

## Dr Line Nyhagen, Reader in Sociology, Loughborough University – written evidence (CCE0077)

### *The role of religious faith in the understanding and practicing of citizenship and civic engagement among religious women, with an emphasis on Muslim and Christian women*

#### 1.0 Summary

1.1. Religious faith provides a significant source of identity and meaning to many Muslim and Christian women. Religious faith often underpins these women's sense of belonging to their local communities, to families, friends and neighbours, and thus also provides emotional ties to places and to people. Moreover, religious belonging provides individuals with opportunities for participation and citizenship practice. However, religious beliefs and practices can provide both barriers and resources to participation within and beyond religious communities.

1.2. For Muslim women, Islam provides moral guidance on how to best live your life, just as Christianity provides moral guidance for Christian women. The women in my research equate being a "good Muslim" or a "good Christian" with being a good citizen. Some of the key values that both Muslim and Christian women associate with being a good citizen are: participation in local communities including in religious contexts; caring for family, friends and neighbours; obeying the law; voting in political elections; and having compassion, tolerance and respect towards other people. Despite their religious distinctiveness, there is a considerable commonality between Muslim and Christian women's views of what citizenship is and what constitutes a "good citizen". Muslim and Christian women's wants are the same: to live in peace and care for their families, friends and neighbours, to contribute to society by playing an active part in local communities, and to feel that they belong by connecting with others in a range of social contexts.

1.3 While Christian women feel that their religious identities and practices are largely accepted by the wider society, Muslim women report that their faith is constantly questioned, stereotyped and stigmatized by the wider society. Muslim women experience discrimination, harassment and stereotyping on the street, on public transport, in educational and employment contexts, in media outlets, and in the public sphere more broadly. These experiences have a detrimental impact on Muslim women's sense of well-being and feeling valued as full and equal citizens. Religious hatred and discrimination should be addressed in educational programmes for children and young people. In this regard, the right of women to wear religious dress that signifies their faith must be underscored. The reporting of religious hate crimes should specifically note gender-based forms of such crimes in order to highlight women victims and address their needs.

1.4 Many Muslim women seek opportunities to actively participate in their own religious communities by attending the mosque and engaging in other community organisations. It is important to them that mosques are able to accommodate women's participation via designated spaces for women, and also that mosques afford women access to roles in mosque management and teaching. Importantly, many Muslim women view gender segregated mosques as providing them with an opportunity for participation, rather than as a barrier to their participation. As a response to the general lack of women in mosque governance structures, some Muslim women are developing women-led mosques (e.g. in London and in Bradford).<sup>1</sup> Muslim community

---

<sup>1</sup> For the Inclusive Mosque Initiative in London, see <http://inclusivemosqueinitiative.org/>; for plans by the Muslim

organisations, including mosques, should be encouraged to include women in their management and teaching. This encouragement should be extended to all faith based organisations that are in receipt of any form of public funding.

1.5 Muslim women's own community organisations should be more widely recognised, listened to and consulted with by UK government institutions, as well as by other civil society organisations including male-dominated Muslim community organisations and also secular women's organisations. Muslim women's organisations provide the best insights into Muslim women's experiences and needs.

## 2.0 Evidence base

2.1 I am an established academic at Loughborough University, with twenty years' experience of researching the lives and experiences of religious women and men, with a special focus on Christian and Muslim women in European contexts including the UK, Norway and Spain. The evidence herein is based on my research, which has been published in a range of scholarly books and academic journals.

2.2 Selected relevant publications:

2.2.1 Nyhagen, L & B. Halsaa (2016). *Religion, Gender and Citizenship: Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Available at:

<http://www.palgrave.com/kr/book/9781137405333>

2.2.2 Nyhagen, L. (2016). 'Lived nations – whose nations? The quest for belonging'. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 24 (2): 171-176.

2.2.3. Aune, K. & L. Nyhagen (2016). 'Religion, Politics and Gender'. In Jeffrey Haynes, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 335-351.

2.2.4. Nyhagen, L. (2015). 'Conceptualizing Lived Religious Citizenship: A Case-Study of Christian and Muslim Women in Norway and the United Kingdom'. *Citizenship Studies* 19 (6-7): 768-784.

2.2.5. Nyhagen Predelli, L., B. Halsaa & C. Thun (2012). "'Citizenship is not a word I use': How Women's Movement Activists Understand Citizenship", in Beatrice Halsaa, Sasha Roseneil and Sevil Sümer, eds., *Remaking Citizenship in Multicultural Europe: Women's Movements, Gender and Diversity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pages 188-212.

2.2.6. Nyhagen Predelli, L. (2008), "Religion, citizenship and participation: A case study of immigrant Muslim women in Norwegian mosques". *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15 (3): 241-260.

2.2.7. Nyhagen Predelli, L. (2004). "Interpreting Gender in Islam: A Case Study of Immigrant Muslim Women in Oslo, Norway". *Gender & Society*, vol. 18, no. 4, August 2004: 473-493.

See also:

2.2.8 Nyhagen, L. (2017). 'Britain's "Missing" Muslim Women'. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/britains-missing-muslim-women-80436>.

2.2.9 Nyhagen, L. (2016). 'Good Muslims' or 'Good Citizens': how Muslim Women Feel about Integration'. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/good-muslims-or-good-citizens-how-muslim-women-feel-about-integration-58796>.

## 3.0 Religious faith as providing resources and barriers to citizenship and civic engagement

---

Women's Council in Bradford to build a women-led mosque, see <https://www.womenledmosque.co.uk/>. For a further initiative in this direction, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/26/seyran-ates-muslim-feminist-liberal-mosque-london-britain>

3.1 Muslim women participants in my research referred to stereotypes in society at large as producing significant barriers to their lived citizenship. Due to negative media portrayals of “Islam” and “Muslims”, and to isolated terrorist incidents perpetrated by people calling themselves “Muslims” in the UK and in other geographical contexts, some Muslim women felt they have to demonstrate that they are “a good Muslim”, and that “good Muslims can be good citizens”, so as to counter stereotypes. For example, one participant stated that Muslims ‘... *have to be good role models; we have to be good, responsible members of society because that is going to reflect on our religion... You have to portray your religion in the best possible light, because you can damage the image*’. It was also suggested that because some Muslim women are ‘so visible and identifiable’ due to their dress, they are under particular pressure to demonstrate that they are good citizens. Another participant noted that she is not as comfortable in public spaces as she was before, thus suggesting that a fear of being harassed. She also observed that an increasing number of Muslim women are wearing the hijab and the practice is therefore becoming increasingly normalized. Because of negative media portrayals, she also felt that Muslim women are under scrutiny and need to demonstrate that they ‘are normal’. The interviewed women underscored participating and contributing to society as positive values and actions that should be promoted by Muslims in order to increase society’s acceptance of Islam and of Muslims. But Muslim women participants also talked about uncomfortable experiences of harassment and discrimination in the workplace, in educational settings or in public spaces like city streets and public transport. Such experiences were in some instances directly associated with the wearing of a headscarf while in other cases it was also related to the woman’s skin colour. Racism, religious prejudice and gender inequalities thus intersect and undermine Muslim women’s sense of wellbeing and of being accepted as full and equal citizens.

3.2. Religious community organisations can be said to inhabit a ‘borderland’ between the private and public spheres, in as much as they are often left alone with little or no public interference (exemplified via exemptions granted to religious organisations from equality legislation) whilst at the same time being important arenas for engagement and participation beyond the spheres of home and/or work. Historically, the voluntary sector has provided women in particular with opportunities to move beyond more restrictive roles in the home and to engage in charitable and political activities that have a considerable impact on the wider societies in which they live. Muslim women in the UK have a long history of mobilization and organization to support local communities, and this history should be made more visible in media and educational resources. Advocates of Muslim women’s rights and Islamic feminism are also becoming increasingly vocal and visible and deserve to be recognised and heard by UK government institutions as well as by other Muslim community organisations and by secular women’s organisations.

3.3. Religious places of worship such as mosques provide vital arenas for women’s sense of belonging and participation as well as for contributing to the wider community. Traditionally, women have been excluded from and/or marginalized within mosques due to a total lack of space for women, or the allocation of an inferior and limited space to women compared to that of men. However, purpose-built mosques are increasingly incorporating separate spaces for women and are thus accommodating women’s participation, albeit in gender segregated ways. Although some mosques are becoming more gender-inclusive, there are still mosques from which women are excluded. Women’s participation in religious organisations may thus be restricted and even denied through male authority and processes of exclusion. In my research, Muslim women reported that while some mosques now accommodate women through designated spaces, there are others that do not have a space at all for women, or only have a small space for women’s prayer, and this was

deemed to produce barriers to women's participation. Other Muslim community organisations may also be male-dominated and should be encouraged to operate in more gender-inclusive ways.

3.4 Muslim women in my research are very appreciative of their mosques, which offer women-only spaces via a separate entrance. This enables women to take part in gender segregated religious services, where men are seated in the main prayer room and women in a separate room. The interviewees stated that women feel comfortable coming to the mosque because they have their own space, where they can talk about their personal lives as well as partake in religious prayers. Some also mentioned the introduction of formal women's committees that have decision-making power in relation to women's activities and fundraising as a positive development. For example, an interviewee noted that, in her mosque, *"ten years ago nobody would have thought of having a sub-committee of women who would have equal voting rights and look what we have achieved today"*. She saw the role of the women's committee to be that of *'empower[ing women] to participate in mainstream society, using their religious knowledge'*. Religious organisations can thus function as a resource to increase Muslim women's participation and influence in local communities and as a pathway to further participation in wider society. Muslim community organisations such as mosques can provide women with designated spaces and actively encourage women's participation and leadership. Muslim community organisations should also encourage women's participation in wider society, through education, employment and volunteering and impart that women's participation is both valued and supported by Islamic teachings. The UK government should encourage and support Muslim women's own organisations as well as their participation in mosques through its funding policies and other policy initiatives.

3.5. One of the strengths of British Muslim communities is their diverse organisational landscape, be it in the form of mosques and other community organisations, including women's organisations that work to support Muslim women (e.g., the Muslim Women's Council of Bradford; the Muslim Women's Network; Maslaha, and others).<sup>2</sup> Muslim women's organisations are legitimate representatives of Muslim women's voices, and as such they need to be heard in governance and decision-making processes that involve stakeholders such as government institutions, secular women's organisations, and other Muslim community organisations.

#### 4.0 Supporting and increasing the civic engagement of religious women

4.1. The government should further encourage the reporting of hate crimes, discrimination and harassment to the police where religious individuals are targeted because of their faith. In particular, government should encourage awareness and reporting to the police of abuse where religion intersects with other identity characteristics such as gender (e.g. when women are abused, discriminated and harassed due to their choice of religious dress). The coordinated work of the Community Security Trust, Tell Mama, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Department for Communities and Local Government police in producing a guide for those affected by hate crimes is commendable.<sup>3</sup> However, while the current definition of 'hate crime' applied by these stakeholders refers to *'a person's race or perceived race; religion or perceived religion; sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation; disability or perceived disability and any crime motivated by hostility or prejudice against a person who is transgender or perceived to be transgender'*, the definition does not include the term 'gender' and gender-based hate crime.<sup>4</sup> In

---

<sup>2</sup> For the Muslim Women's Council, see <http://www.muslimwomenscouncil.org.uk/>; for the Muslim Women's Network UK, see <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/>; for Maslaha, see <http://www.maslaha.org/>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hate-Crime-A-guide-for-those-affected.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See 'Hate Crime. A Guide for Those Affected', 2017, p. 7, published by the Community Security Trust, Tell MAMA,

this regard, the work undertaken by Nottinghamshire Police to include misogyny as a hate crime<sup>5</sup> should be implemented at national level. More attention needs to be paid to *gender-based religious hate crimes*. Such crimes involve intersections between misogyny and religious hatred and can they can be expressed by individuals, organisations, and media outlets.

4.2. The government should seek to combat religious hatred and discrimination through educational programmes for children and young people and also through clear political messages to the wider British public about the need for religious tolerance and the value of religious freedom, including the right of women to wear religious dress. Religious women in the UK, including those from ethnic minority groups, have a long history of mobilization and organization to support local communities. This history should be made more visible in media and educational resources.

4.3. The government should approach the issue of religious faith and citizenship from a broad perspective, where individuals, groups and communities from religious and ethnic minority groups are not viewed in isolation (and thus are potentially further stigmatized) but are seen in relation to individuals, groups and communities of other faiths and none, including the majority faith (Christianity) and secular beliefs. In particular, a political discourse of 'difference' between Muslims and other people in Britain must be replaced by a discourse that emphasizes the commonly shared values that are held by people across religious-secular boundaries. As evidenced by my research, Christian and Muslim women share the notion that a "good citizen" is someone who participates in their community, care for their family, friends and neighbours, obeys the law, votes in political elections, and shows compassion, tolerance and respect towards other people. A constructive step would be for the UK government to talk about 'British values' not as uniquely British, but as resonating with universal values relating to democracy, rights, duties, participation and caring for others.

4.4. The government should actively consult more with representatives from Muslim women's organisations in policy-making processes. These organisations provide important counterpoints and corrections to the views that are imparted by male leaders of male-dominated religious organisations where women may be denied a voice. The government should also consider actively requiring male-dominated Muslim organisations to nominate women for participation in consultations with government.

4.5 Muslim organisations (e.g. mosques and civil society/third sector organisations) should be actively encouraged to include Muslim women in their activities and thus provide arenas that support and enhance further public participation and engagement by Muslim women. In particular, mosques in Britain should be encouraged to provide ample spaces for women's participation in religious prayer and other activities in the mosque, and to include women in their governance and decision-making processes. These recommendations should be extended to religious organisations across all faiths and none. In this regard, efforts by the government to improve the gender balance on business boards through voluntary means could be replicated for voluntary sector boards. As a minimum, all voluntary sector organisations that receive public funding should be encouraged to report on and improve on (where needed) the gender balance of their own governing structures. Thus, when religious community organisations (or so-called faith based organisations) receive public funding (e.g. to provide public services or to implement public policies), they could be asked to demonstrate the participation of women in the management and spending of public resources.

---

The Crown Prosecution Service and the Department for Communication and Local Government. Available at: <https://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hate-Crime-A-guide-for-those-affected.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-36775398>

*6 September 2017*