

Where Mosques can Help Women Solve Community Problems

Research shows that:

Mosques can be important sites for community organization, but their use varies across geographic areas and social contexts.

There is a “gender gap” in the use of mosques for non-worship purposes, with men more likely to support using the mosque for such purposes. This gap narrows in places with more gendered social and economic disparities.

Women in marginalized areas use mosques to address personal and community problems, but they are less likely to do so as the level of economic and social marginalization decreases.

Policy Issue

Political participation is important to achieve gender equality. Yet, in many societies, individuals must be creative about how and where they participate in civic life. Houses of worship can provide this space. This study examines the role of mosques in collective action and civic engagement.

The context and study

Steven Brooke and Monica Komer examine the gendered use of mosques for non-religious reasons in Tunisia, a country where nationwide female unemployment is twice the rate of male employment. This study examines why some citizens rely on mosques for a variety of non-worship purposes related to local governance, while others simply use the mosque for religious events. It draws from an original survey with 1200 Tunisians nested in 265 census districts.

The role of mosques in civic life

Citizens use mosques for various social and political functions, including civil society activism, resolving personal disputes, providing charity, and organizing protests and votes. Existing research suggests that mosque participation increases women’s political efficacy and engagement. In the broader Islamic world, we know that men use the mosque more for worship purposes than women. Is this also true for these non-worship purposes?

Who turns to the mosque in Tunisia?

In general, women are less likely to prefer using mosques to address personal and community problems, confirming the gender gap. However, local levels of marginalization affect this preference. Women in more marginalized communities report a higher preference to use the mosque for non-religious purposes. For example, a woman in a marginalized area is twice as likely to respond that they prefer using the mosque for non-worship purposes than areas with higher levels of development. One possible reason for this is that these women have more limited opportunities to access alternative spaces for these services. This finding demonstrates that gender alone does not affect preferences for mosque usage but instead interacts with local state capacity.

The importance of local context

Mosques are powerful sites for community mobilization. However, their importance to personal and community governance depends on the underlying level of social marginalization. Programs aimed at helping women resolve personal and community issues need to consider how local context shapes the use of mosques for civic engagement and collective action. Mosques help enable women to resolve personal and community issues, a role that is especially pronounced in marginalized areas.

To access the full paper, see:

Brooke, Steven and Komer, Monica C. (2021). “How Gender and Local State Capacity Shape Citizens’ Use of Mosques,” The Program on Governance and Local Development Working Paper No. 37, University of Gothenburg. Available At:

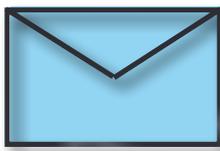
<https://gld.gu.se/media/2025/gld-working-paper-37.pdf>

About GLD

The Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) is a research program based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Program Director, Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The program is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Program findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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