

Gendered Experiences in Mosques:
The Utilization of Sacred Space as a Tool for Marginalization
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Introduction

Houses of worship serve as reflections of theological beliefs as well as material reminders of the power of religion on the landscape. Historically, mosques have served as houses of worship for those practicing Islam and also serve as the center of communal life within Islamic communities around the world.¹ The word “Mosque,” an Anglicized term coming from the Arabic word “Masjid”, which means “place of prostration,” refers to spaces intended for communal, group worship.² However, despite the intent of serving as a communal house of worship, men and women do not experience mosques equally. Modern mosques tend to create a patriarchal structure where women do not have access to the same space, duties, or rights as men. The inherent and unequal differences between women’s and men’s spaces in the mosque as well as the marginalization of women’s space in the mosque has not factored prominently within geographic literature. Studies have tended to focus on the marginalization of women in Islamic public spaces or on the more extensive role these public and private spaces play in shaping the identities of Muslim women, but few researchers have clearly questioned the ways in which women negotiate the divided space of the mosque. This spatial differentiation provides geographers a suitable foundation to explore the gendered divisions of mosques and the effect they have on the identities of Muslim women.

This study seeks to give voice to Muslim women’s experiences within the space of the mosque through textual analysis, participatory research, and a case study. Existing literature on the notion of space as a tool for marginalization reveals that the ways spaces are demarcated can directly influence how they are experienced. Research on Muslim sacred space, the physical divisions of the mosque, as well as the female presence within mosques too often overlook the role of experience. This research expands on existing literature through a case study of college-age Muslim women on the University of Mary Washington campus. In-depth interviews clearly show that gendered, spatial differences exist within mosques. The spatial inequalities within mosques can affect the identities of Muslim women as the divided space often shapes the experiences of the women utilizing it, and geographers truly have a spatial avenue to explore these gendered divisions.

Sacred Space in Islam

Within geography, sacred space has traditionally been understood, following Eliade’s definition, as the location of an event that breaks the plane of ordinary existence.³ Eliade describes this quality as hierophany, meaning the sacred revealing itself to people. Hierophany can manifest itself in the form of space and thus sacred spaces are fundamentally different than

¹. Mattson, Ingrid. “Women, Islam, and Mosques”. *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (2006): 615-618.

². Woodlock, Rachel. “Praying Where They Don’t Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Access to Mosques in Melbourne, Australia.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30.2 (2010): 265-278.

³. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959.

profane spaces; they are breaks existing in the homogeneity of space.⁴ Space attaining the attribute of sacred hinges on the experiences of those entering, and one's position within the space affects their experiences and views of the space.⁵ In Shiner's analysis of the common hearth, he discusses how proximity to a manifestation of the sacred can define a space for those experiencing it.⁶ Throughout history, sacred spaces have existed as places where acts of radical equality occur. In early Christian churches, liminal experiences, one of the many stages of ritual, hinged on the equality of all people including husbands and wives, masters and slaves, as well as Greeks and Jews. This has caused many to consider houses of worship as thresholds of equality.⁷ However, much of the existing literature regarding sacred space and equality lacks a nuanced analysis regarding the ways in which men and women navigate sacred spaces differently.

Mosques serve both as houses of worship and centers for communal life within Islam. In modern times, mosques are separated through different methods based on gender.⁸ However, this separation of men and women within mosques has not always existed: "The first mosque established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina (Saudi Arabia) in 610 C.E., was alive with the presence of women,"⁹ and men and women both had equal access to this space.¹⁰ There is evidence that no separation or partitioning of gender occurred within the mosque, and no separate entrance for women existed.¹¹ However, the streets of Medina were not typically viewed as safe for women, so those who lived far from the Prophet Muhammad's mosque were told to pray in their houses.¹² There also began to be more of a perceived threat to chastity and modesty related to male and female encounters separate from the home.¹³ With the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Sunni Laws were created with the intent to replace traditions of full female participation within the Prophet's mosque, instead encouraging women not to visit mosques

4. Ibid.

5. Finlayson, Caitlin, and Victor Mesev. "Emotional Encounters in Sacred Spaces: The Case of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." *The Professional Geographer* 66.3 (2014): 436-442.

6. Shiner, Larry E. "Sacred Space, Profane Space, Human Space". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40, no. 4 (1972): 425-435.

7. Browning, Don S. *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers, in Modern Societies*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007.

8. Karim, Jamillah. *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

9. Mattson, Ingrid. "Women, Islam, and Mosques". *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (2006): 615.

10. Kahera, Akel I. *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender & Aesthetics*. US: University of Texas Press, 2002.

11. Reda, Nevin. "Women in the Mosque: Historical Perspectives on Segregation". *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, no. 2 (2004).

12. Mattson, Ingrid. "Women, Islam, and Mosques". *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (2006): 615-618.

13. Ibid.

because of fear of “sexual disruption to the public space.”¹⁴ However, throughout the twentieth century, as European countries began colonizing Muslim nations, Western thoughts and ideas began spreading.¹⁵ A viewpoint arose that through improved technology, it was becoming “increasingly unlikely that women who remained in their homes were better protected from temptation than those who went to the mosque.”¹⁶ Similarly, these new Western ideas were making women susceptible to secular trends, and allowing them to visit mosques was a way of preventing this.¹⁷ From this time period forward, female mosque attendance has been on the rise.¹⁸

The increase in female participation within mosques has forced mosques to make some internal changes. The most obvious example of this is the physical separation of men and women within the mosque.¹⁹ Genders are separated in mosques mainly to avoid physical contact during the Jumu’ah prayer, which occurs every Friday and requires participants to bow and prostrate as one unit.²⁰ The communal aspect is meant to create a sense of unity within the mosque, but the gender division complicates this.²¹ Men have a duty to attend Jumu’ah prayers, whereas women do not.²² In the Western world, many mosques are built so that men and women share the same room but are divided by either a curtain or partition.²³ In this scenario, the men occupy the section directly in front of the imam, and the women are behind the men.²⁴ The typical defense for this arrangement is that it makes it so men are unable to see the body shapes of women when performing the prayer.²⁵ This is the most common setup in the United States; as of 2000, 66 percent of US mosques were separated in this fashion.²⁶ There is another less common scenario where a curtain runs down the center of the room, and men and women are separated on either side.²⁷ In this case, women can see the imam rather than listen to him over a

¹⁴. Woodlock, Rachel. “Praying Where They Don’t Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Access to Mosques in Melbourne, Australia.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30.2 (2010): 272.

¹⁵. Mattson, Ingrid. “Women, Islam, and Mosques”. *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (2006): 615-618.

¹⁶. Ibid, 615.

¹⁷. Ibid.

¹⁸. Ibid.

¹⁹. Karim, Jamillah. *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

²⁰. Ibid.

²¹. Ibid.

²². Awde, Nicholas, ed. *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qur’an and Hadiths*. New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2005.

²³. Karim, Jamillah. *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

²⁴. Ibid.

²⁵. Ibid.

²⁶. Ibid.

²⁷. Ibid.

loudspeaker or watch him on a television as they do in the first scenario.²⁸ Women exist in mosques within spatial domains controlled by men.²⁹ The division of the room based on gender perpetuates the idea that women are responsible for the male sexualization of the female body. If men are the ones being potentially distracted by the female body but the women are the ones being grouped into a different area, this reflects larger gender disparities within Islamic culture.

One problematic circumstance within many mosques is that the prayer rooms are not only separate but also unequal.³⁰ The women's section is typically much smaller and less decorated.³¹ Similarly, the entrance to the women's side is usually on the rear side or through a back door.³² This inequality marginalizes women by putting them on the outskirts of the community.³³ Leadership within the mosque often attributes these physical inequalities to a higher male attendance rate.³⁴ As of 2000, women made up only 15 percent of the congregations within American mosques.³⁵ It may be logical to assign less space if there is such attendance disparity. However, these smaller, peripheral female spaces also perpetuate the ideas that women do not need to, and potentially should not, attend Jumu'ah prayers.³⁶

Prescribed gender roles extend beyond the mosque and into the sphere of the home. Men are intended to be family providers, whereas women have duties related to housekeeping and child rearing.³⁷ Women can lose status within the family if they enter the male sphere publically.³⁸ This female sphere of domestic labor creates a general sentiment that women should pray at home, since this is where most of their duties are centralized.³⁹ Further, women do not have duties within the mosque like their male counterparts, and this reiterates the message that it is not important for them to attend service.⁴⁰ Women often use this lack of prescribed religious duty as a reason not to attend Jumu'ah prayers.⁴¹

Throughout Islam, most women seem to have accepted the separation of genders within mosques.⁴² Researchers find that they are unlikely to question this spatial division, and instead

²⁸. Ibid.

²⁹. Kahera, Akel I. *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender & Aesthetics*. US: University of Texas Press, 2002.

³⁰. Karim, Jamillah. *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

³¹. Ibid.

³². Ibid.

³³. Ibid.

³⁴. Ibid.

³⁵. Ibid.

³⁶. Ibid.

³⁷. Predelli, Line N. "Interpreting Gender in Islam: A Case Study of Immigrant Muslim Women in Oslo, Norway." *Gender and Society* 18, no. 4 (August 2004): 473-493).

³⁸. Ibid.

³⁹. Ibid.

⁴⁰. Ibid.

⁴¹. Ibid.

⁴². Ibid.

tend to cherish and appreciate that they have a place to gather as a community of women.⁴³ The separate space is often viewed as empowering by these women because while the space may be smaller, drabber, and less visible, they are thankful for any space at all.⁴⁴ However, when women accept these inequalities, it makes it easier for gender marginalization to continue and possibly expand. The idea of being thankful for one's own form of oppression gives the oppressor power to continue their practices because there is a belief among the oppressed that circumstances could be worse.

According to many Islamic traditions, men or women who are in a state of major ritual impurity could not enter a prayer hall⁴⁵ and one of the requirements related to worship within the Qur'an states that those who enter a mosque should be ritually clean.⁴⁶ Today, this is used to bar female participation within prayer rooms based on the idea that menstruation makes a woman ritually impure.⁴⁷ Recently mosques have tried to alleviate this participation disparity by rebranding themselves as "Islamic Centers", and creating specific prayer rooms within the center where admittance hinges on a state of purity.⁴⁸ However, rather than equalizing the house of worship, these Islamic Centers essentially force women into certain areas of the mosque while they are menstruating, marginalizing them based simply on biological processes.

One strategy that has in the past few decades provided an avenue for improved female mosque participation is the rise of Sunday school.⁴⁹ Particularly in the United States, Sunday school has become a common activity within the mosque.⁵⁰ The role of the teacher typically falls on the mothers of the students, meaning the mosque must allow them to enter.⁵¹ This is both beneficial and problematic. Teaching religious education classes provides women a larger role within mosques, potentially a leadership role within the Sunday school department. However, this avenue of increasing participation uses women as instruments of religious instruction without expanding their theological influence. Female religious educators are only allowed more access to the mosque because they are needed for something, not because they deserve greater access as adherents of Islam.

Another recent tactic to increase women's participation within mosques is the creation of women's groups. Found in most Islamic countries, particularly Sudan and Egypt, these groups, known as religious or Quranic groups, meet in mosques throughout the week to study the Quran

⁴³. Ibid.

⁴⁴. Ibid.

⁴⁵. Mattson, Ingrid. "Women, Islam, and Mosques". *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (2006): 615-618.

⁴⁶. Woodlock, Rachel. "Praying Where They Don't Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Access to Mosques in Melbourne, Australia." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30.2 (2010): 265-278.

⁴⁷. Mattson, Ingrid. "Women, Islam, and Mosques". *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (2006): 615-618.

⁴⁸. Ibid.

⁴⁹. Ibid.

⁵⁰. Ibid.

⁵¹. Ibid.

and to discuss their knowledge of Islam.⁵² In countries like Sudan, where women do not have many safe places to discuss Islamic norms and traditions, these groups also serve as a space to challenge these views and practices.⁵³ Women also often find these groups empowering because they allow them to learn and interpret the Quran themselves, rather than receiving the information secondhand from male imams or teachers.⁵⁴ While these Quranic groups may give the appearance of increased female participation by allowing women to meet and potentially speak out, they may actually serve to marginalize them further. A man may never even hear the thoughts of the women in these groups, and if men are the only ones in positions of power, then changes will never be made.

Methodology

This study took place at the University of Mary Washington campus in Fredericksburg, Virginia. This project utilized a qualitative, in-depth interview-based approach of five Muslim students. The interviews were voluntary, and participants heard about and joined the project through the UMW Islamic Student Association or Arabic Language classes. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on three general areas: background regarding their participation in Islam, physical details of the mosque that they usually visit, as well as their personal and emotional experiences within the mosque. The questions were open-ended and while an interview schedule was used, the interviews were conversational and deviated from the schedule depending on the responses of each participant. Each interview was audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. Because their responses were highly personal, all interviewees were given a random two letter pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

The interviews revealed several overarching themes; however, these patterns are not meant to be applied to or generalize the experiences of all Muslim women on the Mary Washington campus or all Muslim women who visit mosques. Instead, this study aims to explore the individual, emotional experiences of women within mosques. While existing literature examines the marginalization of Muslim women in public space, few have focused on the division of genders within the mosque as well as the implications of this separation, and this study seeks to more fully understand how the space itself can shape the identities of Muslim women. In addition to the in-depth interviews, participatory observation was utilized to better understand the experiences of those being interviewed. Prior to this research project, the authors had never before visited a mosque. For this study, the lead author visited the Islamic Center of Fredericksburg and attended a Friday Jumu'ah prayer service. This participatory involvement was crucial as those interviewed would commonly refer to different parts of the mosque and different parts of the prayer service, and these references would have made little sense to someone who had never entered a mosque.

Results

⁵². Nageeb, Salma. "Appropriating the Mosque: Women's Religious Groups in Khartoum". *Afrika Spectrum* 42, no. 1 (2007): 5-27.

⁵³. Ibid.

⁵⁴. Ibid.

Much of the existing literature on mosques tends to overlook the individual, gendered experiences of members and how the separation of space could be used to marginalize female participants. Results from this case study illustrated the inherent and unequal difference between male and female spaces in mosques as well as the marginalization women often experience inside of mosques. The interviews revolved around three distinct themes: the separate entrances for men and women, the physical barrier between them, and the responsibility women have to their children. One of the most prominent themes discussed throughout the interviews was the presence of separate entrances for men and women. The women interviewed all noted that they use a different entrance than the men. Some enter the building through separate doors, and others enter the building with men and then separate once in the main hallway. ZD described having to go to the back of the building in order to enter: "So my mom just parks and my brother goes to the men's side, and we have to walk all the way down to the side back to enter into the women's side." JE similarly noted: "I'll go into the hallway in front of the room where we'll pray and I'll go to the back, take off my shoes, and then I'll kind of separate ways with my dad and my brother and I'll go to the back of the mosque." This reinforces existing literature, which notes that women's entrances are often located at the rear of the mosque. However, while describing the location of the women's entrance, ZD argued that this was not because women have a lower status in mosques, saying: "So when you pull into the gate, there's the men's side, the main entrance, and the women's side. You enter from the side-back because it's closer to the women's side. It's not a thing. It's not like, 'Oh, women have to enter from the back.' It's just like the way the mosque is laid out." In this way, ZD attributes the peripheral location of the men's entrance to mosque architecture, not because of existing gender hierarchies within the mosque. Indeed, the layout of the mosque provides for a rear entrance for women. However, the mosque is most likely laid out this way because men are the one's encouraged to attend services there and existing gender hierarchies most likely dictated the design of the building.

Another key theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews was a discussion of the physical barrier dividing men and women within mosques. When asked about why she thought the barrier exists, BX, whose name like all participants has been anonymized for privacy, noted: "...It's not traditionally seen as a women's place almost, so I think that...I don't know, that's like a physical embodiment of it." She also expressed confusion over why the barrier exists, especially barriers that prohibit women from seeing the imam or the men. BX continued: "... Growing up, we're always taught we're all the same in God's eyes and we should all be treated with the same level of respect, so that's something that always stood out to me. So I was more comfortable going to mosques where women were on the top floor and men are on the bottom or [where] we were separated in the middle." Some of the women interviewed also expressed that the idea that women and their bodies can distract men should not translate into prayer time. JE noted that the expectation that women must be separated from men so as not to be distracting was problematic: "You can not look at a women for... like you can do it. Like me and you having a conversation. If there was a guy here... if he was respectful, he wouldn't be looking us up and down... Especially during prayer, I think that's when you make more of an effort." BX expressed similar sentiments: "I'm just like, you're not there for anyone else in the first place, so I don't see why it's a distraction or why it would be a distraction for someone." The notion that women are responsible for male sexualization of the female body manifests itself in the form of barriers within mosques. Men and women are separated because men are distracted by women,

but women are the group being segregated. This is a reflection of gender hierarchies within mosques; however, it also further complicates the communal worship role mosques are meant to play within Islam.

Other interviewees noted that the division can create uncomfortable or even tense feelings amongst the congregation. PN said: “Sometimes the women get upset at other people for keeping the curtains open or closing them. The curtains are a really big issue.” The physical barriers obviously separate men and women; however, the idea that the partition could not only exclude women but create issues among the women is even more problematic because it further divides the marginalized female community. JE noted: “I just feel more uncomfortable about the fact that I have to sit, you know, behind men and all that, but I understand there’s certain reasons for that. But I feel like it’s not meant to be degrading, but it just doesn’t feel as comfortable...” By pointing out her uncomfortable feelings regarding the separation, yet qualifying by saying there are reasons for it, JE highlights the notion that the separation is not generally questioned within the community. She even points out that questioning is frowned upon within the community, noting: “When I was younger, asking questions was kind of not really the best thing to do, like asking questions all the time. So I would kind of just accept things and say ‘Oh, well this is good because my parents think this is the best thing and other people do too, and it’s part of my religion that those are God’s rules.’” These statements reflect the findings of existing literature, which argues that women largely accept the separation of genders within mosque. This acceptance could stem from mosques existing in an environment that does not condone questioning of the status quo.

Another prominent thread discussed by the participants is the responsibility women have to their children. While women’s spaces within mosques are often smaller than the men’s space, women also have the added difficulty of caring for small children during service. ZD, for example, noted that “... If the women have to have the kids, then they should probably have more space.” ZD further explained that young boys typically pray with their mothers, but “once they reach a certain age where they don’t cry, they go to pray with their fathers.” This is problematic because it insinuates that the men shouldn’t be bothered with taking care of the children, whereas with women, it is just part of the job. It further connects with the notion that within Islam, a woman’s place is traditionally within the home, and she is not required to attend Friday prayers. Thus, the space of the mosque becomes an extension of larger gender roles. Some of the interviewees discussed this point, further adding that some within Islam believe that women should solely pray in the home. JE noted: “So all the men, they’ll usually get the whole room because usually in mosques it’s mostly men and not too many women because people will give the excuse that ‘Oh, women are busy doing something or they’re at home or something like that.’ Or, ‘They’re busy, they have the kids that they have to take care of.’” This notion that women are responsible for the children and therefore don’t have time to come to the mosque limits their role.

Some respondents discussed issues related to space as a result of having the children in the women’s side. BX expressed: “I feel like a lot of times, what discourages some women to come and pray is because they have kids and there won’t be a space for their kids.” Most of the respondents similarly noted the distractions that come from being cramped into a small space with young children. The women are grouped with the children because this is seen as part of their sphere; however, it also prohibits mothers of young children and, in some cases, those

around them from fully participating in the prayer service. One possible solution to this is something that one of the interviewees mentioned. She detailed a separate section within her mosque intended for families to use during the prayer services. Here, mothers and fathers with small children could pray together as a family unit, without putting all the responsibility on the mother or distracting the other women in the female side. However, while this would address the issue of only women carrying the burden of watching the children, however it does nothing to address the larger problem of gender segregation within mosques.

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most important takeaways from the interviews is that while the interviewees were often willing to point out the differences between their space and the male space and how it affects their worship, they also often qualified these differences by saying that they know there is a reason for it or that they do not feel it is meant to be demeaning. This may reflect a trend within the culture that these issues are not commonly discussed. As an outsider, there is only so much commentary I can provide that carries meaning. The purpose of these interviews was really to hear the voices of Muslim women experiencing the divided space of the mosque, as they are the ones within the community who have the capacity to effect change.

This research represents the first step in incorporating firsthand accounts of women's experiences within the space of the mosque. Future research could undoubtedly include men in an effort to determine how aware they might be of these spatial distinctions and how these differences reflect their theological views. Furthermore, while this study represents a small sample due to the time constraints of in-depth interviewing, a much larger sample would be able to represent broader trends. Many of the women interviewed were initially reluctant to participate, especially about being interviewed by an outsider. BX expressed this reluctance: "...It's hard to talk about issues within your community with someone outside because it comes down to, you know, 'all Muslim women are oppressed!'" Far from proving that Muslim women are universally oppressed by men, this research demonstrates that space itself can function as a tool for oppression and marginalization and further sheds light on the intricacies of women's reflections on these spatial divisions.

Although Muslim women do utilize mosques for religious classes, Friday prayers, Sunday school, and other community activities, the space they are allowed to occupy is largely unequal to that of men. Recent aims at incorporating women into the life of the mosque, such as increased female participation in Sunday school as well as female Quranic groups, have improved female presence within mosques but have not contributed to substantial changes in regard to spatial divisions or inequalities. Mosques serve to marginalize their female congregation through physical barriers that create a separation of genders as well as inequalities of space. More subtle traditions also perpetuate these gender inequalities not only within the mosque but in the more public sphere as well.

Notes