

Article

Mosques as Gendered Spaces: The Complexity of Women's Compliance with, And Resistance to, Dominant Gender Norms, And the Importance of Male Allies

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Abstract: Women's presence and role in contemporary mosques in Western Europe is debated within and outside Muslim communities, but research on this topic is scarce. Applying a feminist lens on religion and gender, this article situates the mosque as a socially constituted space that both enables and constrains Western European Muslim women's religious formation, identity-making, participation, belonging, and activism. Informed by qualitative interviews with twenty Muslim women residing in Norway and the United Kingdom, the article argues that women's reflexive engagement simultaneously expresses compliance with, and challenges to, male power and authority in the mosque. It contends that a complex practice of accommodation and resistance to "traditional" gender norms is rooted in the women's discursive positioning of "authentic Islam" as gender equal. While men typically inhabit positions of religious and organizational power in mosques, the article also suggests the importance of male allies in women's struggles for inclusion in the mosque.

Keywords: authentic Islam; imams; inclusion; mosque governance; mosques; Muslim women

1. Introduction

Mosques have become part of the geographical landscape of urban centers in Western Europe, following post-World War II immigration of Muslims from many parts of the world, including Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Mosques were initially established in existing buildings, but an increasing number of mosques are purpose-built. Today, mosques provide religious, educational, and welfare services to a well-established indigenous Muslim population in Western Europe, and to migrants and refugees with ties to Islam. Questions about what happens inside mosques and how mosques are embedded within their local communities, and how the wider society relates to mosques, are debated by politicians, news outlets and social media, scholars, and ordinary people, including Muslims. The building of mosques is in itself a contested issue, causing political conflicts in many Western European cities (Cesari 2006). A particularly debated issue is that of women's participation and role in the mosque, which raises questions about equality, citizenship, democratic governance, religious freedom, and self-determination; questions that are central to sociological inquiry beyond the realm of religion.

Despite evidence of emerging scholarship on mosques as gendered spaces in Western contexts, including Europe (Nyhagen Predelli 2008; Bhimji 2009; Gilliat-Ray 2010; Bano and Kalmbach 2012; Shannahan 2014; Lewicki and O'Toole 2017), Australia (Woodlock 2010), and North America (Haddad et al. 2006; Hammer 2012), there is still a dearth of research on women's views on and experiences of mosques. Questions that need addressing are: What kinds of spaces and roles do women occupy within mosques? How do women experience mosque spaces and governance structures? Women's access to

and use of male imams and other sources of religious authority is another under-explored issue, as is women's views on female imams. This article seeks to address the identified research gap by examining the mosque as a gendered space via a qualitative case-study study of twenty Muslim women residing in Oslo, Norway and Leicestershire, UK, focusing on their motivations for attending, the gendered spaces in which they participate, and their views on the imam role. It suggests that the women's reflexive engagement with the mosque as a physical and social space represents a complex discursive positioning which simultaneously reproduces and challenges established forms of male power. Taking into account wider developments regarding women and mosques in Norway and the UK, the article also highlights evidence of emerging support for more gender-inclusive mosque practices.

2. Extant Research and Contemporary Developments

Mosques are houses of religious worship that also function as community hubs for social events, welfare services, charitable activities, and political engagement. As such, the ability to access and use mosque facilities is vital for community participation and belonging. Although only men have a religious duty to attend Friday prayer in the mosque, Muslim women in Western Europe are increasingly participating in mosques, including in Norway (Nyhagen Predelli 2008), the UK (Bhimji 2009; Gilliat-Ray 2010; Shannahan 2014; Lewicki and O'Toole 2017), and elsewhere, e.g., Sweden (Minganti 2012), France, and Germany (Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006; Spielhaus 2012). Women's increased participation has been accommodated via the introduction of designated, gender-segregated spaces in some, but not all, mosques. Hegemonic Islamic norms dictate the separation of women and men during prayer due to women's childbearing role and a perceived need to control male sexual lust (Mernissi 1991; Ahmed 1992; Hammer 2012); see also (Lehmann 2012) on the mosque as a sexual space). Women's participation is thus conditioned upon the availability of a gender segregated physical space, with a separate room for women, distinct from the main prayer room, and with a separate mosque entrance too. Mosques that are open to women typically afford them physical spaces that are inferior in quality and size compared to men's, thus demonstrating "an overall prioritization of male space and needs" (Shannahan 2014, p. 15). Many mosques also block women's participation by not offering them a designated space (Roald 2001). Furthermore, mosques in Western Europe are typically governed by men, and men occupy the main position of religious leadership, the imam, who leads prayers. Women may be permitted to lead prayer for women, but only men can lead prayers for men and/or mixed gender audiences. Mosque boards and management committees only rarely include women, and if women are allowed any autonomy it tends to be confined to women's own activities. Whether located in Muslim majority or Muslim minority contexts, mosques "remain bastions of male dominance" (Gilliat-Ray 2010, p. 202); see also (Kalmbach 2012; Vogt 2000).

In contrast to public rhetoric about Muslim women as submissive and passive (Abu-Lughod 2002), evidence shows that Muslim women are not absent as sources of religious knowledge and authority. Despite a historical lack of women in mosques, and the barriers this has caused for women's claims to religious authority, Kalmbach (2012, pp. 15–16) notes that a "sizeable number of female religious authorities appear in Islamic sources, especially biographical dictionaries, prior to the sixteenth century, primarily as Companions of the Prophet, *hadith* transmitters and Sufi saints, but also as scholars, instructors, and patrons of religious endowments". These historical precedents offer legitimacy to contemporary women's claim to religious authority. Kalmbach also observes that competition between an increasing number of stakeholders who claim religious authority, as well as the broadening of women's societal roles, have contributed to a dramatic expansion in women's Islamic leadership in the 20th and 21st centuries (Kalmbach 2012, p. 16). Her view is supported by Jouili (2015, p. 24) who, in her study of Muslim women in France and Germany, noted "the feminization of the Islamic institutional landscape" as a trend. Within mosques, women lead prayers for women and transmit religious knowledge to women and children, thus "solidly establishing, re-establishing, or expanding female leadership in public religious spaces" (Kalmbach 2012, p. 17); see also (Hammer 2012; Jouili 2015). Moreover, feminist Muslim women scholars (e.g., Amina Wadud) advocate re-interpretations of

Islam that support gender equality at home, in the labor market and in politics (Wadud 2006); see also (Roald 2001); on Islamic feminism, see, e.g., (Mir-Hosseini 2000). Wadud is also known for having led public and private prayers for gender-mixed audiences (including in New York, USA, in 2005 and in Oxford, UK, in 2008), gaining widespread media attention and igniting debates within Muslim communities (see Hammer 2012).

More recent initiatives have seen Muslim women and other stakeholders call for more gender-inclusive mosques. Both in Norway and in the UK, reports by various interlocutors have revealed that many mosques lack spaces for women and that women are overwhelmingly absent from mosque governance. For example, a report published by the Norwegian national newspaper *Vårt Land* in 2016 showed that only three out of 248 mosque board members were women, and these three were all members of the same mosque board (Lindvåg 2016). Also in 2016, Azhar Ali, a Muslim woman of Somalian background in Arendal, Norway, initiated a campaign for women to become board members in her local mosque. While Ali eventually succeeded, women are still excluded from most mosque boards in Norway. In 2017, on the back of media reports about the lack of women on mosque boards, the Labor Party, the second largest political party in Norway, put forward a policy proposal in Parliament that would have required boards of religious organizations in receipt of state funds (which include mosques) to have a minimum of forty percent representation of women.

In the UK, voluntary organizations that have consulted with Muslim women, including the (Muslim Women's Network 2006; Faith Matters 2010¹; Citizens UK 2017), have argued that mosques must open spaces for women and include them in governance structures. The Muslim and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) have issued similar recommendations, as has the Scottish Mosques For All initiative founded by Sahira Dar, a Scottish Muslim woman. In 2018, a House of Lords Committee report observed that mosques have “a preponderance of men on their governing bodies” and welcomed an initiative where Citizens UK and the Muslim Council of Britain are working together towards a third of all mosque board members being women (House of Lords 2018, pp. 93–94). Also in 2018, the MCB launched a programme in which twenty women receive training for leadership roles in mosques and community organizations.

In further developments in Western contexts, some Muslim women have reacted against male-dominated mosques by establishing women-focused and/or women-led mosques. The first women-only mosque in the USA, *The Women's Mosque of America*, opened in Los Angeles in 2015, mirroring women-only mosques that have existed among the Hui community in China for several hundred years (Jaschok and Jingjun 2000). In the UK, the Muslim Women's Council in Bradford have launched an initiative to establish a new mosque that, whilst open to women and men, will be led and managed by women. Women will, however, not inhabit the imam role; gender-mixed prayers will be led by a man. By accommodating to hegemonic ‘gender-normative religious practices’ (Darwin 2018), this new mosque initiative has garnered support from male Muslim scholars, including from Imam Zaid Shakir who stated that “[t]he masjid [mosque] will be well run; they're not talking about female imams, and women-led Jummah khutbahs [Friday prayers]” (Muslim Women's Council's Website 2018).

A more “gender-transgressive religious practice” (Darwin 2018) is represented by the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI), established in London in 2012. IMI accepts women leading prayer and welcomes people of diverse gender and sexual orientations. Similar inclusive initiatives have emerged in other Western countries, including the USA, France, Germany, and Denmark. The Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque in Berlin, for example, was established in 2017 by Seyran Ates, a Muslim woman who also plans to open a mosque in the UK.² In Hamburg, a female imam, Halima Krausen, writes sermons but

¹ (Faith Matters 2010) listed five criteria for ‘women-friendly mosques’: a separate prayer space for women; services and activities for women; an imam or female scholar that women can access; the inclusion of women in decision-making; and women members of mosque committees.

² See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/26/seyrans-ates-muslim-feminist-liberal-mosque-london-britain> (accessed on 18 February 2019).

does not lead gender-mixed prayers (Spielhaus 2012). The Mariam mosque in Copenhagen (established 2016) is run by a female imam, Sherin Khankan, who leads Friday prayers for women only (the mosque is open to men on other days; see (Khankan 2018)). In Norway, Thee Yezen Al-Obaide, a gay man, has announced plans to open an inclusive and feminist mosque in Oslo where women and men pray together.³

Recent scholarship has also highlighted Muslim women's activism and leadership beyond the mosque. Regarding the UK, Gilliat-Ray (2010, p. 303) notes "a growth of religious gatherings among women" outside of mosques, as well as Muslim women's participation in community organizations. Similarly, Joly and Khursheed (2017, pp. 152–54) describe an increase in Muslim women's organizations and community activism in Britain since 2000, and explain the growth as rooted in women's need to counter Islamophobia and to offer alternative voices to those of Muslim men, as well as the state's co-optation of Muslim women in the so-called war on terror (see also Brown 2008). At a local level, (Lewicki and O'Toole 2017) observe the mobilization of Muslim women in Bristol in a campaign against violence towards women. In the Norwegian context, Muslim women have mobilized in voluntary associations beyond mosques, including in youth and women's associations (Jacobsen 2011a); for other contexts see, e.g., (Hammer 2012; Minganti 2012); for online activism see (Piela 2010).

3. Research Methods

This article is based on a thematic analysis of twenty semi-structured interviews with Muslim women; ten in Oslo, Norway (five Sunni and five Shia) and ten in Leicestershire, UK (five Sunni and five Shia). The interviews, conducted in 2009–2010, were part of an EU-funded project that also included Muslim women in Madrid, Spain, as well as Christian women in the same geographical locations.⁴ This article provides an in-depth focus on the Muslim women who were interviewed in Norway and the UK. It offers the first comprehensive and detailed analysis of these women's views on and experiences of mosques (limited findings were reported in (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016, pp. 142–43).⁵

The first mosques in Norway were established by Pakistani immigrants in the 1970s, and today the country has over 130 mosques representing Muslims from diverse ethnic, national, linguistic, and political backgrounds (see Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016, pp. 10–11). In comparison, the first mosques were established in the UK in the late 19th century (in Liverpool and in Woking, Surrey). Also representing a diverse population of Muslims, the number of mosques in Britain has recently been estimated at between 850 and 1500 (Gilliat-Ray 2010, p. 181).

This research used a purposeful approach (snowball sampling) to recruit Sunni and Shia Muslim women who are active mosque goers. In both Oslo and Leicestershire, Pakistani-dominated Sunni mosques were chosen because Muslims of Pakistani backgrounds form the largest Muslim groups in Norway and the UK. The recruitment of Shia women was more complex; we found that Shia women in Oslo frequent mosques that attract people from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds, and that Shia women in Leicestershire attend either Sunni mosques in Leicester or Shia mosques in nearby cities including Nottingham and Birmingham. The interviewed women in Oslo were all from ethnic minority backgrounds and spoke fluent Norwegian; the Sunni women had origins from Pakistan (three of whom were born in Pakistan and two in Norway) and the Shia women had origins from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan (two of whom were born in Afghanistan, one in Norway, one in Iran and one in Iraq). The interviewed women in Leicestershire included Sunni and Shia women with origins from Pakistan, India and Iran (of whom three were born in Pakistan, three in Iran and two in the UK; one was born in Malawi and one was a UK-born, white convert); all of them spoke fluent English. Among

³ See <https://www.nrk.no/norge/vil-etablere-feministmoske-i-oslo-1.13567445> (accessed on 15 February 2019).

⁴ Work Package 4, 'Multicultural Citizenship: Intersections between Feminism, Ethnic Identity and Religion' was part of the FEMCIT project (www.femcit.org) funded by the European Commission's 6th Framework Programme (2007–2011).

⁵ Other themes from the full dataset discussed in (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016) include identities, citizenship, gender equality at home and in society, and women's movements and feminism.

the participants were stay-at-home mothers, students, workers in full- or part-time employment, and pensioners. Their ages ranged from the early twenties to the sixties. Some of them wore a headscarf while others did not (for further details about the sample, see [Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016](#), pp. 23–27).

All the interviewed Sunni women attended mosque; most of them attended the same mosque on a regular basis, while others frequented more than one mosque. All five Shia women in Oslo attended mosque regularly; one of them went to a variety of mosques (both Shia and Sunni) but most often to a Shia mosque. Of the five Shia women in Leicestershire, three did not attend mosques in the UK but did so in their country of origin; however, in the UK they participated in religious gatherings for women and families, including weekly women's meetings to study the Quran. Reasons these Shia women gave for why they did not attend mosque in the UK included the lack of a women's room in their local mosque and/or that women are not allowed, or that their local mosque is "too political" with reference to politics in their home country. Two of the Shia women attended mosque in the UK, with one frequenting "any mosque" (Shia and Sunni) and the other attending a Shia mosque in Birmingham.

Several of the interviewed women had leadership roles in their mosque or in the wider Muslim community. For example, a Shia woman in Leicestershire had a central role in a Muslim women's association outside the mosque, and one of the Shia women in Oslo had an important role in her mosque's women's association. Among the interviewed Sunni women, one was a voluntary member of her Leicester-based mosque's main board. A Sunni participant in Norway led her Oslo-based mosque's women's association, while another interviewee had occupied several prominent roles in the same women's association. Notably, the interviews were conducted by non-Muslim researchers, which meant that the participants gave detailed explanations of their faith and practice.

4. Findings: Analysis and Discussion

Three prominent themes emerged from the analysis of the research participants' discursive reflections on the mosque: their motivations for attending, their views on gendered religious spaces and practices, and their perspectives on the imam role and the importance of male allies.

4.1. Motivations for Attending the Mosque

Previous research has found that mosques are important spaces for Muslim women in Western contexts to learn about Islam, pray, socialize, engage in community activities (e.g., fund-raising), and gain a sense of community and belonging ([Nyhagen Predelli 2008](#); [Shannahan 2014](#)). The interviewed women in this study confirmed that they have religious, educational, social, and community motivations to attend the mosque. A prominent motivation was the emotional religious experience afforded by the mosque. Several of the women emphasized the Friday communal prayer as important to them in a religious sense. By praying together, women feel a religious connection to God and to fellow Muslim women. For example, a Shia woman in Oslo described how she feels a sense of urge to go to the mosque; her heart tells her "you must go to the mosque". She achieves a sense of tranquility by listening to the imam's prayer. Another Shia woman in Oslo recounted that she "feels closer to God" when hearing the prayer in the mosque. She experienced the Friday prayer as "a form of therapy" and noted that it helps her cope with everyday challenges related to work and family.

Resonant with findings reported by ([Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006](#)), obtaining religious knowledge for one's own sake was very important, with women recounting how they seek a better understanding of Islam via partaking in mosque sermons and listening to the imam and invited speakers. Some of the women expressed a reflexive, critical engagement with religious knowledge imparted by imams in the mosque; for example, a Sunni participant in Oslo noted how she listens to the imam's instructions and advice and that, when at home, she reads about what he said and checks its accuracy: "So I am completely certain that what the imam says is correct". Similarly, a Shia participant in Oslo observed that she obtains knowledge from the imam and checks what he said by reading the Quran at home: "Is it what Allah has said in the Quran? I can find out". The women are thus actively reflecting on whether to accept the authority of imams and the knowledge imparted by

them. Women also consulted other sources of knowledge, including television and the Internet. One participant, who noted that learning from the imam is important to her, consults a variety of sources, including other women: “many of the women who attend possess knowledge. So I go to the mosque just to get knowledge [. . .]. And I have learnt a great deal [from it]; I also watch Islam on the telly, but I also read a lot by myself”. The usage and checking of multiple sources of religious knowledge indicates an individualistic and self-reflexive approach to religion that resonates with larger trends towards individualization in Western contexts. One participant also suggested that, although women cannot formally be imams, an individual woman can be an “informal” imam in her own right: “If you have learnt Islam properly, then you are an Imam in yourself. Right?” In her view, through reflexively developing her own pious self, a woman can become her own religious authority, independent of any formal religious authority see also (Mahmood 2005; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006; Dessing 2012).

Obtaining religious knowledge and also broader societal knowledge was seen as a tool for empowerment by some of the participants. For example, one interviewee stated that “as long as one has knowledge, one has power”, while another highlighted the mosque’s ability to bring women in the local community together and provide them with knowledge. Whilst noting her own reflexive engagement with religious knowledge, a further participant also emphasized the mosque as a social space where women can be empowered to participate in society more broadly. The ability to transmit religious knowledge to one’s children was also a motivator for some of the women.

The notion that the mosque is a community centre for socialization, learning, support, and belonging shone through several of the interviews. These aspects were highlighted as particularly important to *women*; the mosque fulfils their needs to meet up with other women, sharing problems, getting to know their community, and learning about Islam and wider societal issues. However, not all the participants expressed the same need for the mosque as a social space. One interviewee, a young Norwegian-born Shia in higher education, noted that, while the mosque is an important “social meeting place for housewives”, she herself is not very keen to partake in women’s conversations. Her main motivations for attending are to pray and to learn. However, she often finds that the sermons and lectures in her mosque are repetitive and even uninspiring, as they tend to deal with the same topics (e.g., fasting, prayer, and marriage). In her view, this is because “you have to keep it simple so that it fits for everyone”. Her account differs markedly from the other participants who emphasize that they learn a lot from attending the mosque, thus illustrating that women have different needs depending on their knowledge about Islam.

The participants in this study were overwhelmingly supportive of the activities run by women’s groups in their mosques. A Sunni interviewee from Leicestershire noted that gender relations in the mosque are changing, and that the creation of the women’s group is an indication of women’s increased participation and influence:

“Ten years ago nobody would have thought of having a sub-committee of women who would have equal voting rights; and look at what we have achieved today. And it is more the [changes in] interpretation of our religion. Unfortunately, the male interpretation sometimes puts our religion in a negative light”.

The quote illustrates how women engage in debates about Islam and gender, and that mosques are spaces in which existing hegemonic gender norms and structures are contested. In this example, women fought for their say, and men accommodated their wishes. At the very least, the women’s group symbolizes a step towards the religious accommodation of more inclusive practices within mosque governance. That women have voting rights in the mosque (albeit limited to women’s own affairs) was viewed as a positive step forward for women’s participation and influence. Notably, the male-dominated mosque board is still in charge. The women’s group is required to put forward its activity proposals to the main mosque board. One participant saw this requirement as reasonable: “so at least they [the men] know what the women want, we can put forward to the men as well, this is what we want, this is how we are”. As the discussion below shows, however, other participants were more critical of the need for men’s approval.

Support for women's groups was widespread, but not uniformly positive. One participant stated that the women's group in her mosque does not give her "much of a good impression" and wanted to distance herself from what she saw as "bad culture". While the participant herself wears the headscarf, she noted that her mother and sister, who do not wear the headscarf, would feel uncomfortable in the mosque due to cultural pressure from other women: "So they, they do not dare to come to the mosque, because they know how the culture is, and they will be looked down upon". The interviewee also mentioned "cultural prescriptions" about the colour and length of clothing as limiting women's freedom. Nevertheless, she also said, "I would feel very lonely if I did not attend these gatherings. Even if I am a bit different from them". For this participant, tensions between what "culture and tradition" appears to demand of women and what "Islam" is perceived to prescribe, are difficult to negotiate see also (Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006, p. 628). Her experience suggests that the mosque is also a space that may enable "the policing of women's dress, women's voices and women's interactions with men" (Karim 2009, p. 177), as cited in (Shannahan 2014, p. 7).

4.2. Gendered Religious Spaces and Male Power

The interviewed women appreciated their local mosques because they offer permanent women-only spaces. Participants observed that mosques without dedicated spaces for women, or with only temporary and/or small spaces for women, produce barriers to women's participation. "Now we have got our own dedicated ladies gallery, it means that the mosque is much more accessible to us than it was perhaps before [. . .] because we know that space is ours, regardless", noted a Sunni woman in Leicestershire. In her mosque, the women's gallery is accessible via a women-only entrance; men enter the larger and principal prayer room via the main entrance. Sermons (and also lectures by male speakers) are transmitted to the women's room, while prayers or lectures by female speakers are heard by women only. Male voices are thus explicitly privileged in the mosque, echoing the privileging of male voices in Roman Catholic Christianity and Orthodox Judaism (Manning 1999).

Gender segregated prayer rooms is established practice in mosques that are open to women in Europe and elsewhere (Hammer 2012; Nyhagen Predelli 2008). Notably, the participants in this study did not perceive such practice as a barrier to women's inclusion. To the contrary, gender segregation was seen as providing *opportunities* for women to participate in institutional religious life (see also Nyhagen Predelli 2008; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016). For example, a Sunni woman in Leicestershire observed that her mosque provides a "ladies gallery and ladies facilities as well, so ladies can also attend the prayers. So that is quite good in that it gives the women the opportunity to pray with the imam in the mosque". Furthermore, gender segregated spatial arrangements were interpreted as providing *equality* between women and men. A Sunni woman in Oslo recounted that, in her mosque, the imam's Sunday lectures are received by women and men who inhabit different floors. All the men occupy the main prayer room, while the women watch the imam via a video projector in their own room. She noted, "So, we have gender equality, there is no different treatment. There is no oppression, because at the [mosque] there are very educated people, and the imam is very, very good". In this view, despite the gendered spatiality of the mosque, there is equality between women and men. That women are on their own also offers a safe space for women, away from the male gaze.

By inhabiting their own gendered space in the mosque, Muslim women are claiming their own participation and belonging as religiously and socially legitimate, which in turn may challenge the long-standing, overall male domination of mosques in Western Europe. At the same time, by accepting the gender segregated spatial practices that are justified on the basis of religious prescriptions and cultural traditions, including the allocation of smaller and inferior spaces, women are accommodating to 'gender-normative religious practices' (Darwin 2018) that maintain gender inequality. However, women may also engage in 'gender-transgressive religious practices' (Darwin 2018) that contest and transform hegemonic gender norms. For example, a Shia woman in Oslo noted that the noise from conversations in the women's room is so loud that it disturbs her religious experience. She and other women who wish to focus on the religious service have started to occupy back rows in the men's prayer

room: 'So in our mosque they have introduced a system where you go [and] sit on the men's side. That is, women go and sit down in the men's section so that they can follow what is being said'. When women enter the room, men move forward, and the women occupy rows at the back. About twenty women regularly partake in prayer in this way in the men's room. This practice indicates the increasing and changing role of women in Muslim congregations. It also demonstrates that some Muslim men are willing to accommodate women's presence, also when it contests hegemonic prescriptions about gender segregation during prayer. Nevertheless, this kind of accommodation of Muslim women's participation is highly unusual within mosques in Norway, the UK and Western Europe more broadly. Moreover, while it challenges the male-centeredness of the mosque, it also reproduces a gendered spatiality in which men occupy the front and women are at the back of the room.

Many of the women in this study problematized the relationships among gender, religion, and power. They indicated that men's power in the mosque and in the wider Muslim community is challenged and contested, but also that male power is deeply entrenched and difficult to change. A Sunni participant noted that "now the women are in power as well" in her mosque, while another said that, although women have equal rights in Islam, "at the end of the day we are all human beings and men don't like to give up their power". At times, women offered quite different reflections on specific practices. A further Sunni participant from Leicestershire, for example, questioned the practice that women must obtain men's approval for their activities: "If we [women] need to do anything, we have to ask the chair person, we have to ask him. Why can't we just go ahead and do it? [. . .] I am always in conflict with the ladies, why do we have to [ask], why can't we decide?" That the male-dominated mosque board requires the women's group to obtain its approval shows that men's power is entrenched. It also suggests that men may be reluctant to relinquish their power. The interviewee was also critical of women who accept the policy that men must have the final say. However, her views contrasted with that of another participant from the same mosque, who framed the consideration of women's plans by the main mosque board as supporting equality and equal rights between women and men, rather than as a case of women having to request permission from the men: "[. . .] we can have voting rights, we can vote on our own committee, we can make decisions of our own, so we can fundraise for our own activities. Basically, we have equal rights over all decisions made in the mosque". She clarified that each sub-committee (e.g., women; youth) has representation on the main board, and that the voices of sub-committees are heard via their informal board representatives. Although confirming that the women's group must seek permission from men, the participant insisted that "it is a very democratic process". In her view, gender unequal authority and decision-making structures do not negate the value of women's participation and influence in the mosque. Her interpretation thus prioritizes the actual involvement of women, rather than who is making the final decisions. Together, the above examples illustrate that changes in power structures depend on men's willingness to include women and to relinquish some of their power to women. Support from male allies appears crucial to the inclusion of women in mosque governance. However, women's own aspirations (or lack thereof) for leadership and authority should not be discounted.

Reflections about gender, religion, and power were also offered by interviewees from Oslo. Similar to (Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006, p. 628), findings from their study of German and French Muslim women, Norwegian Sunni and Shia participants talked about tensions between what they perceived as "authentic" Islam and its affordance of equal status and rights to women, versus "cultural-traditional" understandings of Islam which subordinate women to men. A Sunni woman observed that Muslim men seem threatened by women's rights:

"They [women] demand their rights. But the men have not learnt a lot [. . .], they are scared of giving rights. They might think that if we give women freedom, then they might acquire wings and fly away. And that isn't true, because we, if we know about Islam, then we also know our limits. We know how far we can fly. Or how high we can fly. And the men are a bit scared about this".

According to this interviewee, if men feel threatened by women's rights, they have no reason to do so, as women are only demanding the rights they were originally given by Islam. And because women know their "limits" as prescribed by Islam, they will not pose demands that surpass these rights.

Other Sunni and Shia women in Oslo confirmed that mosque debates about gender relations demonstrate tensions between a perceived "authentic" Islam that affords equality and rights to women, versus "cultural" practices that demand women's subordination. For example, a Sunni participant observed that Islam itself does not oppress women, and that tensions only arise when people interpret the Quran in the wrong way. Noting that women and men are equal in Islam, a Shia participant said: "Men have power. But that is completely wrong. Because Mohammed did not do this himself [he treated his wives equally]. But today, it is like the men are saying 'oh, we have the power', but they don't really have the knowledge". Similarly, another Shia participant noted that "if you go to the Quran, then there is gender equality. But not in the real world [. . .]. Men always want to be above, [to] have power over women". These interviewees thus adopted a "religion is innocent" discourse, where patriarchy, and not Islam, is the culprit of any infringements to women's rights (see also [Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016](#), p. 208).

4.3. Views on the Imam Role and the Importance of Male Allies

Mosques are typically governed by male-dominated boards, and the main religious leadership role is held by the male imam. Many imams have been "imported" to Western Europe from countries in Asia and the Middle East, often lacking necessary language skills and socio-cultural knowledge ([Gilliat-Ray 2010](#); [Vogt 2000](#)). In response to demands for "home-grown" imams, imam training is offered at institutions such as the *Markfield Institute of Higher Education* in the UK. Gilliat-Ray ([Gilliat-Ray 2010](#), pp. 164–65) has noted that "Muslim women seek the counsel of imams on issues concerning marriage, children, education, divorce, and so on, yet few imams have been trained in counselling skills, or have the ability to relate Islamic law to the realities of contemporary Britain". [Nyhagen Predelli \(2008, p. 250\)](#) reported that imams in Norway thought it important for women to attend mosque for learning and social activities, yet recommended that it is best for women to pray at home. There is, however, hardly any existing research on women's access to and use of male imams from women's own perspective (see [Taj 2013](#)), nor of women's views on female imams. This study addresses that research gap.

The interviewees imparted a mixture of positive and negative views of their local imams. The Sunni women were particularly appreciative of their local imams and spoke about their admiration and respect for them as providers of reliable and trustworthy religious knowledge and as supporters of women's inclusion and participation in the mosque. A Sunni woman in Leicestershire, for example, said that she attends the mosque as it offers services for women and because the imam is very open and supportive of women's activities. She admires the chief imam as he can be asked any question and always provides good answers: "we ask him, and he puts us straight". Men ask questions directly to the imam, while women put their questions in writing and pass them on to the main prayer room. Another participant spoke of the imam as "brilliant; he answers your questions in a simple way and makes you understand and makes you feel like you want to come back [. . .]. And every time I am going, I am coming out with more and more strength and knowledge". Similarly, this woman imparted her admiration for the imam: "The imam, every Friday, when I go to the mosque, he does his speech. I only go for the speech; he has a lot of power in his voice and you want to sit there and listen to him". Another participant described her imam as "a very good imam who has always included the women". A Sunni woman in Leicestershire also spoke of the mosque's chair as promoting an inclusive approach towards women; she admires him as someone who "is always pushing the involvement of women, not just in the mosque, everywhere [. . .]. Most men don't bother, they are just talking for men, or for themselves". Together, these statements demonstrate women's appreciation of imams who possess religious knowledge and are inclusive towards women. They also indicate the importance of male

allies for women's inclusion in the mosque. Importantly, women do not take such support for granted; it is noted and valued.

Sunni women in Oslo spoke in similar ways about admiration and respect for their local imam as a source of religious knowledge and supporter of women's inclusion. Noting the imam's influence on her faith and her admiration for him, one participant said: "Many people talk about strict imams, but I feel that [my imam] is a very nice person and you get answers to everything you ask. It is very easy to communicate with him". Another Sunni woman in Oslo emphasized her local imam's support for the establishment of a women's group at the mosque. She recalled that the imam came and sat in front of all the women, giving advice on their leadership election. His advice was to elect a leader who "is kind, and that you can cooperate with", regardless of the extent of her religious knowledge. The women went on to elect her—a woman who was "not so much practicing the religion, and I didn't wear the hijab, I wore Western clothing and still do". This imam is viewed as caring and engaged, and that he speaks out against "gender-policing" (Shannahan 2014) of women's clothing is appreciated. The participants emphasize the imam's support for women's inclusion in the mosque; in short, he is perceived as women's ally.

Some of the interviewed women expressed more critical views, especially of imams whom they perceive are supporting conservative views that prescribe male power and authority as representing "true Islam". According to these participants, such conservative views are rooted in "cultural traditions" that have emerged as a result of patriarchal and false interpretations of Islam. These women are engaging in a discursive "politics of authenticity" (Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006, p. 637); see also (Jacobsen 2011b), where practices that subordinate women are challenged via appeals to a "true", "original" or "authentic" Islam that is seen to afford women's rights and gender equality. Such critical views were expressed by Sunni and Shia women alike in both Oslo and Leicestershire. For example, a Sunni participant from Leicestershire recounted the discrepancies she finds between what she reads in the Quran and what some imams impart about gender relations:

"And when it comes to the Quran a lot of things I do read; and it does say equal things for women and men. But what happens is most of the imams they think no; it is to do with the culture as well and what country you come from, how you understand religion, and they shove the women in the background because they are afraid that the women will come forward and probably take over".

Her practice of self-reflexive knowledge acquisition supports the earlier finding that women seek autonomy and empowerment via multiple routes to knowledge, including their own reading of religious texts. Furthermore, her statements suggest that some imams (and also other men) seek to protect male power and privilege by actively marginalizing women; "But it is the men that don't want the women to step forward. I think they are afraid for themselves". A similar analysis was imparted by a Sunni woman in Oslo: "Men are worse [than women] because they are more dominating. They have learnt religion from their parents, from their local imams. An imam who reads the Quran but does not understand what the Quran says". Again, we see how women actively engage in a discursive positioning of "authentic Islam" as supportive of women's rights and gender equality in order to defend women's inclusion and participation in the mosque and beyond.

Some of the interviewed Shia women also expressed critical sentiments about 'traditional imams', but from a different perspective. A Shia woman in Leicestershire, for example, stated that she is critical of mullahs (imams) who insist that it is women's responsibility to take care of the house: 'it is not their [women's] obligation. You believe this if you don't read Islam, and if you only hear what the mullah says in the mosque'. Her interpretation of 'authentic Islam' was also shared by a Shia woman from Oslo, who stated that a wife's only duty to her husband is to satisfy him sexually. To do housework or raise children are not formally women's duties; however, if they are taken on, they will be rewarded. These views are characteristic of some Shia traditions (see Mir-Hosseini 2000, pp. 61–72). Within traditional Islam, women's place is considered to be in the home, but modernist interpretations of Islam support women's rights to education and employment (Ahmed 1992; Esposito 1982).

While the interviewees expressed mixed views of imams, they all agreed with the existing hegemonic Islamic norm that only men can be imams and lead prayer for men and gender-mixed audiences. They did, however, support the work of female teachers and scholars towards women and children.⁶ The rule that women cannot be imams was seen as rooted in religious prescriptions that are not up for debate. For example, a Sunni woman in Leicestershire stated that “in our religion we can’t have a lady imam, that is strictly no. You have lady priests [in Christian churches] but we can’t have, we can’t lead the congregation, we have to follow”. Similarly, a Sunni woman in Oslo declared that “the imam is he who leads prayer, and a woman cannot lead prayer”. Participants noted that women are not obliged to pray in the mosque (as are men), and that they are not allowed to pray during menstruation. These reasons were used to legitimate that women are not suited to become imams. “We are not pure, we are not allowed to pray”, said one interviewee, while another noted the inconvenience of having a woman leading prayer when she would have to be regularly absent from the mosque due to her period. These women’s views were echoed by a further participant who also noted that women are expressly forbidden to pray during the menstrual cycle: “[women] are not pure, we are not allowed to pray. We can enter the mosque, but we can’t pray or lead prayers, so for that reason if there is a woman imam then it is not sure that she will be able to lead prayers as needed”. The notion of female “impurity” during menstruation was not challenged by any of the participants, and the possibility of post-menopausal women being imams was not entertained. One participant also mentioned women giving birth and breastfeeding as practical hinders for women.

The last woman quoted above also noted that she had never heard a demand from women “to be able to stand in front of a congregation and be imam”. While indicating that the idea of female imams is a “non-issue” among mainstream Muslim communities, this example is also illustrative of a larger point; namely, that the interviewed women are engaging in a complex discourse of equality as difference, where gender equality as “equal value” is compatible with gender differentiation in the religious sphere, in the family, and within society more broadly see (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016).

In contrast to other women in the study, a Sunni participant from Leicestershire was aware of an event in Oxford, UK, where a woman, Amina Wadud, had led a gender-mixed *Salah* (prayer) see (Hammer 2012), thus demonstrating that the issue of women leading prayer is at least to some extent debated. Neither she nor her mosque approves:

“So it was literally told to the community that it was going on and a woman [was] performing prayer. And behind the woman, the men and women [were together], this is not right, this is not right. What God and the Prophet’s rules were, that the man should be performing, and the men and women came behind to pray, but women can’t perform [prayer], because it is not right. God does not allow it, simply, and the priest [imam] doesn’t allow you. So, we won’t debate about it”.

The same participant also suggested that women have all the equality they need and want: “We have got all the freedom [we need], we are going to mosque, we are performing our prayers, we are joining events, we are celebrating everything, we are praying and we are getting chances to express our feelings, how we feel and what should be done”. Despite observable gender differences pertaining to spatial segregation in the mosque and the leading of gender-mixed sermons and prayers by men only, the interviewed women claim equality with men. As suggested earlier, within a discourse of equality as difference, it is possible to reconcile notions of equality (as equal value) with difference.

5. Conclusions

This study has shown that women have multiple motivations for attending the mosque, including learning about Islam, praying, socializing, engaging in community activities, obtaining emotional support, and a feeling of belonging. Women report profound religious experiences in the mosque, such

⁶ (Kalmbach 2012, p. 24) argues that the accommodation of Muslim women leaders within religious contexts depends on women’s willingness ‘to support the status quo with respect to gendered norms’.

as feeling connected to God and to fellow Muslims. The participants engage in self-reflexive processes of knowledge acquisition; they develop their own religious selves and identities by comparing and contrasting multiple sources of religious information. They articulate a discourse about “authentic Islam” which is juxtaposed to “cultural-traditional” perceptions of Islam. This “authentic Islam” is presented as contributing to the women’s development of a “correct” or “true” pious, autonomous self and to their own empowerment vis-à-vis men who are perceived as denying Muslim women their rightful status and equal value due to “incorrect” interpretations of Islam (see also [Jacobsen 2011b](#); [Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006](#)).

The analysis has also demonstrated that unequal gender relations are both maintained and contested in the mosque. The very presence of women constitutes a challenge to the overwhelmingly male-dominated mosque spaces. Moreover, women’s groups play a vital role in facilitating women’s increasing influence in mosques, including their (slow) inclusion in mosque governance. Despite these developments, however, mosques remain male-dominated, something which the women in this study partly accepted and partly contested. The women accepted and welcomed gender segregated spaces, as it afforded them opportunities for participation. The example of women quietly occupying the back seats of the men’s room in a mosque in Oslo, however, shows that women may negotiate the gendering of space and that men might be willing to accommodate women’s requests in this regard.

Women in this study were critical of men who cling on to power and who are unwilling to accept more gender-inclusive governance structures. In the words of one participant, men are scared that women “might acquire wings and fly away” if they are given any influence; this would be unlikely, she observed, as when women know Islam, they also “know their limits”. Again, women made references to men who invoke “cultural practices” in order to hold women back, whilst the women made discursive appeals to an “authentic Islam” as valuing women’s contributions. A notable finding is that women express strong support and admiration for men who accommodate women’s participation in the mosque. The importance of male allies in women’s fight for inclusion should not be underestimated; it seems to make a real difference in terms of women’s participation, women’s views on the religious authority of imams and experiences of the mosque as a space for religious learning and prayer, and women’s sense of belonging to the mosque and its community.

On the other hand, the interviewed women supported the notion that only men can be imams, and did not perceive this as any hindrance to women’s participation in the mosque. Rather, the male privilege of inhabiting the role of imam was portrayed as justified and legitimate based on natural–biological differences between women and men related to reproduction (menstruation, birth, and breastfeeding) and concomitant perceptions of “purity” and “impurity”. Moreover, gender differences pertaining to religious authority were interpreted within an overall framework of equality as difference, where the allocation of different roles to women and men can legitimately be interpreted as “equality” due to the equal value assigned to both genders (see [Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016](#)).

The findings indicate that a binary reading of Muslim women’s religious discourses and practices as representing either subordination or resistance does not capture the complexity of Muslim women’s reflexive engagement with sources of religious knowledge and with male power and authority. The interviewed Muslim women engage in a complex discursive positioning of “authentic Islam” as supportive of gender equality and women’s rights and of women’s inclusion in the mosque, whilst also invoking natural–biological and religious justifications for the ubiquitous unequal allocation of mosque space, power, and authority in men’s favor.

In terms of the mosque as a gendered space, the participants were positive towards their own accommodation via segregated spaces for women, the welcoming of women’s groups and their autonomy and decision-making, and the dissemination of an “authentic Islam” that values the inclusion and participation of women. In this regard they differ from other Muslim women who seek to expand women’s inclusion beyond the allocation of prayer space and inclusion in mosque governance. Some women in [Lewicki and O’Toole \(2017, p. 163\)](#) study from Bristol, for example, supported “equal responsibility in ritual leadership to women, including the delivery of sermons and prayers to mixed

congregations". Further research is needed on Muslim women's demands for equality and inclusion in mosques and of Muslim men's (including imams') reactions to such demands, and on the effects of current initiatives such as the women-led mosque initiative in Bradford, UK and the Muslim Council of Britain's training scheme for women. Further research should also address the significance of age and generational differences, as well as differences pertaining to national–ethnic identities, when it comes to the issue of gender in mosques.

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