

MY BRITISH MOSQUE

Research Report



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Open My Mosque is a Together We Thrive network campaign. Thanks to our network members of academics, activists, theologians, shariah law specialists and mosque leaders who have reviewed and guided the report: togetherwethrive.co.uk

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BACKGROUND TO THIS REPORT

Open My Mosque, a campaign that sits within the Together We Thrive network, commissioned SOAS 180 degree Consulting to research what British Muslims want from their mosque spaces and services.

- What does inclusivity look like?
- What does female inclusivity look like?
- Examples of where it is happening and where it is not. How is it happening and how it is not?

We hope the results will inform our ongoing conversations with mosque umbrella bodies and statutory bodies concerning mosques that discriminate by providing a clear view of what equality looks like to worshippers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MANY MOSQUES IN THE UK ARE HOSTILE PLACES FOR WOMEN

"The U.K. is in the dark ages and needs to have an honest discussion and address this issue."

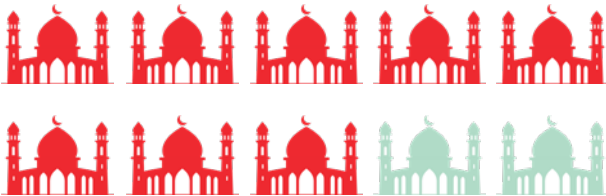


Figure 7: 'How many mosques in your area (where you live) would you say provide a positive and welcome space for Muslim women?' n=314

Most respondents said that only 0-20% of mosques in their local area made them feel welcome. 59% of respondents reported they (or women they know) have experienced negative treatment in a mosque.

The majority of respondents (96%) did not believe there to be any basis in Islamic law to stop women from attending the mosque to pray (n=319) or to be excluded from mosque management committees (n=321).

"When they held elections for committee members I was told the sheet is in the mosque but women can't go inside which bars them standing. Mosque attendees have asked for my help to report issues but no action seems to be taken when you do."

WOMEN REPORT EXPERIENCING DISCRIMINATION AT MOSQUES IN 7 WAYS:

- 1 No space for women; women miss their prayers as a result
- 2 Women's section closed sporadically and without warning; women miss prayer as a result
- 3 Space provided is second class, unsafe, inaccessible, humiliating to use
- 4 No access to religious learning for women
- 5 Verbal abuse when going to prayer or requesting access
- 6 Fundraisers ask women to fund 'women's space' then do not deliver
- 7 Lack of redress to discrimination

See '7 ways discrimination is experienced' in the full report

"Being turned away at the door, rudely and told 'no place for women'. No signposts showing where I was supposed to go so I felt unwelcome and lost in a place that I should feel at home in."

"It creates a bad environment at home when your wife cannot have a public worshipping space to go to but you as a male can."

WHAT MUSLIM WORSHIPPERS WANT

Worshippers do not accept the status quo. 96% of respondents agree that mosques must change to make women feel more welcome. The 5 needs worshippers most want met are:

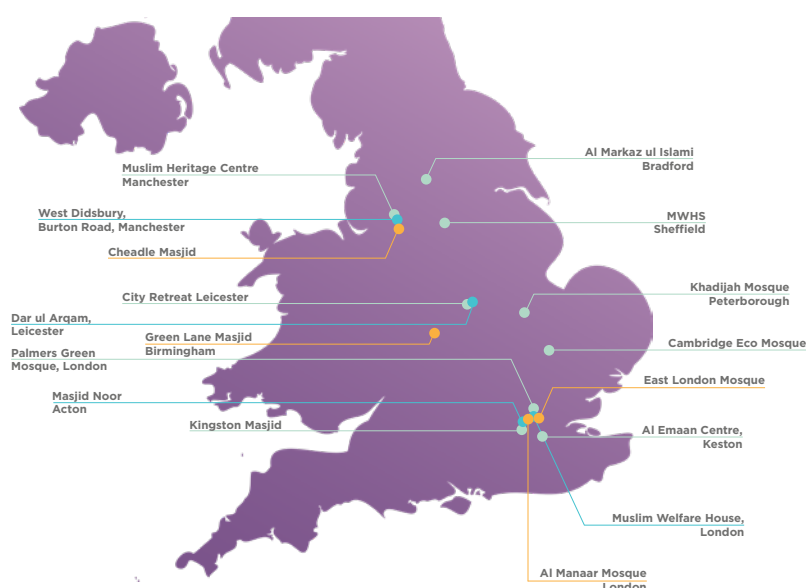


Figure 12: 'What do you and your family especially need from your local mosques? Choose as many as apply' (choice of 19) n=321

"The City Retreat in Leicester have an inclusive space where women don't need to be shut off out of the room, they have family events so we can go with our family groups and feel comfortable sitting with my husband and children and

not feel like I am doing something wrong!! They have family days, support Asylum Seekers and Refugees, social activities, supported the homeless with night shelter facilities and Sunday afternoon movie screenings.

Women are on the leadership, there is less patriarchy, a more diverse crowd: young, old, converts, different ethnicities and cultures. I have never felt so welcome in any other Muslim Space as I have at the City Retreat."



Worshippers shared examples of mosques who are getting it right, describing them as vibrant spaces with activities for all, services for the entire community (refugees, youth, converts and the elderly) and importantly, these mosques engage and value women at all levels. See 'What Muslim worshippers want' in the full report.

"Do not stop your women folk from attending the mosque"

Prophet Muhammad PBUH
Sahih Bukari, Volume 2, Book 13, Number 23

Conclusions

Worshippers want better inclusion and redress for discrimination in mosques. Currently, there is no independent body to offer redress to discrimination in spaces of worship, and equality legislation does not seem to cover places of worship.

The change worshippers seek can only be achieved by working together across statutory services, Muslim umbrella bodies and with community organisers and worshippers. We suggest:

- A public engagement framework bringing together impacted people (i.e. worshippers) and religious scholars, activists and academics to understand where equalities legislation, worshippers' needs and religious belief meet
- The creation of an Equality, Diversity Inclusion and Belonging framework for places of worship, reflecting worshippers' needs and ensuring everyone has a safe place to fulfil their faith
- A mechanism to hold places of worship to account and offer redress to discrimination

See 'Worshippers shared ideas to achieve change' and 'Recommendations' in the full report.

WHY ‘OPEN MY MOSQUE’?

The Open My Mosque campaign was started in 2015 by Anita Nayyar, Julie Siddiqui and Onjali Rauf as the Muslim Council of Britain ‘Visit my Mosque’ campaign launched and mosques across the country opened their doors to their neighbours. A praiseworthy initiative, but we wished many of those same mosques would open their doors as readily to Muslim women. Having repeatedly had our complaints rebuffed by mosque leaders, we started a social media channel where people could share stories of exclusion and also of mosques getting inclusion right, so we could empower a collective voice for change. Over the years we have developed networks of people around the UK who want to open up access to mosques in their area.

Today, 28% of UK mosques self-report they do not provide any prayer space for women.¹³ We believe this number to be higher given reported worshipper experiences. This report seeks to quantify what our social media channels have been picking up, that many Muslims (male and female) want to return to the Prophetic model.



The Prophetic model - a 7th century solution to a 21st century problem

The Prophet Muhammad Peace be Upon Him (PBUH) provides the basis for how Muslims behave. In his day women taught and worshipped in the mosque and a female refugee even lived in the mosque.¹⁹ Given this, and the command of the Prophet PBUH to not stop women attending the mosque,¹⁸ most mosques in the world continue to provide for both genders. The main exception to this is the Deobandi denomination from the Indian subcontinent, which is now the most prevalent denomination to run mosques in the UK.¹³ Some centuries ago, circumstances arose that led this denomination to overrule this legal principle as a temporary measure. The temporary practice of not providing space for female prayer has become a permanent practice for many, contrary to standard practice.

The Islamic requirement for mosques as a place for prayer

The mosque is the backbone of Islamic practice. It allows Muslims to fulfil the most fundamental part of their faith, the 5 daily prayers, referred to in Islamic law as one of only 5 ‘fard ayn’, or fundamental practices that make one a Muslim. It is therefore a communal obligation (fard kifaya) in Islamic law to provide a prayer space to every Muslim. In a time and place where most women work and go out, access to safe prayer space through the day is essential to women’s practice. Prayer 5 times a day is an obligation on all Muslims, female and male, no matter where they are.²⁰

Barriers to change

Firstly, UK mosques have historically been set up as a community enterprise by people moving here from



the Indian subcontinent. They are often governed by people who are, in part, maintaining a way of life. This can sit at odds with the needs of British-born Muslims, particularly when it comes to the roles and activities of women. Negotiations for better inclusion of women can be seen as a threat to old ways of life.

Secondly, Islamophobic narratives unfairly paint the faith as anti-woman and this can make many reluctant to speak out in public. As campaigners, we are constantly negotiating the balance of fighting for women's rights as set out in Islam, and not embedding stereotyped narratives of a religion that is hostile to women. As a result many Muslims keep conversations about better inclusion within the community. This does not work because the people looking for change are disempowered and have no recourse to make change in the current system.

Finally, recourse to outside help is limited. For example, in 2017 approximately 26% of mosques were registered with the Charity Commission.¹³

The case for change

We feel it is important to address the needs of worshippers on both fronts, under Islamic law and as British citizens, and to educate those who can help us achieve change. Islamic and British principles are not at odds when it comes to women's inclusion in mosques.

Women unable to practise their faith fully and safely throughout their day struggle to find redress to discrimination, either from Muslim representative bodies or statutory organisations. The mosque trustee boards who are responsible for handling complaints are the same people responsible for decisions to exclude women. Equalities legislation has not been tested in places of worship and where one excluded female worshipper did make an appeal to the Charity Commission under equalities legislation, the mosque sought legal advice reinforcing its position that it can only accommodate men. The Charity Commission was unable to act.⁷

At Together We Thrive, we feel that redress can only happen in conversation with statutory and non-statutory bodies, governance boards and umbrella bodies. We need to find a position where women's rights within the faith and as British citizens are upheld. We hope this report can be a tool to help those who can offer redress to do so. We seek to increase understanding of worshippers' needs and the theological basis for full inclusion of women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Aside from our own study, there is a growing body of research showing that UK mosques are not meeting the needs of their worshippers, in particular (but not exclusively) women worshippers. Recurrent themes in research show that worshippers want mosques to provide prayer space for all and that they should improve their activities for the whole community, including families, youth and outreach to other communities. Worshippers tend to locate the problem with 'power-hungry' mosque boards dominated by a small group of men with 'back home' mentalities, unwilling to adapt to contemporary needs.

UK mosques - an overview of women's spaces

72% of mosques report that they have space for women's worship. Qualitative reports suggest that this number is lower, as mosques who have women's space on paper have a tendency to close or repurpose those spaces. Amongst Sunnis, the Indian Deobandi denomination runs the largest proportion of UK mosques (41%) and only 49% of Deobandi mosques provide space for women. Over 90% of Sunni Salafi, Maududi, Arab and African mosques provide space for women. But they are far fewer in number than Deobandi mosques across the UK. All Shia mosques in the UK provide prayer space for women.¹³





The theological basis for women's inclusion in mosques

The theological position has been discussed at length by UK scholars aware of the challenges posed to female worshippers. Jasser Auda presented his extensive research on the topic to the Annual Regular Meeting of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) in 2015 where they made a declaration outlining the rights of Muslim women:

- It is forbidden to prevent women from their right to visit the mosque
- Muslim women must be encouraged to attend the mosque
- The tradition of the Prophet Peace Be Upon Him did not include barriers between men and women in the mosque
- It is an obligation to protect women in the mosque from any mistreatment or harassment
- A non-Muslim woman should be allowed to visit a mosque, with or without a headscarf, as long as she is dressed decently
- A woman is allowed to stay in seclusion (i'tikaf) in the mosque and visit others who are staying there
- A woman can and may lecture men and women in the mosque
- A woman can and may participate in the mosque's management and all social activities^{3 17}

Shaykh Akram Nadwi, a Cambridge based scholar has also written on the rights of women to attend the mosque within a Deobandi framework as well as a broader Islamic perspective.¹²



UK worshippers' needs and the impact of gender discrimination

In the last decade, several pieces of research have explored what Muslims in 21st century Britain need from their places of worship and the extent to which gender exclusion impacts faith practice. Here are themes from the two largest such studies (in addition to our own).

The Muslim Census report 'A Muslim Woman's Faith Experience' is the largest study. Insights drawn from 4 focus groups with 24 women and a survey of 1200 Muslim women, weighted to the age and ethnic spread of Muslim women in the UK, found the role of the mosque to be pivotal to Muslim women's overall faith experience:

- 61% of Muslim women reported that limited access to mosques has a negative impact on their spirituality and their relationship with faith
- Only a quarter of Muslim women reported having a mosque local to them that provides for women
- Of those, only 42% indicated that the quality of the space and services provided for women were good
- 51% cite poor quality services
- 47% cite unequal consideration in comparison to men
- 38% cite judgement regarding their appearance and perceived levels of modesty
- Women who had been denied entry noted that despite the presence of a female prayer space, they were turned away due to the space being blocked off or in use by men
- Women denied entry to a mosque reported that they pray in uncomfortable or unsafe alternative spaces such as car parks, street corners and changing rooms
- Only 19% of Muslim women raised the issue with their local mosque
- Of those who provided feedback, only 3% were satisfied with the response they received from the mosque board

The report concludes that in order for mosques to accommodate changing needs, robust, clear and open feedback channels are necessary. The report also picks up on generational and cultural differences in comparative experience.⁸



Vibrant Scottish Mosques ‘Hear My Voice’ research listened to the needs of 90 worshippers (81 women and 9 men) aged 18-66 in 4 focus groups in cities across Scotland. The forewords by Chairman and Islamic scholar Shaykh Ruzwan Mohammed and Founder Sahira Dar ground the need for gender inclusion in Islamic jurisprudence. Focus groups identified 5 key needs:

1. Inclusivity - The majority of women reported that the mosque often made them feel unwelcome or unwanted; they spoke of a ‘back home mentality’ in reference to male dominance
2. Leadership and decision making - Nearly all the participants believed the Board of Trustees and Management Committees were unresponsive to the needs of Scottish communities and that more women on boards could improve issues women face
3. 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 are usually small, lack windows, lack basic hygiene at times and are often commandeered by men when they require extra space
4. Communal worship and spirituality - Key occasions like Ramadan, Eid and Jummah (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
5. The exemplary mosque - Worshippers describe an ideal scenario where Muslim men openly and vocally ally to create change, and where every mosque is aligned to its unique community needs, driven by principles of social welfare and equity, and is a welcoming and friendly place for everyone who enters¹

The themes in The Muslim Census Report and Hear My Voice can also be found in academic studies^{5 14} and in our own study of 322 worshippers in England and Wales contained within this report.



Further evidence of the need for change

Both of the prominent mosque umbrella bodies, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB), have published research highlighting the need for better inclusion of women, converts to Islam and young people.^{11 2} The MCB have set a bar for better inclusion through their 'Our Mosques our Future' workstream, which amongst other things provides training for women to prepare them for board roles and promotes women in governance.¹⁰ MINAB have been vocal on social media and mainstream media about the need to provide equal prayer space for women. It should be noted that neither body has the power to make the change happen, only to inform and persuade. Faith Associates monitor mosques for inclusion each year and nominate 'Beacon Mosques' at an annual Award Ceremony. These initiatives have some success but not enough to meet worshippers' needs at the time of writing.

Citizens UK ran a National Commission on Muslims in Public Life.⁴ Large numbers of Muslim women raised that male-dominated mosque boards are the factor most negatively impacting their participation in public life. Members of mosque boards are put forward for public positions to represent the community and are approached by policymakers and political parties looking for candidates and looking to understand Muslim community issues.

"There is an overwhelming sense of inequality in mosques, where the elders who are men are in charge of the management and day to day running of the mosque. These men tend to be very inward looking. As a result of this the patriarchal structure fails to support the women." (Female former Councillor, Muslim respondent, West Midlands)⁴

On the specific theme of Muslim women resorting to prayer in public spaces that feel unsafe, for context Tell Mama document that Muslim women are far more likely to be the victims of Islamophobic attacks than Muslim men.⁶ There is a real risk of attack to Muslim women making such a public act of worship.

Our report echoes the significant need for change documented here through the voices of worshippers in England and Wales. It also, we hope, deepens understanding of what worshippers want and expect from mosques in Britain using worshippers' own examples of inclusive mosques that can act as a blueprint for what is acceptable and achievable. Our goal is to provide the basis for a collective way forward, not just for Muslim organisations but also for those who oversee governance and engage with impacted communities of women.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Method

A survey was disseminated to female and male worshippers through Muslim social media groups (e.g. Muslim students, professionals, parents) in England and Wales in 2021-2022. Respondents were asked to interview their elders to capture those not in the online space. The sample was weighted to reflect the age spread of Muslims in the 2011 census.

The survey design built upon qualitative insight gained by Open My Mosque through its social media channels which have been gathering stories of mosque experiences since 2015. It sought to quantify how welcoming the mosque landscape is for women worshippers and what worshippers, male and female, expect from mosques in Britain. Respondents were invited to qualify their answers in open questions.

The survey received 322 responses. Whilst the sample of male respondents (20%) was too small to reach any significant comparisons between genders, male responses did not vary noticeably from the results reported for the whole population and we quote male and female responses in the findings.

In addition to the survey, consultants undertook 10 expert interviews with professionals in mosque management, on Muslim representative bodies and with policymakers in the faith and inclusion space. Responses to expert interviews have guided the research design, literature review and recommendations made at the end of the report.



SAMPLE

AGE

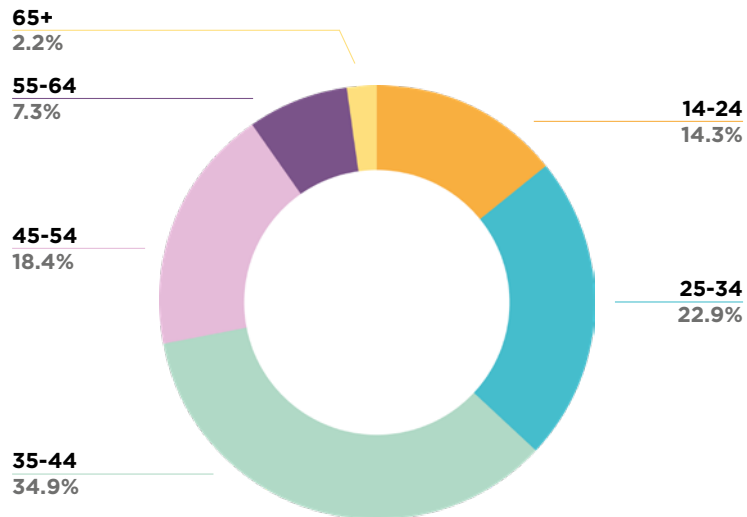


Figure 1: 'What is your age?' n=315
Weighted to reflect Muslim population in the UK 2011 Census.¹⁶

GENDER

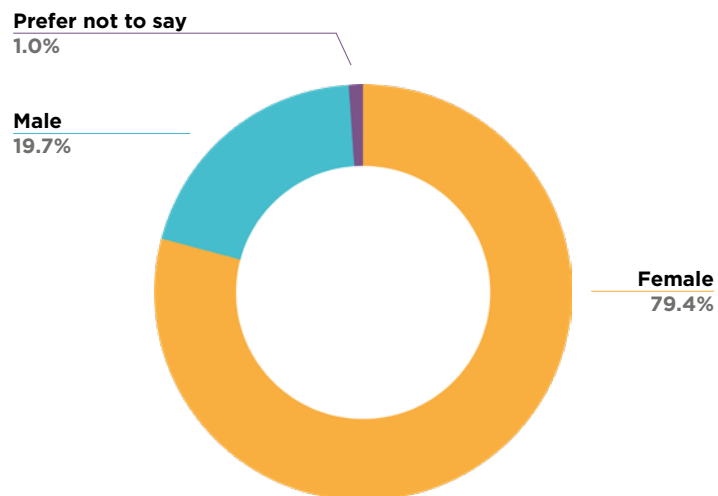


Figure 2: 'What is your gender?' n=315
The survey targeted men and women. Women were more likely to respond.
This may be because the subject matter was female oriented.

ETHNICITY

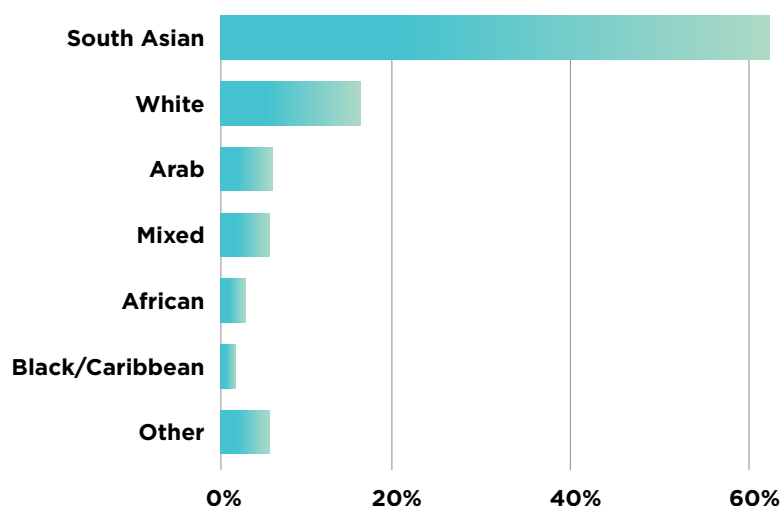


Figure 3: 'What is your ethnicity?' n=315

Ethnicity weighting was based on the ethnic spread in the ONS 2011 Census. We received more White responses than expected and fewer African. Otherwise responses reflect the British Muslim population with a majority (61%) of South Asian origin.¹⁵

LOCATION

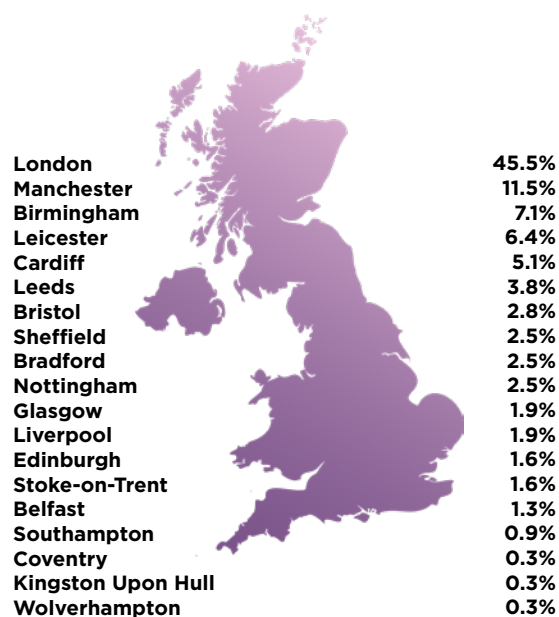


Figure 4: 'Where do you live? Choose the nearest city' n=314

Survey is weighted towards cities with large Muslim populations in England and Wales, with some responses also coming from Scotland.⁹

PLACE OF BIRTH

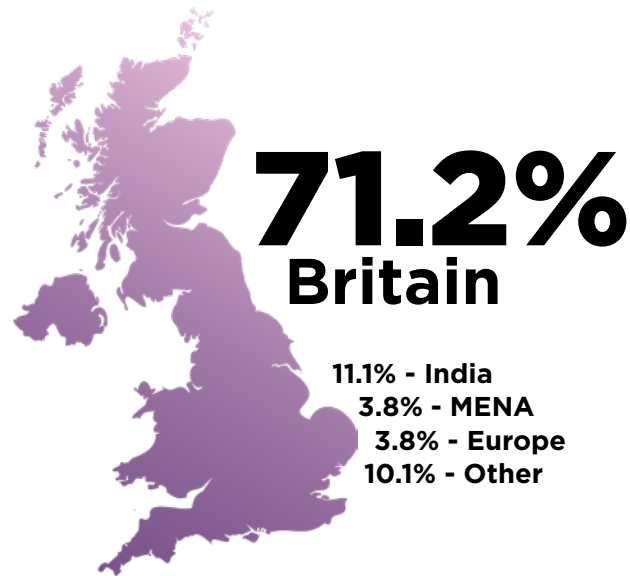


Figure 5: 'What is your birthplace?' n=316

The survey distributions targeted predominantly British Muslim spaces online (rather than spaces that provide for migrant or expatriated Muslims). This was in order to gain a culturally British Muslim perspective.

DENOMINATION



Figure 6: 'What is your adherence?' n=316

We weighted the sample towards Sunnis because the issue of lack of access for women is most likely to affect them.

KEY FINDINGS

THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE

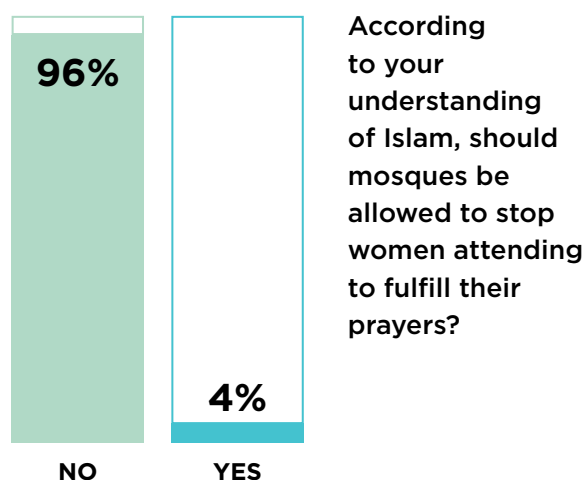


The majority (182 out of 314) of respondents reported that only 0-20% of mosques in their local area provide a positive and welcome space for Muslim women.

Figure 7: 'How many mosques in your area (where you live) would you say provide a positive and welcome space for Muslim women?' n=314

The majority of respondents reported that only 0-20% of mosques in their local area provide a positive and welcome space for Muslim women. This tells us that, although positive experiences were reported to us, they only apply to the minority of mosques in UK towns and cities, and that the work required to improve mosque management and inclusion of women is extensive and urgent.

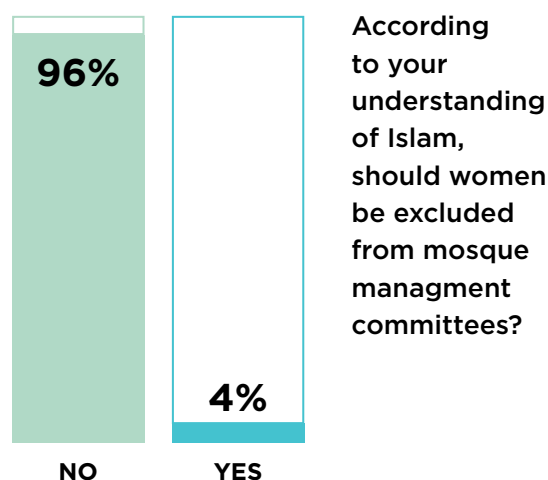
WHAT MUSLIM WORSHIPPERS BELIEVE



According to your understanding of Islam, should mosques be allowed to stop women attending to fulfill their prayers?

Figure 8: 'According to your understanding of Islam, should mosques be allowed to stop women attending to fulfill their prayers?' n=319

The majority of respondents (96%) did not believe there to be any basis in Islamic law to stop women from attending the mosque to pray.



According to your understanding of Islam, should women be excluded from mosque management committees?

Figure 9: 'According to your understanding of Islam, should women be excluded from mosque management committees?' n=321

The majority of respondents (96%) did not believe there to be any basis in Islamic law to exclude women from mosque management committees.

HOW DISCRIMINATION IS EXPERIENCED

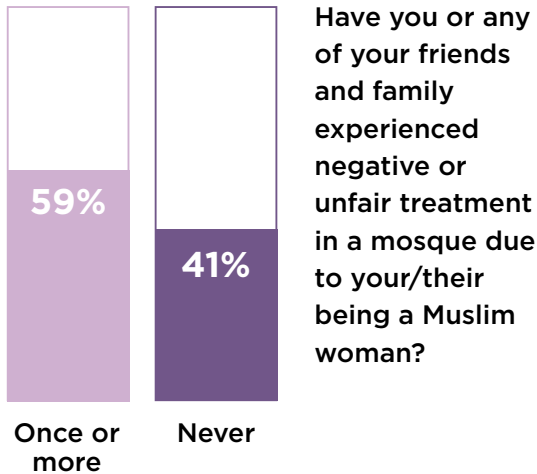


Figure 10: 'Have you or any of your friends and family experienced negative or unfair treatment in a mosque due to your/their being a Muslim woman?' n=319

6 of 10 respondents had experienced negative treatment of women in a mosque, of which 4 of 10 more than once. Women's reports of their bad

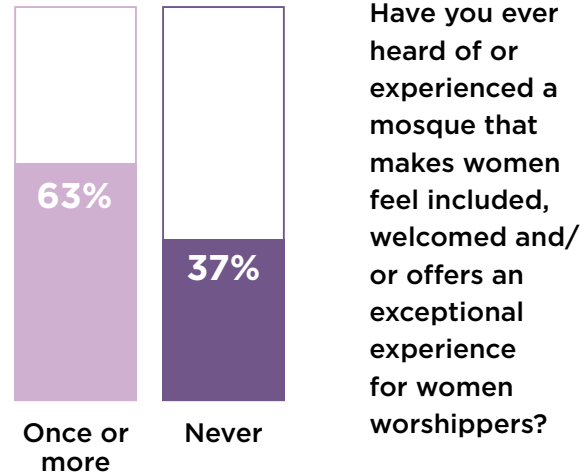


Figure 11: 'Have you ever heard of or experienced a mosque that makes women feel included, welcome and/or offers an exceptional experience for women worshippers?' n=320

experiences paint a picture of a hostile environment for female worshippers, with second class spaces and intimidating (in some cases abusive) treatment by staff.

7 WAYS DISCRIMINATION IS EXPERIENCED

1

Women miss prayers when mosques do not grant access. Finding a place to pray takes a lot longer as a female.

"Women also go out, work or run errands and in between salah (prayer) is missed because there is no prayer space. Women are also more likely to be targeted or attacked, so forcing women to worship out in the open is a threat. It prevents women from fulfilling their obligatory salah."

"It was a hard slog finding mosques that catered for women and offered women prayer areas/ facilities in East Ham, Greenwich and Kings Cross, Edgware Road and Kensington and Chelsea. I did eventually find a mosque located on the High Road near East Ham, the mosque elders decided to sympathise with my search, let me in and pray."

"It creates a bad environment at home when your wife cannot have a public worshipping space to go to but you as a male can."

2 Where mosques offer a space for women to worship on paper, it can be closed down or locked at no notice. In COVID, when this survey went out initially, many mosques closed the women's space whilst keeping the men's space open.

"When I've tried to visit a mosque you're told you can only come on one day at a set time and it's always a space that's not setup for prayer or reflection. If you're a man you're welcome whenever you want to go."

"I was told I was not allowed to pray during COVID time even though it was open for men. I felt like praying fard for women was not as important as it was for men."

"Doors are often locked in Manchester so I feel awkward having to go to the men's to get someone to open the door. Men tend to panic if they see me in the men's area so I get told I'm not supposed to be there. The impact is frustration, irritation and resentment."

3 The approach to and design of women's space can often make women feel unsafe and like second class citizens with physical access barriers to entry commonplace.

"Mosques should provide a space for women at the back of the male congregation as it's on the ground floor and more accessible than balcony etc. I don't understand why in the UK there is such a conservative mindset towards this. Females prayed in close proximity to males during the time of the Prophet PBUH."

"Not allowed in as I was alone. Having a man walk in whilst I was praying. Unclean poor wudhu facilities, insufficient places to actually pray. Women's area tends to be in some rubbish corner the men don't want. Being squashed in a basement made me very uncomfortable like I'm a secondary citizen."

4 Hostile mosques create barriers to religious learning for women. Converts can find themselves without relevant guidance into their new faith and women born into the faith struggle to find classes that develop their understanding of the religion.

"After my Shahada I felt disappointed and deflated visiting a mosque. After several failed attempts at getting close to different mosques - no space for women, or locked entrances to women's doors, put us up waaaaaaaay too many stairs out of the way, I just gave up and worshipped at home. There didn't seem to be a place for me."

5

Women can face intimidation when trying to assert their right to pray or access women's spaces in mosques.

"It has happened to me numerous times. It includes: Being turned away at the door, rudely and told 'no place for women'. No signposts showing where I was supposed to go so I felt unwelcome and lost in a place that I should feel at home in. It makes me angry because this is the House of God. Everyone should feel welcome. Men have no right to tell women they cannot come, whatever excuse they give for it."

"Too many examples to enumerate - women's spaces being awful, sectarianism, cultural values imposed, hostile atmosphere without discernible reason. So much. Hurried out during prayer. Men asking women to move to underground space where they aren't visible. Men stopping women from using the same entrance. Just negative atmosphere."

6

Fundraisers request money from women to build/develop the mosque and do not deliver on women's space.

"Whilst at the fundraising stage they seem to adopt inclusivity and lots of promises however after completion it's a different story. They tend to cater

mainly for men and the dominant culture within that area. The U.K. is in the dark ages and needs to have an honest discussion and address this issue."

7

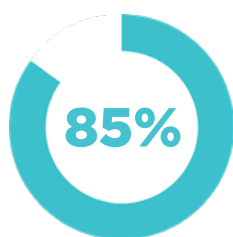
Women do not always find redress if raising complaints and face barriers to joining the board to make the changes they want to see.

"My local mosque does not permit women to attend citing lack of space, when they held elections for committee members I asked how to sign up and was told the sheet is in the mosque but women can't go inside which bars them standing without directly saying so. Other mosque attendees have told me many bad stories about the committee and asked for my help to report issues but no action seems to be taken when you do."

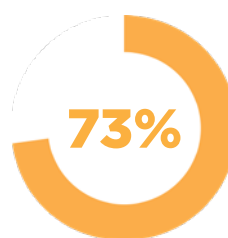
The result: Women miss their obligatory prayers, Women feel unsafe and go to the mosque or approach each mosque ready for an altercation. Women cannot access boards to make the change they want. Or they opt out fully with consequence for their personal worship. Converts to the faith do not get the support they need to learn about their new faith.

"I don't engage with the mosque because I know it's unlikely to cater to my needs."

WHAT MUSLIM WORSHIPPERS WANT



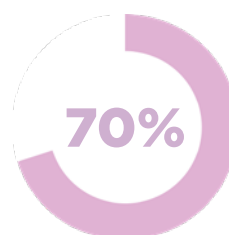
**Prayer space for
both men & women**



**Jummah prayer for
both men & women**



**A welcoming presence
from staff & worshippers**



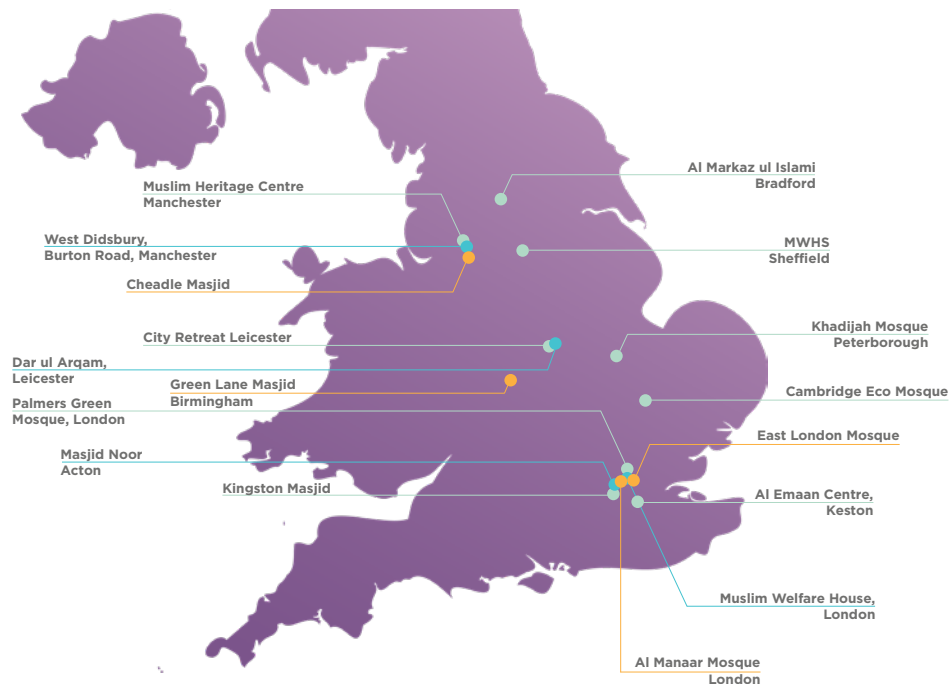
**More inclusion on
the governance board**



**More women on the
management board**

Figure 12: 'What do you and your family especially need from your local mosques?
Choose as many as apply' (choice of 19) n=321

SOME OF THE MOSQUES NAMED AS ‘WELCOMING’ BY WORSHIPPERS



MOSQUES WHO DID OFFER POSITIVE AND WELCOMING SPACES FOR WOMEN DID 5 THINGS CONSISTENTLY:

1

At the most basic level, women were offered a consistently accessible prayer space on an equal footing with men. They are spoken to with respect.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- Offering space for the 5 daily prayers that is always open (same opening terms as men have) or
- For smaller mosques having men's hours and women's hours for each prayer so no one gender's prayer is prioritised over the other when space is scarce
- Mosques which did not close to women in COVID
- Mosques offering taraweeh (nighttime) prayers in Ramadan
- Space for women at the Jumma (Friday) sermon
- Welcoming spaces that are not 'less good' than the men's hall and it is made clear that the space is not 'no-go' for women worshippers

"There are mosques in Malaysia, with excellent accessibility for women on the ground floor, and a large screened and ventilated space to pray in an area behind the male congregation. The toilets and wudhu area are close by, clean and have mirrors(!). During COVID, access for taraweeh prayers were provided by setting up a simple schedule and registration procedure, and those who registered were given slots to attend prayers on specific days. Both men and women could enter through the front entrance(s) to the prayer hall rather than having to walk round the back (which I find so common at UK mosques). Mosque committees have both men and women. I felt happy, like I was fully a part of the community and that I belonged at the mosque, and I felt motivated to increase my worship in a beautiful and safe space."

2

Women are integral to the activities and layout of the mosque, and the activities and layout of the mosque reflect women's needs.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- The Imam and/or management actively seek women's input into the running and activities of the mosque
- Tone and gesture of engagement actively suggest women are important members of the space (e.g. ensuring women's section has food offered first in Ramadan, not as a second thought)
- Signposting and mosque layout include women, there is easy ground floor access for disabled women and women with children, there is a front entrance (rather than a back entrance), the entrance and prayer space is as nice as the men's
- Female scholars teach and/or lessons specifically target women in a meaningful way
- Families can attend and feel comfortable e.g. men can attend with their wives and daughters, crèches for young children, activities for young people and events for the whole family to attend together
- Men in the sample particularly wanted mosques they can attend as a family with wives and daughters
- Space for spiritual reflection and 'lingering' whilst connecting with God

"At Cambridge Eco mosque I loved that one could linger e.g. garden, cafe, museum so I didn't feel too highly scrutinised. It made me feel more connected. I felt it's a place I could bring members of my family who aren't praying and they wouldn't feel out of place and wouldn't feel judged. It felt as if the place was very genuine as a group of tourists was being treated with lots of respect. The Imam made a point of speaking to us after the Jummah (sermon) to address any needs and to ensure we are happy."

3

The mosque acts as a hub for community, with activities for the wider community.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- Support for refugees
- Iftar (Ramadan) dinners for all communities and neighbours
- Homeless provision or support
- Community events
- Food banks
- The mosque is a hub for all ages and ethnicities

"The City Retreat in Leicester have an inclusive space where women don't need to be shut off out of the room, they have family events so we can go with our family groups and feel comfortable sitting with my husband and children and not feel like I am doing something wrong!! They have family days, support Asylum Seekers and Refugees, social activities, supported the homeless with night shelter facilities and Sunday afternoon movie screenings. Women are on the leadership, there is less patriarchy, a more diverse crowd: young, old, converts, different ethnicities and cultures. I have never felt so welcome in any other Muslim Space as I have at the City Retreat."

4

There are women specific services.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- Support services e.g. counselling, support for abuse and domestic violence, Islamic guidance and advice from scholars (including from female scholars)
- Convert support and information for women entering the faith
- Courses for women on topics important to women
- Alimah courses to develop female teachers
- Dhikr (spiritual remembrance through chants and songs) for/by women

“I work at Didsbury Mosque in Manchester, we have offered taraweesh prayers throughout Ramdan, since I have started working here we have implemented a line of support for women to reach out to and to have a safe space where they can go to be heard and express themselves. We are in the midst of developing women’s support groups, workshops and special support circles for women who have suffered from any form of domestic abuse. We have a Shariah council and we are lucky enough to have women as active participants on the panel.”

5

Women hold leadership roles.

Respondents saw women in a leadership position as an important prerequisite to all 4 areas above, they mentioned leadership through:

- Women board members who oversee the direction of the mosque
- A women’s committee or subcommittee directing mosque activities
- Female members of staff on duty to support and guide
- Female volunteers and helpers at events

It is important to mention here that some respondents mentioned the need for women who are placed in leadership positions on their own merits rather than being family members or ‘yes’ women. In the latter scenario, respondents tended to find women’s requirements were not met and could be actively undermined by women on the board.

“Al-Manaar Mosque & Cultural Centre has always ensured women are included in the board of directors, as executive directors, heads of departments and projects. The Mosque closing and opening periods during the COVID lockdowns was deliberately made gender neutral to ensure the Mosque is open to all and at all times irrespective of the situation. During this year’s Ramadan taraweesh prayers women were given preferential treatment by exempting them from advance online registration. The same has been offered for weekly Jummah prayers. While men are required to register online in advance, women have been allowed to turn up and register at the door on the day and time of prayer. Al-Manaar staff and volunteers, who are from both genders, have always ensured adequate space was made available for women worshippers.”



WORSHIPPERS SHARED IDEAS TO ACHIEVE CHANGE

96% of respondents agree that mosques must change to make women feel more welcome. Respondents shared how they think change should be achieved...

Communities speaking up together

“The change must be from the ground up. Women in Muslim communities need to mobilise and lobby their local mosques. They need support and a listening ear from male allies to help them do this. Those male allies must be educated in how to support women without eclipsing them (i.e. following the example of the Prophet Mohammad PBUH).”

Setting up alternative spaces of worship

“I have been on a mosque committee myself and I know what an uphill struggle it is to change attitudes of other men when you are in a minority. Solution: Either women open new mosques (not necessarily exclusive women-only mosques) and establish the ethos they want with male allies on the charity/committee, or men establish new mosques and bring women on board as trustees and committee members from the outset.”

Inclusive, person-centred design when building new mosques

“During the design stage, I believe that the prayer space allocated to women should be equal in size to the men’s space. Women should be on every mosque management’s board or committee. Women should be regularly consulted for their feedback and suggestions on how the mosque is run.”

Feedback mechanisms for female worshippers

“Have more feedback and inclusion of women in leadership positions within the management teams or board. Allowing women to have views and opinions, providing feedback for change.”

Equal standards for male & female space

“Mosques should be designed and built for the whole community to access, with women and children in mind rather than women being an afterthought and a broom cupboard being allocated as a prayer room. The eco mosque in Cambridge is a fantastic example of excellent and well thought out design, taking into consideration women, community, environment and even aesthetics. It feels welcoming to Muslims and non Muslims.”

Creating a policy or legal position that asserts women's rights

"Engage with Muslim women first before government law enforces it upon them. Engage with organisations like the MCB and build allies across the Muslim charity sector."

"Make it mandatory (according to law) to allow women to attend. Make it compulsory to allow women to come to the mosque. Force mosques to have women's spaces by law and include them in the management group."

Diversifying leadership at each level of the mosque structure

"Women need to be represented and present, consulted and engaged at every stage and department and process of a mosque. From initial planning to delivery of services so that fair and equal space is guaranteed and open to all."

Holding spaces to account

"I think that any funding that is given to the mosques should be given after a contract that they will always have decent space for women (not in basements!!!!) and that they will celebrate women's presence in mosques. They need to show evidence of this and they need to be inspected on this regularly."

Measuring & monitoring change

"Establish a mosque with an all-women board of directors. And administer it like a business, with clear, measurable objectives. Use the mosque as a pilot scheme for how mosques should function in the 21st century in the U.K, centring the needs of the majority community it serves, i.e 75% of the members will be women and children, not focusing on the 25% minority of men."

Re-centring the Prophetic approach as religious norm

"In general, the Muslim community needs re-education about women's religious lives in today's society, there seems to be a misconception that women do not need to be around the community, that women do not benefit from praying in congregation, that women don't live public lives so it's assumed they can pray at home. This is not reflective at all of the lives of Muslim women today, in all honesty this was not the reality of the female companions of the Prophet PBUH either."

CONCLUSIONS

“Empower muslim women to make change, give us a platform rather than attempting to advocate on our behalf. Stop equating modesty to silence.”

This report and the research set out in the literature review provide a clear case for change. Mosques need to be more inclusive places.

Worshippers want change – This research and previous studies show a majority of worshippers are dissatisfied with the provision from most mosques for women, and that this is impacting their ability to engage fully with their religion.

Islam supports this change – The requirement for everyone to have a place to pray is fundamental within Islam, and there is precedent from Muhammad’s life (PBUH) and Islamic scholarship that this should include mosque access.

Change is being held up by absence of procedures, loopholes in legislation and fear to challenge. Where people experience discrimination or hostility in mosques, there need to be set and defined standards that mosques are held to, along with the means to hold offending mosques accountable. To achieve this will take a group effort between worshippers, Islamic legal and umbrella bodies, statutory services, policymakers and mosques themselves.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Statutory organisations and policymakers

Places of worship are 'a grey area' for equalities legislation. This report highlights the risks and damage caused to people by having no avenues for redress either through the mosque complaints procedures or under equalities law.

Recognise that the current situation where places of worship are not clearly covered under equalities legislation is leaving worshippers vulnerable and without redress.

Develop a public engagement framework bringing together impacted people (i.e. worshippers) and religious scholars, activists and academics to understand where equalities legislation, worshippers' needs and religious belief meet.

Develop an Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging framework (EDI&B) for places of worship, working closely with worshippers and faith representative bodies. Set benchmarks for change and include robust complaints procedures and accountability measures.

If you already work closely with mosque boards, we recommend supporting them individually to adopt an EDI&B framework and work towards change.

Muslim umbrella bodies and theologians

Mosque umbrella bodies who would like to see greater inclusion of women can sometimes feel unable to influence mosque boards. They also show that the local dynamic can be more easily influenced than a national change due to local cultural and denominational needs and understandings of mosque use.

Create procedures to assess local worshippers' needs, offer feedback mechanisms for worshippers and implement change. Do this in an ongoing way.

Develop a local faith-centred Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging strategy using case studies of existing mosques that are already doing this and using Islamic scholarship to underpin guidance for local mosques.



If you are an award giving body, ensure mosques receiving awards and recognition have integrated diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging in a meaningful way, following the 5 things worshippers outline they want from spaces of worship in this report. See 'What Muslim worshippers want' section.

Worshippers and activists

Action achieves most when it is localised. An understanding of the local power dynamic, an insight into how to impact it and a collective and persistent voice for change do have an impact.

To create the change we need, it is important to work together and present a communal voice for change, and to identify the people who can make that change happen locally beyond the mosque board (e.g. local council of mosques, influential individuals). At Together We Thrive we are keen to connect people campaigning for change and work together to have our voices heard.

We have a national network of women campaigning for change, nationally and locally. We also offer advice and guidance to people who would like to make a change but do not know how. To join the network get in touch via social media @OpenMyMosque or contact info@togetherwethrive.co.uk

Terminology

1. **Alimah** - A female scholar of religion
2. **Deobandi** - A conservative Sunni religious movement that emerged in response to British rule in India in 1866
3. **Eid** - The name of the two Muslim festivals, both of which involve congregational prayer for women and men
4. **Fard** (Religious Obligations) - The prayers or actions which are obligatory to Islamic practice. When one does not complete a fard it is considered a sin but generally does not put one outside the faith
5. **Fard Ayn** (Personal Obligations) - The actions which are fundamental to Islamic practice (without which one is no longer considered to be practising the faith). There are 5 practices which are fard ayn; public acceptance of the belief in one God and his Prophet Muhammad PBUH, 5 daily prayers, fasting in Ramadan, hajj pilgrimage and zakat tax. These are the same for women and men
6. **Fard Kifaya** (Communal Obligations) - The community's obligations to provide space and resources for Muslims (regardless of gender) to complete their fard ayn. Mosques are a communal obligation as they provide space for Muslims to complete the 5 prayers
7. **Hadith** - a collection of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH which constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran
8. **Iftar** - The first meal at the end of a day of fasting e.g. in the holy month of Ramadan
9. **Imam** - Person who leads the prayer. Can play a pastoral role in mosque life and offer the Friday sermon
10. **Jummah Prayer** - Friday congregational prayer with sermon
11. **Masjid** - Arabic word for mosque (literally place of supplication)
12. **Muhammad** - The final Prophet and messenger to whom the Quran was revealed by God. The most perfect of mankind whose actions Muslims use as a guide for their own actions
13. **PBUH** - Acronym for Peace Be Upon Him. A prayer Muslims are encouraged to make after mentioning the messenger of God, Muhammad
14. **Quran** - The Muslim Holy Book. Considered the final book and a summary of what was previously revealed to Jews and Christians
15. **Shahada** - Declaration of faith made when entering the religion of Islam
16. **Shia** - The smaller of the two main branches of Islam
17. **Sunni** - The larger of the two main branches of Islam
18. **Taraweeh** - The nighttime prayers through the month of Ramadan through which the entire Quran is read
19. **Wudhu** - Ritual washing of the hands, arms, head and feet before prayer

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*“Do not stop your
women folk from
attending the
mosque”*

*Prophet Muhammad PBUH
Sahih Bukari, Volume 2, Book 13, Number 23*