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Gender Apartheid in Mosques:  
Al-Qarawīyīn Mosque in Fez as a Case in Point.

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of an apartheid system within religious practices, presumably, the unequal separation and segregation found in Moroccan mosques. Mosques in Fassi communities are designed with two partitions that enable men and women to have two different entrances to the prayer space. But spaces designated to each gender is not equal. This paper will critically discern this difference in access, explain how it has a deep connotation associated with limiting women's full access to the mosques space, and analyze briefly how this difference has shaped women's interaction with public life. Beginning by defining the status of mosques in Muslim communities, this study will explain the differential treatment assigned to spaces designed and dedicated to each gender. Additionally, it will provide results from observation conducted in Al-Qarwīyīn, the oldest and most prestigious mosque in Fez, Morocco.

Keyword: Apartheid, Gender, Mosque, Segregation.

It is unfortunate that men and women continue to experience different gender battles in various fields of life, and it might appear that this situation is also an endless dilemma in Muslim societies. This inquiry shall examine a form of what I provocatively term apartheid system that is, in this context, associated with Muslim women and mosques. To limit the scope, this study addresses gender segregation in places of worship—particularly in the sacred sites of Fassi mosques. A mosque, by definition, is a place where Muslims worship God and perform daily prayers.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, mosques play a significant role within Islam and in each Muslim community. They transcend their traditionally perceived role where Muslims go to pray and they have been the hub and the center of public life throughout history.<sup>2</sup> Mosques also provide educational, economic welfare, and conflict resolution services for Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, this study analyzes how

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<sup>1</sup> Aisha Stacey, *What is a Mosque?*; 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Nevin Reda, *Women in the Mosque: Historical Perspectives on Segregation*, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*.

<sup>3</sup> Mbaye Lo and Taimoor Aziz, «Muslim Marriage Goes Online: The Use of Internet Matchmaking by American Muslims » In *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. Volume 21(3): Fall 2009.

mosques transcend their material tangibility and how gender dynamics are distributed and viewed within them in a particular Mosque in Fez, Morocco. In this observation, I argue that there exists a form of detrimental segregation in a historical Fassi mosque, which is displayed through multiple partitions that are linked to each specific gender. Essentially, this includes separation of entrances and spaces of worship, and designed areas for each group have contributed to belittling women in the society, as well as decreasing the space dedicated to them in public gathering. Thus, the role of mosques in our societies is very crucial for it is not only a sacred place, where one performs his or her religious rituals, but it is also an establishment that shapes our political and civic life at home and on the streets.

Having acknowledged the significant role that mosques held in the lives of people and communities, it is practical to endow some information regarding the mosque that will be surveyed in this study, Al-*Qarawīyīn* Mosque in Fez City, Morocco. We focus on Al-*Qarawīyīn* mosque—a place of worship that holds paramount significance within the Muslim world of North and West Africa due to its profound historical role in these regions. Particularly noteworthy is how the mosque was founded by a woman. Credited to Fatima Al-Fihri in the year 859 AD, Al-*Qarawīyīn* mosque of Fez became a preeminent stature as a bastion of spirituality and erudition during the epoch of the Islamic Golden Age.<sup>45</sup>

The selection of this mosque was not a random act; rather, it was a conscientious choice informed by its multifaceted importance in Moroccan society, intricately interwoven with its symbolic eminence in the wider Muslim communities of the region. In addition to that, I am a Fassi women, and this is a part of my history and religious space. Therefore, in this study, I argue that empowering women in our society calls for respecting and empowering them inside the mosque as well. For, mosques for women enable them to have full access to spiritual and public life. It is crucial to underscore that our intention extends beyond mere spatial delineation. Instead, it highlights the importance of the space and how it has contributed to the role played by women in Islam and within their respective societal milieus.

In Islam, the practice of men and women praying separately is based on interpretations of religious teachings and principles. While it is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, yet selective hadiths (sayings and actions of the Prophet

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<sup>5</sup> Nazmul Muhammed, *The World's oldest University and its Financing Experience: A Study on Al-Qarawīyīn University (859- 990)*. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 2021.

Muhammad) and historical practices have influenced this tradition.<sup>6</sup> By promoting women's presence in mosques and their involvement in congregational prayers, the Prophet Muhammad established a precedent that aligned with his broader teachings of justice, equality, and mutual respect. These historical accounts serve as a testament to the Prophet's efforts in breaking down gender barriers within religious spaces and acknowledging the essential role of women in the practice and dissemination of Islam.

Yet, the separation of sexes in mosques has become a matter of interpretation. For example, during pilgrimage in Mecca men and women pray together. In this instance, there are variations and cultural differences in how this practice is implemented. These practices can vary greatly across different regions and communities, reflecting the diversity of interpretations within the Muslim world. Significantly,<sup>7</sup> and conversely, the separation of men and women in mosques during prayer is primarily aimed at ensuring modesty, concentration, and minimizing distractions. While in some mosques, there may be separate prayer halls or designated areas for men and women, in others, men and women may pray in the same space but with a physical barrier or a gap between them.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, this survey focuses on the separation of the sexes in prayer and argues it is a form of apartheid to isolate women and relinquish them into an inferior space. In an observational note by Mariem Haitami, a Moroccan scholar and university professor at the International University of Rabat, notes that:

While visiting Al-*Qarawīyīn* mosque/university (built by a woman!)- after over two years-, I was surprised to see new barriers being placed between the men's and women's sections, as well as at the entrances leading to the central courtyard with the purpose of blocking women's access to the courtyard, which has for centuries been a shared space- I remember sitting with men around the fountain to perform my ablutions, less than a decade ago! And it is sad to witness the gradual shift toward making places of worship more exclusionary and rendering patriarchal performative religion more assertive.

This shows the inconsistency of the state's oft-sung claim to promote 'moderate' Islam and expand the space for women to be proactive transmitters of 'moderate' religious teachings, while institutionalizing restrictive Islam and the proliferation of gender segregation and hence structural inequality seem to be going hand in hand. This also had me rethink whether we can talk about a full-fledged Islamic feminist movement in Morocco, and if/when it exists, is it able to bridge intellectual activism

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<sup>6</sup> Nevin Reda, *Women in the Mosque: Historical Perspectives on Segregation*, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*.

<sup>7</sup> Mattson, I. (2006). *Women, Islam, and Mosques*. In R.S. Keller & R.R. Reuther (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (615-619). Indiana University Press

<sup>8</sup> Mattson, I. (2006). *Women, Islam, and Mosques*. In R.S. Keller & R.R. Reuther (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (615-619). Indiana University Press.

with challenging systemic order? While choosing to be unmosqued has been my form of resisting the Bid'ah (non-Islamic innovation in traditional Muslim practices) of gender-based segregation in sacred spaces, I've grown to believe in the critical need to create alternative discursive spaces that are more inclusive of 'other' religious perspectives and challenge the hegemony of the patriarchal mainstream.

As mentioned, Haitami expresses her frustration towards the newly institutionalized separation of the spaces dedicated to prayer for men and women. She further criticizes how this segregation is a form of sexism practiced against women to keep them away and to reinsert that the Mosque is a male-dominated realm and should remain as such. In my personal experience in visiting Al-Qarawīyīn mosque, women do not have access to the courtyard—the most beautiful space and sought after history in the mosque. Nowadays, the mosque even has a guard at the gate to make sure each gender goes to their designated space. The male person guarding the gate makes sure that women go to their designated, limited space, and men go to their large and open-spaced area. Significantly, the space dedicated to women in Al-Qarawīyīn mosque is relatively small, and it does not enable one to contemplate the greatness of this building, and the spirituality that comes with viewing and moving around the courtyard area that was founded by a woman. I personally would feel the frustration of Fatima Al Fihri when she describes how we Muslim women could not benefit from this edifice gracefully. Restrictions on women's access to mosques or their exclusion from certain areas are influenced by cultural patriarchal practices and local traditions than by Islamic teachings.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition and effort within the Muslim community to address the issue and promote greater inclusion and access for women in mosques. Many mosques around the world are actively working to create welcoming spaces for women. However, it is crucial for historical mosques such as Al-Qarawīyīn, considered one of the oldest and most visited religious spaces in our region, to lead this change, and adopt practices that enhance women's freedom, rights and dignity. Reducing women visitors to mere subjects that threaten men's order, and implementing policies that safeguard that patriarchal order is but another form of what I call here gender apartheid. It is un-Islamic, un-democratic and, after all, demeaning to women, the founders of the religious space itself. In conclusion, creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for women in the mosques involves a multifaceted approach that welcome them openly to all physical, cultural, and social aspects. Establishing a more inclusive mosque environment for women also requires a commitment to understanding their needs, engaging them in the decision-making process, and fostering a sense of belonging. I have no doubt that Mosques that actively prioritize women's access and participation contribute to a stronger, more vibrant, and more equitable community.

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