

Article

# Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: Australian Muslim Women and the Mosque

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**Abstract:** Women's presence and role in contemporary mosques in Western countries is contested within and outside Muslim communities, but research on this topic is limited and only a few studies consider women's roles inside mosques in Australia. There is a complex intersection of gender and religion in public sacred spaces in all religious communities, including Muslim communities. Women's role in these spaces has often been restricted. They are largely invisible in both public sacred spaces and in public rituals such as congregational prayers. Applying a feminist lens to religion and gender, this article explores how a mosque as a socially constructed space can both enable and restrict Australian Muslim women's religious identity, participation, belonging and activism. Based on written online qualitative interviews with twenty Muslim women members of three Australian Muslim online Facebook groups, this article analyses the women's experiences with their local mosques as well as their views on gender segregation.

**Keywords:** gender segregation; mosque; Muslim women; religious space

## 1. Introduction

One of the most disputed practices associated with gender issues in Islamic societies is gender segregation or the public/private or inside/outside divide. This idea of a Muslim public/private spatial dichotomy has long been used to publicise images of isolated Muslim women who are separated from public life. This polarity is often reflected as a distinct feature of Muslim communities that many scholars consider as a central, cross-cultural component of Muslim social life (Fewkes 2019). In Muslim societies, this division is depicted in the mosques where there is strict separation between women and men, and the gender segregation is ingrained in women's child-bearing role and a perceived need to control women's sexuality (Ahmed 1992; Hammer 2012b; Mernissi 1975). Strict gender segregation in mosques, in the form of separate rooms and entrances, is also a common practice among Muslim communities in Europe and other Western countries (Auda 2017; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016). Australian Muslim communities are no exception. Most mosques practice gender segregation. Despite growing scholarship on mosques as gendered spaces in Australian contexts, there is still little research on women's views and experiences of attending their local mosques. Currently, the inclusion of women in mosque activities is a contested issue (Nyhagen 2019). Although some research indicates Muslim women in Australia are participating in mosques (Hussain 2009; Woodlock 2010a), the practice of gender segregation is still happening and women are often not involved in decision making (Rane et al. 2020; Sohrabi 2016). Therefore, the mosque space remains overwhelmingly male-centred. The cultural practice of gender segregation in many mosques leads to a general lack of women's participation in public events and restrictions on their role in places of worship. It is noteworthy that the segregation in the mosques is not merely based on gender. Particularly in countries where Muslims are a minority, there is often a social segregation based on theological views or ethnicity (Kamil and Darajat 2019).

By 2016, there were over 340 mosques in Australia, most of which were built after the late 1970s.

The earliest mosque in Australia was built in Maree, South Australia, likely in the 1860s (Bowker 2016). In Australia, similar to other Western countries, mosques have mostly been founded by immigrant communities and culturally situated in their Islamic traditions and interpretations of religion (Woodlock 2010b). Predictably, these mosques reproduced the culture of the mosques in their home countries which were mainly conservative in terms of women's role and participation in the mosque (Hussain 2009). Mosques in Australia are generally run by men. Men also hold the positions of religious leaders or Imams, who lead the prayers. Attending Friday prayer is only a religious obligation for men, while women are encouraged to pray at home. These first Muslim communities provided little opportunity for the participation of women in mosques, relying heavily on the cultural practices of their home countries, which encouraged gender segregation and were mainly exclusionary towards women (Woodlock 2010a). The exclusion of women and having their own religious space has functioned as a shelter for women from the public (male) gaze through the shield provided by curtains, walls, and closed gates (Jaschok 2012). Women's attendance is dependent on the availability of a gender segregated place separated entirely from the main prayer room and a separate entrance (Shannahan 2014). Mosques that are open to women usually allocate women worse physical spaces compared to those provided for men which reveals "an overall prioritization of male space and needs" (2014, p. 15). When women go to mosques, they are peripheral, separate, and invisible.

On the other hand, the importance of religious institutions in the reception and resettlement of immigrants in Western host countries is not limited to Muslims (Karimshah et al. 2014). Some studies (Foley and Hoge 2007; Wilson 2011) found that for immigrants, membership in a place of worship not only serves religious needs but plays an important role in providing social connections in an unfamiliar environment. Therefore, the ability to access the religious space is vital for community belonging. However, in recent years, Muslim women, mainly in North America and Europe, have challenged the gender segregation and absence of Muslim women in the mosques. They have developed alternative pathways where traditional hierarchical religious discourses were replaced by more inclusive, integrated, and egalitarian perspectives (Hoel 2013). They established inclusive mosques and led prayers in mixed gender congregations. Regrettably, in Australia, the current patriarchal structure of mosques has not often been questioned by Muslim communities. This research tries to open the discussion for progressive Muslim women to express their views on gender segregation. This paper seeks to address the identified research gap by examining the mosque as a gendered space via a qualitative study of twenty Muslim women and their experiences, expectations and challenges with regard to accessing mosques.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Muslim Women's Status in the Mosque

The mosque has always been central to the communal lives of Muslims. The first mosque in the world was established by prophet Muhammad in Medina (Saudi Arabia) in 610 C.E. It was filled with the presence of women, who joined congregational prayers, prayed individually or were involved in group discussions (Mattson 2006). All Muslims regardless of sex or race have the right to access the mosque (Woodlock 2010a). Auda (2017) explores the role of women in the mosques based on Quran, Hadith and the prophet's tradition thoroughly. He argues that some Quranic verses about mosques urge all believers, men and women, who seek guidance and knowledge to attend mosques. Moreover, the tradition of the prophet comprises many authentic narrations about women's presence in the mosques on all occasions and all times (Auda 2017). There are many examples of equality between men and women in leadership roles in mosques and women who became famous preachers (Krausen 2013). Kalmbach (2012) states that before the sixteenth century, there were a number of female religious figures in Islamic sources who had roles as prophet's companions, transmitters of Hadith and scholars. These historical examples legitimise contemporary Muslim women's claim to gender equality in religious institutions. Women activists and Muslim feminists (as some Muslims call

themselves) have based their argument about gender equality on this historic evidence (Nyhagen 2019). Muslim women scholars (Wadud (2006); Barlas (2006); Hassan (1999); Mernissi (1991); Badran (2011); Mir Hosseini (2011)) have attempted to unpack dominant patriarchal interpretations of Islam in an attempt to produce a re-interpretation of Islam based on gender equality and justice (Al-Sharmani 2014). This multifaceted practice of resistance to traditional gender norms is rooted in Muslim women's invoking of "authentic Islam" as a gender-equal religion. In particular, Amina Wadud is well known as the first Muslim woman who led Friday prayer for a mixed gender congregation in New York on 18 March 2005. Since then, there have been other female leaders who have led mixed gender prayers or women only prayers. In North America, five other Muslim women have since been prompted to lead mixed gender public prayers (Sharify-Funk and Kassam Haddad 2012). In Scandinavia, at least four women have openly demanded the title of Imam since 2001, and others have either been granted the title or claimed it in their local communities. Similarly, in Germany, at least three women utilise the Imam title (Petersen 2019). Globally, however, some women deliver the khutbah<sup>1</sup> and lead Friday prayer without claiming the Imam title (2019). Therefore, despite the current increasing segregation of the sexes in the Muslim community, there has been a surge of Muslim women's activism in different arenas, particularly in women's claims to religious authority. There are indications that Muslim women are rapidly developing religious knowledge and authority (Kalmbach 2012).

## 2.2. Gender, Religion and Space

Gender is a prominent feature of religion. All around the world many religious beliefs and traditions determine gendered and sexual practices and routines (Avishai et al. 2015). Applying a feminist lens to study the intersection of gender and religion means studying how religions "produce and reproduce gendered identities and institutions, as well as how men and women live their lives and negotiate with dominant ideas and identities" (2015, p. 13). Historically, studies of gender and religion were dedicated to women's religious experiences and interpreting oppressive religious traditions. The discussion of gender and religion began in the 1970s and 1980s with feminist critiques of religion such as Nason-Clark (1997) and Braude (1987). Following the history of gender studies, much of this scholarship was produced by women sociologists who were active in the women's movement and who excoriated women's experiences within different religious traditions (Avishai and Irby 2013). More recently, studies have focused on critical feminist scholarship such as the meaning and impact of the participation of women and men in conservative religions (Avishai et al. 2015).

Furthermore, the ways people understand, organise and communicate about the spaces around them play an important role in the development of social relations. Successively, social relations, impact on how environments are defined and experienced (Massey 1994). Religions have a strong impact on the making of space and reproducing the power relations (Knott 2005). Often religion is used to create space into binaries such as male/female, public/private, and sacred/ordinary. In contrast, some people utilise their faith to challenge existing hierarchies and power relations (Prickett 2015). As Kong (2010) affirms, everyday spaces are associated with religious meaning making, maintaining and also challenging religious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, feminist theorists and geographers argue that any social space is always gendered (Massey 1994). They have highlighted the important and complex ways in which space and place are created and experienced in gendered ways. Gender as a social construction influences the life chances and spatial experiences of women and men in a range of different localities (Hopkins 2009). Kong (2001) also explains that religious places are socially structured spaces therefore, both religion and space are experienced in different ways by men and women. Regarding gender inequality in religious spaces, the hegemonic patriarchal views and attitudes which exclude women can be contested. Therefore, religious spaces are complicated and the intersection between religion and gender result in a conflicting argument that religion can both reinforce oppression of women and

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<sup>1</sup> prayer and sermon delivered in the mosques.

empower them to achieve gender justice (Wang 2017). Here, the intersection of religion (Islam), gender and space (mosque) will be explored through Muslim women's views and experiences of attending their local mosques.

### 3. Method

This study comprises online qualitative research based on a thematic analysis of written online interviews with twenty Muslim women members of three Australian Muslim online Facebook groups: Progressive Muslim women of Australia, Muslim collective (Sydney group) and Islamic Community Academic Network (ICAN), as well as some other Muslim women active on Facebook, who were referred by the first group of women in the sample (snowball sampling). Snowball sampling is a strategy to find respondents, whereby the researcher asks participants if they might know of other potential participants who would be willing to participate in the research. This recruitment approach tends to be effective when existing interviewees are likely to know others who may fit the research criteria (Patton 2002).

The inclusion criteria for the study are women who are:

- A member of Facebook;
- Muslim (convert or non-convert);
- Aged 18 years and above;
- Live in Australia;
- Attend their local mosque.

After obtaining research ethics approval from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC no H-2020-0255), I initially shared a post to the three above-mentioned Facebook groups. After approval of the post by group administration, the participant information sheet (PIS) and research flyers were posted to the groups. The women who were interested sent a message to the researcher through Facebook and provided their email addresses. The questionnaire and consent form were emailed to each participant and the completed questionnaire and signed consent form were emailed directly back to the researcher.

Data analysis methods employed thematic analysis whereby specific themes were first identified, then these small-scale categories were merged into the main themes. All data categories and coding were developed using NVivo 12 software.

## 4. Findings: Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1. Demographic Profile

The sample includes a culturally diverse population comprising 20 Muslim women from 9 different ethnic backgrounds: ten women born in Australia, two from Bosnia, two from Afghanistan and one each from Malaysia, Sudan, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and New Zealand. The average age of the sample was 41 with a range of 19–69 years. Of the 20 women, 16 had a university education. Eighteen women were working in professional positions. Seven women were Muslim converts and 13 non-converts. Eighteen were Sunni and two were Shia Muslims. In order to maintain the women's privacy, pseudonyms were chosen for each participant.

Five prominent themes emerged from the analysis of the research participants' reflections on their experiences of attending the mosque: (1) motivations for attendance; (2) frequency of attendance; (3) views on gender segregation; (4) experiences of gender discrimination and insulting lectures and Khutbahs. The women's contributions are broken up into illustrative quotes that indicate particular themes. The aim in presenting their detailed narratives is to ensure that these women are not de-personalised in the process of being objects of study.

#### 4.2. Motivation for Mosque Attendance

Current scholarship has found that mosques are significant places for Muslim women in Western contexts to gain knowledge about Islam, worship, improve their spirituality, engage with the Muslim community and gain a sense of belonging (Nyhagen 2019; Rane et al. 2020; Shannahan 2014). For most of the women in the study, the main motivation and reason for attending the mosque were for worship and spirituality, as well as connecting with and belonging to the Muslim community.

Attending the local mosque allows me to stay connected with the Muslim community and praying in a mosque helps to keep my Iman<sup>2</sup> strong. I find I concentrate more on worship in the mosque and leave feeling accomplished. Attending my local mosque makes me feel positive and I like to think of the blessings we receive for praying together. (Jane, 28)

There are many reasons. One of the most important reasons is for the spiritual dimension associated with engaging in congregational prayer at a mosque. Acknowledging that praying in the mosque is not compulsory for women, attending the mosque sometimes is spiritually lifting. (Huda, 50)

For some women attending special events such as Tarawih<sup>3</sup> during Ramadan and celebrating Eid<sup>4</sup> are particularly important in terms of connecting with Allah and the Muslim community.

During Ramadan for Tarawih, being at the mosque fulfils both community engagement and spiritual congregational prayers. Sometimes my attendance is linked to community events such as weddings, funerals or dropping children for religious classes. (Huda, 50)

Similar to findings of previous research (Nyhagen 2019; Shannahan 2014; Woodlock 2010a), gaining religious knowledge for some women, particularly convert women, was very essential, with some women saying that, by attending the mosque, they hoped to be able to ask questions and discuss issues with knowledgeable Muslims. For a few converts, being accepted into the Muslim community was among the reasons for their attending the mosque. It is noteworthy that none of the women attended their mosque for any non-religious social gatherings or community education or for any women only gatherings. This could be due to the male dominated nature of the mosques and the indication that gender relations are not changing or that the women themselves do not see the necessity or the need to create social groups in the mosques and rather, pursue these needs outside the religious space.

#### 4.3. Frequency of Mosque Attendance

Most women did not attend their local mosque regularly and went to the mosque mostly for special religious occasions and events such as Ramadan<sup>5</sup> and Eid. The reasons proffered were mainly the belief that attending the mosque is not compulsory for women, childcare responsibilities, working full time and living far from the mosque:

As I work full time and as women are not required to pray in a mosque, I take one Friday off each month to attend Friday prayer. During Ramadan, I try to attend the mosque at least two to three times a week. (Jane, 28)

I do not attend mosque regularly as I do not live near a mosque. (Huda, 50)

The belief that attending the mosque is not compulsory for women is mainly based on conservative interpretation of Quran and Hadith. It relies on the cultural practices of some Muslim countries

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<sup>2</sup> Believer's faith in the metaphysical aspects of Islam.

<sup>3</sup> Additional ritual prayers performed by Muslims at night during the holy month of Ramadan.

<sup>4</sup> Festival or feast.

<sup>5</sup> Month of fasting.

(Woodlock 2010a). Although Quran and tradition of the prophet clearly do not prevent anyone, male or female, from attending the mosques (Auda 2017).

For some, feeling uncomfortable in the mosque due to gender segregation or a feeling that the mosque was an unwelcoming space were the reasons cited for not currently attending the mosque, despite going in the past.

I was prevented to pray in front of curtain. I hated to pray in a smelly and dark room at the back of the mosque which is the reason I stopped going to mosque. (Nadia, 43)

I don't attend my local mosque anymore. I don't believe it offers me anything—certainly the facilities are not conducive to be a spiritually aware space. (Noor, 57)

The women's space is so small and dirty. I feel it is very unwelcoming place for women. That's why I stopped going to mosque. (Aziza, 33)

After asking the women how often they attend the mosque, they were asked if they think women should attend the mosque or not. Most of the women believe that Muslim women should attend the mosque for the same reasons they attend the mosque: empowerment, engaging in the community and belonging. Two women strongly argued that women should not attend the mosque unless some changes happen regarding gender roles:

No I don't—there is nothing for women there . . . Imams don't know anything to be able to advise women anything—apart from religious questions—and then they are slanted anyway—so if a woman wants to just pray, she can do that anywhere—and if she wants advice or community support, there are organisations that offer that outside the mosque setting, with qualified people. (Noor, 57)

No, when it humiliates women and excludes them from decision making, they should not attend, but if it is women friendly and empower women, why not? (Nadia, 43)

Another woman expressed her view about why women do not attend the mosque regularly:

The majority of Muslim women are not regular attendees at the mosque: a main reason is busyness. Women juggle multiple roles, especially if they work or have young children or are carers. Another reason is accessibility. Most mosques are difficult to access by public transport. And the third and most important reason is that mosques generally are not a welcoming environment for women. Women entrances are usually small, at the back of the building and women's prayer areas are small. If the microphone is not on as a woman in a back room, you don't know what is happening. Generally, the experience is not inspiring or spiritual. Also, the strict adherence to segregation within the grounds of the mosque makes women feel unwelcome. (Huda, 50)

One woman was not sure, but compared the mosque with the church in terms of spirituality and learning:

I don't know if women 'should', but I wish the mosque was more welcoming to women. My understanding is that Friday prayers are an obligation for men, but not for women. I don't understand this. Having experienced attending various churches as a child and teen, my understanding of the place of a mosque is very Christian in nature. I believe a place of worship should be a place of prayer and learning as well as a place for believers to socialise and encourage each other, regardless of their age or gender. If that isn't what a mosque is, then what IS a mosque for? (Lilli, 42)

Generally, the majority of women believe in equal access to mosques for both genders and find attending the mosque positive and empowering, even though they may not be able to attend regularly.

Some were eager to attend if some changes happened in terms of the quality of the women's space and the easing of gender segregation. This finding supports previous scholarship which highlights Muslim women are eager to participate in the mosque in order to gain religious knowledge, community engagement and spirituality (Hussain 2009; Nyhagen 2019; Woodlock 2010b).

#### 4.4. Views on Gender Segregation

Most of the women (12/20) were against gender segregation and saw it as a discriminative and misogynistic practice which humiliates women. They believed through this practice women are othered, sexualised and considered second class. These themes were evident in several answers:

Gender segregation heightens the sense that women are 'othered' in the house of God. It makes me feel unnecessarily sexualised and second class to the men. (Aziza, 33)

I personally would prefer to have men on one side and women on the other at the very least. However, during the vigil at one mosque, we weren't segregated at all and it was lovely. I am single, but I see my married friends sitting away from their husbands. I feel it tears families apart in some ways. I also don't like husbands and wives not being able to pray together in the mosque. What message is this for the children; that men and women can't be trusted to be together, that they can't even pray together? It seems that men get the best spaces; this isn't just true of mosques, but in a holy place, this isn't a good message for anyone. (Lilli, 44)

Segregation makes me feel like a second-class citizen. Segregation is gender-based discrimination. I've never experienced gender-based discrimination anywhere else on this level in my life. It makes me feel like I'm less worthy than the men in the community. I feel excluded from what is happening in the main hall. Even if I can watch the proceedings in the back room on TV it's not the same as being in the main hall. I might as well stay at home and watch it on the TV at home. (Maria, 42)

Interestingly one woman stated gender segregation is an un-Islamic practice and made a comparison of the mosque with other institutions where there is no gender segregation and questioned the current gender roles in religious institutions. This point has emerged as a theme in previous studies. For example, Woodlock (2010a, p. 277) states "patterns of segregation and exclusion of women that have been enforced in the mosque environment are most likely not experienced anywhere else by Muslims in the wider Australian community".

I disagree 100%; it is very humiliating, and un-Islamic. At the time of Prophet, men and women were praying together. It reduces women as objects and causes troubles. It is patriarchal and misogynist act. When men and women are equally participating in society and mix in different institutions such as health, education, politics, why need to be segregated in mosque? (Nadia, 45)

Another woman compared praying in mosques with praying in Mecca, which is not gender segregated.

I hate it immensely. I just don't see the need for gender segregation to the extent that our mosques do it . . . every other religious congregation sits with their families and we have to be separated . . . I can go to Mecca and have prayers standing with my husband, but I can't at any other mosques!. (Noor, 57)

Noor's argument is based on the fact that even conservative interpretations of Islam acknowledge that gender segregation did not exist in the Prophet Mohammad's time. This gender separation is still not observed in the central mosque in Mecca (Hammer 2012a). Another woman believed that gender segregation makes women feel very self-conscious about their gender and how they are dressed. She also mentioned that women are often automatically assigned the role of childcare, so children in women's prayer spaces can also be distracting and disruptive. Some women specifically viewed

gender segregation as a tradition or culture rather than Islamic practice and mentioned that women at the time of prophet Mohammad prayed side by side with men. They believed culture plays a great part in shaping patterns of gender relations at mosques. As mentioned earlier, this is in line with some Muslim feminists' interpretations of Islam based on gender equality (Al-Sharmani 2014). For these participants, conflicts between what culture and tradition prescribe for women and what Islam demands, are problematic to negotiate. However, the intersection of culture and religion, particularly in the area of women's rights, has been well addressed in current scholarship (Carland 2017; Ghafournia 2019) and it is of great interest that women in the study spoke about it.

I started to learn about Islam from friends in Pakistan. They told me 'women may not go to the Mosque because this what the Holy Quran says'. But my understanding is that in the time of our Prophet Mohammad, women did pray side by side with their men. (Nina, 58)

Gender segregation is more of a tradition, rather than adopting Islamic rulings. Although women should have an option of having a private space away from men, it is not necessary for men and women to be completely separate. In fact, it actually can cause further issues. (Sofia, 31)

Among this group of women, for some, the main reason for disagreeing with gender segregation was the quality of women's spaces in the mosques:

When I visited our local mosque in my city and walked to the ladies' room at the back of the mosque, I used to feel suffocated, not much room for everyone to sit, very crowded with kids and mums, old ladies can't sit on the floor comfortably. Furthermore, I could not hear the Imam's speech (khutbah), which was delivered via the big screen in the room, because of the crowd in the very small space. In addition, when I was there, I got worried about my kids all the time, they used to go out and in for the whole time, which is not safe because the mosque is located on the main road and has no fence to be closed. (Donya, 50)

I do hold reservations about the quality of the space offered to women at times, though mosque authorities, I have noticed, they are generally beginning to address this issue. I also have issues with gender segregation when it is taken to the extent that women cannot see the Imam except through a televised projection. Men and women should have equal access to knowledge and gender segregation can be a hindrance at times. (Jamila, 37)

Don't start me about social settings. I do have major problems when women are relegated to dark, dingy, dirty rooms, no facilities or comfort, no ability to hear anything, etc. (Noor, 57)

It would be fair to have one entrance and one prayer room for both women and men sitting side by side, not in separate rooms where usually women's room is at the back somewhere. It is smelly and you can suffocate. It is very degrading. (Badra, 69)

Few of the women were accepting of gender segregation, if the quality of the space is similar to the men's space. They claimed equality with men in this regard:

Segregation within the grounds of the mosque makes women feel uncomfortable. Segregation inside the mosque is ok if the spaces are welcoming and not an afterthought. It seems that all mosques have been designed with men in mind and the spaces for women are decided on later, as an afterthought, which makes women's experience of the mosques one of frustration, rather than inspiration and spiritual. (Huda, 50)

I'm not actually against segregation as long as both genders are provided equal facilities and ease. Instead, women's sections are heavily neglected in care and consideration, making it a hostile place to be. (Sofia, 31)

Among the sample, eight women approved of gender segregation. The most common reasons for their beliefs were feeling relaxed and comfortable, being more spiritual, not being distracted by the opposite sex and bonding with other women:

I prefer gender segregation as women tend to feel more comfortable and 'let go'. They are also given the opportunity to have closed or open discussions with their fellow sisters in such spaces—without feeling like they are being monitored or watched. For women with children—they tend to feel more relaxed in segregated spaces. I prefer the segregation, especially whilst conducting study circles, as it is a safe space where open discussions can be had without judgment. (Shakufa, 36)

I am fine with it. Because the mosque is a spiritual place, I feel the gender segregation helps with the focus and comfort for both genders of all ages. (Sakina, 45)

I agree with gender segregation during prayers and sermons. Men and women are privy by nature to desire each other—especially during teenage years. This becomes a distraction from what going to the mosque is actually about. (Aliya, 32)

I believe it is a positive attribute of the mosque and allows men and woman to focus on worship rather than being distracted by the other sex. Especially for single men and women. I also feel with the genders separated, the women have the opportunity to bond with other women in the community and form relationships, exactly the same as men. I don't have any issues with gender segregation in mosques and feel it is fine. (Jane, 28)

One woman was not sure about gender segregation, but believed it is what the Quran advises. Among this group, a few women preferred gender segregation just for praying but not for other activities and were not happy about the quality of the women's space in the mosque:

I think that for worshipping purposes, segregation is important but there is no immediate need for physical separation during classes or lessons. For example, some mosques or Islamic learning centres teach men and women in the same room (men on one side, women on the other). I think this is appropriate as it still creates segregation but does not restrict women by placing them in another room or behind men. I think that men and women should have equal access to mosques and the way that mosques are built should take segregation into consideration more. Often women's entrances are at the back of the mosque and women only areas are small and have restricted viewing/hearing of the Imam. In these cases, proper audio/visual equipment should be set up. Ideally, mosques should have two entrances at the front, for men and women respectively. Women's sections should be private but allow for women to see and hear the Imams at the front of the mosque. For example, some mosques have women's sections on the upper floor allowing women to look down onto the men's section and see/hear the Imam. (Therese, 23)

Overall, the women's view on gender segregation was not uniform, which returns us to the diversity of Muslim women's views in negotiating gender roles in religious institutions. However, the majority of the women in the study questioned the existing gender norms and structures in the mosque. They perceived the practice as a barrier to women's inclusion in religious activities, causing them to be considered as a second-class human and, for some, was a reason to stop attending the mosque. This is in line with Auda's (2017, p. 127) research which states internationally if Muslim women are allowed to attend the mosques, they are treated as "second class citizen". Notably, when it comes to the issue of space for women in the mosque, even women who approve of gender segregation believed in equality to access the mosque and expressed their wish for improvements in the women's space in the mosque. They were overwhelmingly supportive of the necessity for changes in the quality of women's spaces in the mosque. The poor quality of women's space in the mosque is well supported by current

scholarship (Rane et al. 2020; Shannahan 2014; Woodlock 2010b). Mosques that are open to women usually only offer them physical spaces which are poorer in quality and size compared to men's space. This clear inequality shows "an overall prioritization of male space and needs" (Shannahan 2014, p. 15). Moreover, mosques are usually run by men and they have the leadership role. Mosques management committees and boards are mainly occupied by men (Hammer 2012a; Kalmbach 2012). Subsequently, the decision about any changes in women's space are made by men and it can lead to a big disparity between the quality and size of women and men's space in most mosques. Moreover, the notions of sexual attraction and desire, distraction from worship in mixed gender congregations and being watched by the opposite sex have been mentioned by a few women who approve of gender segregation. This notion goes back to the medieval concept of "*Fitnah*" (temptation). Historically, in the dominant conservative interpretation of Islam, women are considered as a source of *Fitnah* (Saktanber 2002). The ability of women to provoke temptation in men, has been used to justify their exclusion from the official domain of religious authority (Mernissi 1975) including in the mosque. Understandably, this patriarchal interpretation of the "female" body and character has begun to be challenged by the Muslim community (Bano and Kalmbach 2012).

#### 4.5. Experience of Gender Discrimination

When the women were asked if they have ever been discriminated against in the mosques, based on their gender, 12 women had experienced different kinds of discrimination. The forms of discrimination were diverse according to the women's narratives. However, there were common patterns described by the women such as: dress code, equal access to Imam, not a welcoming atmosphere, quality of space, gender segregation and insulting lectures or Khutbah. One woman was asked to leave the mosque as her dress was not approved by men and women in the mosque. Her experience implies that the mosque is still a space that enables the control of women's dress, their voices and communications with men (Karim 2009).

Before I was not a practising Muslim and when I attempted to attend [name of the mosque] Mosque, I was not covered, and I was unsure of where to go. A man was very rude and shoo'd me away. (Maria, 42)

Two women could not gain access to the Imam to ask their questions:

I haven't experienced any direct discrimination. However, I have wanted to talk with the Imam and felt that I couldn't as he was surrounded by men in a men's space. (Lilli, 44)

Three women found the atmosphere in the mosques not welcoming and felt uncomfortable. One woman believed that it is not only men but also women who make the atmosphere in the mosque unwelcoming. The unwelcoming atmosphere of the mosque has been one of the findings of the recent National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents (Rane et al. 2020).

I always feel uncomfortable if I attend the mosque for any reason. (Badra, 69)

It felt as if I was not wanted and it was not for women. But it was not said. Simply cold and not welcoming. (Nina, 58)

Women are made to feel unseen, unheard, unworthy distractions which is very unfortunate. There is not a welcoming vibe for women in mosques. This is not only perpetuated by men but also by women, unfortunately. (Sofia, 31)

One woman talked about men's different attitudes towards her, inside and outside the mosque and felt very uncomfortable:

When I used to go to the mosque, I didn't feel comfortable physically (crowded place) and emotionally because the way the Imam of the mosque and the other men deal with me and

women in general there. Many times when I went there, I tried to greet male friends from the community normally, however, they ran away and didn't look at me, or sometimes they tried to avoid me, which left me uncomfortable, especially those males/men behaved completely different outside the mosque, and always I asked myself, if the mosque changes people, they should change and be better human beings, not be rude and unfriendly. (Donya, 50)

This point was highlighted in Auda's (2017) research as a problematic issue of the excessive and strict banning of normal interaction between men and women inside the mosque. While the same women and men interact normally in other social contexts; this is in contrast to the Prophet tradition in which interaction between men and women in the mosques did exist.

Again, the concept of women's space was highlighted by some women. For them, the poor quality of the space was a kind of discrimination in itself:

The horrible spaces that women pray get crammed into is a form of discrimination. Out of the way, out of sight, crowded and noisy. I also don't like feeling uncomfortable when occupying a non-segregated communal space and feel like the men look at me like I'm not supposed to be there. (Aziza, 33)

I often felt as second class human being there, a piece of "meat" who should hide her body and voice and go and sit quietly at the back in a room which was once use as a garage, her only responsibility to keep the kids quiet and listen and not participate in the discussion in the main room. It was a discrimination. (Donya, 50)

The fact that women's spaces are not of the same standard as men, and the entrance to women's space is not welcoming, is a form of design discrimination. While there is no specific incident, there is a general feel of not being welcome when I go to the mosque. Having to be on guard, stay away from men spaces and not feel comfortable to just hang around and talk to people in the same way that men do, is akin to gender-based discrimination. (Huda, 50)

Similarly, some women found the practice of gender segregation itself to be a kind of discrimination:

I wasn't allowed in the men's section to pray, even though it was Fajr<sup>6</sup> time and no other women were around, the speakers weren't set up, the women's area wasn't open and I was going to stand at the back of the hall for my prayer—got stopped on the stairs . . . eventually got up there, had my prayers on the veranda, and then got told by someone in authority that they had opened the area for women, and I told them that I had finished anyway! Wrote some obscure post about it on FB, without identifying the mosque, and got a phone call a few hours later from the mosque committee telling me to take it down . . . my regret was that I did . . . they thought that I had changed and been a bit more community focussed and were disappointed that I was up to my old tricks of calling out bullshit when I see it—it disappointed them, even though I didn't name them—guilty conscience! So, it seemed I wasn't a team player . . . so they bullied me into taking it down! I gave in (Noor, 57)

Because of the segregation of spaces, I felt I couldn't, as a woman, go into the male space and speak with the Imam. In my opinion, the atmosphere of segregated spaces doesn't encourage women and girls to speak up, rather, like in my case, it can be a barrier. It is a discrimination (Lilli, 44)

I was asked to give a speech from the back of the mosque as it was deemed inappropriate for a woman to speak from down the front of the mosque. I have been prevented from entering

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<sup>6</sup> dawn prayer.

into the main hall of mosques and instead directed to women's sections which are much more cramped and confined than the men's sections. Some women's sections are converted storerooms at the back of the hall. One was a run-down dilapidated house next door to the men's multimillion-dollar marble structures. There is no equity in the design or size of the two facilities. (Maria, 42)

I attended our local mosque and I didn't like white sheet hanging in the middle of the prayer room to separate males and females. That was in 2010. I have never returned there. I did not attend other mosques at my city. I felt excluded and discriminated. (Sarah, 35)

On the other hand, eight women had never experienced any kind of discrimination. They believed the mosque to be very welcoming and a place they always felt comfortable:

I have never felt discrimination in a mosque for being a woman; this includes mosques in Australia, Makkah, Madinah and small Masjids<sup>7</sup> on the side of the road in Saudi. (Jane, 28)

Not that I have personally experienced. And this is despite being a traveller (with my family) and often stopping at mosques to pray. My husband also makes a conscious effort to ensure that my daughters and I enter the mosque (wherever it is—and even if it does not have specific female facilities for prayer) and pray in congregation. This may have helped my positive experiences. (Shakufa, 36)

No discrimination! In fact, I have always found men to be respectful and considerate in the Muslim community, more than Aussie/western men at least. (Aliya, 32)

#### 4.6. *Insulting Lectures or Khutbahs*

As part of the question about experiencing any gender discrimination, another question asked women about whether they had experienced any insulting or disrespectful lectures or Khutbahs. Surprisingly, there is more consensus on this topic as nearly all women had witnessed some insulting Khutbahs. Some women, however, did not consider it discrimination, rather they just found it offensive. These Khutbahs could have been invited Khutbahs in the mosque or online Khutbahs;

I heard some insulting khutbah but can't recall the exact one. It has been so long since I went to a mosque—it would be an Eid khutbah. (Aziza, 33)

One woman talked about a particular Khutbah delivered by a well-known Imam who was invited to her local mosque. The context of the lecture was addressing newly arrived refugees in her city. The encouragement by the Imam for the men in the congregation to share their wives like objects was shocking for this woman:

Most of the time, I didn't feel emotionally comfortable with the Khutbah, which contains violence, hatred, discrimination against women and against others (non-Muslims . . .). In the past, I used to leave the mosque with headaches and stress, because of the Imam's loud voice, yelling and screaming in anger. His Khutbah, instead of giving me good knowledge of Islam, made me feel sick, physically and emotionally. I used to get worried about my kids listening to his speech, which is not really suitable for them. One day, I was listening to one of popular Imams in Australia; he was invited by the mosque to give a Khutbah. He said that "in the time of Prophet Muhammed, and when the Muslims migrated to Al Medina, the people of Al Medina offered their wives to the migrant Muslims to marry them!! He said to migrants "you left your wives in Mecca and you need new wives here, and every man has more than

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<sup>7</sup> Mosques.

one wife, can divorce the second and give her to his Muslim brother" . . . . from that day, I have not been to the mosque. Thanks God, my son was playing outside and didn't pay attention to that Khutbah. (Donya, 50)

Other insulting Khutbahs portrayed women as passive obedient wives, over emphasising women's dress code and undermining women's religious equality before Allah, which are all implications of strict patriarchal gender roles:

This has happened a couple of times during weddings at the mosque. When reference is made to women's responsibilities in marriage and the importance of obedience to husbands without reference to men's responsibilities and roles. Is frustrating, disappointing and is a reflection of the medieval views that some of our Imams hold. This is common among Imams who are new to Australia. I have not been to the mosque in a long time, so I am not sure what the state of affairs is now. I hope it has changed, but I am not holding my breath. (Huda, 50)

I personally haven't but friends have and were in shock afterwards. I have heard one particular Imam speak and give advice as well as answering questions when I was deeply offended by what he said. It wasn't because I was a woman, however, but because to my mind he lacked cultural sensitivity. Unfortunately, that particular Imam seems to see things in very black and white terms. I feel this is unhelpful in this society. (Lilli, 44)

I have heard lots of Khutbahs that promote stereotypes such as women being soft and submissive and men being strong and impactful. Women having the role of being a mother whereas men's role is to earn the living. Men as the leaders of the family, etc. I have also heard lots of emphasis on women covering themselves with long loose clothing and headscarves and women made to feel ashamed about dressing differently to that, in see-through or shorter length clothing. (Maria, 42)

I often heard very misogynistic Khutbahs, which is the reason I stopped going to mosque.

One in Eid Khutbah, that Imam said according to Prophet, women comprise majority of Hell, so they need to work harder to please God!! Another time men and women's role are completely based on private and public. Women's place is at home encouraging polygamy. (Nadia, 43)

One woman mentioned the distinction between Shia and Sunni's mosques but did not go into details:

I heard insulting Khutbahs only when I attended Sunni masjids; Khutbahs in Shia masjids seem to be more respectful due to the divine feminine aspect of Fatima Zahra<sup>8</sup>.

Few women have not heard any insulting lectures or Khutbahs:

When I was younger, I enjoyed listening to the talks offered and had a very romantic view of religion. I looked forward to being the 'ideal' Muslim woman, getting married and supporting my husband with his leadership roles, etc. The problem is that I never got married and I have struggled to understand my role and value in a system that gives much importance to women as wives and mothers. I don't feel insulted, but I feel a bit left out and under-valued at times. (Jamila, 37)

I have never heard a lecture or Khutbah that made me feel uncomfortable as a woman. I feel as though speakers, in this day, are considerate of all people, aiming to make lectures and Khutbahs to inspire and educate Muslims, rather than deter them. (Jane, 28)

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<sup>8</sup> Prophet Mohammad's daughter.

I don't attend Friday prayers, so I have not. In the two or three occasions that I did attend, there was nothing offensive against women. (Sakina, 45)

In general, while most of the women experienced some sort of discrimination based on their gender, still there are a number of women who did not have any experiences of this kind. However, nearly all the participants for the current study noted problems with the quality of women's spaces in the mosque, either in terms of access, size, cleanliness or visibility and ability to hear the Khutbah. They questioned the current gender norms practiced in the mosque. This can be interpreted as an indication that Muslim women in Australia are fully aware of these strict gender roles and this contest can be viewed as a positive step forward for women's equal participation in the religious space and their inclusion in religious institutions. In particular, most women in this study are strongly against strict gender roles in the religious space. This can be due to high levels of education amongst the sample as most of the women have university degrees and work in professional positions. Another pattern in the women's narratives is the difference between converts and non-converts. It appears that convert women, in particular new converts, are supportive of current gender segregation and even approve the notion of women's body as a temptation. This traditional notion of gender and femininity appeals to women converts. Some studies (Van Nieuwekerk 2006) highlight that convert women's decisions to convert is mainly due to a desire to pursue more family-oriented and traditional values. Yet, these interpretations can serve to subordinate women. Furthermore, most of the women had experienced insulting Khutbahs, either at their mosques or online. They expressed critical sentiments about Imams who promote misogynistic and patriarchal views. It is worrying that Imams focus their Khutbahs on discriminative attitudes towards women, rather than promoting gender equality and harmony among Muslim families. As Woodlock (2010a, p. 274) explains, the reason for the existence of these rigid gender roles might be that "the mosque becomes iconic in representing Islam for Muslims living as minorities. Strict segregation in the mosque takes on symbolic importance in representing idealised gender roles, which are virtually unachievable anywhere else in the wider non-Muslim society in which the Muslims live".

## 5. Conclusions

This paper discusses the experiences of a sample of Muslim women attending the mosque. It explores the women's views on gender segregation as well as any experiences of gender discrimination in the mosque. The notion of the mosque as gendered space and women's embodiment in this space appeared as a noticeable common theme in the personal narratives. Most of the women in this study highlighted the relationships between gender, religion and power. The majority of the women challenged the male dominated structure as well as the current practice of gender segregation in Australian mosques. Some women found the practice of gender segregation damaging to the dignity of Muslim women, sexualising and othering towards them. These women claimed their own belonging and participation in the mosque, as well as their rights to have equal access to the mosque. They expressed the need for urgent change in the male dominated structure of the mosque and the attitudes of Imams and religious leaders to accommodate Muslim women's requests for gender equality. At the same time, some women in the study accepted gender segregation based on the religious teachings or Islamic traditions. It seems they reconciled "gender-normative religious practices" (Darwin 2018) which support gender inequality. This view reflects the dominant understandings among some Muslims in Australia who remain loyal to more conservative interpretations of gender roles. However, the findings of this study indicate that new voices among Muslim women are emerging which are looking for more inclusive religious institutions. Hopefully, there will be more reformist voices in Australian Muslim communities which will be allied with Muslim women for more progressive changes in the structure of the mosque and consequently more involvement of Muslim women in leadership.

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