

CHAPTER THREE

FINDING THE WOMEN'S SPACE: MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE MOSQUE

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In most major world religions, it has been argued that initial concepts of gender equality were eroded gradually by the development of patriarchal norms (Abraham 1995: 17-20; Oojitham 1995: 53; Kabilsingh 1995: 58; Schmidt 1989: 163, 208, 211-212). In recent times, in western religious discourse, women have challenged the inequality between men and women in the church and religious establishments. However, in areas of the world which have remained relatively unaffected by western ideas of gender equality, differential treatment of men and women persists. This is particularly noticeable in Muslim countries where segregation and unequal treatment continues to be justified on religious grounds, despite liberating statements in the primary sources of Quran and *Hadith*.¹

When Muslim communities migrate, becoming minorities in western countries, a dilemma arises: should traditional norms be rigorously preserved in the new environment, or should changes be allowed to adapt to the new circumstances of a society with much more liberal attitudes towards women? Muslim communities in Australia were established by first generation migrants who tended to recreate as far as possible the conditions of their home communities. In most cases, these communities made little provision for the participation of women in mosques and Islamic associations, relying on the practices of their home countries and traditional interpretations of religious texts, which stressed the need for segregation of men and women and encouraged women to stay at home.

Now a new generation has grown up of active, educated Australian Muslim women, many of whom are no longer prepared to be limited by the conditions of the past. This chapter examines the participation of women in Sydney mosques and Islamic societies, and the attitudes of Imams and religious leaders towards women's involvement in religious spheres that traditionally have been reserved for men.

The importance of the mosque in community life

The mosque is the central focus point of a Muslim community. In Australia, the principal role of the mosque is to provide the location for congregational Friday prayer, and the delivery of the Friday *khutbah* (sermon). Most large mosques also serve as a community centre, offering classes in Quran and *Hadith* for adults and children and serving as a venue for lectures, discussions and other religious activities. It may also be the focus of social activity for the elderly, especially those who do not speak English well and are unable to participate much in mainstream life, especially at festival times when the whole community may come to the mosque for communal prayer and a get together.

In the early days of migration, it was a priority for each community on arrival in Australia, to set about raising funds to establish its own ethnic-specific mosque, which, unsurprisingly, tended to replicate the culture of the mosques of the home country. In Sydney, Lakemba mosque, formally known as the Imam Ali ben Abi Taleb mosque, opened in 1977, was the first and largest, and serves mainly Lebanese and other Arabic speaking Sunni communities. Surry Hills mosque was inaugurated shortly afterwards, initially as a mosque with a multicultural congregation, but at a later stage it was "taken over" by a conservative group of Indo-Pakistani origin which changed its ethos, especially in relation to the participation of women.

The Gallipoli mosque at Auburn, opened in 1979, is the largest mosque serving the Turkish community, but other Turkish mosques exist in other areas of Sydney. Rooty Hill mosque is the principal mosque for the Indo-Pakistani community. Apart from these, there are mosques for Bosnian, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Malay, Fijian Indian, South African and Afghani Sunni communities as well as several Shia mosques which cater for immigrants of Lebanese, Iranian and Afghan backgrounds who follow the Shia stream of Islam.

The place of women in the mosque

Islamic teaching is that attendance at Friday prayer at the mosque is compulsory for men but optional for women. This difference is explained on the basis that women may have family duties that prevent them from coming to the mosque. It is therefore acceptable for them to perform their religious obligations at home. Unfortunately, over the years in most Muslim countries, this concession hardened into a virtual prohibition, strongly discouraging women from coming to the mosque.

Nowhere do the primary texts say that women are forbidden from attending the mosque. There are several well-known *hadith* on the subject, many of which indicate that women were accustomed to attending the mosque during the time of the Prophet, praying behind the men without any curtain or barrier. Other *hadith* show that the Prophet gave lessons for women in the mosque, and informed his followers that they should not prevent their womenfolk from going to the mosque to pray if they wished to do so.²

Traditions attest to the active position of women in the religious life of the community at Medina during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. However, in the centuries following the Prophet's death, women's freedoms were eroded gradually. Soon after the Prophet's death came claims that society, or more particularly, women's morals, had deteriorated to such an extent that they should be excluded from the mosque,³ and reliance was placed on *hadith* which encouraged women to pray exclusively at home.⁴ Eventually, patriarchal control reasserted itself so that by the end of the Abbasid empire (Kennedy 2004: 161), women were neither to be seen nor heard in public in Muslim societies.

In most of the Muslim world, this situation has continued up to the present day. In countries of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, parts of the Arab world and Turkey, women are either barred completely from most mosques, or strongly discouraged by cultural factors from attending. "Turkish women don't go to the mosque," a woman of Turkish background informed me. When pressed for a reason, she could only explain that the culture did not encourage women or girls to go to the mosque, but this did not mean that Turkish women were not religious. In Saudi Arabia, women do not normally attend the mosque although technically they are not forbidden from doing so. Some Lebanese and Egyptian women do attend the mosque regularly, although it seems that their numbers are not large except at *Tarawih* prayers in Ramadan and at the Eid festivals. In South East Asia, a more liberal attitude is apparent, but the numbers of women who attend mosque is still very small compared to the numbers of men, and women may be discouraged from attending Juma'ah prayer for reasons of space.⁵

Women and the mosque in the Western diaspora

Traditions from the home countries have continued in Australia and other western countries where Muslims have settled, and overall it seems that comparatively few women attend a mosque on a regular basis. First generation migrant men who tend to uphold tradition and overlook the

needs of women in their communities still predominantly control mosques and mosque associations. Some men and some communities, such as some Bangladeshi communities in England, prohibit women from attending mosque at all.⁶ In 2007, an independent British MP felt the need to request the British government to pass a law to force mosques to open their doors to women (BBC 2007). Some limited reform seems to be under discussion in the UK but it is likely to be a long-term project. A similar situation exists in the US and Canada.⁷

In Australia, few mosques, if any, purport to ban women completely, and since there are now many mosques catering for almost every ethnic group and variety of religious opinion, it might be expected that Muslim women would have little difficulty in finding a mosque that suited them. Some, no doubt, have, especially those who from experiences in their home countries do not have high expectations, or come to the mosque only on *Eid* (festival) days.

However, many Muslim women complain about the space and facilities provided for them and their treatment by the men who control the mosque organisations. Complaints mirror those expressed by active Muslim women overseas: some women resent the feeling of being shut in by walls and barriers, not being able to see or hear the prayer leader clearly or at all, being confined to dilapidated unattractive areas while men enjoy much better accommodation, and having their views ignored by the men in mosque associations and congregations. Converts and locally educated younger women who are likely to have a strong sense of the importance of gender equality, are likely to take note of the deficiencies in their mosques and either seek changes or stay away altogether.

There is strong opposition among some men to women raising these issues and so far, the majority of women and women's organisations seem to be unwilling to seek change. There are probably a number of reasons for this, one being the fear of creating *fitna* or dissension in the community, even at the cost of their rights. A situation occurred in one mosque in 2001 when a number of women, feeling that they had been unfairly dismissed from membership of the mosque association on the basis of their gender, sought assistance firstly from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) and then from the Federal Court. The women were successful in their request for reinstatement and an apology, but for a time, there was a great deal of unpleasantness towards them in the community.

Other reasons that Muslim women do not seek to change the status quo include acceptance of tradition from their home countries, belief in *hadith* which discourage women's participation and the fact that it is often not

convenient for women to travel to a mosque that may be some distance away. Some appreciate the concession of not being obliged to leave home or work to go out for prayers. One convert remembered the guilt and unhappiness that her mother, a Catholic woman with five children, experienced when she was criticised by nuns for not regularly attending Sunday mass. The daughter, a Muslim, was happy not to have any religious obligation to make her way to the mosque with her children in tow.⁸

Another explanation may be that in a practising Muslim family, family prayers are a regular part of the day. The husband or other male relative will lead the prayer, the rest of the family forming the congregation behind him.⁹ They may read Quran together or listen to many of the Islamic religious programs that are now available on radio, DVD or the Internet. In these circumstances, the benefit of mosque attendance is replicated in the family home.

In mosques where younger educated men form the executive, there seems to be more understanding of women's needs, although this is not always put into practice. At Auburn mosque at a public lecture, women were invited to come down from the gallery and sit on the main floor so that they could hear and interact with the speaker. On a similar occasion at Lakemba, a male member of the congregation abruptly ordered from the floor two women who had the foresight to obtain the permission of the mosque management to do this.¹⁰

It can be argued that in Muslim majority countries where the state and society support the religion, it is not so important for women to have access to the mosque, since there will be formal and informal religious gatherings which women may attend to gain religious knowledge. However, in western countries where these supports are not present, and not every family is religious, it is more important that Muslim women who wish to do so are able to access the mosque for prayer and religious learning. Islamic religious texts (Darussalam 2000: 226) emphasise the importance of congregational prayer, especially on Friday, and the necessity of listening attentively to the *khutbah* for the (male) congregation to gain knowledge and reinforce their faith. Apparently most of these *ulema* (religious scholars) did not consider this knowledge necessary for women—in spite of *hadith* to the contrary—but in more recent times, even some conservative scholars have conceded that conditions in the modern western world make it desirable for Muslim women to attend the mosque if they wish to do so (Doi 1990: 30).

The mosque survey project

In 2005, a colleague, Faikah Behardien and I decided to carry out a survey of Sydney mosques to determine which were "woman friendly" and which ones did not provide good facilities for women. There are currently seventy-eight mosques and *musallas* (prayer halls) in the greater Sydney area according to the directory on the Muslim Village website (<http://muslimvillage.net/>). Some *musallas* are small and are not used for Friday prayer. Others, mainly in CBD locations, are used only for Friday prayer and have no established mosque structure. We did not include these in our survey. Of the twenty four larger mosques in the Sydney metropolitan area, we initially chose fifteen to survey, being as far as possible a representative sample, based on ethnicity, size, whether purpose built or not and whether Sunni or Shia.

Our survey was limited by constraints of time, funding, man and womanpower, and our ability to make contact with responsible representatives of mosque committees or imams. We began with a telephone survey, intending to speak to the imam of each mosque but this proved unproductive, as only a few mosques are large enough to have administrative staff and many proved impossible to contact by telephone. We found that the best way to be sure of catching the imam or representative of the mosque committee for interview was to attend the Friday *Juma'ah* prayer and speak to him after the service. For this purpose we needed to engage a male Muslim researcher, since in most mosques it is impossible for a woman to approach the imam in the men's space at prayer times. In fact, if the women's section is completely sealed off from the main mosque, it may well be impossible for a woman to know who the imam is. This strategy proved more successful, and we engaged two bright male Muslim law students as research assistants. They were able to obtain suitable interviews, in most cases, after Friday prayers.

Only two imams refused to participate, although it was clear that at a couple of other mosques there was some ambivalence about answering questions. Faikah and I made personal visits to most of the mosques at Friday prayer time where possible, although we found that a few mosques did not admit women for Friday prayers on the basis that all the space was required for men. We attempted to visit these mosques at other times.

We conducted two further surveys, one of a sample of forty-one Muslim women, for their personal views on how comfortable they were with arrangements for women in their local mosque, and another of sixteen imams to ascertain their opinions on the role of Muslim women in the mosque community. The imams were not necessarily the imams of the

mosques surveyed although many of them were. In addition, we spoke informally to many women, some of whom attended a mosque and quite a few who did not.

Mosque architecture

Where mosques are purpose built, usually at considerable cost and with the engagement of architects, there can be little excuse for the provision of inadequate spaces for women. The large, purpose built mosques in Sydney are all designed on the traditional lines of mosque architecture—a large ground level prayer hall for men, and an upstairs gallery for women.¹¹ This gallery may be U shaped, allowing women to come close to the position of the imam on the floor below or simply an upstairs area cut out at the back of the building.

In many cases, however, mosques are converted churches, factory buildings or other premises, including ordinary houses. These pose particular limitations of space, structure and orientation. The prayer area must be oriented towards Mecca, which represents the *qibla* that Muslims must face in prayer. There must also be provision of facilities such as bathrooms for both sexes since Muslims are required to be ritually clean before prayer.

Many immigrant communities are not well funded and do not have the resources of existing religious communities to call upon, as Christian migrants did not in earlier times. Typically, they purchase a building—preferably a disused church, since it is more likely to be approved by the local council for use as a mosque—and make an appeal for funds from the community to complete the purchase and to make necessary renovations. These mosques are essentially making do with what they can afford and facilities are often less than desirable for both men and women.

What constitutes a “woman friendly” mosque?

We took as our exemplar, the *Haram* at Mecca, the primary mosque of the Muslim world, where as many as two million men and women pray together at the time of the Hajj pilgrimage. Here, worshippers are not separated by gender, and although the building may be crowded, the atmosphere is open and spiritually inspiring. Local mosques cannot aspire to the same size and quality of building, but one could hope that the same sense of reverence and spirituality might be present even in humble premises.

We based our criteria for “woman friendliness” on ten factors:

- The amount and type of space set aside for use by women as a prayer area, whether this space was adequate for the number of women who habitually used it and whether it was clean and comfortable.
- Whether that space was available for women at all times, including *Juma’ah* (Friday) and *Eid* (festival) prayers.
- Ability to see and hear the imam and to feel included in religious services by being able to follow the imam’s movements and clearly hear his recitation, or sermon at Friday prayers.
- The access to the women’s space, whether access was available through the main entrance, or another entrance designated for women that was easily negotiated, well signposted and did not place women or accompanying children in danger.
- Access for disabled or elderly women and provision for them within the women’s space e.g. provision of chairs for those unable to get up and down in making the movements of ritual prayer.
- Clean and accessible bathroom facilities.
- Whether the mosque held religious or other educational classes for women.
- Whether women could access the imam for counselling or other personal issues.
- Whether women were eligible for membership of the mosque association and for election to its executive and whether women were consulted about affairs related to the mosque.
- Whether, in the case of larger mosques, women were employed as administrative or other staff.

The women’s space

In most of the large, purpose built mosques, the women’s area is located in an upstairs gallery. This is invariably smaller than the men’s space but usually more than adequate for the number of women who wish to pray there. The gallery is accessed by stairs, and is bordered by a railing which may or may not allow the women upstairs to see and follow the prayer ceremony conducted by the imam below.

In several mosques—Rooty Hill, Auburn Gallipoli mosque and Bonnyrigg mosque—the railing is of open design which allows sight through or over the railings. At Lakemba, a high, blue-tinged Perspex screen has been erected on top of the railing, which according to one informant, was placed there for the safety of children who might climb on the railing and risk falling to the floor below. This screen has had the

effect of enclosing the women's gallery in a visually confined space. At Surry Hills, what was built as the women's gallery is now used as men's space and women are confined to a narrow area, divided completely off from the rest of the mosque by a solid wall at the back of the building.

In smaller "ad hoc" mosques, the women's area is likely to be much less satisfactory, sometimes bearing a stronger resemblance to a prison cell rather than the *Haram* at Mecca. It may be either curtained off or divided by a solid wall enclosing a small area at the back of the mosque, or a space in a completely separate building where women must follow the service through a piped audio system, or as at Minto mosque, through closed circuit TV. Not all women consider the latter satisfactory.

Availability of space for women at *Juma'ah* and Eid prayers

This is a contentious point. *Juma'ah* (Friday midday) congregational prayer is compulsory for men, but not for women. Figures are difficult to estimate, but certainly large numbers of men do attend the Friday service, and in the smaller and the more popular mosques, the space designated for men is not sufficient for the numbers who attend. The men then move into the space allocated for women, which normally means that the women must move out. Only at Rooty Hill, it seems, is the women's space inviolate, regardless of the number of men praying outside on mats.

The situation is worse at *Eid* festivals, when many nominal Muslims make the effort to attend, and others make a point of taking a day off for the occasion. Mosques are crowded to and beyond the doors, men praying in the courtyard, outside areas or even in the street outside.

Most mosques attempt to find alternative space for women. This is sometimes very unsatisfactory. Women have been forced to pray in kitchens, dodging sinks and appliances, outside in tents, under the foundations of the building or in one case, in the yard of the mosque in full view of the patrons of the pub opposite. At the Gallipoli mosque in Auburn, women are redirected into an old cottage next to the mosque where they must follow proceedings through an audio link. During renovations at Lakemba, women were sent into the yard to pray at the height of summer, being obliged to make their prostrations towards a row of garbage bins. The mosque management casually dismissed their protests.¹²

Where there is a contest for space, women nearly always lose out. At one mosque, women visitors were told they would have to wait until the men had finished praying before they could enter. At another, they were initially refused entry, despite the existence at that mosque of a large

"women's" room adjacent to the main prayer hall. When they were reluctantly admitted into this room, the men insisted on closing the adjoining door so the women could neither see nor hear the prayer service. At this mosque, the "women's time" is between 10 am and 12 pm on Sunday morning. Women are not expected to attend at any other time and are normally discouraged from attending the Friday prayer.

One recent solution to the problem of crowding at *Eid* prayers has been to hold them in a park, with the congregation praying on large mats set out on the grass. In many ways, this is more satisfactory, if the weather is fine and the audio system up to scratch. The parks also provide a playground for children and this makes the whole occasion more of a family friendly festival.

Separating the women from the men

Many traditions indicate that in the Prophet's mosque at Medina there was no barrier separating men and women, as is the case in the *Haram* at Mecca today during Hajj. Except for those that have an upstairs gallery for women, almost all Sydney mosques separate the women's space from the men's with an opaque curtain or solid wall. This barrier has no theological basis as every imam, even the most conservative whom we interviewed, confirmed that such a barrier is not necessary as a matter of religious doctrine.

The custom appears to have its origin in Middle Eastern culture with the heavy emphasis it placed on modesty and the fear that contact between men and women would cause *fitna* (immorality). In its modern manifestation, it seems to be a belief that while Muslim men can mix with women in the workplace, in the market place or at school or university, they must not catch sight of a Muslim woman in the mosque.

A good proportion of women favour the separating curtain or barrier. They say they like the privacy of the women only space, and the feeling that male eyes are not inspecting them as they make their devotions. Other women resent being shut away behind a barrier, not being able to feel part of the religious service and generally feel that they are being treated as second-class citizens. For this reason, some women have voted with their feet and no longer attend the mosque since they feel uninspired by facing a blank wall or alternatively watching the imam on TV, if that is available. In the results of our survey, the proportions were roughly 60 per cent in favour of the barrier and 40 per cent against. The respondents to our survey were all women who were self described as religious, and all

except one claimed to attend the mosque at least from time to time, if not regularly.

No Sydney mosque seems yet to have addressed the differing requirements of women in this regard, although in some Shia mosques, men and women sit side by side with a curtain between them, allowing them each to see the imam but not the other sex. An innovative solution exists in Hobart mosque, where Venetian blinds are set in panels dividing the men in front from the women behind. The cords to the blinds are on the women's side allowing them to choose to open and raise the blinds or leave them closed as they wish. However, the imam reported that some men objected to this arrangement.¹³

Ease of access to the women's space

Access for women is not always satisfactory. Traditionally, women are expected to enter by a different door to that used by men, to avoid coming into contact with unrelated men. This women's door is not always easy to find. At Lakemba, it is towards the back of the building across a car park, which must pose some danger to women and children when cars are moving in and out.

At Surry Hills, it is via a narrow inner city lane, which borders the rear of the mosque and into which only a brave woman would venture after dark. Gaining access to the women's door itself sometimes requires exceptional agility, since women must squeeze past motor vehicles parked up against the wall of the building at some cost to the cleanliness of their clothing. At the same time they must dodge drips from the air conditioner in the men's section while they negotiate two flights of stairs to the non-air conditioned narrow gallery that is reserved for women.

Stairs pose a problem for some women where the women's space is located in an upstairs gallery. The bathroom area at Auburn Gallipoli mosque is located in the basement, down a steep flight of stairs below ground level, and the prayer area is up another steep flight of stairs from ground level. This is a challenge for women who carry small children and their associated paraphernalia up and down these steep flights of stairs.

Facilities for the elderly and disabled

For elderly and disabled women, the placement of the women's space in an upstairs gallery is an impediment for those unable to negotiate the stairs. Chairs are sometimes provided in the gallery for those unable to sit on the floor (mosques have no pews) or to get up and down in the

movements of the prayer. At Bonnyrigg, there is a disabled toilet located at the bottom of a short flight of stairs. This necessarily limits its use for elderly and disabled people. Imams surveyed on this point seemed mostly to be unaware of the need for facilities for disabled women beyond the provision of chairs, and even these are not always available.

Wudu (washing facilities)

Islamic doctrine requires that worshippers be in a state of ritual purity before prayer. Thus mosques are equipped with washing facilities which may range from a row of taps outside the building (a temporary measure for men only) to neatly tiled, well equipped and scrupulously clean bathrooms with showers and toilets. The purpose built mosques generally meet these requirements, and all except Gallipoli provide access to bathrooms on the ground floor or at the same level as the women's gallery. Surry Hills is again an exception. Here the toilet and washing facilities are in a cramped space opening directly off the women's prayer area and are in need of maintenance, as indeed is the rest of this mosque.

Classes for women

The quality of Islamic (and secular) education among Muslim women in Sydney varies greatly. Many younger women are studying at tertiary level for higher degrees, some in Islamic studies. Others, newly arrived as refugees from poor countries, are illiterate in their own language as well as in English. There are elderly women who have never mastered English and who are largely confined to the home, their Sunday morning visit to the mosque their only outing for the week. Some women are competent in Arabic and well versed in religious scholarship. Others rely on the memorisation of a few verses necessary for their prayers and the religious-cultural traditions of their homeland for spiritual solace.

Islam is a law-based religion and one that has a long and well-established tradition of scholarship. The Quran constantly exhorts Muslims to use their intelligence, and the Prophet advised his followers to "seek knowledge, even in China". Women were not exempted from this quest and there were many famous female religious scholars in the past.¹⁴ However, in most Muslim countries today, this tradition largely has been allowed to lapse. In many countries, it is still considered unessential for women to know more than the basics of a few prayers and commonly repeated *hadith* (Engineer 2007: 130, 136-37).

In Australia, a secular country where the population at large does not appreciate Islam, it might be expected that imams and religious leaders would make a special effort to ensure that Muslim women were educated in religious matters and were thus able to teach and set an example to their children. Our survey showed that not all mosques have met this challenge, although some do exceptionally well.

One imam told us that his mosque was situated in an inner city area where few women live, and thus few women attended and classes were not necessary. In fact, it is difficult to see how this imam would know how many women attended his mosque, since the women's section is sealed off from the rest of the mosque and women enter from the back lane. Women who regularly attend Friday prayers here told us that there was no direct communication with the imam, who never spoke to the women.

On the other hand, Shia mosques particularly, seem to be active in organising classes and activities for women and young people. Some imams, both Sunni and Shia, were emphatic that provision for women's education was essential and made every effort to run classes for both women and youth. Others pleaded lack of funding and lack of time, since some imams are part time volunteers with their own work and families to look after.

Women's ability to consult the imam

In Muslim countries, the imam is usually simply a prayer leader, and services such as personal and family counselling are the function of other bodies. In Australia, the duties of the imam have become much more like those of a Christian priest or minister, advising members of the community and providing counselling to those who request it.

At the large mosques, imams are likely to be full time employees, with offices within the mosque building, as at Lakemba. Smaller mosques often rely on part time volunteer imams who are present only to lead prayers or sometimes only for Friday prayer. Accessing the imam for advice in these circumstances may be difficult for men and impossible for women, who may find it difficult to know who the imam is since few mosques have administrative staff or websites to provide information.

Nevertheless, some individual imams are known to give generously of their time and a few have banded together to provide a counselling service for women in need. It is not always easy for women to locate these imams, since most of these services are provided on an informal basis and are not well publicised.

Participation in the mosque association

Mosque associations run the majority of mosques. Membership is normally open to members of the congregation. However, the Lebanese Muslim Association, which controls Lakemba mosque, limits membership to men of Lebanese background, and the mosque association at Green Valley mosque limits membership to men of Indo-Fijian origin.

In some associations, women may and do become members, in others there may be a "women's wing" which is supposed to look after the interests of women. In many cases, these are unfunded and rely on the efforts of women volunteers to run classes and raise money for their own needs. Some mosque associations allow women to become members of the executive committee, others do not.

Imams interviewed in our survey varied in their response to the question of women's participation. A number spoke strongly about the need for women to participate and one expressed disappointment that so few women attended his mosque. In one or two other cases, the imams interviewed made it clear that they believed that women's place was in the home and they saw no need for them to get involved in mosque activities. Some invoked reasons of lack of space, lack of time, the fear that women might not dress appropriately and women's need to look after their children.

Conclusion

This research revealed a wide range of facilities for women at different Sydney mosques, and a wide variation in attitudes of imams and male committee members towards the participation of women. While some imams clearly preferred women to stay at home to perform their religious obligations, others encouraged women's participation and organised classes and events especially for them. The research also revealed considerable differences of opinion among Muslim women themselves, especially in relation to the erection of barriers between the women's space and that of the men, and the extent of women's satisfaction or otherwise with existing mosque facilities.

Muslim communities in Australia are still comparatively new. It is natural that first generation migrants will hold firmly to the religious and cultural traditions they have brought from their home countries, and some women are still satisfied with these. Other women interviewed by us, especially younger women and those Australian born and educated, expressed dissatisfaction at current conditions and sought improvements in

facilities and the right to be treated with respect and dignity by the men in the mosque congregation.

In a minority situation such as exists in Australia, it would be hoped that Imams, mosque committees and Muslim men in general might give more consideration to making better provision for women, both in the physical facilities of mosques and in the areas of education and community involvement. Women must be participants in the forging of an enduring, vibrant Australian Muslim community.

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CHAPTER FOUR

RECREATING COMMUNITY: INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND ISLAM

PETA STEPHENSON

The majority of Australians are unaware of the existence of Aboriginal Muslims. The material that is available generally focuses on men.¹ The challenges facing Indigenous Muslim women extend beyond cultural invisibility. They include the negotiation of identity but also, above all, of community. In Australia, where families tend to be nuclear and where mainstream values privilege the agency and identity of the individual, the archetypal model of the woman's role in Islam appears regressive. In its resistance to contemporary Australian (and "Western") values, it can even be viewed as threatening. An additional context for this study is the plight of contemporary Indigenous Australians, whose social, economic and psychological welfare—as the media never tires of reporting—lags behind that enjoyed by most non-Indigenous Australians. Against this background of marginalisation and conflicting experiences of community, how do contemporary Indigenous Muslim women perceive their identities and construct a sense of community?

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today, and Australia is no exception to this trend. The increase in its Muslim population is not due solely to immigration, but reflects rising rates of conversion amongst residents. According to the 2006 census, there are more than 340,000 Muslims in Australia, and between the 1996 and 2006 censuses, the number of Muslims grew by almost 70 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics).² A particularly interesting phenomenon that these general figures do not reflect is that rates of conversion to Islam are increasing among Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

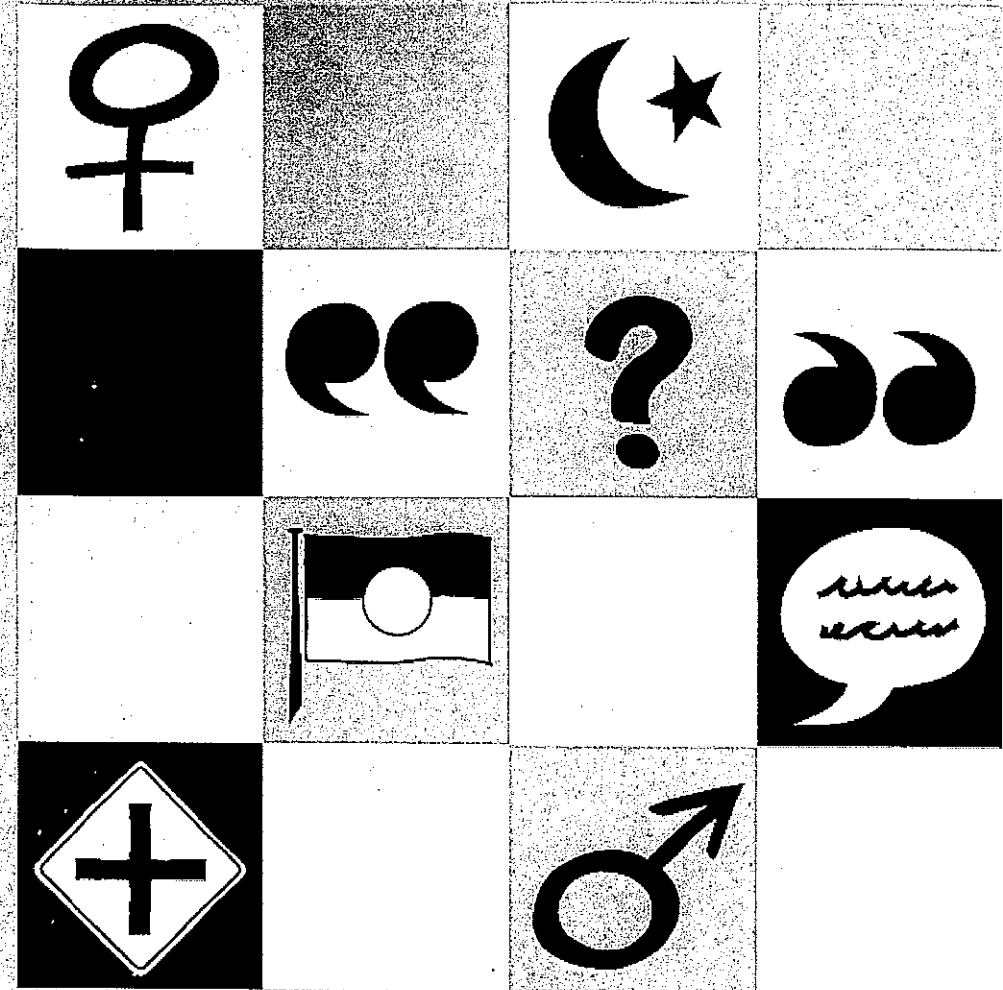
Indigenous and Muslim communities have traded, socialised and inter-married in Australia for hundreds of years.³ From the 1860s to the 1920s, an estimated 2000 to 4000 so-called "Afghan" camel handlers (no official records were kept) came to Australia from Afghanistan, Baluchistan and

BEYOND THE HIJAB DEBATES

NEW CONVERSATIONS ON GENDER, RACE AND RELIGION

Tanja Dreher and Christina Ho

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...ives in schools. Ethnic gang rapists. Domestic violence in Indigenous
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...oncerns about marginalised communities often revolve around issues of
...and women's rights. Yet all too often, discussions about complex matters
...ced to simplistic debates such as 'hijab: to ban or not to ban?' or 'Muslim
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...lection provides a space for in-depth analyses on the politics of gender
...l religion. As well as critical reflections on images and experiences of
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...ndings at the intersection of gender, race and religion.

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Beyond the Hijab Debates:
New Conversations
on Gender, Race and Religion

Edited by

Tanja Dreher and Christina Ho

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