



Vibrant Scottish Mosques

Aspiring to improve representation of women



Ramadan

Women's experiences during the sacred month

HEAR MY VOICE

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

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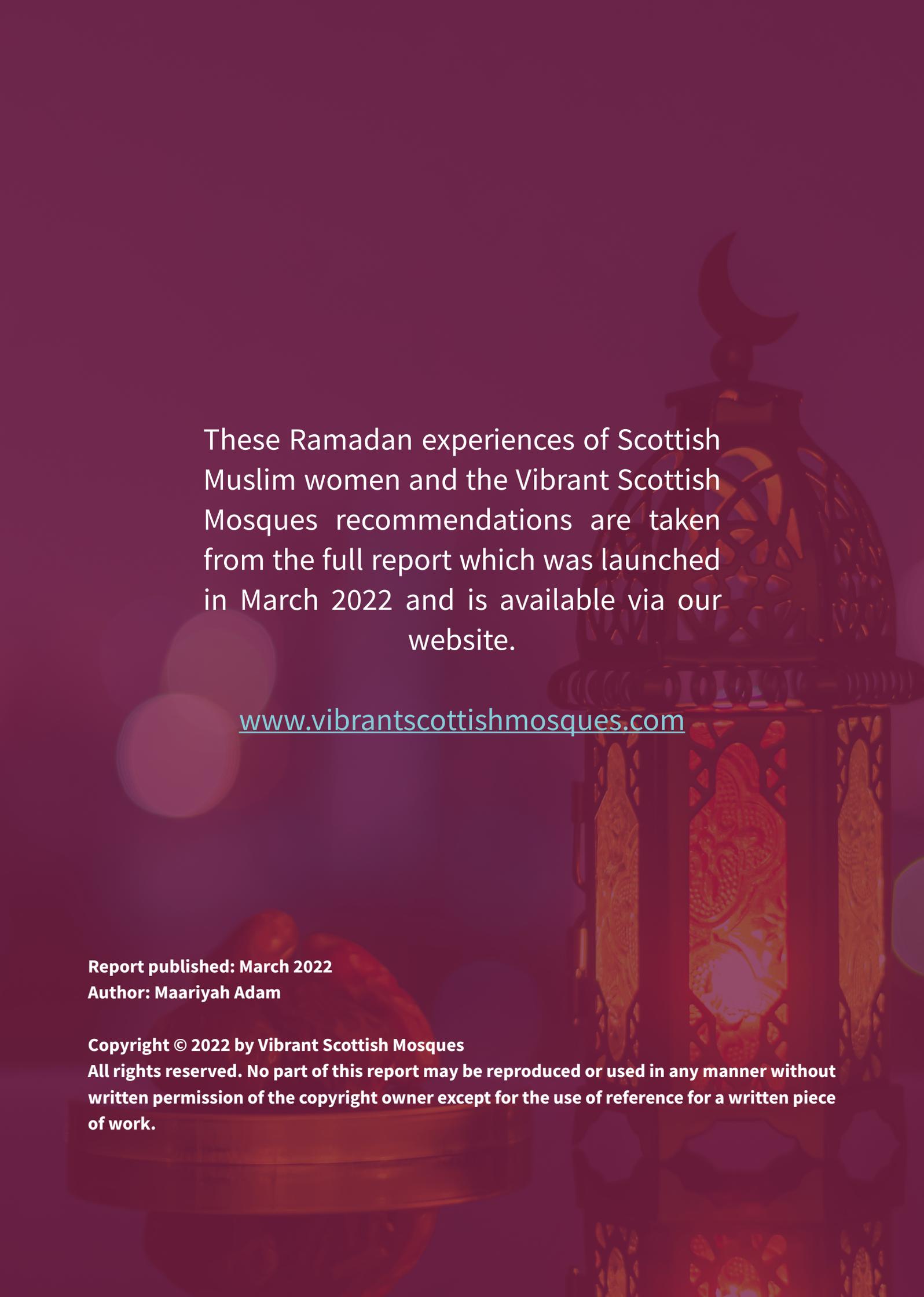
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These Ramadan experiences of Scottish Muslim women and the Vibrant Scottish Mosques recommendations are taken from the full report which was launched in March 2022 and is available via our website.

www.vibrantscottishmosques.com

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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.”



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

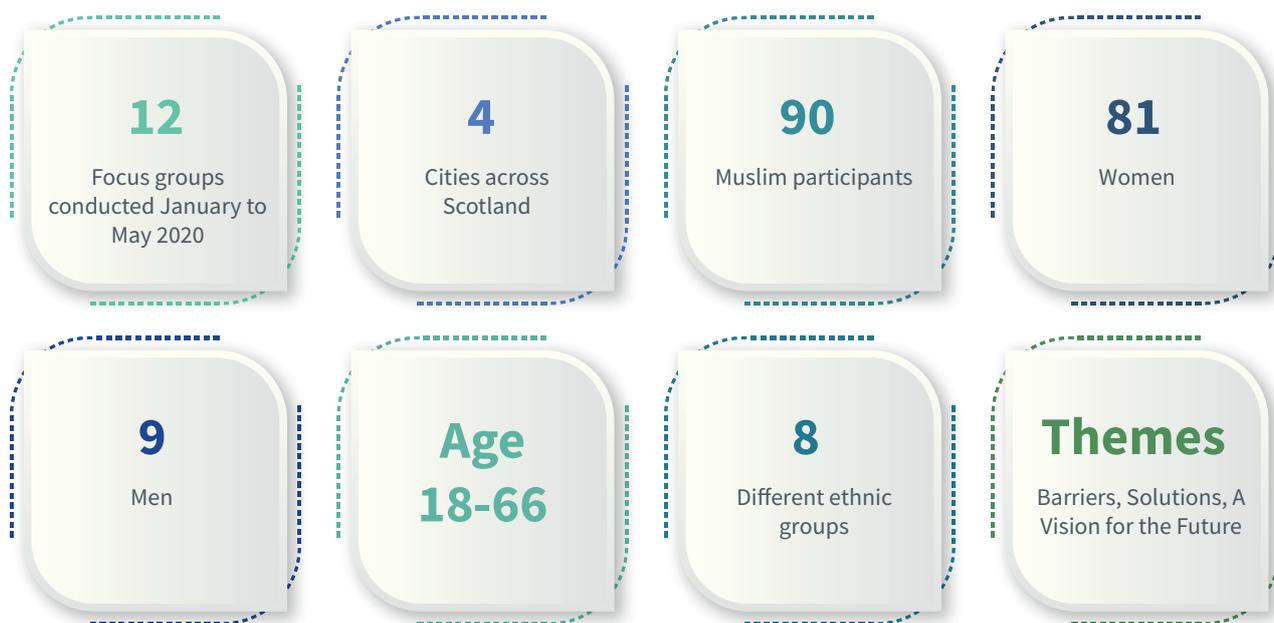
	Recommendation	Action
23	Developing effective feedback systems that allows for continuous growth through assessment and critical feedback.	Mosque Management Committees



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

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.

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



Advisory Board

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MESSAGE 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.

