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## **Praying Where They Don't Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Mosques in Melbourne, Australia**

### ***Abstract***

This paper looks at a sample of women converts to Islam residing in Melbourne, Australia, and their passive boycott of mosques resulting from gender discrimination and ethnic prejudice. Although religious conversion requires structure and support through the performance of religious rituals, including at the community level, Muslim women converts are hindered in their ability to freely access and enjoy mosques. This is despite historical freedom for women to access the Prophet's mosque, and is the result of Islam in Australia being largely characterised by immigrant cultures that assert sex-segregation in the mosque as a way of possessing and ethnicising space.

### ***Introduction***

The mosque plays a central role in the community life of Muslims, and for converts to Islam, observing the rituals of mosque attendance helps facilitate the adoption and confirmation of new Islamic identities; participating in Muslim community rituals helps converts learn to feel, think and act as Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

Mosques in Australia, having been mostly established by immigrant communities, reflect cultural interpretations of idealised Islamic space. Inadvertently or otherwise, these ethnicised mosques are often exclusionary toward women as well as members of different ethnic groups. Female converts can have trouble gaining access to the mosque because of gender discrimination as well as ethnic and cultural difference. Without family support networks to help negotiate entry into Muslim space, they become new members of

communities that either subtly or overtly discourage them from attending the mosque, or at the very least do not place high importance on facilitating their access.

This paper looks at issues raised by a small sample of female converts to Islam, based on in-depth interviews conducted in metropolitan Melbourne during the better part of 2004. In particular, it examines perceptions of gender and ethnic discrimination experienced by ten convert women in the context of their attempts to gain access to Melbourne's mosques. The structure of the paper is such that it will cover an introduction to the concept of mosque, in particular the Prophet's original mosque and its gender inclusivity; conversion to Islam as a process that involves the negotiation of a new identity requiring structure and relationship support; the differences between first encountering Islam overseas as compared to in Australia; the nature of mosques in Melbourne, including their migrant ethnic character; experiencing the mosque as female converts; the historical debate over women's access to mosques; gender discrimination faced by converts in their attempt to access mosques; and the role that cultural and ethnic difference play in contributing to the exclusion of female converts from mosques in Melbourne.

Ten women were chosen to take part in the study through snowball sampling, selected on the basis it was believed they could contribute to and inform the study; were willing and available to take part in the research; and were within easy geographical reach for interviewing. At the time of the interviews, three women were aged between eighteen and twenty-four; four were between twenty-five and thirty-four; two were between thirty-five and forty-four; none was between forty-five and fifty and one was over fifty. One was English; seven were Anglo-Australian and two were Asian-Australian. Seven were married; one had never been married and two were single but had been married previously. Of the nine that were married or had been married, five had husbands who had been raised as Muslims and

four had husbands who were also converts. Seven had children and three had none. Three were in full or part-time paid employment; three were full or part-time students; two were self-employed and two were full-time homemakers. Three participants were relatively new to Islam, having been Muslims from between one to four years; while seven were relatively experienced, practising Islam from between five to fifteen years. One embraced Islam while in the Middle East; four began practising while in Asia and five became Muslims in Australia.

### ***The Mosque***

The Anglicised word mosque comes from the Arabic *masjid* meaning “place of prostration” and the Qur’an directs believers to build such places of worship in which to perform the ritual prayers together.<sup>2</sup> The holiest such place for Muslims is the mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, within the precincts of which is found the ancient Ka‘ba, a large cuboidal structure that Muslims believe was patterned on a heavenly archetype. Pilgrims--both male and female--pray and circumambulate together, performing the pilgrimage rites.

The second most holy site is the mosque built by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina in 622CE, which gave unfettered right of access to all Muslims regardless of race or gender. Originally, it possessed a marker to orient worshippers towards the direction of the Ka‘ba; a clean space for Muslims to pray shoulder-to-shoulder in rows; a raised platform for the imam to give a sermon; and ablution facilities for washing before prayer. This model is what Akel Ismail Kahera calls the Prophet’s “spatial Sunna”--the archetype that has affected all subsequently built mosques. Yet, mosques are also what Kahera calls “contested space” reflecting the cultural values of the communities in which they are built.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Converting to Islam***

Technically, conversion to Islam is a simple procedure. In front of two witnesses, the convert simply recites a short formula, known as the *shahada*, testifying there is no deity but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God. Despite the simplicity of the formal procedure of conversion, Lewis Rambo points out that embracing a new religion is a process that occurs over time rather than simply being experienced in a single event, and that this process differs from individual to individual. He writes: “Conversion [is] a dynamic, multifaceted process of transformation. For some, the change is abrupt and radical; for others, it is gradual and very subtle in its effects upon a person’s life.”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Ali Köse in *Conversion to Islam: a Study of Native British Converts* writes that conversion to Islam is a complex and gradual phenomenon. Converts may reject their natal religion early in life; undergo a moratorium period in which they question values and ideas in a secular setting; and then undertake an intellectual religious quest that leads them to Islam.<sup>5</sup> Köse also states that the development of a Muslim identity is an important part of the process of Muslim conversion. Converts require a structure for the adoption and maintenance of a new identity, which is affected by how the host community provides social support for the new Muslim. Köse does not elaborate on the role of the mosque as a base of social support although he does report that most of his interviewees felt welcomed by the Muslim community around them.<sup>6</sup>

Both Rambo and Köse’s descriptions of the conversion process appeared in the related experiences of the participants in the current study. Although most went through variations on a typical conversion ceremony, some spent much time experimenting with praying, fasting and wearing Islamic dress before eventually acknowledging their Muslim identity. Daniel Winchester, in his study of a group of Muslim converts in the United States, argues that it is

in the performance of religious rituals, such as prayer, fasting and adopting Islamic dress (and we can certainly include mosque attendance in the list) that the Muslim ‘self’ is generated.<sup>7</sup>

In the current study, three women described positive experiences with Muslims and mosques while travelling, before adopting Islam. Before she became a Muslim, Leah<sup>8</sup> was impressed by a mosque in Asia, “...seeing the way that people worshipped. The style of prayer, the respect of God that was evident in the prayer. It is a very physical way of praying and the way they all prayed together, it’s peaceful. There is no sound except for ‘*allahu akbar*’<sup>9</sup> and then the sound of every body moving. Only human sounds.” Alternatively, Carmel converted at her husband’s request when they got married. She was impressed with his example and agreed to convert. She had not known about Islam before meeting him and did not visit a mosque until some years later.

In contrast with the travellers, those that had initial contact with Islam in Australia faced barriers in approaching the religion, and the potential converts had to go to great lengths in order to read and learn about the religion before choosing it as their own. Four specifically spoke about feelings of intimidation, fear and discomfort they had experienced at the thought of entering a local Melbourne mosque whilst discovering Islam.

For those who felt nervous or fearful to approach a mosque, there was a sense that ignorance of appropriate etiquette might offend Muslims. Sukayna related: “as a non-Muslim it can be a bit scary because you don’t really know what you’re doing.” Nur said: “A lot of people think that non-Muslims aren’t allowed to go in mosques. A lot of Muslims think that non-Muslims aren’t allowed to go in mosques. There’s a barrier to keep people out, to keep people from being too interested.” Sharon related a story in which a man, noticing her headscarf, approached her to ask about Islam. She was impressed with his open-mindedness but when he inquired as to whether it would be useful to go to a mosque for more

information, she thought to herself “oh no, don’t go to a mosque.”

The disparity in experiences between those who travelled and met Muslims and their places of worship while playing the role of tourist, and those who attempted to learn about Islam locally, may be due to the first group’s status as observers in a foreign country. As outsiders journeying through a Muslim land, they encountered an Islam with an established history forming the dominant religious paradigm of the country. In contrast, Muslims in Australia are an embattled minority under scrutiny from political and media commentators questioning the validity of their existence in Australia. Converts, however, problematise the polarisation of Australian and Muslim identity. As Tina Gudren Jensen writes: “Converts see themselves as ‘different’ and ‘other’, and also as different from ‘the other’.”<sup>10</sup> As in Jensen’s Danish research, the converts in the present study inhabit a liminal space. The natural response of immigrant Muslims “battening down the hatches” to the non-Muslim world, even for potential and new converts, is evident in the way that some mosques operate as semi-closed to strangers. The mosque rarely figured in the conversion ceremonies of the interviewees. Instead, converts were more likely to have pronounced the *shahada* somewhere else, such as in front of a Muslim spouse or among friends in places such as University meeting rooms.

Further along the conversion process, Rambo found that relationships between converts and advocates for the religion are crucial, giving the example of sub-Saharan African converts to Islam who go through a patronage system, where a Muslim host facilitates entry of the new convert into the community.<sup>11</sup> The need for social patronage is also noted in Köse’s study. He writes: “the maintenance of a new [Muslim] identity requires a structure to make it workable and ... after conversion it matters a great deal how the new community provides for the ongoing sponsorship of the new convert.”<sup>12</sup>

After becoming Muslims, participants in the current study indicated they mostly gained support in their conversion process from Muslim friends and relatives, rather than from specific services offered in and by mosques. When asked: What type of support did you get in becoming a Muslim? there were a range of answers but none mentioned services specifically provided by mosques. Muslim family members (such as the husband or in-laws) and friends were nominated as providing the most support for the new convert on her religious journey (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sources of support after conversion

Type of support received	Nominations
Family (husband, in-laws)	6
Friends (raised Muslims, other converts)	5
University Islamic societies	3
Islamic classes	3
Convert organisations	3
Self-taught (books, internet)	2

Sharon recalled hearing stories of people drawn to Islam through books or the influence of other Muslims, whose interest had fallen due to lack of support from the community. Deborah was gracious about possible failings of the mosque community toward new Muslims: “I can see that the community has to attend to more important things, like the young people.” Still, all participants noted the positive influence that some individuals Muslims had been on them. Bilqis recalled: “Later I joined a Qur’anic studies group [run by a lady], and that lady is somebody I love very much. ... I still maintain contact with her and every time I take a Qur’an out to read, I remember her. She is the one who taught me Qur’an, so it’s very emotional when I think of her. She’s a lovely lady and she’s an embodiment of what we are supposed to be as Muslims. She’s kind, gentle and non-judgemental.”

Both Sharon and Tahirah suggested a mentoring system would be helpful for new

converts. Tahirah used to belong to a church that provided a support system of older Christians helping newer ones. She felt there was potential for such a mentoring system at Melbourne's mosques with many of the learned, elderly Muslims who attend, but felt that language and cultural problems may be a barrier. Sharon felt other converts were in the best position to help new believers.

In particular, three interviewees had founded or joined specific converts' associations or support groups. Three had attended some form of Islamic instruction but none of the programmes had been organised by mosque officials, being privately run classes. This suggests, as Rambo and Köse described, that converts need--and appear to seek out--sources of support to facilitate their conversion and consolidation in the Muslim community. Muslim relatives or friends generally provide this support as Melbourne's mosques play no real role.

### ***The Mosques of Melbourne***

Traditionally, Muslim scholars have categorised mosques ranging in size and importance: from the grandeur of the *jam 'i* mosque, which hosts the special Friday prayers for the whole city; to the local community *masjid* in which the five daily prayers are performed; to the *musalla* or open prayer space outside the city where massive Eid festival prayers are held.

In Australia, the building of mosques by community groups and ethnic organisations is a relatively recent phenomenon, and is more likely to be modelled on the pattern of the local community *masjid* than the large *jam 'is* of traditional Muslim countries.<sup>13</sup> As well, there is an informal categorisation of mosques into two types: those referred to as *masjids* are purpose-built or converted structures, owned by Muslims who employ imams to lead regular prayers, whilst the term *musalla* is used for any temporarily converted place where the prayers are performed on a semi-regular basis, or which is owned by non-Muslims but open to Muslims for the purpose of prayer. This latter category includes airport, university and hospital prayer-



rooms.

The mosques of Melbourne range in size and style from rented shopfronts to large purpose-built structures complete with minarets, domes and auxiliary buildings; the two largest being the Broadmeadows Camii Mosque and Preston's Mosque of Omar Bin El-Khatab.<sup>14</sup> Mosques are managed by associations that vary in the style of their membership and organisational structure. Membership of mosques in Melbourne is extremely loose and there is no requirement to become a financial member of a mosque organisation in order to regularly worship there, attend classes or participate in other community activities; hence the congregations tend to be porous.

Interviewees for this study were asked to nominate which, if any, mosques in the greater metropolitan Melbourne region they had visited in the past. In all, they had visited fifteen *masjids* as well as two *musallas*. The City Mosque--also home to the Islamic Council of Victoria, the peak Victorian representative body for Muslims--was nominated the most, followed by the Omar Bin El-Khatab Mosque in the city of Darebin (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mosques (excl. *musallas*) visited, by number of nominations

Mosque Name and Municipality	Nominations
City Mosque (Melbourne)	8
Islamic Centre Mosque of Omar Bin El-Khatab (Darebin)	7
United Migrant Muslim Association (Manningham)	4
Fatih Mosque (Moreland)	4
Broadmeadows Camii Mosque (Hume)	3
Islamic Society of Melbourne Eastern Region Mosque (Knox)	3
King Khalid Islamic College Junior School Mosque (Moreland)	3
Islamic Unity & Emir Sultan Mosque (Greater Dandenong)	2
Albanian Sakie Islamic Centre (Greater Dandenong)	2
Bosnia Hercegovina Islamic Society (Greater Dandenong)	2
Albanian Mosque (Yarra)	2
El Sedeaq Islamic Society (Banyule)	1

Mosque Name and Municipality	Nominations
Australian Bangladesh Islamic Council (Monash)	1
Alghadir Islamic Association (Moreland)	1
Islamic Information and Support Centre of Australia (Moreland)	1

A feature of mosques in Melbourne (as elsewhere in Australia) is their ethnic identification. In Muslim countries, believers can rely on already existing institutions or the state to build new mosques. For immigrants to Australia, however, building their own mosques has been of urgent importance, allowing them to Islamise and control a small part of the public space of their adopted home. That each ethnic group is emotionally attached to its own (and at times conflicting) cultural pattern of Islam, may explain why mosques have been built along ethnic fault lines in Melbourne. The mosque is not only a sanctuary for a small piece of Islam, but also for a small piece of “back home.” The question then becomes, where do converts fit in?

Although all participants had visited at least one or more of Melbourne mosques at some time in their past, at the time of the interviews none were regular attendees for either the daily ritual prayers or the weekly *jum‘a* service. This does not necessarily indicate a drop in levels of religiosity, however, because Islamic law as traditionally interpreted does not consider praying in the mosque a compulsory act for women. This raises the question of why converts who had regularly attended services in the past would decide to stop going. The answer to this can be found in the gender and ethnic discrimination they experienced, and their passive refusal to accept discrimination that relegates them to second-class citizenship, by walking away from the mosque.

### *Experiencing the Mosque*

Jane I. Smith’s book *Islam in America* provides a picture of the diversity of the North

American Muslim community at the end of the twentieth century. She covers a number of areas relevant to the issue including the negotiation of identity for Muslims living as minorities in a Western context; the development of mosques and Islamic centres, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century; the phenomenon of conversion; and the debate over the place and role of women in the community. Smith notes that American Muslims look to the example of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims to model their lives. Of relevance to this study is the invocation of the women around the Prophet, particularly his wives, as professional, political and personal role models for modern Muslim women. Pro-mosque attendance advocates have been rediscovering the early involvement of women in the Prophet's *masjid* to challenge current exclusionary practices.<sup>15</sup>

For at least three converts in the present study, developing their own understanding of Islam affected their attendance. Grace was initially taught that Islam required strict segregation, and that it was “Islamically better, sister” for the women to be isolated from the men. Over time, she questioned this belief; Grace is no longer close with many of those who initially taught her Islam. Soon after her conversion, Hafsa began attending a study circle held at an inner city mosque. She remembers being “turned off” about having to study intricate religious law regarding funerals, which she felt was irrelevant to her life. Now, she feels more confident in her understanding of Islam and her ability to filter what others tell her about the religion.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, at the time of the interviews none of the interviewees was regularly attending the mosque for prayers. Only two of the participants had never attended the mosque on a regular or semi-regular basis. Three had attended overseas mosques regularly and five had been active locally in the past. There had come a point, in each of the eight converts' lives, where they felt unwelcome; their personal understanding of

Islam differed from that held by other Muslims at the mosque; or it became difficult to attend, and consequently they stopped going to the mosque. For Tahirah and Hafsah, having children affected their mosque visits. “You get frowns if the kids are sitting the wrong way” said Tahirah. Hafsah felt welcome to pray at mosques but had not found time since the birth of her first child. Grace mentioned concerns for her child’s safety, and her resulting inability to concentrate, while trying to pray upstairs at one mosque she visited which had an open staircase and no child-safety barrier.

Nine of the converts were directly asked: As a female convert do you feel welcome at the mosque? Of those nine, six reported answers in the negative. Deborah felt caught between cultures; Grace felt acutely unwelcome as a woman; Leah felt intimidated as a woman when first going to any new mosque; Carmel felt unvalued; Tahirah said she did not feel welcome and that she would never go to a mosque by herself; and Sharon said that whether she felt welcome as a convert depended on which mosque, for what event and whether she knew people there but also said she did not feel a sense of belonging with any particular mosque. On the other hand, three converts reported that they did indeed feel welcome. Hafsah said she definitely felt welcome to pray although people might not specifically talk to her. Sukayna felt good wearing *hijab*<sup>16</sup> and going to the mosque although she did note feeling a bit strange that men would consciously avoid interacting with women. Nur--whose main experience was with other women at a University prayer facility--said she absolutely felt welcomed.

Nevertheless, most had negative experiences with mosques, which were overdetermined; culture, language, differing religious views and gender discrimination all played a part in affecting the converts’ experiences of mosques. The problem of gender discrimination is addressed in more detail below.

### ***Historical Debate over Women's Presence in the Mosque***

A disparity exists between what we know of the experiences of women surrounding the Prophet, and those of succeeding generations concerning women's access and presence in mosques. Nevin Reda has analysed source material from the Prophetic period until the compilation of the *hadith* canons. She argues that initially women had full access to the Prophet's mosque, and that it was not until after his passing that women's attendance at the mosque became an issue of concern, with pro- and anti-attendance *hadith* narrated to support women's access or the prohibition thereof.<sup>17</sup>

Asma Sayeed has studied medieval Sunni legal interpretations on the question of women's right of attendance at mosques. Like Reda, she notes that despite the majority of Prophetic traditions affirming or acknowledging women's full presence in the mosque, early Sunni law overrode them to discourage women from going to the mosque based on fear of (particularly young) women causing *fitna*, a word originally describing civil strife, but interpreted to mean sexual disruption to the public space.<sup>18</sup>

From the perspective of the debate over women's place in the mosque, Kahera makes a number of arguments that accord with a notion of gender equity when it comes to participation in mosques. Firstly, worship of God is an obligation for every male and female Muslim, and the Qur'an stipulates only two requirements about worship, neither of which have gender implications: a) believers are to perform regular prayers; b) anyone who enters the mosque space should be ritually clean and dressed appropriately.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, given that men and women had free right of access for both socialising and performing religious rituals in the Prophet's mosque, Kahera asks: Why are women prohibited or restricted from attending the mosque in light of these two points? Like Sayeed, he finds his answer in the notion of the privatisation of women and their removal from the public arena. Medieval

jurists privileged men in their interpretations of who had rights in accessing and moving about in public space--space in which the mosque was a prominent feature.

That the debate about women's access to mosques continues in Western countries where Muslims form minorities is a result of a number of factors. First, many contemporary Muslim jurists share the views of their medieval predecessors without regard to historical contextualisation. Second, the interpretation of religious law by indigenous Western Muslims is under-developed, there are few jurists willing, able or interested in developing a *fiqh* that recognises women's rights and finally,<sup>20</sup> there is a general lack of scholarship among local leaders of mosques.<sup>21</sup>

The question over the right or desirability of women attending mosques was discussed with the interviewees for this study. In particular, their level of familiarity with the debate was ascertained, and they were asked a series of questions designed to elicit their opinions on the desirability of women attending mosques. Only three quoted actual *hadith* or verses concerning the issue: one quoted a pro-attendance tradition only, while two quoted, with some knowledge of the topic, both pro- and anti-attendance *hadith* and Qur'anic verses. Surprisingly, the rest of the women did not reveal knowledge of strongly partisan views either way. Two replied they had no knowledge of the situation at the time of the Prophet regarding women's access. Grace was the most knowledgeable, quoting not only the statement of the Prophet: "do not forbid women from going to the mosque"<sup>22</sup> but also arguments against two anti-attendance *hadith*, and an interpretation of the Qur'anic verse: "to Us are known those of you who hasten forward, and those who lag behind."<sup>23</sup> She explained her understanding of the occasion for revelation of the verse:

This verse came down at a time when there was a really beautiful woman amongst the Muslims, and she was so beautiful that at the time of prayer some of the men used to rush to pray at the back so in *ruku*<sup>24</sup> they could look at her through their armpits. Other men, because they didn't want to be distracted by her beauty (which first of all

challenges the idea of *niqab*<sup>25</sup>) would rush to the front. So this verse came down. It's very interesting to note with this verse, here's a situation where a woman's beauty caused, you could say a *fitna*. Allah never said to that woman 'stay in your house, don't come to the mosque.' Allah never said 'cover your face.' In fact, Allah admonished the men and said 'I know why you're doing what you're doing.'

When introduced to the medieval concept of women being a sexual *fitna*, none of the participants found it relevant to their own lives. Carmel was "deeply offended" by the concept and felt it essentialised the nature of women, an objectification that men do not experience. Lack of familiarity with the *fitna* argument even amongst mature converts suggests that it does not have popular currency with Muslims debating the issue in English-speaking contexts. Yet, when the issue of women's discrimination in Australian mosques was publicised in late 2008,<sup>26</sup> and the Mufti of Australia, Sheikh Fehmi Naji el-Imam, promised to address a request to end segregation of male and female mosque space, almost immediately there was a strong response from conservative members of the Muslim community who articulated a fear of sexual *fitna* if women were to be allowed in the same main prayer space as men in Australian mosques.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Gender Discrimination***

Gary Bouma's *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia* is the only notable sociological study of patterns of Muslim migrant settlement in Australia. Bouma found that women are important in helping to build and establish mosques, but their needs in relation to mosque attendance are often neglected. Despite this, Bouma found that mosques are important to Muslim women who have helped build and maintain them in Western countries. For minority Muslim communities, mosques play a central role in serving community needs, but women complain of discrimination. Some Muslims believe that women should pray at home, and this is reflected in lower rates of female worshippers in mosques. Generally speaking, however, women indicated they wished to pray and be involved in mosque life.<sup>28</sup>

Nearly all the participants for the current study noted problems with patterns of gender relations in the modern Muslim community. Only Sharon felt that being a woman had not caused any difficulty for her when going to the mosque: “I’ve never felt awkward going to the mosque on Islamic grounds at all, at any time, to do any prayer ... I’ve never experienced a negative reaction to my being in the mosque,” she said adamantly. However, the others expressed varying levels of discontent.

Grace felt that mosques in Melbourne were exclusionary and noted the structural sexism in requiring women to climb flights of stairs to pray in balconies and upstairs. “Generally the women are the ones with babies, small children and prams, so it becomes physically impossible. What if a woman with a wheelchair came?” she asked.

Four interviewees specifically mentioned that culture played a large part in determining patterns of gender relations at mosques. Leah said: “Even if people are brought up in Australia, they behave in the more traditional culture when they go to the mosque because they think that is how you be religious.” Carmel felt that becoming a Muslim had adversely affected her own perceptions about male and female relations; that it had “warped” her.

This returns us to the theme of the experience of dissonance between being Muslim and being Australian, as it plays out in gender roles and relations. In comparison, dominant Anglo-Australian cultural practices include very little segregation, whereas many Muslim cultures follow a pattern of stricter sexual separation, most clearly seen in the different dress codes for men and women.

Many Muslim cultures hold to interpretations of Islam that require women to cover their entire bodies with loose-fitting, opaque clothing in public, although some exception is made for the face, hands and feet. In contrast, Muslim men are religiously required to cover only between the navel and knee, although wearing more clothes is considered desirable. The



purpose of the dress code is to de-sexualise and privatise the public sphere.

It is possible that the mosque becomes iconic in representing Islam for Muslims living as minorities. Strict segregation in the mosque takes on symbolic importance in representing idealised gender roles, which are virtually unachievable anywhere else in the wider non-Muslim society in which the Muslims live. Because the mosque is possibly the one public arena over which the Muslims have power, gender segregation here is tightly controlled: furthermore, women are figured as safeguarding this morality.

For example, one northern suburbs mosque has a notice affixed to the entrance wall, warning women in English and Arabic to wear a head cover and conservative religious dress before entering. There is no similar sign warning men to observe Islamic dress and cover themselves appropriately, even though verses of the Qur'an and many *hadith* enjoin modest dress and behaviour on *both* men and women (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Notice affixed to mosque wall on women's dress requirements.

When it comes to the issue of space for women in the mosque, the participants had different opinions on the need for equal, un-segregated space and resources for men and women. Tahirah, Nur and Grace felt that there should be equality. Nur argued: "it seems to

me that women have an equal need for Islamic education and socialisation.” Carmel also felt uncomfortable with the division and segregation between men and women at mosques. Leah talked about her time in Asia and noted that in the bigger mosques, there are no demarcated and segregated areas; women wander around, chat and even nap in the mosques. Tahirah said that while she would not feel comfortable with men and women praying in mixed rows, she thought it was “sad that a lot of mosques only give women a small space to pray in, or [send them] off in another room.” However, both Hafsah and Sukayna noted that men need more space to pray (due to the *jum‘a* prayer being obligatory for them) and felt satisfied with a smaller area for women. Sukayna did feel, however, that it should be as nice an area as the men’s and be clearly demarcated with ablution facilities available for both men and women.

A number of the converts mentioned the need for modest behaviour and dress on the part of both men and women. Six of the converts were committed to wearing some form of Islamic headscarf while in public; whereas four did not wear a covering except to pray. Deborah explained that she was careful to wear *hijab* when going to the mosque although she did not wear it ordinarily. She felt that Western dress for women had gone “too far” and that women had to take some responsibility for dressing modestly. Like Deborah, Leah usually dressed carefully when going to the mosque, although she felt that extreme segregation was cultural and not Islamic. “I’m usually very conscious when I go to a new mosque ... I try and stay out of their [men’s] way and not flaunt myself,” she explained. When asked how she felt about modifying her behaviour for men, she replied: “I don’t really like it, but it’s something I’m prepared to do because I know that’s the way they feel. I’d rather they didn’t think like that. I do want to respect them because it’s their space as well as mine, although I think it’s less my space because I have to do that for them.”

Hafsah particularly drew a connotation of respect in both male and female covering:

“When I became a Muslim, I knew these things were part of Islam ... It’s one of the reasons I became a Muslim, because I felt Muslims respected God, respected his holiness. That’s one of the things I find in a mosque, when you come into pray, that covering your head is part of that respect.”

Given the diversity of responses about division of space and segregation, it is not possible to say that there is a united voice in completely opposing current mosque practices of assigning the main prayer space for men and a smaller segregated space for women. This--along with the majority adopting Islamic dress in various fashions--suggests the participants accept as authentic, the de-sexualisation and privatisation of public space. This acceptance did not extend, however, to the assigning of inferior quality resources to women, or preventing them from attending altogether.

### ***Culture, Ethnicity and Exclusion***

Another study of Muslim minority communities in a Western context is Kambiz GhaneaBassiri’s in-depth sociological analysis of Los Angeles’ Muslims in *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles*. He chose Los Angeles as representative of the United States as a whole, which has become “a kind of laboratory for creative Islamic institutions.”<sup>29</sup> GhaneaBassiri pits traditional Islam with a newly developing indigenous Islam that is more accommodating to gender parity. GhaneaBassiri does not clearly define what he means by traditional, and given the wide diversity of the seventeen different ethnic groups he surveyed, it is possible to suggest that by traditional, GhaneaBassiri is referring to the more nebulous perception of idealised Islam from “back-home” that is held in the minds of immigrants.

Participants in the current study indicated that cultural clashes and language barriers meant they did not feel welcome at Melbourne’s mosques. Seven specifically mentioned

culture problems with mosques. Tahirah said: “The mosques tend to be ethnically oriented ... which doesn’t make me want to go very much. Often I force myself to go to things to support [my husband].” She related an experience before becoming Muslim in which an elderly man told her off for attempting to get her shoes that she had left at the men’s entrance. “I’m sure the man who yelled at me, his English wasn’t too good so he sounded more abrupt.” Another convert expressed frustration that she could not join a particular mosque committee due to its policy of only allowing Indo-Pakistani men as members. “I can’t be a member because I’m Australian and I can’t be on the committee because I’m a woman,” she complained.

For Leah, not understanding the Friday *khutba*<sup>30</sup> was a problem. She and her husband had decided to live near a mosque, however “the main *khutba* was in Arabic which went for at least half an hour, and the English *khutba* would be only five minutes. I thought ‘we’re not getting the full picture here’.” She said the imam sounded angry and “school teacher-ish” and the *khutbas* had little relevance to her life. She tried to go to another mosque with sermons that suited her better, but it was some distance away and few other women attended, which she disliked. However in contrast, Deborah used the Arabic *khutba* as meditation time.

Her own cultural attitudes and ethnic background may affect the development of a female convert’s own nuanced understanding of Islam. Because Melbourne’s mosques are flavoured by various migrant ethnic groups that dominate one mosque or another, there is no place for the culture of the Australian convert to operate. Put another way, it appears perfectly legitimate to be ethnically Turkish, Lebanese, Indonesian, Egyptian, but Australian Muslims from ethnicities that have not historically contained large numbers of Muslims (such as Anglo-Saxon, Celtic etc.) can feel pressured to choose between their Australianness and their Muslim identity as if there was an inherent conflict between the two. They may be encouraged to adopt Arabic names; wear Middle Eastern or Asian clothing; and follow non-

Australian prescriptions for gender relations, while being told that these new activities are “Islamic” rather than simply the norms of various Muslim cultures.

Nevertheless, where there is tension between the convert’s own cultural identity and the new Islamic identity, it is clear that the non-native cultural interpretations of Islam, or even the idealised Islamic identity on offer to the convert, do not always predominate. As Jensen notes, a third manifestation of identity occurs, where converts ‘indigenise’ Islam as much as their identity is Islamised. “By dissolving the common discourse on a Danish ‘self’ vs a Muslim ‘other’, new constructions and relations of identity appear.”<sup>31</sup> The participants in the present study are agents, passively boycotting the mosques that do not accord them the equity of treatment they desire.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter discusses the gender discrimination as well as the cultural and ethnic prejudices that impair Muslim women convert’s full access to and enjoyment of Melbourne’s mosques. In summary, conversion to Islam is a process that requires structure and support for the adoption of a new religious identity, yet mosques did not significantly figure in the conversion experiences of the converts interviewed for this study, even though some had visited mosques before embracing Islam. Some converts--namely those that had lived or travelled overseas in Muslim countries--had positive pre-conversion experiences of mosques, while the others spoke of fear and nervousness at the thought of approaching local mosques as non-Muslims in Australia.

Historically, women had full access to the Prophet’s mosque, however due to the privileging of men by medieval and current interpreters of Islam, segregation and female exclusion (in varying degrees) became normative. Yet, none of the interviewees understood Islam to forbid or disallow their presence in the mosque. The converts were largely

unfamiliar with the details of the historical argument over women's right of access to the mosque, but there was a general sense that women should be free to attend, even if there were different opinions as to the ideal level of segregation. As none were regular attendees of the daily prayers or weekly *jum'a* service, other forces are clearly at work in dissuading female converts from attending the mosque.

The trend to exclude women from mosques has been imported into the Australian context due to the strong ethnic identification of mosques with immigrant communities that are used to greater degrees of sex segregation than is generally practiced in Australia. Patterns of segregation and exclusion of women have been enforced in the mosque environment that are most likely not experienced anywhere else by Muslims in the wider Australian community. This is possibly due to mosque space becoming idealised Islamic space. It can tentatively be suggested that the embattled nature of the mostly immigrant Muslim community under harsh political and media scrutiny, causes it to close ranks and dissuade outsiders from entering. Furthermore, the various cultural manifestations of Islam are idealised and preserved in the one form of public space over which Muslims have control, that is--the mosque.

Although one convert stressed her female status had not affected her mosque experience, the others noted experiences of sexism. This gender discrimination formed part of the ethnic and cultural differences that affected the enjoyment and use of mosques by Muslim women converts. This, in turn, led to the abandonment of regular mosque attendance as a form of passive boycott.

#### NOTES

1. D. Winchester, "Embodying the Faith: Religious Practice and the Making of a Muslim Moral Habitus", *Social Forces*, Vol. 86, No. 4, 2008, pp. 1753-1780.
2. For example, see Qur'an 24:36, 9:108, 9:18.

3. A. I. Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, pp. 10, 121, 134.
4. L. R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 6.
5. A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1996, p. 66.
6. *Ibid.* pp. 133-134.
7. Winchester, "Embodying the Faith," *op. cit.*, pp. 1754-1755.
8. Names have been changed, and identifying details altered to preserve anonymity.
9. The invocation *allahu akbar* means "God is greater" and is uttered at various points throughout the ritual prayer.
10. T.G. Jensen, "To be 'Danish', becoming 'Muslim': Contestations of National Identity", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2008, p. 401.
11. L. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-112.
12. A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
13. R. Holod and H. U. Khan, *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons and Designs since the 1950s*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1997, p. 19.
14. G. D. Bouma, *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia*, Canberra: Australian Govt. Pub. Service, 1994, p. 56.
15. J. I. Smith, *Islam in America*, Columbia Contemporary American Religion Series, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 110-112.
16. The word *hijab* is used here to refer to modest Islamic clothing and in particular the head covering.
17. N. Reda, "Women in the Mosque: Historical Perspectives on Segregation", *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2004, p. 77.
18. A. Sayeed, "Early Sunni Discourse on Women's Mosque Attendance", *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World Newsletter*, No.7, March 2001, p. 10. An exception is found in the Zahiri school, which gives preference to women's attendance.
19. A. Kahera, *Deconstructing*, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-134.
20. One notable exception is Khaled Abou El Fadl, who was trained in Islamic law in Egypt, Kuwait, and the United States, and who has specifically challenged gender discrimination in *fiqh*. See, for example K. Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2001.
21. A. Kahera, *Deconstructing*, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124, 129-130.
22. This tradition in various renditions can be found in the canons of Bukhari and Muslim, commonly accepted as the most authentic collections of *hadith*.
23. Qur'an 15:24.
24. *Ruku'* refers to bowing that occurs in various places as part of the obligatory prayer.
25. A *niqab* is a piece of cloth used to veil the face, a practice some Muslims argue is highly recommended or obligatory for women. Other Muslims disagree, and consider showing the face to be permissible or preferable.
26. J. Hussein, "Making Room for the Sisters", *Challenges to Social Inclusion in Australia: The Muslim Experience*, NCEIS Conference, 19-20 November, 2008. Hussein's discussion of sexism in Australian mosques at the conference was reported in a broadsheet Australian newspaper, the *Age*, garnering attention around the nation.
27. An example is Sydney personality Keysar Trad's 24 November 2008 opinion piece in the online Australian magazine *Crikey*, where he wrote: "if women did not have such private space, one could imagine the circle of male worshippers may multiply (and new converts joining en masse) to allow those who like to pack their person tightly against women in crowded places to attend in an attempt to create a different type of 'worship'."
28. G. Bouma, *Mosques*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-75.
29. K. GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 11.
30. Sermon given by the imam as part of the Friday prayer service and festival days.
31. T. Jensen, "To be 'Danish'", *op. cit.*, pp. 402.