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Recreation and the creative Muslimah

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will be sharing the results of interviews and research I conducted on the recreational initiatives of Muslim women catering to the needs of fellow sisters in Islam. In most countries around the world literacy and employment rate amongst women has risen steadily in the last few decades, as it has amongst Muslim women too. Many amongst them are seeking simultaneously to learn about Islam, i.e., their obligations as Muslims and the rights that Islamic law has endowed them. Engagement in economy also means an availability of capital to spend for recreational activities. However, the question arises if and which recreational activities will be permissible and preferred by Muslim women. Therefore, many females have introduced tourism, hospitality, and event management initiatives that cater to educated urban Muslims' aesthetics. The travel bloggers from Indonesia who review female mosque areas, Instagrammers from the UK who normalize a niqabi¹ lifestyle while capturing beautiful picnics, and Pakistani women who promote travelling into beautiful areas of Pakistan in female and family-friendly ways are a few prominent examples. These professional women are aware of the needs of their fellow sisters and make halal ways of recreation their business motto. This article will provide real-life instances of how believers can find a balance as they strive to find a balance as ummat-e-wasat.

Key words: *Muslim women, Gender and religion, Halal tourism, Islamic practices.*

Within the Islamic advice literature for women, a plethora of literature addresses Muslim women and society's expectations from them. This article reminds us how Muslim women from different parts of the world can express their faith and pious endeavors while being unique in their approaches. The increased literacy in the global middle class has given them access to knowledge and resources



simultaneously which has also given rise to the concept of Halal tourism and Shariah tourism². Indonesia is one of the leading service providers in this field.³ For believers of Islam belonging to the middle class, the global flow of goods shapes the consumption patterns. Studies from Turkey, Malaysia and the Middle East have shown that believers could benefit from goods created for the consumer market that caters to Muslims. It makes sure that their religious practice needs are taken care of in the design and contents of their product. The list is long, starting from Islamic banking, halal food industry, modest fashion brands and toys for children.

In Pakistan, the majority of working women are comprised of fieldworkers, domestic labourers and handicrafts and industry labourers. Their jobs are labour-intensive and underpaid. Moreover, there is now a large number of the workforce in diverse fields like small businesses, medical, engineering, teaching, IT etc. Amongst the educated middle-class women, many initiatives for studying religion are popular.⁴ These women have access to economic capital, and have knowledge of their religion. Faith forms an important part of identity for most of them, and therefore for them, patterns of consumption are always based on their interpretation of what God demands from them.

While it is clear that Islam does not restrict recreation for women, it is the obligation of Purdah, which makes it confusing for some believers.⁵ This confusion is evident in the many letters written to the magazines of Islam seeking an opinion about if women are allowed to leave home for recreational activities since it does not fall under the category of necessity (*Zarurat*). The answers to these questions usually address the issues of increased expenses (*fuzool kharchi*), unnecessarily leaving the house and mixing of genders and other concerns about encountering the haram like haram ingredients of food. These questions show that there is a class that has access to resources and that they are also anxious about their piety. Here I quote one example of a curious girl asking a Sheikh about the same topic. While some variations in opinion and argument exist, it does include the Hadith and Quran references used often to address this topic.

Question: I've been wondering about what I've heard some Muslims say about women going out, that they have to have some legitimate purpose to go out. Would going out for things that serve little purpose (like halal entertainment of some sort) as long as the woman wore the proper hijab? I and another muslim girl differ on this.

Answer: Praise be to Allah. Islam came to protect women and their honour, and prescribed rulings that take care of that. Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning): And stay in your houses [al-Ahzaab 33:33] Based on this, the general principle is

that women should stay at home and not go out except for essential reasons or cases of need... This does not mean that women have to remain prisoners in the house. Islam permits them to go to the mosque, and has made Hajj and Umrah, Eid prayers, etc. obligatory for them. Among the kinds of going out that are prescribed are her going to visit her family and mahrams and going out to ask religious questions from people of knowledge. Women are also permitted to go out for their own needs, but all of this has to be within the limits and conditions set out in shareeah, such as being accompanied by a mahram when she travels, or being assured that her route is safe when she moves about in her own city or locality. She should also go out wearing complete hijab, and she should not be wearing make-up, adornments or perfume. A number of texts have been narrated concerning this, including the following:

1. Ibn Umar reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: If the wife of any one of you asks for permission to go to the mosque, do not stop her. (Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 827; Muslim, 442)
2. Zaynab, the wife of Abd-Allaah, said: The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said to us: If any one of you (women) comes to the mosque, let her not wear perfume. (Narrated by Muslim, 443)
3. Jaabir ibn Abd-Allaah said: my maternal aunt got divorced and wanted to go and pick some fruit from her trees. A man told her off for going out, so she went to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), and he said, Never mind, go and pick the fruit from your trees. Maybe you will be able to give it in charity or do something good with it. (Narrated by Muslim, 1483)

The entertainment referred to in the question may involve mixing or looking at strangers (non-mahram men), or travelling without a mahram, or many things that are of no benefit. So you have to be cautious and make sure that the entertainment really is permissible and halaal, and free of any haraam things that would earn the punishment of Allaah. If a woman goes out to a place where there is nothing haraam going on and she does not go out too frequently, there is nothing wrong with this. We ask Allaah to protect us, keep us chaste and make our commitment to religion good and strong.⁶

I quote this rather long example to demonstrate the many instructions which may leave the readers confused. Since one may be unable to ensure all the instructions before leaving home, in many cases, pious women would feel discouraged and confused by the answer. The extreme level of caution recommended may make it a huge decision to go out and enjoy a coffee with one's friends. However, the practical examples that will follow are much clearer and offer believing women with the plural approaches in which women decide about their approach to

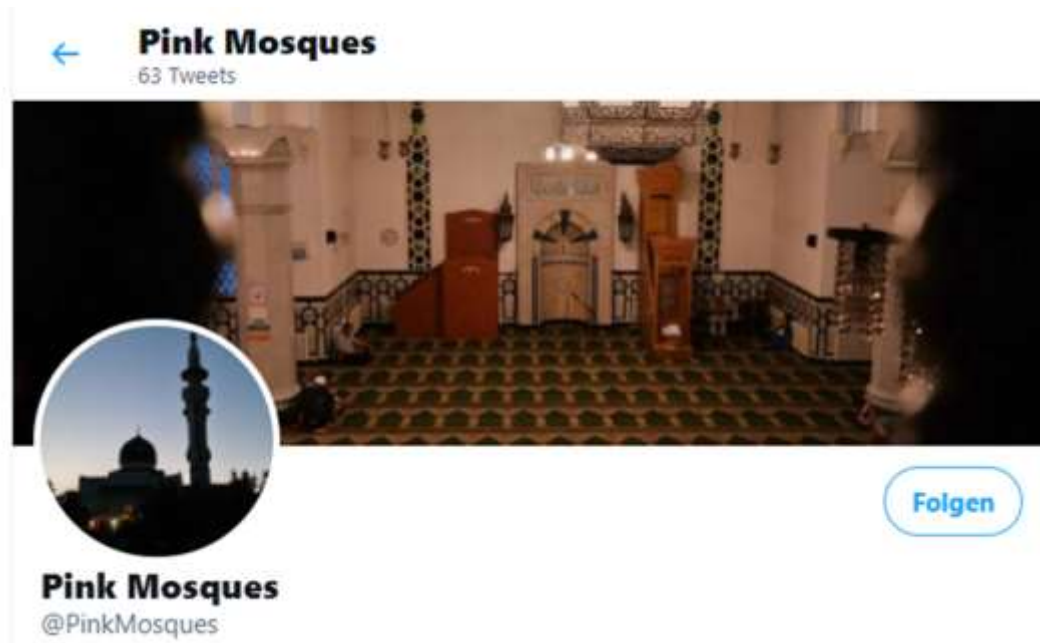
recreational activities while being attentive to their societal context and obligations as believers. These are also triggers for producing a plurality of opinions on the topic. So, I quote another example of an answer to the question from another website, where the religious scholar provides an opinion which refers to the change of times (تغير احوال):

It is permissible for a woman to travel without a mahram provided the way, destination and return journey are safe and provided she does not meet with any harassment jeopardizing both her safety and religion. ...it is permissible, and there is no objection to a woman traveling alone by the various safe routes and means of travel via their venues such as airports, harbors and the like. This applies whether she is traveling for something obligatory, recommended or permissible. The hadiths forbidding a woman to travel without a mahram pertain to lack of security which was the case in previous times. Based on this, if a woman's safety is ensured, the prohibition is lifted.⁷

While many debates exist about the permissibility of education and work, which is then understood as a need, recreational activities are the first to be criticized as unnecessary. While some reach out to the Muftis for guidance, others use their resources to create new avenues for Muslim women that are compatible with their faith. These women add to the repertoire by performing a pious recreational activity and therefore creating the avenues. This article zooms in on three examples from the Indonesia, Pakistan, and United Kingdom to discuss the initiatives that change the discourse via praxis. All these initiatives are simultaneously unique in that they are responses to their particular contexts. The Pakistani initiative responds to the need of many women and families who want to travel across the country safely. There is a whole field of "halal sensitive tourists to benefit from tourism services without contravening Islamic law."⁸ The Indonesian example is a strife of Indonesian women for finding their place in the mosques. The example from the UK is an endeavor to normalizing modest dressing.

As a child growing up in Pakistan, shopping for Eid and celebrations, I was thrilled to go to the market to get colourful clothes and matching bangles. Usually, the trip was taken with my mother and grandmother. However, it often had to be cut short since we needed to leave after offering the Asar prayer at home and return quickly before Maghrib prayer. This left us with hardly two hours. Unlike Indonesia, and many Urban centres in Muslim majority countries, shopping streets in Pakistan did not offer the facilities for offering prayers or a women section in the mosque. Recently, the urban centres have started to offer a prayer section for women in a few shopping malls, and there is still a lack of a prayer area for women in most mosques.

Therefore, the first example I chose to reflect upon is Pink mosques, the initiative of four Indonesian female students travelling and sharing their experiences of visiting the female section of the mosque. They wrote down their impressions and reviews when they visited mosques in different parts of the world. One of the founders, Auliya Halimatussadiya, shared with me that she was used to going to a mosque growing up in Indonesia.⁹ Every mosque in Indonesia contained a female section which was part of the main building. However, when she and her friends visited other countries in Europe and Asia, they felt that the female section of mosque was either non-existent or was a small room not well ventilated and in no way as beautifully decorated as the male section of the mosque. This caused them to document their travel experiences while being sensitive to the needs of female Muslim travellers.



This is a photo of their twitter page where the journey started. Their unmet expectations at the mosques in other countries led them to create a journey from the Muslimah’s lens. Their page announces, “We are three Indonesian women humbly trying to know more about Islam through its mosques worldwide.”¹⁰ These three friends started writing a blog about mosques they visited during their travels, focusing on what they experienced as women. The blog developed into an e-book that details their journeys as all of them were mobile professionals and students.

Auliya writes about her emotional journey for pilgrimage to Makkah and her experience of visiting Ka'ba in detail.¹¹ The stories are explorations of young students in cities of Europe, the USA and Indonesia. The more exciting part is when they are lost in the streets on their search for a mosque.¹² They are, however, adamant about finding the House of Allah and their place within the House of Allah. They travel not against Allah's will, instead of making it a highlight to visit a beautiful mosque in every city they visit.

While most bloggers document touristy mosques, or the male area of the mosque, the Pink mosque team has access to the area where females are allowed only. The experience is varied in different places. It is the stunning mosque of Shaykh Zayd to the modest room in New Castle, England, where the female section is separated via a mosquito net for Eid day. They are curious young women who explore the world and make a pause during the day to connect with their inner self and Allah. In a small mosque in the Chinese majority area of Indonesia, the writers met a recent convert to Islam. After talking to her in the mosque, they followed her to her food stall and bought food as a token of support.¹³ Their occasional interactions with Muslims from other parts of the world also show their curiosities. They use those moments to create bonds of friendship with Muslims from other parts of the world or fellow countrywomen abroad.

Worship and prayers continue to shape their day, and they express their feelings of being relaxed and content once they enter the mosque. They do not talk explicitly about women's right to recreation. Instead, they relate examples of young Indonesian professional women who travel for work, studies or leisure. They use the mosque's space to worship and find peace and go to great lengths in their search for the mosque. The comments are not limited to the atmosphere or experience of prayers but the (un)availability of facilities for ablution. Their comments are the imagined ideals they would like to have as Muslimah from their Muslim community. How they would like to have a female space for ablutions and be able to be at the central, more beautiful part of the mosque rather than relegated to a windowless dark small corner room in an otherwise big, decorated mosque for men. Their wish for inclusivity as members of faith is expressed in their comments like the ones in the section about Eid day at New Castle.¹⁴

One of the contributors, Alvia Zuhadmono, visited many mosques during her stay in New Castle, England, for her studies. She recounted her experience of offering Eid prayers in a plain room, which identified a women's section by putting a mosquito net in the corner of the room. She and her friend shared the women's section with another woman from the Middle East. At that moment, she missed the Eid festivities and the practice of women joining the eid prayers, where the number

of women and men in the mosque is the same. “Hati ini memelas, rindu suasana Idul Fitri di Yogyakarta.”¹⁵ Zuhadmono’s account also recounts how she missed the sound of Adhan and the minarets of the mosque. However, she expressed gratitude to have a spot in a mosque to thank Allah. She visited many mosques in New Castle and found the absence of minarets and the mosque architecture unsettling. However, she always appreciated and savoured the moments when she could be inside the mosque and talk to the Creator. While she missed the minarets, dome and gold decorations, the small prayer room always brought her a feeling of inner peace and together with the Muslim community in a foreign land. This initiative of Pink mosque is an essential document with narratives about their experience of being Muslim women who seek refuge and peace in the house of God but do not feel welcome since a majority of mosques bar them from the entrance. Their voice is important to remind the community of believers about their responsibilities towards women who do not get their fair share in the mosques.

The second example I focus on is from two Muslim women from the UK. It is an Instagram influencer page Moving with modesty (MWM).¹⁶ The initiative of the friends’ duo Laila’s mum and Noah’s mum is representative of the diaspora populations as a Muslim minority. In Europe and the Americas, many Muslims face Islamophobic reactions for their modest dress choices. Therefore, the duo normalizes the use of modest clothing and symbols of Muslim veiling via performance. The word veil has been synonymized in Islamophobe discourses with oppression, but the photographic representations of women clad in long robes paint a picture of happy friends. The photographs and short video clips “document all things related to modesty, travel and our day-to-day life”.¹⁷ They fight the stereotypical images of the veil and their associations with oppression by producing counter images of pious expressions of aesthetic beauty and capture moments of happiness. Their page has thirty-eight thousand followers and 585 posts.



Their posts are categorized in travel, everyday life, and food photography. They share the pictures and videos of their picnics which are aesthetically created. Their pictures also feature both the Instagrammers clad in long robes covering them from head to toe, and only their eyes are visible. They do not use the black burqa; instead, they wear white or lighter shades of grey and brown. Their choice of colours differentiates their image from the usual black, which has been overused in media for representing oppression and fear. They try to re-paint the picture of their lifestyle by creating content about happy moments like travelling, lavish picnics and shopping sprees. Their travel destinations are also significant since the

photographs of mosques and Ottoman architecture are frequently shared. The artistic style and photography are performative of a happy Muslim life.

I chose this example as many women who practice Purdah avoid being photographed. However, in the diaspora context, Islamophobia is a major challenge. Therefore, some believe women choose to express their creativity and represent themselves instead of letting others interpret and project on their silence. They choose to challenge the stereotypes and images through their appearance on social media portals like Instagram, YouTube or Tiktok in a burqa. MWM is also one such initiative in the diaspora context. They photograph moments of happiness and remind their audience via their photography that a veil is a conscious dressing choice of a believer. This also implies that the stereotypical image of veiled oppressed women can be counter-imagined via their representation of happiness. The pictures of sunny days spent with family in vast meadows, warm beaches, and meandering streets of large cosmopolitans paint a picture of the participants of the urban middle-class lifestyle. Their choices of travel destinations include Turkey, Mecca, UAE, the Philippines and some parts of Europe. They can be seen in mosques, museums, cafes and gardens but also dinners and coffees at home while sitting next to a Quran. Their uniqueness lies in their modest fashion, recitation of the Quran, or the days they celebrate, i.e., Ramadan instead of Christmas. The captions for the travel pictures are always from a religious source like Quran or Hadith.

Since their struggles are in a Muslim minority context, their challenges are not the same as our subsequent case study, Girls on the Road in Pakistan (GOREP).¹⁸ This group of girls facilitate female solo travelers and families to travel safely to the beautiful natural and historical spots within Pakistan. During her interview, the founder shared her experience and journey of founding the page.¹⁹ Her page GOREP has more than seven thousand followers. When Afeefa Haider, who lived in Karachi, shared her wish with her family to travel to the mountainous region in the north of the country, they were worried about her safety. The culture of women travelling alone for leisure is not widely prevalent in Pakistan, their struggles are however not unique.²⁰ However, her passion for trekking and hiking and her love for the mountainous regions was such that she took baby steps to inch the distance from her dream into a reality. The picture below is the cover photo of their Facebook group.



Girls On Road to explore Pakistan 🚗 🏠

She started her online business of modest fashion, *Hijab-lil-Banat*, to pay for her travel expenses. While she faced many hurdles at the business front, her passion soon became her source for a livelihood when the travel agency hired her as their tour guide and marketing person. Her presence in the travel agency encouraged many solo female travellers too. However, Afeefa still faced many hurdles gaining the trust of a larger majority. Many girls turned to her to consult about how she could obtain her family's permission to travel across the country. So, she found a Facebook page where she could start discussing the topic and related issues. Her page is a place where women and girls share information about reliable travel groups.

Moreover, they also share information about preparing for a particular travel destination, reliable hotels, partner discounts, and activities. They also share their pictures in the group taken at tourist destinations. Many women usually avoid sharing their pictures on social media. However, the platform of GOREP provides them with a safe women-only platform to normalize Muslim women's images as solo travelling hikers and trekkers.²¹ Afeefa shared that many women, who were passionate trekkers, left the travelling community and trekking after marriage. The only exceptions were those women whose husbands were working in the field of tourism. Since women are expected to stay at home and be responsible for domestic household responsibilities, their families and in-laws discourage them from activities that may be a hurdle for the domestic rhythm. The tourism industry in Pakistan exhibits a wide gender gap in terms of participation and it is not always a lucrative opportunity for women.²² However, as a step to creating a safe environment for girls, GOREP connects travellers and helps them form travel groups where families and girls can feel comfortable.

Afeefa is aware of the financial hurdles, so she always continued to earn via her online business. She continued to learn about online businesses via courses. During this process, her networking via Facebook was always helpful for running her business and promoting tourism amongst women. Following Instagram celebrities like Dina Tokyo and Amna Khan, she felt the need to introduce modest fashion in Pakistan. She introduced her hijab line as she felt that many girls did not cover their heads as they did not find a modest fashion according to their taste. She recognized this gap and started importing articles of modest fashion for her business.

Afeefa believes that there is still a long journey to normalize women travelling for recreation at their own will and discretion. She quoted the verses from the Quran, which she finds inspiration for her as someone who likes to travel and explore the earth, which has signs of the Creator, “He is the One Who smoothed out the earth for you, so move about in its regions and eat from His provisions. And to Him is the resurrection of all.”²³

Mobility as a Muslim woman

All three examples show the flexibility that our respondents got due to internet literacy and online mobility. They are highly educated, tech-savvy women who are aware of their religious obligations and active in their professional journeys. Many refer to the verses of the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet, which they find inspiring for their passion and profession. What is striking in these women’s approaches is their ability to study and interpret the religious texts themselves. These women look up to the model of Khadija as the working woman and believe strongly in the empowerment that they seek within their religion as also demonstrated in earlier studies.²⁴ They live, create and represent media images of Muslim women who pursue their dreams while feeling a strong connection with the Creator.

There are many opinions (Fatwa) which were sought if women should leave home for studying, work, pilgrimage with or without an accompanying mahram. The examples I quote however, are women who seek to understand the message and meaning of the sacred texts and integrate Islam into their lives while treading unusual paths. In the example of Pink mosque, a group of mobile Indonesian women travelling around the world look for mosques in every city they enter. They are curious to see if they have been allotted a space in the mosque. They seek to raise their voice for a space in the mosque for every Muslim woman and criticize the practice of excluding women from mosques. They also highlight the issue that even when women’s prayer rooms exist, they have a relatively small portion without windows, and the characteristic Islamic art and architecture is absent. Rather, they find themselves behind a mosquito net or a dark corner that is one-

tenth of the size of the large prayer hall for men. These women go from city to city, penning down their experiences. They also express happiness that Indonesian women have access to mosques in cities and villages alike, and therefore, they do not feel marginalized.

Similarly, the second initiative of Moving with modesty highlights the struggles of Muslim minorities who are always portrayed as the oppressed women in Niqab. These two friends highlight the choices of pious women to veil and make a point that this does not deprive them of happiness. They share moments of happiness spent with family, friends, on picnics, and share their beautiful photography and videos. They are also promoters of modest wear and run a business of modest clothing. They are working women with visibility on media who challenge our tendency to stereotype based on appearances.

The third case study from Pakistan is also based in the context of a country where peace and safe travel for women has remained a challenge. While there have been long debates about women's inclusion in the workforce and all the challenges that come along, Afeefa highlights their wishes and aspirations through her discussion forum, which are well within the bounds of Islam. With an increased female workforce, more women have access to the resources for travelling in the form of income and safe travelling options. These women encourage and develop trust for female travellers and hikers to discover the hidden gems in the mountainous regions of the country.

These professional Muslim women have the knowledge of Islam, which they use to fashion their lives. They pursue their passions to study Islam themselves instead of seeking the opinion of a scholar who may not be able to understand the intricacies and all the situations these women are going through in their day-to-day. Their approach is to understand the scripture and include women's practice of Islam and their interpretations by using media avenues that enable them to network with fellow Muslim women who share their concerns. It is extremely helpful for them to have the freedom to be believers who can travel their path of piety without being restricted by scholars' interpretations of the scripture in the previous centuries. Their knowledge of Islam empowers them to be believers who can profess their faith and organically pursue their professions and passions without experiencing a break from their religious tradition and cultural norms. Their knowledge of their context allows them to also focus on the issues which impact them immediately. They can seek strength for their position from the shared values and norms. Since their model for empowerment is based on the shared norms, they frame it as a right that Islam gave them. They have a better acceptance rate than the framing within the feminist narrative, which may sometimes increase hurdles in specific contexts due to an existing aversion to the frames and vocabulary that has a colonial

connection. These groups of women are passionate about their work and seek happiness and engage in recreational activities. They portray pictures of happy believers, which is rarely represented in the mass media. They help address the issue of marginalized communities and their negative representations.

Conclusion

In the three case studies, these women navigate and negotiate in a specific context. While many debates are focusing on women's right to work, their pursuit of happiness and how to spend one's free time is not discussed much. The fatwah collections (legal opinion) and advice literature are replete with advice for women about things to avoid. When the topic of recreational activities or travelling for leisure is discussed, the answer is replete with why this should be avoided. Instead, some pious activities should be pursued. However, these believing women who are aware of religious beliefs and knowledge push the boundaries through practice. They change the impression of oppression and redefine the idea of leisure for Muslim women in different contexts by portraying the picture through their own lens.

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⁵ **A'isha reported:**

BY Allah, I remember the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) standing on the door of my apartment screening me with his mantle enabling me to see the sport of the Abyssinians as they played with their daggers in the mosque of the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him). He (the Holy Prophet) kept standing for my sake till I was satiated and then I went back; and thus you can well imagine how long a girl tender of age who is fond of sports (could have watched it). Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi, “Sahih Muslim: 892d, Book 8, Hadith 19,” accessed Monday, August 23, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:892d>

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²³ Qurán 67:15

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