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A Muslim Woman's Faith Experience

Introduction

Anecdotally reported experiences of Muslim women lead many to conclude that Muslim women are not afforded the same consideration as Muslim men in their access to religious resources and support spaces from Masjids to community centres and people of knowledge. Part of this may be due to religious teachings encouraging men to pray in a congregation as opposed to women being rewarded more for praying at home. The accepted rulings on this topic vary among different communities due to a difference in jurisprudential methods and opinions. Nevertheless, the wider social and spiritual implications of prioritising male facilities in religious spaces at the expense of female spaces have been overlooked in the UK. Indeed, lifestyle and social changes have necessitated the provision of safe spiritual and communal spaces for women - for example during the working day - that in many cases, simply do not exist or are sub-par in their quality.

With this in mind, Muslim Census conducted a study to understand the faith experiences of Muslim women living in the UK. A series of focus groups and a survey, which received 1,200 responses, were conducted as part of this study. Previously, limited comprehensive research existed that explored the challenges Muslim women face while navigating their faith in the UK.

It is important to note that the research conducted by Muslim Census aims to explore the experiences of Muslim women within the community and does not aim to contribute to the body of scholarly or religious discussion in this area - this is neither the objective, specialism or purpose of Muslim Census. Rather, through exploring and investigating Muslim women's access to the community, religious guidance and Masjid spaces and identifying the difficulties that they face, we hope our findings will help Masjids and community leaders develop initiatives that specifically cater to the needs of Muslim women.

Muslim Census collaborated with the Ta Collective who have been active advocates of enhancing the faith experience for Muslim women. They aim to use this research to continue the existing work they do to overcome accessibility issues within religious spaces by empowering women around various aspects of worship to boost their overall spiritual well-being and their relationship with Islam.

This summary report and the associated research study were designed and written by Ambia Begum, Shaza Mahmood, Omar Hussein, Shima Islam, Fahima Saiyed. For any queries regarding the content of this report, please contact team@muslimcensus.co.uk.

Focusing on Focus Groups

To develop an initial understanding, Muslim Census conducted 4 focus groups to explore the perspectives of Muslim women and determine what areas of their spiritual lives they thought required greater attention and study. The focus groups had a total of 24 participants across various age groups, locations and ethnic backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive demographic representation.

Participants noted that community spaces at a grassroots level are often not inclusive so Muslim women struggle to enter Muslim community environments. Such difficulty at the grassroots level continues through to established positions where a lack of early community inclusion for Muslim women results in a lack of female representation in community spaces, Masjids and educational institutes.

Such circumstances mean that focus group participants were often unable to identify the appropriate female leaders and advisors within these spaces to whom they could refer to for any concerns, questions or advice.

Ultimately, this meant that they sought alternative avenues of support - occasionally from non-Muslim sources which introduce their own difficulties and are regularly unable to provide satisfactory support inclusive of religious considerations.

Even where participants had access to Muslim environments, this was largely through reliance on online forums, resources and institutes. Of course, this brings with it the challenges of a lack of transparency and accountability but it is also devoid of the personal connection that is imperative in building a relationship with faith and people of knowledge.

Further to this, participants also noted that where they were able to access people of knowledge, this was often only through their male relatives and their religious networks. This often made it difficult to discuss matters pertaining exclusively to women or personal and gender-sensitive issues, adding unnecessary barriers in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

Similarly, in reference to the provision of actual physical spaces dedicated to women, participants noted that this is rarely provided and even where it is provided, they are almost always poor quality, badly maintained and far too small to accommodate the demand for the space. Participants drew attention to the failure of Masjid and community spaces to specifically accommodate the needs of women through, for example, areas for breastfeeding or the provision of female sanitary bins. Such a lack of access led participants to resort to having to pray in changing rooms, street corners, and car parks or in some instances, miss prayer despite there being a Masjid in the local vicinity.

The themes identified in these focus groups form the foundation upon which the majority of this study was built. With any study that Muslim Census conducts, and this study in particular, it is critical to highlight that though our research is presented as numbers and statistics, these are the real and lived experiences of Muslim women. It is easy to view statistics from a purely abstract perspective - they must be humanised to fully understand and empathise with the experiences of our respondents.

Community and Guidance

Our findings revealed that only 45% of Muslim women reported having an overall positive experience within their community. The likelihood of reporting a positive experience varies slightly with age - only 43% of Muslim women between 18-34 are likely to report a positive experience in contrast with 55% of Muslim women over the age of 45. This variation across age groups highlights the need for greater consideration towards enhancing the experiences of Muslim women, especially for a younger demographic who have different challenges, needs and expectations than the generations before them. For instance, the variation could perhaps be a result of lifestyle differences between young and older Muslim women. Variations which may include increased employment and education rates, increased travel outside of local regions and the prominence of social media culture among younger Muslim women.

Less than half of Muslim women report a positive experience within the Muslim community

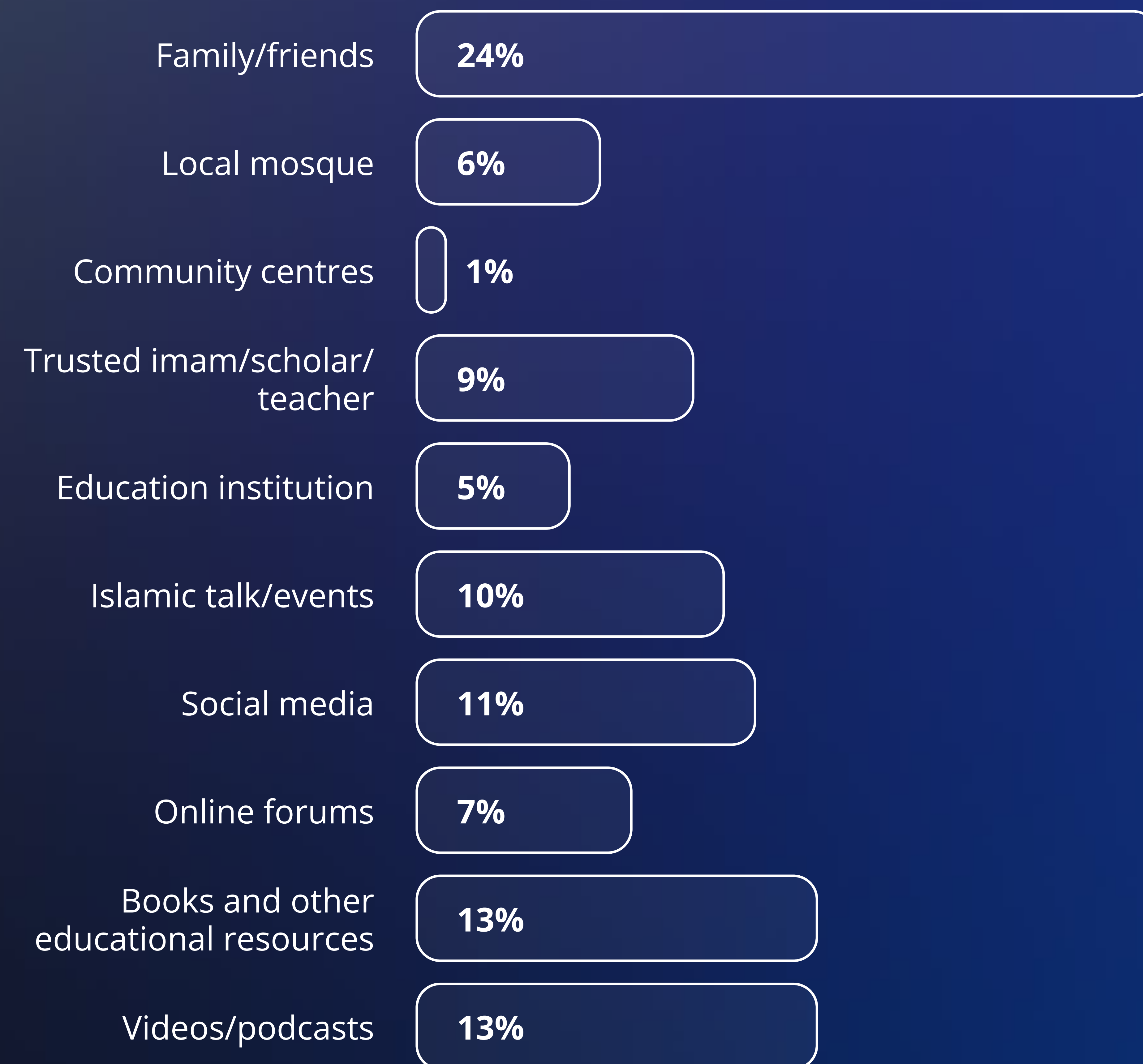
The experiences of Muslim women remain fairly consistent across location demographics and across various ethnic backgrounds though Muslim women with Indian heritage reported the highest overall positive experience - 48% - in contrast to Muslim women from the Black community who reported the lowest - 41%. It's worth noting that in no instance did over 50% report a positive experience.

Having a positive experience within the community is closely linked to how and where people are able to obtain information and guidance pertaining to matters of faith. The increase in digital methods to access information has naturally improved accessibility for communities that do not have local sources to find guidance. Furthermore, it has transformed the understanding of what an individual perceives as their source of a community from whom they seek knowledge and advice.



Community and Guidance

While more than half - 52% - of Muslim women in the UK reported using a combination of both online and in-person routes to seek guidance, 39% of Muslim women reported that they only rely on online sources. Muslim women aged 18-34 and those from the Black Muslim community were most likely to report relying on only online sources. Contrastingly, only 9% use in-person methods exclusively to obtain Islamic advice. However, those who only used in-person methods demonstrated greater satisfaction rates with the advice and knowledge available to them in comparison to those who sought online guidance alone - 58% compared to 31%.



Overall, the most common source Muslim women rely on for guidance and support in faith matters is their family and friends. Though this wider familial and friendship support network is crucial, it is perhaps worrying that only 15% of Muslim women in the UK reported Masjids or a trusted Islamic scholar as their main source of Islamic advice and knowledge. Masjids and scholars should occupy a communal position within the wider Muslim community, accessible for all those seeking guidance - it is concerning that an overwhelming majority of Muslim women in the UK do not have this experience.

Only 44% of Muslim women indicated that they were satisfied with the overall guidance they have access to. This sits at 37% for women aged 25-34 but increases to 56% for Muslim women aged 45+ once again indicating that the changing circumstances that younger Muslim women find themselves in perhaps necessitate a new response from community and religious spaces.

Amongst those who noted that they were satisfied with their sources of guidance, many indicated that direct access to an Imam or a female scholar and access to female-only community spaces were critical to their satisfaction.

“The males go to the masjid and we are forced to pray in changing rooms, car parks etc. It becomes so that Salah is a box to check off – there is no ease, no Khushoo [sense of tranquillity or focus], no community”

“[I] felt like [mosques] would rather me pray on the streets where I have more chance of being harassed...”

“[it felt] frustrating as all Muslims should be allowed to access and use the facilities of the home of Allah, regardless of whether it’s recommended for women to pray at home...”

“[I felt] angry that those men have the right to prevent me from a right my Lord has over me to pray. and in direct opposition to the hadith about not preventing women from the mosque”

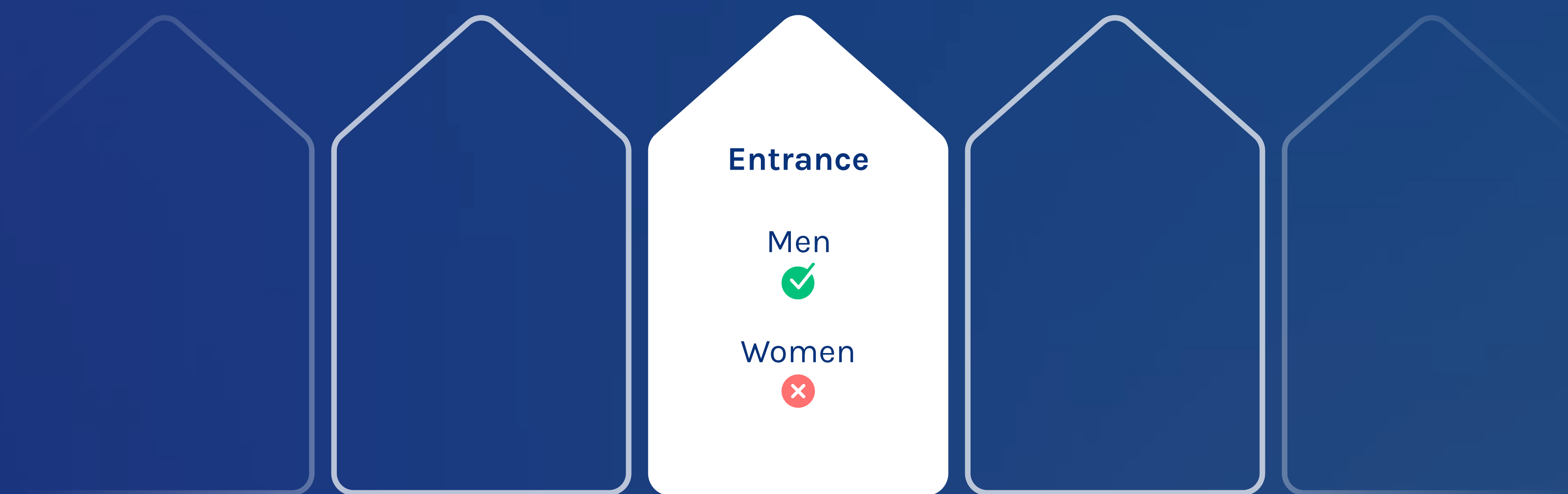
Accessing Masjids

In spite of the role of a Masjid as a centre for communal and spiritual life, 25% of Muslim women rarely visit the Masjid whilst a further 17% never visit the Masjid. Similarly, only a quarter of Muslim women in the UK have a Masjid local to them that provides facilities for women. The lack of access may partially be explained by the distribution of Muslim communities across the UK. For example, women are more likely to have a Masjid available to them in London compared to those outside of London. Additionally, it is worth noting that COVID-19 caused the suspension of some Masjid services which may impact this data.

Almost one in five Muslim women never visit the Masjid

Of those who have access to Masjids and have visited them, only 42% indicated that the quality of the space and services provided for women were good. 22% of Muslim women noted that despite attending the Masjid, they feel uncomfortable in doing so with 51% citing poor quality services, 47% citing unequal consideration in comparison to men and a further 38% citing judgement regarding their appearance and perceived levels of modesty.

However, the issue of accessibility is exacerbated by the fact that, in some cases, locally available Masjids do not cater for women at all. The provision of dedicated female spaces within Masjids is a crucial component when assessing accessibility as male and female areas of worship are typically segregated within Masjids in accordance with religious teachings.



Whilst it is true that the majority of Masjids in the UK offer facilities for women in some form, the lack of complete coverage across Masjids in the UK contributes significantly to our finding that 20% of Muslim women in the UK have at some point been denied entry to a Masjid. Almost a third of our respondents who were denied entry to a mosque reported being told that there was no dedicated space for women or that it was better for women to pray at home. In other cases, women were told that they could not use Masjid facilities because they were not appropriately dressed. Almost a fifth of women who had been denied entry noted that despite the presence of a female prayer space in a mosque, they were turned away due to the space being blocked off or in use by men.

Crucially, the impact of being denied entry to a Masjid is not solely spiritual; it can also lead to circumstances of physical unsafety and discomfort. As prayer is a religious obligation that Muslims must fulfil at specific times during the day, many women have been put in difficult situations after being denied entry to a Mosque and have had to resort to fulfilling these obligations in uncomfortable or unsafe alternative spaces. Respondents noted having to pray in car parks, street corners and changing rooms - a problem also explicitly identified in our focus groups - after being turned away from Masjids. The passages below highlight some of the experiences and feelings of Muslim women after being denied entry to a mosque.

The Importance of Masjids

It is without a doubt that Masjids occupy a significant and primary role in the spiritual well-being of Muslim women and Muslims more broadly. It is unsurprising then, that 61% of Muslim women reported that the limited access to Masjids that they experience has a negative impact on their spirituality and their relationship with faith.

The spirituality of almost two-thirds of women is detrimentally impacted by a lack of access to a Masjid

This is consistent across locations although varies significantly across age groups. 66% of Muslim women aged 18-24 noted that their spirituality is negatively impacted by a lack of access to Masjids in contrast to 48% of women over the age of 45. Muslim women from the Black community reported the highest level of negative spiritual impact where Masjids are unavailable - 72% in comparison with 46% of the Indian Muslim community.

Access to Masjids as physical spaces for prayer is not the only resource Muslim women identified as a need. Whilst approximately 40% of respondents cited access to a dedicated and quality prayer space and wudu facilities as their primary need, 65% noted the need for easy access to female scholars and a further 54% noted the need for classes that specifically cater for women and address their experiences as necessary services.

However, despite their pressing needs, only 19% of Muslim women have provided feedback to their local Masjids to raise issues. In order to facilitate continuous development and allow for community spaces and Masjids to evolve their services to accommodate changing needs, robust, clear and open feedback channels are necessary. Indeed, of the 81% who have not provided feedback, 44% did not know how to, a further 21% were uncomfortable with providing feedback and a further 18% felt that they would not be heard. Unfortunately, even for those who provided feedback, only 3% were satisfied with the response they received.

In spite of these challenges facing Muslim women, many are active in seeking alternatives to fulfil their religious and spiritual needs. Indeed, 38% of Muslim women sought some alternative to services or facilities they would hope to access from a Masjid. Young women appear to be more active in seeking out alternatives with the percentage dropping to 29% for women over the age of 45 in comparison to 40% for women aged between 25-34.

“As a young Muslim woman, it's been difficult making practicing/ spiritual friends. It would be great if Masjids opened their doors to female speaker events, classes etc. that both involve the community and also gives Muslimahs a strong sense of belonging.

I travel quite far to reach communities and a space where different voices are heard and different faces are present, to access questions I often turned to the internet and found amazing scholars and institutes and just generally expand my circle I've been able to find other institutes that offer programmes and such, I've not found a specific mosque that I can go to frequently but I've found spaces that wouldn't deny me a relationship with my lord or faith.

I attend a Muslim women's halaqah space that is run online as they were not given masjid space due to gatekeeping in the masjid about who is allowed to create spaces and who isn't. As a revert, I wanted beginner's advice on basics pertaining to women such as post-menstruation ghusl and required clothing for prayer. No services at local mosques so went online for information. Specifically, I wanted to learn from female scholars/teachers which is something I was able to do online but not in person (I.e from my local mosque)”

The Relationship with Islam and the Community

Overall, 70% of Muslim women in the UK feel some level of positive connectedness to Islam, with a small proportion, 7%, feeling disconnected with their faith. These findings are consistent across various demographics although the availability of Masjids with facilities for women heavily impacts how connected Muslim women are. However, and quite worryingly, where Muslim women reported not having a Masjid locally available to them, 48% felt disconnected from their faith highlighting the substantial contribution of a local Masjid with appropriate facilities for women in nurturing their relationship with Islam.

While a majority of Muslim women felt connected to Islam, only 32% felt connected to the wider Muslim community indicating the failings of the community to accommodate the needs of Muslim women. Such a gap between feelings of connectedness to Islam versus Muslim communities alludes to a disconnect within those communities and their ability to nurture the faith of Muslim women. From the perspective of some Muslim women, the issue appears to be that Muslim communities fall short of the ideals of Islam as they understand them. This is highlighted by 2 in 5 Muslim women reporting that they did not feel that the Muslim community was representative of the teachings and values of Islam. Respondents identified several themes that created a feeling of disconnect within the community - these included a lack of compassion and sensitivity when addressing Muslim women, the conflation of religious teachings and cultural practices and a lack of knowledge or a misunderstanding of the duties owed to women.

Some of these experiences are outlined below:

"I feel belittled and disregarded and my spiritual journey is not as important as a man's. It's tiring. When I have sought out an imam for advice I've received really cold treatment and left with a sense of shame. It put me off going to the masjid for a while as I don't think they know how to interact with women in a way that is merciful and relaxed. You always feel illegal (best way to describe it) seeking out the provisions that are your right as a Muslim."

"I feel like a sort of second-class citizen - if there's extra space/time/resources, we'll be accommodated for."



The Relationship with Islam and the Community

'I feel the attitudes towards women within the Muslim community are often very misogynistic and judgemental. There is not a lot of sympathy for women who are trying to hold on to their Deen but are struggling to find Muslim spaces that accommodate for their needs. It often feels like women are not even thought of when, for example, new mosques are built; it almost feels like we are second-class worshippers in our own religion. I think another big part of the problem is how little access Muslim women are given to female scholars and people of learning; every well-known sheikh or ustadh I've ever listened to has spoken about how important it is to have an established relationship with your local scholars, but don't acknowledge how difficult this is for women. It means that Muslim women often have to rely on generalised Islamic advice when dealing with very specific, personal issues.'

Though many commented on having limited access to quality Islamic education and female teaching, the lack of a wider relationship with the community has profound implications for more severe, albeit less frequent circumstances. The experiences of Muslim women highlight the failure of the community and religious spaces to address marital breakdown, domestic violence and substance abuse, amongst others, in a way that accommodates the perspectives and needs of Muslim women. These experiences are documented below:

"I have experienced a great deal of sexual harassment from men in mosque and dawah spaces and have been victim blamed consistently when I spoke about it"

"Whilst I was divorced, I was told over and over again how divorce is hated and Allah's throne shakes when a woman asks for a divorce. Nobody not once berated the ex who mistreated me and our children and was violent and abusive... I would never go to a Muslim institution to seek help or advice ever."

"Lack of access to women scholars, or scholars that have knowledge about women's issues, inherently creates a culture of young Muslim women to not recognise/connect with important tenets of Islam."

"There are issues that disproportionately, or exclusively affect women and girls. If these issues are not discussed as openly as other issues are and have been, these women become disillusioned from Islam."

"By reading about historical Muslim women who were remarkable in their accomplishments makes me wonder how can I become such when any step a woman takes towards success is deemed as an act of feminism. Islamic values shouldn't limit women to excel in their contribution to society"

As part of this study, Muslim women across the UK honestly reported their faith experiences, and eloquently expressed their deepest concerns and most upsetting experiences. In response to this, there is a collective responsibility to reflect, listen, engage and act to create inclusive spaces that provide appropriate communal and religious support both inside and outside the Muslim community for Muslim women.

A Word from Ta Collective

Many months ago, Ta Collective (formerly known as My Mosque Story) was approached by Muslim Census for a discussion on the faith experiences of Muslim women.

From our conversations with countless women who engage with our work, attend our events and follow us on social media, we knew that Muslim women were struggling to access Masjids, places of knowledge and religious scholars. Where women had access to these spaces, they still weren't catering to the specific needs of Muslim women. We welcomed the opportunity to do a formal research project on this and have spent months working with Muslim Census' researchers to create a questionnaire that is relevant and gets to the heart of the issues faced by Muslim women.

As an organisation, we set out seeking to provide a safe space for Muslim women to build their faith, deepen their connection with Allah and feel part of a community.

The findings in this report reinforce the need for such spaces. With two-thirds of women wanting access to women scholars and less than 10% seeking advice from their local mosques, it's clear that we have a lot to do to help the faith of Muslim women flourish.

We have sought to provide spaces for Muslim women to connect to Allah, to one another and to not feel so isolated in their faith journey. Our Scholarly Works series which sheds light on the God-given rights of Muslim women, the Salah Series, a recent course we ran with a woman scholar and the Breakfast Club, a space for Muslim women to come together during Ramadan all seek to do this.

We hope that this report can act as a catalyst for many more projects and initiatives which show that the faith of Muslim women is a priority, not an afterthought.

Methodology and Limitations

This study is a combination of 4 focus groups with a total of 24 participants and a survey of 1200 Muslim women in the UK. The survey was conducted online between 12 June 2022 and 25 July 2022. The focus groups were also conducted online between 17 March 2022 and 02 April 2022.

The majority of responses for the survey were obtained through online channels including email subscribers and social media. Focus group participants were blindly recruited and ensured we had a distributed number across categories that include, location and age, female scholars, Muslim women that frequently use the Masjid, Muslim women that do not use the Masjid amongst others.

The results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The margin of error varies based on the size of the sample. In this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that a survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 3% from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.

To increase the accuracy of the sample, overall statistics have been weighted by age and ethnicity to ensure that demographic ratios for Muslim women in the UK according to this study are similar to that recorded by UK Census data of 2011.

However, controlling for all variables is challenging. For instance, as the interviews were conducted exclusively by an online survey in English, considerations of access to the internet, and various language barriers, amongst others were not accounted for. Similarly, Muslims who have engaged with Muslim Census as an organisation and have completed previous interviews are more likely to have responded to this particular survey. This may potentially skew the results in favour of Muslims who are politically engaged, educated to Level 4 or higher, have an online presence in some capacity and are English-speaking.

Overall, however, given the large sample size which has considerable location, age and ethnicity coverage, we can be confident that this study provides valuable insight into the experiences of British Muslim women.

It is also worth noting that this study primarily captured the difficult experiences that Muslim women experienced in navigating faith spaces. There are undoubtedly positive experiences that accompany these. In the last few decades, substantial work has been done to ensure that the British Muslim community has dedicated and appropriate spaces to support the faith experience of all. In order to ensure that this continues, it's critical that community and faith leaders engage with those who have positive experiences to learn what works, what doesn't and how they can make their services as inclusive for Muslim women as possible.

Data tables

Ethnicity

	Responses (% of Sample)
Pakistani	375 (31%)
Bangladeshi	304 (25%)
Indian	162 (14%)
Black African	141 (12%)
Arab	54 (5%)
White	45 (4%)
Asian - Other	46 (4%)
Mixed	39 (3%)
Any other ethnic group	17 (1%)
Black - Other	11 (1%)
Prefer not to say/Other	7 (0.6%)

UK Region

	Responses (% of Sample)
London	529 (44%)
West Midlands	184 (14%)
Yorkshire & Humberside	94 (8%)
North West	103 (9%)
South East	110 (9%)
East	18 (1.5%)
East Midlands	81 (7%)
South West	30 (3%)
North East	20 (2%)
Scotland	12 (1%)
Wales	12 (1%)
Northern Ireland	2 (0.2%)
Prefer not to say / Other	6 (0.5%)

Age

	Responses (% of Sample)
18 - 24	466 (39%)
25 - 34	412 (34%)
35 - 44	173 (14%)
45+	143 (12%)
Prefer not to say / Other	7 (0.6%)