

Challenges Faced by Muslim Women in Pursuing Islamic Education in Melbourne

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Summary:

This report explores the challenges faced by Muslim women in Melbourne when pursuing Islamic education. Through the insights gathered from 156 survey respondents, this study underscores the pervasive barrier of inadequate female representation among teachers and mentors, which significantly hampers women's access to Islamic scholarship. Furthermore, it offers strategic recommendations based on respondent suggestions and highlights the importance of ongoing research to empower Muslim women in their scholarly pursuits in the Islamic sciences.

1.0 Introduction

Islamic education has a rich history that includes the active participation of women as scholars, educators, and contributors to the Islamic intellectual tradition (Muḥammad Akram Nadwī 2016). Historically, Muslim women were active participants in Islamic scholarship, making significant contributions in various fields, including theology, jurisprudence, hadith studies and more. Muslim women were instrumental in transmitting and preserving Islamic teachings and their involvement was widely recognized and respected (Mohammad Omar Farooq 2003)

However, in recent times a disparity has emerged between men and women when it comes to pursuing Islamic scholarship (Abdo 2018). This report aims to shed light on the contemporary challenges that Muslim women in Melbourne face when it comes to pursuing Islamic education.

2.0 Methodology:

A descriptive anonymous questionnaire was distributed without restrictions through various social media channels including; WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook. A total of 156 responses were received. The list of questions asked to participants can be found in Appendix 1.

3.0 Results:

3.1 Demographic Profile:

- **Age and Location:** A diverse age group was represented with the majority of participants falling within the 18-30 age bracket (67.3%, Figure 1.) and residing predominantly in the Northern (44.5%) and Western suburbs (34.3%) of Melbourne (Figure 2.)

Figure 1: Distribution of Participants by Age

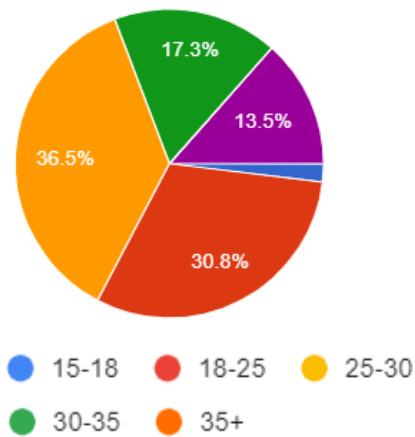
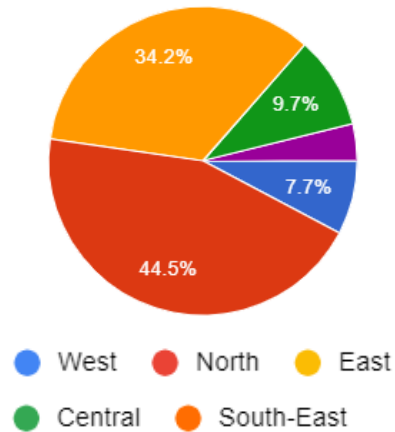


Figure 2: Geographic Distribution of Participants by Suburb



- **Occupation and Level of Education:** A substantial portion of respondents identified as either full-time employees or students (Figure 3), with over half of the respondents holding a bachelor's degree in tertiary education (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Occupation of Participants

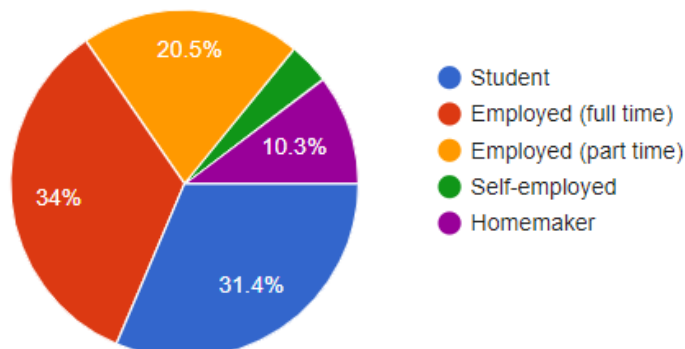
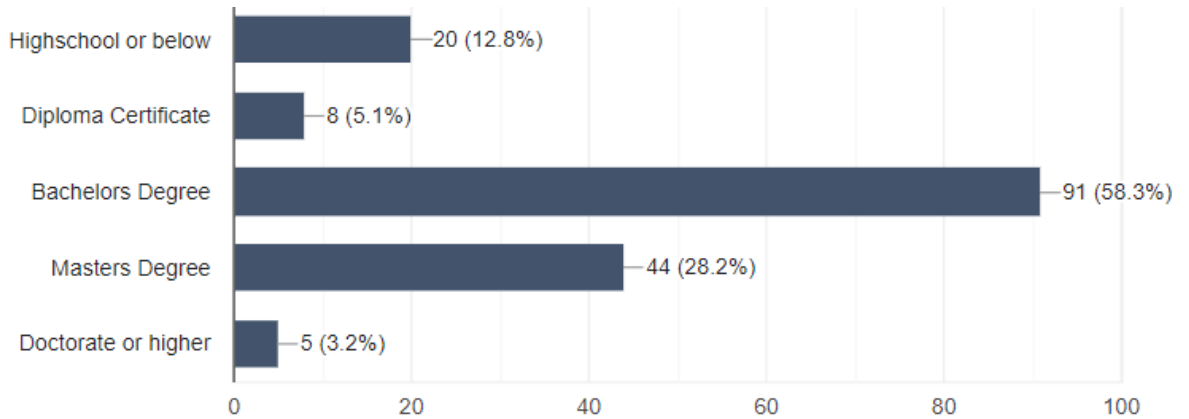


Figure 4: Highest Level of Secular Education Completed by Participants



- **Marital Status and Children:** The marital status of respondents were nearly evenly distributed between single and married individuals. Among those who were parents, the majority reported having 2-3 children (Figures 5 and 6.).

Figure 5: Marital Status of Participants

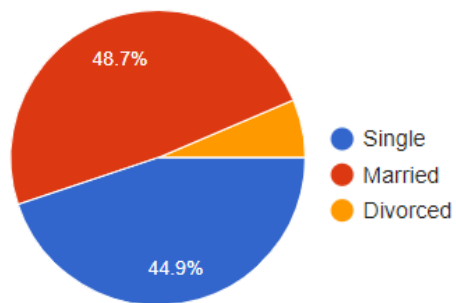
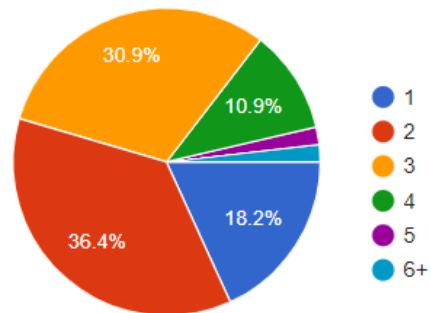


Figure 6: Number of Children (Among Those with Kids) of Survey Participants



3.2 Experiences in Seeking Knowledge

Figure 7 highlights that participants primarily engaged with Islamic education through the mosque system (32.1%) and weekend courses (32.1%), but their aspirations for further Islamic education leaned towards short-term programs (34.6%) or regular classes in local mosques (19.2%), with a notable interest in traditional 5-year Alimiyah programs (17.3%) and Master of Islamic Studies programs (14.1%).

Figure 7: Distribution of Participants Based on the Highest Level of Completed Islamic Education

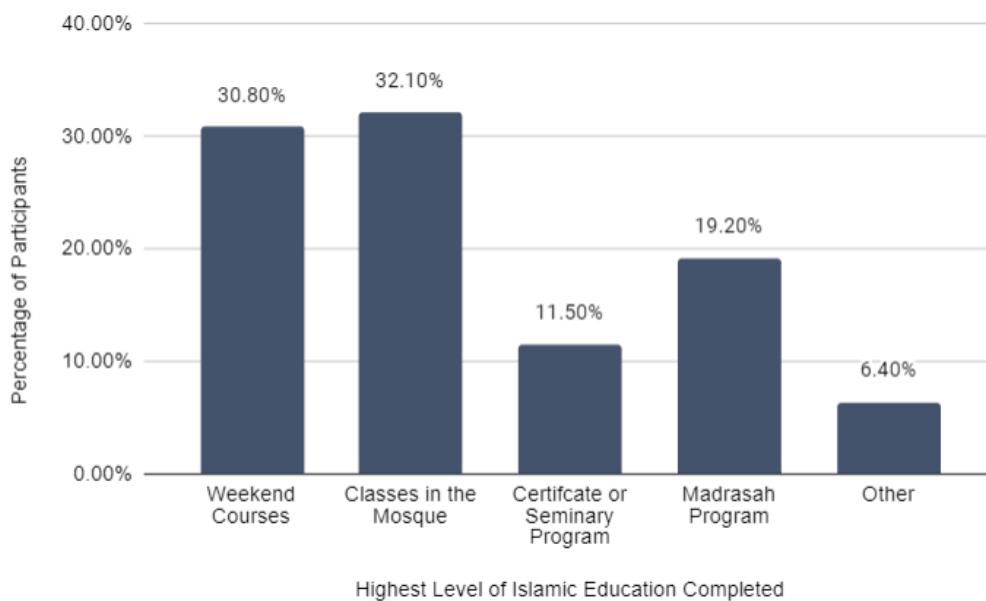
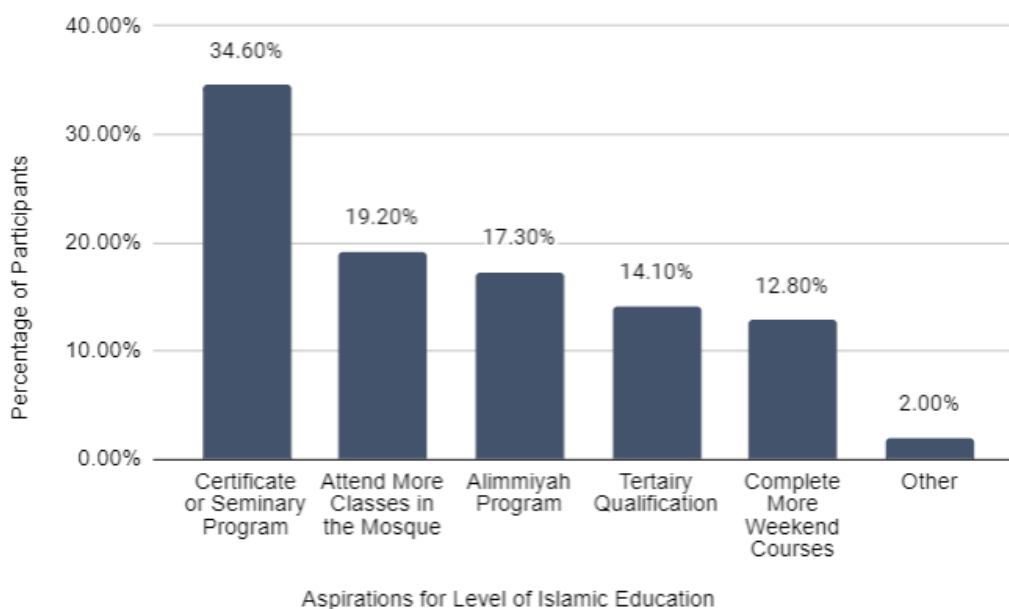
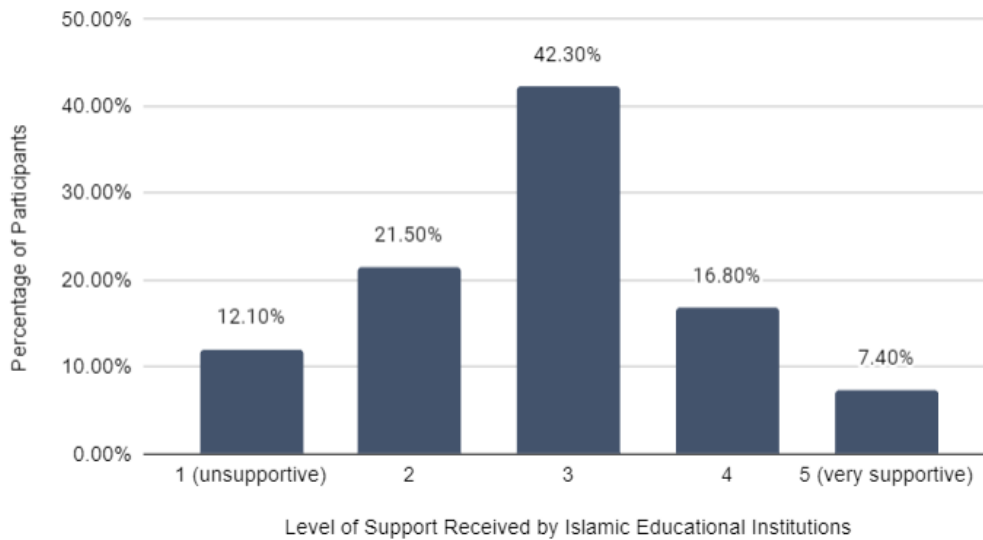


Figure 8: Distribution of Participants' Aspirations for the Level of Islamic Education Completed



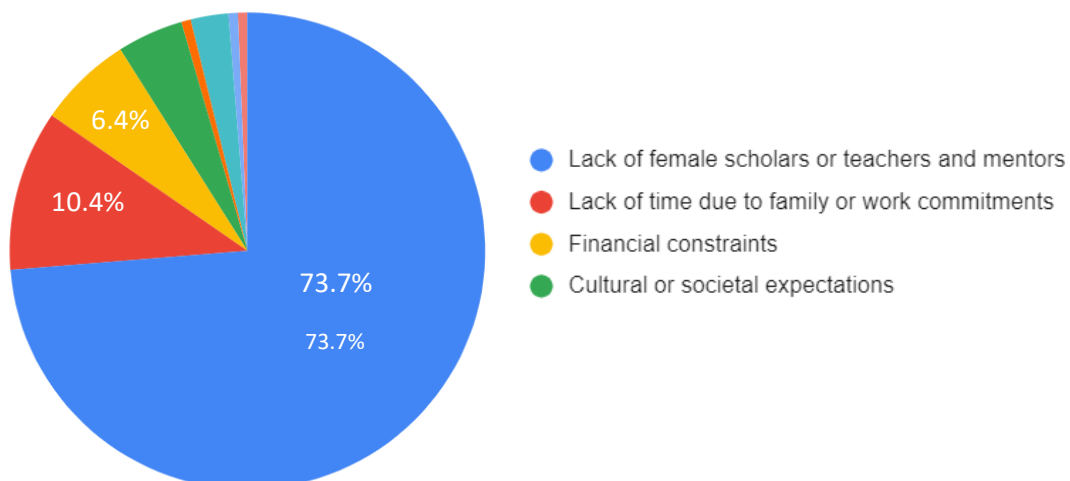
The perceived level of support from Islamic educational institutions was generally neutral, with a slightly higher proportion perceiving it as inadequate as highlighted below in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Perceived Level of Support Received by Participants in Pursuit of Islamic Education



The most notable finding in this study was the prominent concern raised by a substantial majority of participants (73.7%) who identified the absence of female teachers and mentors as the primary impediment to their pursuit of Islamic education. Limited availability of time due to family or work commitments (10.4%) and financial constraints (6.4%) were also cited as barriers albeit to a lesser extent as illustrated in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10: Primary Obstacles Perceived by Participants when Pursuing Islamic Education



When asked what can be done to support Muslim women in their pursuit of Islamic education, recommended strategies included providing flexible learning options (37.7%), establishing mentorship programs with experienced scholars or educators (24.7%), and developing an inclusive curriculum reflecting Muslim women's experiences and perspectives (24.7%) (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Suggested Strategies for Enhancing Support for Muslim Women

Pursuing Islamic Education

Strategy	% Participants in support of this strategy
Provide flexible learning options	20.9%
Develop a diverse and inclusive curriculum that reflects the experiences and perspectives of Muslim women	16.7%
Establish mentorship programs with experienced scholars or educators	16.2%
Ensure women are actively involved in the administration of education programs	13.5%
Offer financial aid and scholarships specifically for women	12.7%
Provide on-site childcare facilities for students with children	12.1%
Establish a system for collecting feedback from Muslim women students to continuously improve support	7.9%

4.0 Discussion

Limited research exists regarding female Islamic scholarship in Australia. While attempts have been made to explore global barriers to female Islamic education, this research predominantly focuses on underdeveloped countries, limiting its relevance to women in contemporary Melbourne (Ahmad & Tak, 2020). Consequently, the findings of this study represent the initial exploration of the experiences and challenges encountered by Muslim women in their pursuit of Islamic education, along with potential strategies to enhance their educational endeavours.

Notably, this study highlights that the most critical barrier within Islamic education is the lack of female teachers and mentors. This underscores the broader challenge of gender inequality within religious educational institutions. Considering that 62.9% of participants had their main interaction with Islamic education through the mosque (32.1%) or through weekend courses (30.8%), we can use these settings to unpack how and why a lack of female mentors and teachers within these spaces has led to barriers for women seeking Islamic education.

Within the mosque setting, a disparity exists between the access and involvement of women surrounding the Prophet PBUH, and the access and presence of modern women in mosques (Woodlock 2010). This is echoed in a participant's response who said, *"since the first accessible place of Islamic education is the mosque, women immediately face the built-in problem - they learn architecturally and structurally that they themselves are an afterthought, using the side door, the small space, the less celebrated or decorated back rooms."* Similarly, a brief review of the two leading Australian Islamic institutions conducting

weekend-seminar programs highlighted that only 4 of their 28 instructors were female (Al Maghrib Institute n.d., Al Kauthar Institute n.d.). Ultimately, both spaces where most Muslim women in Melbourne seek Islamic education, are not cultivating an environment that nurtures the scholarship of Muslim women.

Moreover, it is well established that the teacher-student relationship is integral within the learning environment (Liberante 2012). Although beginning to improve, both the mosque and Islamic event spaces have traditionally created a barricade between the female student and the male scholar through hypersegregation. This point is further emphasized through the feedback of one participant who stated, *"I think being able to access scholars as frequently as men do would be helpful too."* Similarly, another participant highlighted that *"the problem of gender segregation in Melbourne leads to double standards and Muslim women feeling like second-class citizens in public life. How can Islamic education take place unless this is addressed directly and honestly? I personally appreciate women-only spaces and classes, but I cannot deny that this is a significant barrier to Islamic education."*

Naturally, the constrained access to educators can have a detrimental impact on the student experience, potentially limiting engagement and motivation (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011).

Beyond the lack of female teachers and mentors, a lack of time availability due to family and work constraints was highlighted as another barrier, although not as significant (10.2%). This coincides with most participants wanting to pursue more short-term programs such as completing a 1-year certificate or seminary program (34.6%) or attending more regular programs in the mosque (19.2%). These results suggest an opportunity for seminaries and mosques to address the scarcity of female Islamic scholarship at the grassroots level, by

prioritizing inclusivity and enhancing the visibility of existing female scholars within their programs.

Lastly, it's worth noting that the majority of participants have attained tertiary-level education, with 86.5% holding either a bachelor's or master's degree. This underscores the readiness for educational pursuit among participants, yet it highlights a potential discrepancy in the receptiveness of the learning environment.

5.0 Opportunities for Future Research

Further research is required to build upon the insights gained from this study including in-depth interviews to complement survey data. This would help provide a deeper understanding of the experiences and needs of Muslim women pursuing Islamic education. Longitudinal studies can also be undertaken to track the educational journeys and outcomes of Muslim women over time, offering a more comprehensive understanding. Research can also assess the impact of implemented strategies such as mentorship programs or curriculum changes, to determine their effectiveness in enhancing support and access for Muslim women in Islamic education.

6.0 Limitations of the Study

It is essential to acknowledge that this study provided only a small look into the experiences of Muslim women in the field of female Islamic scholarship, and hence there are numerous limitations. Firstly, the survey's distribution through social media platforms may have introduced sampling bias, as respondents active on these platforms may not represent the broader population of Muslim women pursuing Islamic education. Furthermore, the survey

was only open for four days hence a longer window would allow for a broader population to be represented. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases and inaccuracies. Future research should consider incorporating more objective measures or conducting in-depth interviews to validate findings.

7.0 Conclusion

This study sheds light on the limited research regarding female Islamic scholarship in Australia, highlighting the unique challenges faced by Muslim women in Melbourne as they pursue Islamic education. The critical barrier of inadequate female representation among teachers and mentors, coupled with gender inequality within religious educational institutions, hinders women's access to Islamic scholarship. The study calls for future research to deepen our understanding of these challenges and assess the effectiveness of proposed interventions. While acknowledging its limitations, this research underscores the importance of addressing these issues to empower Muslim women in their pursuit of scholarly learning in the Islamic sciences.

8.0 References

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Appendix 1

Survey Questions Asked to Participants can be found here:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdOOTP90prUghctqsvmO7c0f5VvkUGhzte_NY-sH1E_bihwQ/viewform?usp=sf_link