female)

One participant described significant changes being implemented for better access when it involved a family member of the committee,

“It took family members amongst trustees for the lift to be opened for women with wheelchairs. It’s not a community set up for them, it is a personal thing” (male)



2.3 Money Matters

When organisations and institutions are scrutinised and questioned, often money and funding are one of the first probes. Tied inextricably with leadership and governance, is finances. Some participants perceived that mosque ‘culture’ and ‘mentality’ was dictated by foreign financial backing,

“(Mosque X) is backed by the Saudi government” (female)

as well as by the fact they are privately run institutions,

“currently Mosques are run as a business, which it should never be” (female)

Mosques rely heavily on private donors and public fundraising. This was felt to be inherently negative because there was a possibility of influence and favours for private donors and a lack of transparency about money, which at times can lead to decisions about who is appointed in key positions, and how and when money is utilised. Control was essentially seen to be embedded through this reality. Whilst it was felt Imams possessed the necessary skills to do their job – described as “*sacred knowledge*”, they were not seen to possess the control or some of the skills required to create a change for the community.

The idea that mosques were inherently businesses operating on growth and margins was spoken about at length and almost exclusively by the male participants,

“The running costs of a mosque are around two hundred thousand pounds a year, which comes from only a couple of people. We need to keep them happy. We can’t throw them out. Nobody else can be in the trustees. No-one can challenge that. Now that they are in that position, everyone who tries to change anything is a threat to them. They think that they have spent all this money, now the new generation, the westernised women and youth need to stay out of the mosque, keep the west out. And I have heard this directly from the ones in charge” (male) One male participant drew parallels with how a bank operates, **“How are masjids funded and run?... they are run like a bank” (male)**

One participant likened Imams to cashiers working on a minimum wage – they are the people with the least influence. A participant expressed that because some mosques were fashioned and run like a business, their primary goal was not community cohesion, but rather profit. Therefore, the result was expected – a disconnect between the needs of women and the community at large,

“these people are businessmen and they think like businessmen. But they do not think about representation for the vulnerable, or representation for women. The mosque is there, it is a resource, it should be in line with the needs of the society. The mosque must be progressive, otherwise it will die out or become irrelevant. How many of our wives feel that the mosque is in any way connected to them?” (male)



Another participant felt for change to occur, mosques need to be incentivised like businesses. He suggested if mosques were to generate their income from various sources, they may begin to change their ‘service provision’,

“They are businessmen. They only think who will give them the money. And it’s not the women and the children. It’s the men. The problem with mosques like (mosque X) is that they are ninety percent self-generated. So, if people come or don’t come, they don’t really care. The moment they lose that, they would need to start providing different things for different people, to get more money. Until that happens, they will not change. How can you get into the mind-set of a businessman? You can’t go to them with social problems, that does not make them tick. You need to think as a businessman to get them interested” (male)

Mosques also raise funds successfully through public donations. Most of the participants felt it was a worthy and natural thing for the Muslim community to do. At the same time some questions were raised. One female participant stated,

“women also give their money to the mosque, yet we don’t get much for it” (female)

Another questioned,

“people say that they are not happy with how the mosque is run, they still give money to the mosque. Why would you support an institution that you don’t agree with?” (male)

An apt question indeed, one that can be explained by the deep spiritual connection people feel towards the mosque. Women, want a place to congregate that promises spiritual growth, a community, and a place to develop a religious identity for future generations.

It should be noted that the business analogy cannot exclusively be used to describe how mosques in general function. Whilst this was the analogy cited by the participants, it is not necessary that it does and will apply to all mosques across Scotland.

There was a worry expressed that reaching out to the wider community for help on anything related to the mosque would invite a kind of ‘cultural imperialism’ that would place Islam and Muslims firmly open for even further scrutiny,

“We should collaborate with other mosques, especially the ones which are inclusive, forward thinking etc. We do not want to compromise the core values with a traditional fiqh, not to get a westernised version of Islam, which is a worry for a lot of Muslims. That is why we don’t want outside agencies to have a say. Like for example, we do not want people questioning why women would not lead the prayer with men. Women can teach and they can do a lot of things, but within fiqh. We don’t want cultural imperialism imposed – there is this thing, we know what is best for you” (female)



2.4 Accountability

The symbiotic relationship between leadership, nepotism or favouritism and accountability cannot be ignored here. The women were fervently assured about what they needed from mosques and cited a lack of accountability because of closed ranks,

“The issue is I do not want to be relegated to cakes and bakes.

When there are serious issues, there is a complete shutdown. Anybody who is not part of the inner circle, will be left out. There was a serious issue, I suggested for the board to bring in someone who actually has experience in the same issue, brainstorm, but they just ignored it.

There are people in charge who are actually not fit for purpose.

I spent hours preparing for a presentation on a very important topic to present to the board and there were two members who were on their phones at the same time. This shows disrespect!

This should be told (to them) that they are not fit for the role” (female)

“I feel in these kinds of institutions, they close ranks” (female)

“There is no transparency, we don’t even know who is in charge. We would not know (what to do). They do not follow systems and that is a big problem” (female)

Some participants did not hesitate to include women who are in the social circle of the people running the mosque,

“the Chairman, he’s in-charge and his wife becomes in-charge by default” (female)

One participant described how she experienced female ‘leadership’ or representation in her mosque as a ‘clique’,

“there needs to be openness and transparency and we have to admit that we need more women...not ‘secret appas’¹⁵...the mosque calls the shots for the female stuff...if there are problems or someone needs help, it’s based on one-to-one connections” (female)

When probed to explain further she described a “clique” of women who embraced and “towed the party line”, who were exclusive and very much focused inward. It was seen as an “open secret” that there is an inner circle of women who play a role. Albeit within the realms of male approval, access to the mosque and participation in its social structure, and “being in the know” was a by-product of being part of ‘the clique’.

15. “Appa” is a term of respect or endearment used for those females who are older than you by blood or by a position of respect such as a teacher.



There was understanding as well as disbelief that many women did not question the status quo. There are those women who are happy to be led by men in positions of authority. Many also understood that for a number of those women, the idea of change would not be in their thought process. Firstly, because they may feel happy and satisfied with their experience in the mosque and secondly, because it was seen as normal for many women to comply with a authority-based system within the home, one which translates into public spaces particularly when those spaces are controlled by relatives.

2.5 Representation

Representation of the female voice as well as a physical presence on a leadership level was reported as scarce.

Where there was representation, it was either tied to male approval through ‘female committees’ or individual females who acted as go-betweeners. These were reported as being passing phases, in other words there was no official strategy for the representation of women in a leadership capacity,

“The committee sees the mosque as a quiet place of worship...it becomes an empty space... there was a ‘female department’ but the lady is not in-charge any longer” (female)

Some women reported they were able to independently organise social and religious gatherings for women without much interference

“at the moment we are able to arrange and plan for anything like a class or a halaqa”

However, there was a strong feeling that fulfilling the needs of female congregants in an ad hoc manner was not optimal,

“we are not saying they don’t respond but they don’t consider us when they are planning. They don’t ask us!” (female)

In addition, the idea, or the perception that activities are tailored for men and so by default keep women out was echoed again by another participant,

“I haven’t personally been a part of the mosque community...but I think that Muslim women don’t really have a say in holding community events or activities. I think that the mosque is mainly open to men for these types of things” (female)

Many women expressed a desire for direct and full representation on a leadership level in the mosque, citing that such a presence would undoubtedly level the playing field within the mosque. They differed on what this might look like. Some suggested a fully operational and somewhat autonomous women’s committee would suffice,

“we need a team of women, or a women’s committee to arrange things...” (female) and “If we want communication with the men we need one woman who will be in charge here” (female)

and

“I’m not even saying to rock the boat and have women next to the men...we just need to be able to do our own stuff without being told ‘no!’” (female)



Some expressed that changes in the way Imams are recruited would help as often they are the first port of call when requesting something,

“[the] Imam can change everything he is the key, who chooses the Imam? People should have a say?” (female)

Others felt it was time for women to lead in a manner that is directive rather than prescriptive and to move beyond short term fixes,

“ok, they are good people - they fix issues...for example, in Ramadan it was hot so the imam brought a fan - so yes he is listening. I’m talking strategy when we plan things - it’s all reactionary at the moment. This is what is missing. The view of women is not considered” (female)

In addition, some pointed out that it would only be logical to include women as it would make it easier for governing bodies to develop effective strategies,

“Men do not understand all female issues. Having a woman on the board would actually make their lives easier” (female)

In a minority of mosques, it was found that women were full members of the board or committee and in one case this was a constitutional requirement,

“Masjid X is really good in general. They are mainly male but they have to have two women on the board and this is enforced” and “Women have a say in activities, weekly events are run by women. We just do it” (female)

Some felt that very small steps were being taken to improve the representation of women in mosques. Whilst some felt that this was tokenistic, others acknowledged that

“at least they are beginning to think about it” (female)

The male perspective on how women should seek leadership was decidedly different. It was suggested that women may need to ‘play the long game’ and appealing to the people in authority would yield the best result when done on the terms set by them,

“leadership being taken over from youth is inevitable. Everybody will die eventually. Leadership from the perspective of women, this is a different story. Trustees and committees are above the Imam, so what you end up with is you mix up leadership with representation and this is where it gets messy. The best way to approach it would be to clearly say we do not want leadership, we just want representation. Maybe then the committee would be open to representation” (male)



Having male voices present alongside female voices in this analysis has been useful as it highlights that the path to better female representation in mosque governing bodies is not black and white.

It is notable that male participants expressed a strong desire of wanting change in mosque leadership. Whilst they acknowledged that they do not share most of the barriers women face, they shared that they unequivocally suffer the negative effects of leadership that is geared toward keeping young men out and older men in. They argued that if young men were able to change the system it would be a win for women as their increased involvement would naturally follow,

“if the male youth manage to get their right in the mosque, guaranteed that women will follow....If the male youth give up, say there’s no point, there will be no chance” (male)

It was also the male participants that offered some anecdotal experiences of the inner workings of mosques. This is likely because as men they have unfettered access to conversations with other men, people who may be on committees or boards or through third party individuals who are affiliated with trustees and committees. They felt the current system of governance in some mosques were far from perfect or effective.

One participant described that in some mosques there was an internal “tug of war” that has an impact on the overall running of the mosque,

“Mosques are sometimes governed by trustees, committee members do what the trustees say... the typical mosque has three heads – trustees, committees and imams...they all have major influence, it’s a bit of a tug of war. In (city X), the committee members are staff members” (male)

Another described a chaotic system of decision making that is filtered down from a few people without consultation. Egos are carefully balanced, and the effects are borne not only by people running the mosque, but also its congregants – and those in the frontline of fire tend to be women and children,

“you can be on the committee, but when you do sit there, you will realise that they do the nonsensical things. It’s the trustees who decide...committee is just made to feel important. Trustees just come together a couple of times a year and then they decide and it’s done” (male)

A deeper inquiry into the governance of mosques in Scotland would reveal a broader view. However, the absence of this does not negate the lived experiences shared here which may point to something that needs to be explored.

It was also strongly felt governing structures should be reflective of the ethnic, gender, age and skills-based composition of the community it represents,



“the mosque committee should have a diverse representation. And they should understand it is morally and ethically right” (male)

One that is determined through transparent systems of voting and election,

“they need elections for committee roles” (female)

It was recognised that a broader palette offers improvement as well as increased possibilities for people to get involved,

“we need different people and a wide range of skills from different backgrounds to be active in the mosque to make it welcoming for everyone” (female)

and we

“need more opportunities with a range of responsibilities to be involved in the mosque (female)

Those participants who were not from a South-Asian background indicated that diversity within mosques should seek to recognise and be inclusive of Muslims who are not South-Asian,

“...everyone is not Pakistani they need to recognise and accept the diversity within the community...the mosque should represent everyone” (female)

The participant continued to make further distinctions - firstly, that ‘authority’ and ‘power’ is almost always concentrated in the South-Asian community and resources are often directed away from the smaller contingents of ethnic groups that exist in Scotland.

Secondly, from her experience it is well-known and accepted that racism within the mosque exists, specifically towards the Black Muslim communities,

“...the most racism I felt is from the Pakistani community...I always felt like there is no way I’m going to (mosque X), I was terrified of facing people...there is no choice but to face the mirror... this means active transformative change, like we see a fault in our physical appearance like a grey hair...we need to find solutions to fix this” (female)



2.6 Skills

Trustees and committee members were often viewed as having limited capability when it came to the running, development, and strategic planning of mosques.

When probed about why this perception exists, participants indicated that perhaps there was a lack of professional skills that meant development was hindered,

“People in charge of the mosques do not have proper training...we need to realise that training is important” (female)

It was acknowledged that Imams tend to be highly qualified in religious knowledge and were often more than capable of carrying out their duties. There is often confusion about the boundaries within which Imams are expected to operate. The overlap between committee roles and the Imam’s role often places them in a difficult position whereby the line between their job role and accountability for mosque operations can be blurred. It was felt upskilling and training more Imams in wider professional skills would allow that role to become much more dynamic,

“Mosques and Imams are not capable or trained to deliver the services the community may need” (female)

and

“More training is needed in empathy, enthusiasm, people skills...” (female)

In addition, some felt that some Imams may be unaware of the deeper and wider needs of the Muslim community in the context of Scottish life,

“...they are not in tune with what the community needs...Just because they have sacred knowledge doesn’t mean that they are equipped to deal with these issues...there is a lack of professional skills” (male)

There was a sense of despair among participants when they pointed out that issues such as drug abuse, domestic abuse and youth disenfranchisement in the Muslim community could never really be addressed in a meaningful way when the mosque itself was not a solid functioning institution. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that participants were proud and keen to talk about the number of Muslim community organisations and initiatives that are currently engaging with socially relevant issues, offering skills development and opportunities for the Muslim community in Scotland.



Some participants questioned the need to reform mosques, train committee members and Imams to incorporate the above into mosque provision when community groups were doing a superior job,

“I think we have become too fixated on the mosques, but we need to move away from that. I could name tens of organisations in Scotland that are doing a better job than mosques. As far as prayer goes, yes. But we should be able to direct people towards the right services that are available” (male)

Others however, felt that the mosque should do it's best to emulate a communal focal point for worship, intellectual development, and social interaction,

“I think the mosque should be the place where people could go. From a Christian perspective, people used to go to the church and then get help. When the church was separated from the state, separate organisations were created. But us as a community, we should do something to help our people. People should be able to go to the mosque and get help...” (male)

Male participants affirmed that a lack of services in the mosque are not female specific. For example,

“if we're talking about counselling or help, yes, not available for women, but again – it's not available for men either. They don't have the knowledge for it” (male)

Further, there was a perception that when women seek out representation or an equitable sharing of resources they may be seen as a threat and delegitimised,

“the threat is that if someone was to come in asking for representation, they will get people behind them and organise a coup. The same happened with the women during Ramadan, like what do they want next? They want to take over? become Imams? run the mosque?” (male)



2.7 Women as Drivers, not Barriers

There was an interesting theme that emerged from the listening exercises that warrants a discussion. Many women felt that women themselves can often be the barriers to progress.

When speaking about personal experiences of working as a teacher in a mosque one participant suggested that women who gave new ideas or suggested new approaches to improving the teaching system were met with derision by other female staff,

“especially if she’s one of them and she agrees with them...you either kick up a fuss and they tell you to get out or you blindly follow which is what all the women do” (female)

The overriding consensus was that women need to work together to build mosques that are equitable in their inclusion of the whole family.

One participant felt that women are always at the forefront of donating money when a new mosque is built, yet they never question whether the mosque will be of benefit for them. Some suggested that women were perhaps wired to act in a certain way due to a lifetime of behavioural patterns that are learnt in a context of male hierarchy and authority,

“women never fight for their rights! Men go and find the place...women always pray privately but because men need a public space and need to pray, it becomes an issue for them and we take a back seat” (female)

The idea that women ‘tend to take a back seat’ was not echoed however by women who relayed their experiences of other places,

“to make changes women themselves have to do something...it has to be organic...I can tell you from my experience and places I’ve stayed...in an African village women made it happen, in Norway women made it happen, in Holland women made it happen” (female)

One experience suggested that even where there is positive female input in a mosque, women can fail to rally around the women leading the initiatives,

“you know how they say you need a village to raise a child? This should be our village!...I was in a very good mosque. The convert sisters were leading the Muslim women end. It was so welcoming, kids were there. There was an opposite problem there – the committee was saying for the women to get involved, be part of the committee but women would just not come, which is sad” (female)



Muslim women do not necessarily agree with the nature and the extent to which change is necessary and needed. What the participants in this report felt strongly about was that women needed to become a more cohesive and organised group who lobby for the change that is necessary to ensure that their mosques are meeting their needs.

A historical glance of the relationship between women and mosques in the UK at large has been examined by (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2020)¹⁶ in a paper that examines the contributions of women in the first mosques built in the UK in Woking and Liverpool in 1889.

She highlights that these women were active in Eid celebrations, debating, writing articles, and holding positions such as treasurer and secretary in mosque related activities. Whilst this is true, she also identifies that criticism and debate of the female role did indeed exist. She clarifies that her research does not qualify to be used as a comparison for women today as the differences are stark.

The women being examined in her paper are middle-class white converts to Islam, while most of the community today are either from South-Asia or from South-Asian descent. However, one can make a case after listening to women through these workshops that there may be many women who would identify more closely with the women from 1889 since they feel Scottish or British and it is where they were born and raised.

Therefore, the normalisation of female involvement in 1889 in mosque related activities might be of interest to young Muslim women who have expressed a wish to create a norm free from bias and who are open to new ideas.

For example, some of the youngest participants aged between twenty and twenty-two articulated they have a strong desire to live in a way that dismantles religious authority from their personal lives as it is seen as inherently anti-female. They asked questions that need further exploration,

- Who are mentors to young Muslim women in Scotland?
- Are they encouraged to grow, and think?
- Are young Muslim women being engaged in a way that is productive?

16. Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. Women in Britain's First Muslim Mosques: Hidden from History, but Not Without Influence. *Religions* 2020, 11, 62.



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.



- 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's 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.



It was found that those women who worshipped regularly at one mosque in Scotland reported no issues with physical space or access. This is a direct result of the involvement of women in the initial design and building stage of the mosque.

Those who regularly attended the same mosque commented,

“I came four months ago and I made a suggestion to have a coffee morning and they were receptive...it’s an open house for help” (female)

“If the ladies section is closed they open it...and if they are crowded they accommodate us” (female)

“...because (the) masjid (mosque) is open we have access and (our) kids can go easily so they have access” (female)

“In the Easter holidays and on Christmas the kids have camp here...” (female)

In contrast, most participants in this report reported a myriad of operational barriers that act as a constant impediment to worshipping in a conducive environment. These are laid out below,

- 3.1** Space
- 3.2** Access
- 3.3** Toilet and Ablution Facilities
- 3.4** Ability to See and Hear
- 3.5** Feedback and Communication
- 3.6** Children



3.1 Space

“I feel there is a basic issue not addressed – we take pride in being Sunni Muslims and taking the example of Prophet and Sahabas.

Do we consider how it was at the time of the Prophet?

Men used to pray in the front and women and children in the back and that was a norm. It should bring the Ummah together, not half of the Ummah, the whole Ummah.

The question of modesty is brought up – women pray in these or those positions, but this was already addressed by the Prophet (saws). Some companions didn't have enough clothes to cover their whole nakedness and this was not addressed by leaving the women home.

Why do we always quote the Hadiths that say that women get the most *Ajr* (reward) for praying at home?

Why don't we quote the other Hadiths that state that women should not be prevented from going to the mosque?" (female)

One of the key problems for some women is that their local area does not have a mosque that has any space for women.

'No space' is synonymously expressed as 'women are not allowed in that mosque'. Unsettling as it may be to read that half of a community is barred from a physical building, it is not something that remotely surprises many people in the Muslim community in Scotland. It is however something that quite often disheartens and angers women and men that such a status quo exists, is routinely affirmed, and rarely goes challenged.

Further, their understanding of the Prophetic tradition of the female experience in the mosque during his life does not match with their current situation. The reasons for women not being allowed in a mosque are complicated. Nonetheless, the resulting experiences that women face daily are not complicated, but rather they are rudimentary in their nature which makes the whole situation even more frustrating for the women who have to work around such barriers.

Where female spaces do exist, the space allocated to women is small, sometimes lacks windows, and basic hygiene can be questionable,

“...getting space is fundamental any time of the day...when its Juma'ah (Friday prayer) the room is so small and tight and its worse in like Ramadan or Eid...it [the room] doesn't even have windows or proper light...I don't feel peace” (female)



Their spaces are at times commandeered by men when they want or need extra space. For example, one woman reported she found men sleeping in the women's space and discovered later they were visiting from a different country and were offered the women's space to sleep,

“...I went in for Juma'ah salah (Friday prayer) and when I opened the door to the room it was literally full of guys, they looked [ethnic group] or something. They were sprawled out in sleeping bags. It's bad enough that the room is already so small, I just felt really angry and irked, like why can't they sleep in the men's area? Which by the way is huge...why take the only tiny space we have got?...” (female)

What we do see however, is in mosques that maintain the integrity of the female space and presence, limited physical space becomes less of an issue for their female congregants,

“This mosque has really made a difference...no one asks why are you here or something like this...(the) glass screens are perfect as you know when prayer has started...if there are problems with the microphone or which rakah they are on” (female)

More regularly however, women report that at the times of large congregational prayers like on *Eid* or *Juma'ah* prayer women's spaces are often used without prior knowledge to accommodate the larger numbers of men in attendance.

Most understood that the physical limitation of a building is not something that could be controlled or changed. However, it was felt that mosques where accommodations for women and families can easily be made, should be made. One participant summed up her feelings by saying

“...if men needed space and there wasn't any they would probably think outside the box and make space...probably open the community centre and even madrassah classrooms...” (female)

Eid and *Juma'ah* were specially mentioned as a focal point of barriers for the community at large given that many mosques still function primarily on non-English languages,

“It's not a barrier just for women. There is a sense of isolation, because we are in a non-Muslim country. Quite often talks and classes are in Urdu or another language – that is a big problem, because this is Britain and there are so many people of second, third generation.

They say you'll get reward for sitting there, but that is not acceptable, everybody should understand. There are men who go to Juma'ah not for Khutba, because they don't understand (the language), they just go for the prayer” (female)

One male participant mentioned that even when spaces and facilities are provided, a lot of women do not then make use of them. This conversation led to the women in the group highlighting that ‘male privilege’, coupled with a lack of knowledge and/or understanding of the barriers and stigma women experience is the reason for the black and white interpretation of the situation. It may be true that in some mosques women are not fully utilising the physical space that is available. However, when women must jump over and around multiple barriers that we have set out in this report, the difficulty of utilising a ‘provided space’ becomes evident.

Some of these barriers were highlighted by the participants and are discussed in the rest of this section.



3.2 Access

“Men and women should be viewed as equal at mosques” (female)

“This is Allah’s House, and everyone should be made to feel welcome” (female)

Many women expressed a desire to have access to the mosque and female prayer area that is safe, secure, and physically open. Women reported,

- locked doors
- lack of lighting
- lack of heating
- lack of lifts and disability access
- lack of access to anyone who would open the door for them.

“There is no heating, it’s not a comfortable environment” (female)

“It’s also an idea of making it not inviting to females. It’s often the smallest and least inviting room in the whole building and men looking at women in the parking lot like “what are you doing here” (female)

Those male participants who had wives and families shared the same frustrations as they were usually called upon to rectify the situation and they experienced first-hand how difficult it can become for a woman to simply enter a mosque. The example below illustrates this well,

“Typically, you go to a mosque, you’re out shopping and you need to pray. You go in from the front, she needs to go from the back, but it’s locked. So, you need to go to find someone to open the back door. The person can be happy or not happy to do that. I ask myself, what would happen, if I was not there for her?

She would need to go in from the front. And would get dirty looks – what are you doing here? But it was not her choice. She’s going to have to find the right guy ... and then next time she will not come.

She’ll need to go pray in a changing room in Debenhams.

So the basic reason why mosques are there has not been fulfilled for the women. And as a result, it’s not been fulfilled for the families. And if she’s not close to the mosque, her children will not be close to the mosque, and I will not be close to the mosque. Single guys can go talk to single guys. But family men cannot mix the two” (male)

“For my daughter, I just take her to the men’s toilets, because women need to go outside, there are no lights” (male)

In addition, some male participants felt it was simply a matter of logistics and could, in most likelihood, be practically resolved,

“The person who is in charge of opening the doors, should make sure both are opened and closed...It’s a logistical issue rather than anything else” (male)

Others however felt a lack of access spoke to the ‘culture’ of the mosque and those who are running it,

“sometimes I can’t go to the mosque because I would need to take my daughter with me. The only mosque I can go to then is (mosque X). It’s about the culture in the mosque.

If I go to (mosque Y), there is a big chance that someone will make a remark to me about her behaviour, but she is a child. Some people quote a Hadith “Don’t bring your insane and children to the mosque,” but it has been fabricated. In mosque X there is never a dirty look” (male)

When probed about what ‘culture’ means, the conversation turned to the differences of opinion concerning the issue of women being a potential cause of ‘*fitna*’ (discord) in the mosque for men. The correlation being that a legal stance defined in *fiqh* by Islamic Jurists translates into a perceived ‘culture’ of how women are selectively included and viewed by men as well as the ‘lived experience’ of persistent exclusion for women. This is compounded even further for those women who have snippets of information or knowledge about how mosques existed in the Prophetic era, coupled with the different global approaches they either have experienced as a way of living or while visiting different countries on holiday.

In one mosque where there is a shared entrance for the congregants, one woman expressed an unease about having to often push past a group of males to go inside,

“I used to go to the mosque. Now I don’t feel comfortable as there is a lot of men standing and gathering outside the entrance of the mosque...Also, women are taught not to go to the mosques” (female)

In some instances, it was not widely known which mosque provided access to a female space and the participants felt more needed to be done to advertise among the local community as well as clear signposting at the mosque itself,

“(mosque X) is open and allows women but not many women know about it...the entrance should show that a mosque is woman friendly” (female)

“(there is) no signpost for the women’s area for (mosque Y)” (female)

“The small local mosques that do allow women in don’t advertise it well enough. No signs and no advertisement of facilities” (female)



Given that many women expressed that they have directly or indirectly been taught that it is better for them to pray at home, it can become an easy and stress-free option. The ability to enter a building to utilise its services is the definitive line between service provision and rejection. Therefore, it is not a stretch to say that women feel unwelcome, marginalised, and side lined - given that they cannot enter the mosque to use it, leaves any other issue banal.

“I think it’s sad - the largest Muslim community is in Glasgow and the mosques here don’t even let women in” (female)

“Honestly, the doors are always locked...you have to look for someone who can open the door for you” (female)

**“I was at (mosque X), it was prayer time and I wanted to go to pray and the man said
“Go home and read.”**

I was with my kids, my sons and daughters saw it...at Eid ul-Adha we were sent back once again, we had to go to another mosque and there we were not allowed to pray until we donated, so they forced people to donate.

Now I go to (mosque Y) because they welcome women” (female)

“Historically mosques were built with little resources, so it was a different time. Now a lot of mosques have made the transition to including women, but not all. Especially in winter it is a challenge because prayer times are close.

Big mosques are accommodating, but there are other mosques that are not, for example – someone told my husband to tell me not to come in to read the messages on the notice board... ‘it’s the Hanafi fiqh...it’s more rewarding to read at home’, but it’s not practical nowadays.

Women need to find a way to make wudu and pray in shopping centres, dressing rooms.

There has been a lack of thought in allowing women to access the mosque regarding things connected to children. If a school or Madrasah are holding a parents’ meeting or Jalsa in a Masjid, then that is not fair on women because they might be in major impurity.

It’s not a question of fiqh, it’s a question of principle and a big concern. These kinds of things should not be held in areas that are considered Masjid – this is lack of regard” (female)



3.3 Toilets and Ablution Facilities

Some women reported that in one mosque, they did not have access to toilets inside the main building at all and had to use ‘port-a-loo’ style toilets outside the building.

Where toilets were available inside the building, they were sometimes dirty and lacking in necessities like soap and hand towels.

Only one mosque reported having a baby change unit, and it was unclear how many had sanitary disposal facilities.

3.4 Ability to see and hear

A lot of women also indicated that quite often they can only hear lectures and khutbas and that the 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. There were those that reported glass barriers which was welcomed as

**“it means I can know what the Imam is doing or saying because I can see, this is really good”
(female)**

It was felt this was a silently devastating barrier that deeply affected their engagement with the mosque.

3.5 Feedback & Communication

Effective communication is the cornerstone for most healthy, successful, and thriving relationships. Croucher et. al (2017) argue that a close relationship between religion, community and culture is prevalently seen in the community engagement and participation that occurs in religious institutions. They argue that various benefits are derived from this interaction, among them “material” and “social support” for their congregants, as well as an overall influence on crucial life matters (p.4-5). When we analyse the comments from our participants, we begin to see a lack of communication which is one of the many reasons women in particular feel that they are largely not benefitting from the ‘material’ and ‘social’ benefits of communal life in a mosque.

Not only are the women not benefitting, but the cultural norm has also created a false theological norm that made some women feel like they were ‘sinning’ by being in the mosque. The same feeling existed when talking about questioning or critiquing the mosque in order that improvement may be made,

“...complaining about the mosque is akin to sinning” (female)



The narrative that questioning an institutional status quo is the same as diverging from theological tenants that equate to sinning is troubling to say the very least.

- Where do these notions come from?
- Why do they exist?

These are questions that need deeper probing, something out with the scope of this report.

There was a consensus that mosques in general were poor communicators, and when they do communicate, it is confined to male congregants. Often, the expectation is that the males in the household would be able to communicate with the women. This was challenged by women who pointed out that not all men in all families frequent the mosque. Further, it assumes that all women are married or have family in the same city as them,

“...information comes through men...what about unmarried women like me? Or those who don’t have men?...they just don’t think about this stuff” (female)

It was suggested that other means of communication be used to keep all mosque goers updated on activities, changes, and procedures in general,

“...it should be known what the portals of feedback are. There should be the possibility to leave feedback, a notice board and there should be clear accountability...answers to the questions as well. There should also be info on a helpline...There is more information in our hospital spiritual room than in the mosque...” (female)

“They should have info about, for example, who to call to open the door when it’s closed” (female)

There are a few things to consider when looking at feedback. Firstly, not all participants knew how to make a complaint or suggestion or even if it was “allowed”.

Secondly, language barriers can be one of the reasons women in general may not seek out an avenue for feedback. One male participant suggested that females whose first language is not English or who are from an ‘older generation’ cannot utilise modes of communication such as emails or social media. The only real option left is to make a phone call, which again would be rarely utilised. These barriers apply to how women are receiving information from the mosque itself.

Thirdly, those women who shared that they had engaged in feedback reported that officials were usually unable to be helpful,



“It’s irritating, because you have to get your way in, find a way to a person who is willing to help. And they can be quite defensive because they don’t know how to deal with complaints. They can’t manage the emotion of the parent and dealing with the issue...” (female)

Furthermore, there was a feeling of apathy arising from a realisation that the mosque can be rigid and unwelcoming of change,

“I feel I won’t be listened to as (the) Mosque doesn’t give space or time for new ideas or suggestions” (female)

In addition, some women felt they were alienated, ignored, and shamed,

“Many times I’ve made some suggestions but they are never taken forward...I feel like they don’t care” (female)

“When I made a complaint my name was widely used and it was very embarrassing for me, as my name should have been kept anonymous” (female)

“I made a complaint and I was alienated...” (female)

3.6 Children

Some may question placing children under ‘physical and operational’ barriers, rather than a standalone account. Through the discussions it became clear that the physicality of having young children was the fundamental reason many women could not and chose not to go the mosque.

Children featured heavily in the conversations during the listening workshops. This is completely unsurprising given that the overwhelming majority of childcare is the responsibility of women. As children are almost always with women and can be a source of distraction in more than one way, the quality of learning and interaction taking place becomes less than desirable. Especially, for example, when you factor in things like not being able to see or hear proceedings; not having accessible toilets; a lack of space and lack of lighting and windows.

Several women expressed their frustration at the fact that men rarely were expected to take responsibility for their children,

“I think the dads forget it’s already their responsibility to take them to the mosque” (female)

Moreover, there was a kind of indignation that there was an unspoken rule that children should be with the women so that the men do not get distracted while they pray in the main part of the mosque. During one conversation, indignation turned to comedy when one woman described how a child was sent to the women’s area,



“One time I saw a dad come to the women’s area to give his kid but he didn’t even give it to the mum he just passed it over to the first woman! (followed by laughter)” (female)

This idea that somehow women as a collective were naturally expected to pick up this child and ensure the mother was found was both a source of humour, dismay, and an uneasy repudiation of the ‘way things are’. In addition, it was pointed out that boys often fare better overall if they have fathers who start bringing them regularly once they are a little older,

“The boys are going with their dad, so they will see another side of the mosque, but what about girls? How can they learn to love the mosque?” (female)

Women from every city mentioned that often it can be those women who do not have children, or older women who tend to make women with children uncomfortable,

“I can’t go as I have my kids and I get evil looks from other women, as my child can be active (and) noisy” (female)

This sentiment was shared by a number of participants who specifically mentioned that having children in the women’s prayer area is not only a barrier, but also the noise level and behaviour of the children was solely the mother’s responsibility.

“...children need to be taught manners when entering mosques. Children’s behaviour is the responsibility of the woman. Even these new mosques that are built, there is no consideration for kids” (female)

“I know some mosques in Glasgow and I understand to a certain extent because some parents will just sit and let their kids run riot and even run across the street causing havoc in the neighbourhood and within the mosque...but it lies with the parents and they have to establish respect for the mosque” (female)

So, we begin to see that something as fundamental as having children acts as a barrier, source of stress and judgement for many women. Another reason staying at home becomes an easier option. Easier as it may be to stay at home, it is one that deprives women and their children of the benefits of meeting others in a communal place of worship, and social gatherings. The disconnect from the mosque many adults express is often linked to either negative experiences or a lack of physical attendance in younger years.

Many thought the resolution is to have appropriate provisions in place for children, especially on occasions where there are larger gatherings to make the mosque experience less stressful,

“Having children is a barrier. Should there be something for the kids to do while tarawih is going on? Mosques do not see it as a hub – just a place for prayer” (female)



The perception of the mosque being a place just to pray was intimated throughout the course of the workshops. Both female and male participants expressed a desire for the mosque to be a place of communal activity that would encompass and benefit the entire community. We see this outlined in detail later when we look at how the participants described their utopian mosque. Some suggested that at the very least a place should exist where young children can be occupied with toys or crafts. Comments like, **“where am I supposed to go and put my daughter?” (female)** are powerful because the woman here spoke in a state of frustration – that while there was indeed space for her to attend her local mosque, the mix of condemnation from other women in relation to her child, a lack of willingness from men to have the children with them and nothing available in the mosque to occupy her child meant that more times than not, she would miss out on communal prayers at important times like Ramadan.

This can often lead to isolation from the wider community, loneliness, and a loss of connection to the religion itself,

“I have not been for tarawih in about ten years.

My husband has always gone because I had to be home with the little ones. I’m not going to lie, I’ve kind of lost hope of ever going to mosque X because it’s pretty cramped and there is nothing for my kids to do now...

I don’t remember the last time I felt that Ramadan buzz...

the kids get bored because the rak’ah’s can be really long. I tried to go to mosque Y once, it was amazing there...so many women and children and everyone was having iftari together...but the space is so small and gets filled really quickly” (female)

One participant mentioned that,

“In (mosque X) they have a whole soft play area which is so much fun for the kids...it is always open for women...and they have an Islamic primary school attached to it...amazing sisterhood...diverse nationalities” (female)

This perhaps, highlights what can be possible when there is a desire for it, married with a will and space to make it happen.

Some participants drew from the examples they knew from the Prophetic era,

“women with children have barriers to come to mosques...the Prophet shortened the prayer because a child was crying” (female)

and

“children would ride on top of the Prophet’s back in the mosque” (female)



It is important, and even transformative to have this discussion at length because it highlights one of many disconnects contemporary Muslims experience with what they read and learn about the Prophetic *sunnah*, and the reality of what they see in their day to day lives in Scotland.

The disparity between the Scottish experience becomes even wider when we compare the culture of mosques in other parts of the world,

“The mosque is supposed to be a second home, a safe space for us...it’s been ingrained in me by my mum...when we moved here there were not a lot of women in the mosque compared to Nigeria where women and kids are in the mosque all the time for like tarawih and Juma’ah...it’s not unusual, you are culturally raised to go to the mosque” (female)

“I spent a Ramadan in Dubai...straight after iftar we would all go the masjid, everyone’s timetables were cleared...tarawih is a shared experience for the whole family” (female)

The examples above indicate that there are deep divisions in how a mosque functions and operates in a ‘cultural’ context depending on a variety of factors.

Geography, the country and culture of origin of those running the mosque, and the adoption of a preferred juristic opinion are some of the reasons women and families experience the mosque in different ways.

Reflecting on their own childhoods some of the participants mentioned the reason they have a strong connection to the mosque is because they had a positive and enriching experience as children and that negative experiences will undoubtedly push them away as adults,

“The reason why I keep going is that my childhood experience was so blessed and so lovely... I’m lucky to have experienced a good start” (female)



4. Ramadan

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 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.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 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 a well-rounded family experience.

“The sunnah of the Prophet is that he never discouraged it, children were always playing around him and even on him when he prayed...negative memories of kids being pushed away is not going to get them to come when they are older” (female)

It was evident that Ramadan was a time in the year that presented an opportunity, as well as a barrier for the women in the listening groups. It was also when women became acutely aware of the availability or lack of space and access they were afforded by their local mosques. It was highlighted on dozens of occasions as a time when not only did their need for a deeper connection to the mosque increase, but their access to it became much more complicated.

They cited a need for a social connection with the community through communal prayer and the sharing of food when breaking their fast (*iftar*).

Those women whose local mosque provided dedicated space and access for women and their children for both the *iftar* and *tarawih* prayers reported a higher level of satisfaction, although, even in these examples the women spoke about instances and examples that point to a less than perfect picture. For example, one participant spoke about feeling happy with her mosque, but then highlighted some of the practical difficulties women must work around,

“they serve the men first and then the women. They put the platters in the lift but then its left there! Women are wanting to take responsibility in the mosque. But when preparing for Ramadan, no one approaches or asks women. They assume men will prepare and do everything and serve but no one asks. If they ask the men they will ask their wives and that’s another issue for people like me (single women) ...” (female)



The uneasiness in women's voices when listening to them was clear. They were looking for acceptance and validation. There were multiple suggestions that at the very least establishing a 'women's group' during the month of Ramadan to cater for women would go a long way. It was found that in the mosques where women were offered space for the iftar, women formed their own informal networks during Ramadan to organise themselves

“in Ramadan at (mosque X), they put out the mats for women and women then arrange everything”.

It was especially jarring to hear of instances women were denied a space to break their fast, despite a female space existing. One participant was aghast at hearing female students were turned away from a mosque at the time of the *iftar*

“we know that there are single women, students and they have no family here and if you are aware of this and still turn them away, where are they supposed to go?” (female)

On a number of occasions, the women highlighted the diversity that exists among Muslim women – the assumption that most women are married, and/or have children is one that alienates all the women who are single, students, divorced, widowed or travellers.

It was felt that especially during this month the mosque should be mindful of this diversity and cater for women on a more equitable playing field. One woman commented that she thought women

“love coming together with food...I know people that have said to me that they hate Ramadan and can't wait for it to be over...because their husbands are at the mosque and they're all alone for a whole month...it's really sad” (female)

The women communicated a sense of loneliness in a time that should feel like the opposite -a time for community gatherings

“people feel alone. A lot of the mums have come to me and said they feel alone. Women feel isolated. I feel like I'm the only one saying it, but there are other people and we all feel isolated. We should come together” (female)

Many felt that they were limited in physically attending the mosque in Ramadan because their mosque did not offer a family friendly service i.e. if their husbands are at the mosque, and the women and children are not catered for they have no choice but to stay at home.

One participant recalled,

“they told me to my face that there was no space for women...they told me to go to mosque X that does cater for women...my daughter asked me why can't women go to the mosque in Ramadan, now she feels inferior...eventually he told me to come but just this once and no other time...I just thought I'm fasting and you're going to turn me away?...it's insane they feel they are allowed to treat women like that” (female)

The essence of this experience is a feeling of disbelief, unwantedness, sadness and anger – these are feelings experienced by many women who feel side-lined and marginalised without many champions openly fighting for their cause. One participant's comment ties in with the idea that 'mentality' is intrinsically linked to how actions are perceived and the reactions to it,

“...in their opinion these are women who are feminists.



5. Spiritual Needs

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 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.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 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.

“It’s the women who don’t cook at home, so they want to come and get free food. The point is that it is a particular personality. I have said that there are women who struggle with Ramadan because they feel isolated. But they deny that there are women like that” (male)

“Mine [memories] were good up until a certain point...my time at (mosque x) was really nice. I had a nice time during Ramadan...I would get excited for Ramadan, it was dark but peaceful and there was a beauty about it up until I don’t know when, but less and less young people came to mosque and that was really sad. I’m quite conflicted I don’t know the reason for it” (female)

The need for an enriching spiritual experience within the mosque was another theme arising from these listening workshops.

Women felt as though they should be ‘grateful’ to even have a space and that asking for more ‘stuff’ might feel uncomfortable. Also seeking out further spiritual satisfaction within the confines of the mosque may be an ‘immodest’ thing do.

One participant suggestion ‘community champions’ be appointed to bridge the gap between women and the governing bodies so they could comfortably relay suggestions especially on more personal matters,

“we need “champions” in the mosque who can be middle men/women between community and the mosque management, these champions can be easily approached and certain matters discussed with them” (female)

Overall, the message was clear, women would like open access to Imams, Alima's and female scholars who can help individuals and families navigate through their spiritual development. Often, Muslim private life has a theological and spiritual dimension, marriage is the most obvious example,

“[we] need access to Alimas for very personal issues, I feel that the mosque in general “guards” the Alimas when in fact this service should be accessible for all” (female)

Some mentioned a lack of knowledge of who to reach out to, if indeed anybody. Others said they had heard about Alima's through word of mouth or 'just by chance'.

The picture emerging is that there is no clear and cohesive system across the cities where women can access Imams or Alima's for guidance and advice. What is being referred to here is different from existing religious classes that women may attend at a mosque that are designed for delineating Islamic knowledge. What women were alluding to is the kind of individual and private access that would allow for specific guidance on personal issues like marriage, divorce and parenting etc.

Many of the participants who have access to space and some autonomy to organise events or classes mentioned that they had frequented these. However, the majority mentioned seeking out religious and spiritual guidance from other established male and female scholars in Scotland who are not attached to any mosque and from big organisations in Glasgow such as iSyllabus¹⁷ and Al-Meezan¹⁸ who provide a range of spiritual and knowledge-based programmes for men, women, and children.

Others reported listening to podcasts, watching online lectures and enrolling in courses that are offered online.

What was apparent was that most women would like this element of their religious learning to be linked to the mosque in some way and not entirely separate from it as the mosque is the place to congregate together as a community and pray, worship, and build relationships.

17. <https://www.isyllabus.org/>

18. <https://www.almeezan.co.uk/>



6. Overseas Experience

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women participants with a vast experience of mosques in other countries felt some Scottish mosques were less welcoming and accommodating to women.

Some of the women who took part in the workshops were either from another country, studying in Scotland, recently settled there, or who grew up in a Muslim country before moving to Scotland with their parents and they all expressly stated that their experiences of the mosques in the UK have been a direct contradiction to what they are used to at 'home'. Some of these countries include Sudan, Nigeria, Oman and Palestine among others.

They shared that they had a close connection to the mosque, loved going to the mosque and were encouraged to do so, and it was not abnormal in any way that women frequented the mosque and partook in mosque activities,

“women are turned away – I’ve never seen this in any other country...women are generally facilitated” (female)

Additionally, it was felt that the ‘older man’, ‘different generation’ culture did not seem to exist in other places, for example

“...in Morocco, age doesn’t matter, old or young men will tell you to pray behind them if there was no space for you in the mosque...” (female)

One participant cited that she felt Europe should theoretically be different as it is “*liberal*” and “*free*” and the central mosque in Moscow is the only other place she’s personally seen no space for women,

“the central mosque in Moscow is men only, but women can go to the bookstore, but what do you expect, they are ex-communist!” (female)

There were many stories and experiences women shared with us, some of them have been outlined below,

“Where I come from in Palestine, it’s a family thing, it’s absolutely normal, everybody goes, everybody’s welcome. Coming here, it was a great culture shock, especially that this is Britain – a country of openness. We’ve got a bit of space here and a bit of space there, but it’s not right. My daughters do not feel welcome and that feeling of not being welcome is so sad” (female)

“Back at home in Tunisia, we do not have any of those problems. Women come and go whenever they like, no problem (male)

“Women not feeling invited is a big mistake. I grew up in an Islamic country and it was so different. Here it’s a challenge to take my daughters to the mosque. Ok, don’t give us food, we can bring our own food, just give us a space. It’s so important to make things inviting for children so they would love the mosque. Kids want to go to the mosque there on Friday, because they are given balloons, bubbles are blown...kids want to go to the mosque, they ask when is Friday” (female)

“In Sudan it is normal for women to be in and around the mosques. It’s not something we think about” (female)

“I was really surprised when I first got here because I thought there are so many Muslims here it would make life easier for me...in France, Paris they do have space and it’s never an issue to get spaces...to be honest they also have a lot of mixed spaces, especially for lectures the men and women would be side by side” (female)

“...my experience in Kuwait has been like (mosque X) where you would find women upstairs and men downstairs, they always keep the space for women even if there are lots of men...you are always welcome” (female)

“In Morocco it’s not an issue...some mosques don’t have space for them but it’s not because of an ideological belief...if a woman wanted to pray they would allow her to pray at the back of the men’s hall” (female)

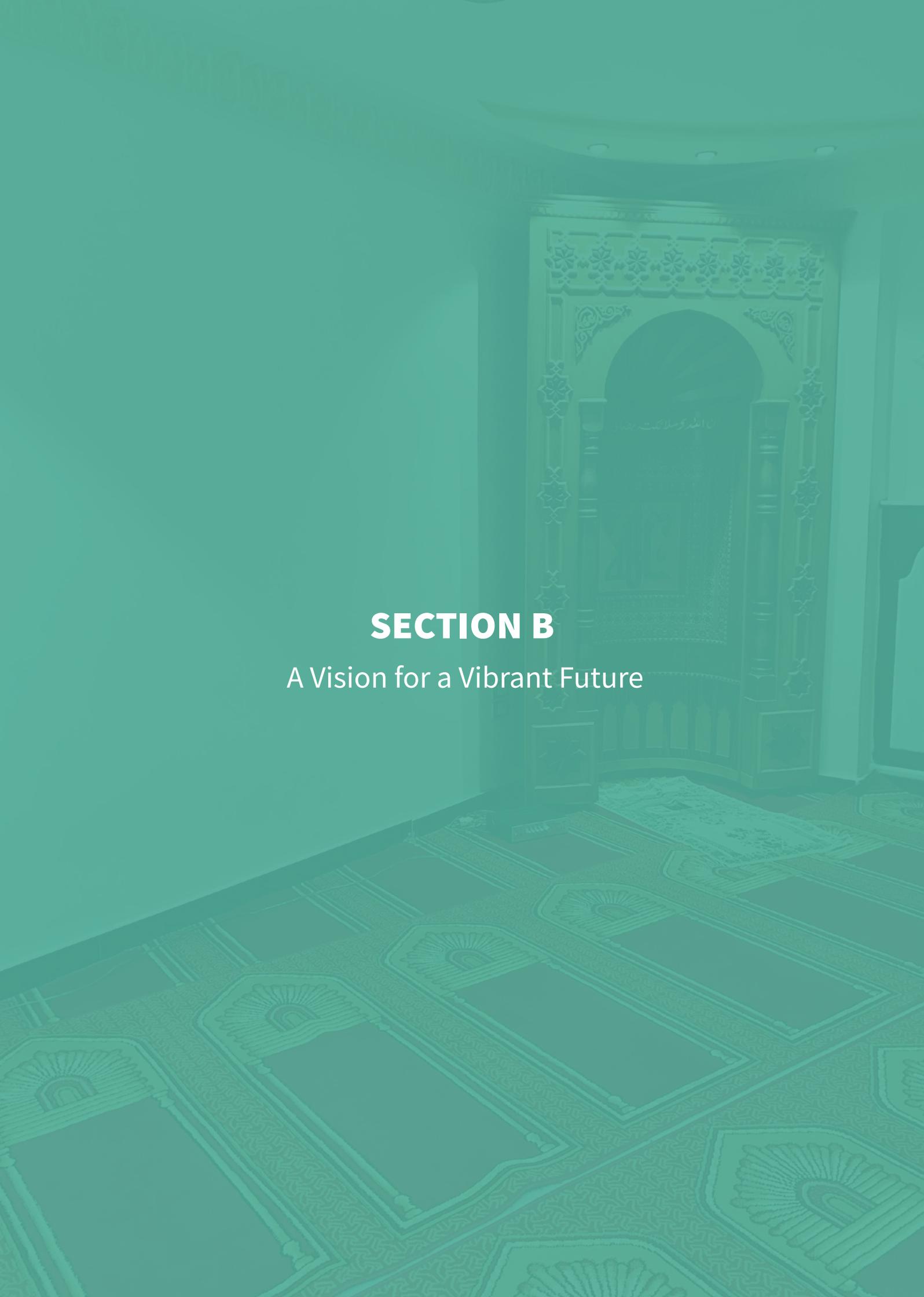
We can see a myriad of experiences that indicate a lack of space and access to mosques is something many of the women felt was unique, or more commonly found in Scotland and the UK than in other countries.

A few women however described their experience as being similar or more restrictive than their experience in Scotland,

“Where I was living in Malawi, the women did not go to the mosque at all. You stay at home. You can’t even say Salam to non-Mahrams” (female)

Certainly, there are countries where the role of women in mosques is negligible, and the idea that women stay at home is enshrined as the only religious truth. What we found anecdotally through these listening exercises is that those running the mosques in Scotland where women have issues with space and access tend to be run predominantly by people from those countries. Again, deeper analysis on this correlation is needed to ensure we can step away from ‘anecdotes’ and start conversing in facts.





SECTION B

A Vision for a Vibrant Future

THE EXEMPLARY SCOTTISH MOSQUE

We asked our participants to describe what a mosque would look like if all major impediments were removed, and they could design and decide everything. This question posed an interesting opportunity to extract big ideas and visions about what ‘could be’ from a majority female audience. The thought being that a big picture can be effective in drawing out smaller, clearer, and achievable goals.

The responses were wide and varied, but what they had in common were concepts rooted in the Prophetic traditions of worship in a mosque that delivers on community cohesion, pluralism, accessibility, and relevance for the time and place. Broad as these concepts may be, it speaks to the social, intellectual, and emotional aspirations that the women in these listening workshops have in their desire to create access to a place of worship that fulfils not only their needs, but the needs to the Muslim community in Scotland at large. The female participants advocated that a vision of an equitable mosque cannot come to fruition unless Muslim men begin to stand up openly and vocally as allies.

This exemplary mosque would provide a haven and a reflective space for women. It would be a mosque that is aligned to its unique community needs and one that changes and adapts accordingly. It would be a place where bonds are created through participation in the formative stages of a child’s development – a utopia where the mosques are preventative, rather than reactionary institutions.

They envisaged an institution that organises its strategic priorities based on principles of social welfare and equity, in a language(s) that cater for most of its congregants. It was important for the participants that any exemplary mosque be a welcoming and friendly place for everyone who enters, some quoting the Prophetic Hadith that likens smiling to a charity.

We have outlined their vision of an exemplary mosque in a nutshell by organising suggestions into four broad categories,

- 1. The Building**
- 2. Leadership and Governance**
- 3. Mosque Services**
- 4. Outreach Programmes**



1. The Building

- An equitable female representation in the design and building stage of the mosque.
- Where possible, there should be an open prayer space without fully obstructive barriers that allows women to pray in the rear of the hall, similar to mosques in Istanbul and other countries. This may include the use of a partial partition to enable women to feel part of the congregation and a direct connection to the Imam rather than feeling detached, while retaining some privacy. There should be consideration for an additional female-only area to accommodate women who may wish to remain separate.
- A building that is disability friendly inclusive of physical access, hearing support and brail *Qur'an's*.
- A thoughtfully designed space to accommodate younger children, with dedicated staff planning and leading activities.
- Compliance with basic hygiene standards to include accessible and clean toilets and ablution facilities, sanitary towel disposal units, baby changing facilities, and a private space for breast-feeding mothers.
- A dedicated wing for teaching and learning that would include classrooms and lecture theatres.
- Building management staff who are qualified and paid for their roles, as opposed to volunteers, who can be held accountable to ensure they are doing their job to the highest professional standard.
- Utilising modern amenities such as free and accessible wi-fi and using the online forum to extend services out to more people.
- The use of technology to ensure safety for all congregants, working screens and PA systems that would allow all congregants to see and hear proceedings from anywhere in the building.
- The building would include a food outlet that would provide services for a diverse range of people, a library, and a sports hall and/or gym.

2. Leadership and Governance

- There would be transparent, skills-based appointments of people as staff members and in positions of leadership.
- The composition of the leadership structure should fully and equally represent women, young people and be representative of the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the local Muslim community.
- A dedicated women's department with its own office that can lead the strategic planning required to ensure women's needs are being listening to and implemented.
- The perfect institution would stay abreast of legal and policy changes that affect the running of an institution.
- There would be a specific safeguarding service with a safeguarding officer in the mosque.
- There would be financial transparency framed in ethical practice that complies with Islamic and legislative directives.

3. Mosque Services

- A strategically devised educational programme that caters for the spiritual and intellectual development of the whole community.
- Qualified scholars, both male and female who can be utilised by the whole community.
- The mosque may offer professional services that are advisory as well as advocacy based to help the community.
- An exemplary mosque would provide social events relevant to the community i.e. tea and cake afternoons; mother and toddler groups; dedicated Ramadan programmes and days out.
- There would be a local focus on volunteering such as cleaning the local park and visiting the sick and old people.
- This mosque would raise awareness about issues like sexual violence, drugs, and mental health.

4. Outreach Programmes

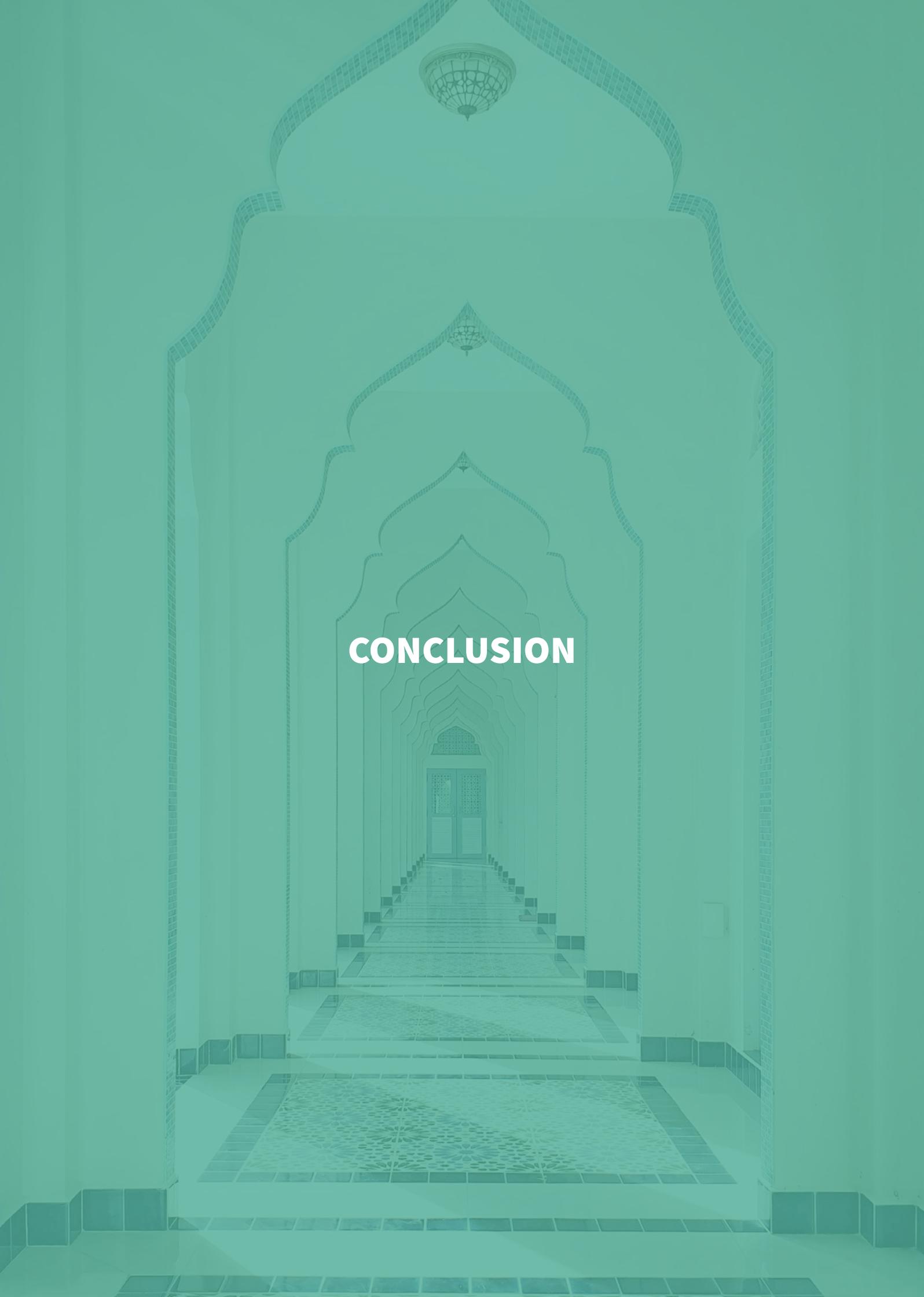
- Awareness raising events framed in an Islamic context would be held by the mosque on broad issues like career days, health promotion, and mental health etc.
- The mosque would co-operate and collaborate with other local mosques with the aim to create harmony
- The mosque would work with and collaborate with the wider community to build bridges i.e. interfaith work, the police etc.

The purpose of this exercise was not to outline a road map to what a mosque should look like. Rather, it was to allow the reader to gain an insight into what an exemplary mosque might look like from the perspective of Muslim women to contextualise the improvements they seek. It is essential that female voices are heard and women we spoke to were realistic in their expectations. We hope that we have contributed towards a blueprint for mosques which can be built on by all sections of the community.

Moreover, conversations about the almost unachievable utopian ideal of the participants were nuanced with a sense of both hope and caution. Hope that from such a vast vision it is possible to create incremental goals to achieve smaller digestible aims – a hope that is not a stretch of reality. However, utopia is often a dream that even after a lot of hard work and time, is rarely achieved. The participants were mindful of living between hope and caution and understood that an improvement in their lived realities would likely be incremental.

When finding a path to creating improvements in mosques, it is essential to learn from existing good practice models in Scotland that are already fulfilling some of the utopian wish list highlighted above.





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.

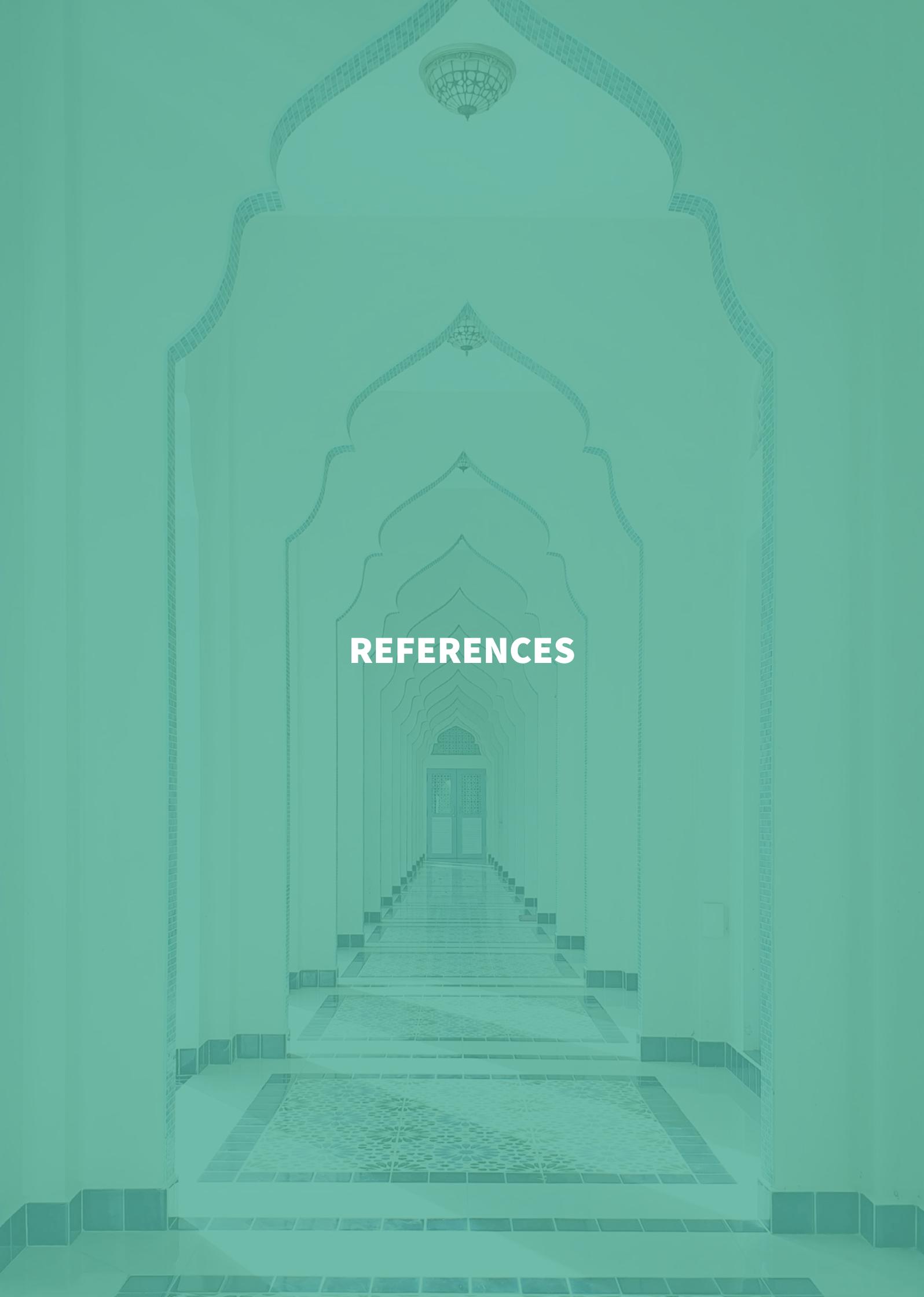
Whilst we have seen examples of positive engagement and good practice models, most women reported lack of, and often substandard, space and access to pray. Men, and more specifically inflexible 'elders' were seen as the protectors of a status quo, or an 'old boys club' – one in which power and control 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.



A teal-tinted photograph of a long, ornate hallway. The hallway features a series of repeating arches that create a sense of depth and perspective. At the far end of the hallway, there is a double door with intricate geometric patterns. The floor is covered in a patterned tile, and the walls are also decorated with subtle patterns. The overall atmosphere is serene and architectural.

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