



Inclusive Mosque Initiative
www.inclusivemosqueinitiative.org

Summary of research findings: Gender and inclusivity in UK mosques

Research Period: 10/2012-04/2013

Overall this research looked at how a sample of women feel about existing mosques, especially their 'locals', and their experiences there. There were three main findings;

Access

- Although there are some truly awesome mosques which evince clear concern and attention to gender inclusivity, there are many more which do not even provide a women's section.
- Respondents reported vast differences between female-friendly mosques and ones that have inadequate, or non-existent, spaces for sisters. Whilst they pointed out specific mosques in major UK cities with great facilities, they mentioned many more, especially in smaller cities and towns, that are not inclusive enough.
- Respondents who had visited mosques outside the UK commented on the differences, and suggested that UK mosques stand-out in not providing spaces for women.
- The examples of Makkah and Madinah were raised, as were hadiths, to indicate that mosques can, and should, provide decent spaces for female worship.

Inclusivity

- The way that a mosque deals with inclusivity issues appears to strongly affect respondents willingness to go there. There seemed to be a strong link between actual spaces made available for women (physical space for ibadah, cleanliness of women's toilets, audio quality and specific-services offered) and how regularly they would attend.
- All the respondents mentioned, in some form or another, how prejudice in UK mosques is not limited to gender. Language, culture, class, race and sectarian differences were mentioned. Converts reported racism in mosques, a Shia woman said that she did not

feel welcome in her local Sunni-majority mosque. More broadly, the dominance of a specific ideology, politics or interpretation at a mosque could put women off attending.

- Respondents felt very strongly about how un/welcome they were made at their local mosques, and some said that negative experiences have put them off attending regularly.

Relevance

- All respondents saw mosques as important to British Islam and Muslim community, but attendance was not cited as absolutely necessary for personal belief and practice.
- Some individual mosques were praised for having interesting khutbahs which respond to contemporary events, yet more respondents questioned the relevance of khutbas and educational programmes on offer. It was suggested that khutbas need to engage more with the lives of attendees and the issues that they face, and be broader in scope.
- Significantly, even respondents who identified as non-practicing said that they would be interested in going to lectures and events at their local mosques if the focus was different.
- Languages used were also questioned, and it was suggested that more could be done to ensure that khutbahs were accessible to everyone.

Conclusion

- The most surprising, and inspiring, finding from this research is just how interested women remain in UK mosques. Both women who identify as practicing, and those who say they are not particularly religious, showed an emotional investment in what happens in their local mosques. Everyone interviewed welcomed the idea of an inclusive space, and made a range of suggestions to make mosque programmes more inclusive and welcoming to women.
- What was really striking during the research process was the levels of emotional intensity that the topic evoked in respondents. There was a lot of disappointment and sadness around during the interviews; women felt frustrated, unwelcome and angry, at points, around the lack of inclusivity felt to mark existing mosques spaces. There was also a great deal of despondency about the potential of existing mosques to change, as male privilege (from committees to regular attendees) was seen as so encompassing. Thus whilst respondents were interested in seeing all UK mosques become more inclusive, they were also sceptical about how much change is possible.

- This research has highlighted just how big a topic inclusivity is, and how fruitful further studies of UK mosques could be. Future research areas include; gender and mosque management, the practicalities of mosque access (especially for Muslims with special hearing, sight and mobility requirements), trends in language use, attendance needs, frequency and type, and how these trends are shaped by age, class, race, linguistic, and sectarian factors.

Recommendations:

- Every mosque should offer clean, well-maintained spaces for female worship. Facilities should be of the same quality as those available to male worshippers. Where space allows, all mosque facilities should be child-friendly (and could include play areas and baby changing room) with trained and CRB checked staff, as well as adequate interior space for pushchairs.
- Mosques should have induction loops fitted as standard, ramps and access to all floors, rooms and amenities, including literature in large print and Braille.
- English language should be used alongside community languages to assist engaging and being relevant to a greater variety of Muslims, youth and converts.
- Female involvement in and leadership on mosque committees should be proactively developed, supported and encouraged.
- Develop policies, guidance and training for all mosque staff and volunteers on inclusion and non-discriminatory practice.
- Mosques should regularly conduct independently assessed internal critical assessment on inclusion practices, including quality sampling from a range of attendants across a range of demographics.

Output:

We intend to commission further research on this topic when funds allow. For now, though, the full research findings will be published soon;

- as a book chapter in an edited collection (*Islam in practice, Routledge Studying Religions in Practice series*, edited by Gabrielle Marranci, forthcoming 2013; <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415643986/>).

- as a research paper in an academic journal (currently under review in *Journal of Contemporary Islam*;
<http://www.springer.com/social+sciences/religious+studies/journal/11562>).