

# Halaqa in the Czech Republic: Experiences and Sense of Belonging of Muslim Migrant Women

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*Abstract: This study is based on qualitative research fieldwork – participant observation – carried out at Al-Firdaus Mosque in Prague, Czech Republic. The primary focus of the research was the weekly activities of Muslim migrant women. My aim was to understand their experiences and activities and how they enact a sense of belonging through weekly halaqa sessions and interaction with their fellow community members. Through observing and partaking in halaqa activities I have found that such gatherings served a dual purpose – a) to share knowledge from Islamic texts to enhance the lives of the halaqa participants in both practical and spiritual ways, b) create avenues for Muslim migrant women to socialize in a new place after migration. Using the framework on belonging provided by Yuval-Davis, I have shown how women create a community of belonging through shared narratives and stories about civic responsibilities of Muslims because of which the community members – especially the young adults – are persuaded to enter respectable career domains. By urging their young community members to pursue a noble profession like medicine, the women inadvertently strived to affect the social and material well-being of all the stakeholders involved – the individuals and the Muslim community at large. Furthermore, the study has explored how the women discuss certain religious narratives that intersect with their gender identities and re-signify the narratives through both the mere act of practicing them across different time-space continuum and actively deliberating on them as in the case of wearing the hijab and private ownership of wealth. Subsequently, I have explored how the act of belonging unknowingly turns into a political project with the members of the halaqa creating a fluid space for anyone even from outside the community to participate, contesting the boundaries of a community of belonging.*

**Keywords:** Muslim, women, migrant, religion, belonging

During my years at school in India, I came across a couplet ascribed to poetry of Hazrat Amir Khusrau. The couplet goes:

*Agar firdaus bar ru-ye zamin ast  
Hamin ast-o hamin ast-o hamin ast*

Translated, it means:

*If there is Paradise on earth  
It is this, it is this, it is this*

These lines have been variously understood to describe Kashmir or Siri, the capital of Emperor Khilji or the walled city of Delhi, in India (Blake 2002: 44). In a manner of speaking, this couplet was my introduction to Persian culture. So, when I read the name of the mosque, I was due to visit in the autumn of 2019, the couplet came back with a resounding affirmation.

Here was *Al-Firdaus*, the Paradise, around the corner in Praha 8-Libeň, with an unassuming exterior. Of what I could make out, in the darkness, it was a courtyard behind a fence and a beige front wall. It was by accident that I chanced upon a gathering of women in this otherwise quiet Masjid, Al-Firdaus.

## Introduction

In Western scholarship, while talking about Islam, issues surrounding gender find a ready significance. Among other symbols, there has been consideration of mosques as gendered spaces in the academic discourse (see Nyhagen 2019) – Western Europe (Becker 2019; Mateo 2019; Kuppinger 2018), North America (Kibria et al. 2021; Westfall 2018), and Eastern Europe (Aytar and Bodor 2021; Račius 2018; Górak-Sosnowska 2011; Spahić-Šiljak 2010). At the behest of the cultural narrative that borrows from an Orientalist mindset. “.... Islam,” is understood, “in such a way as to emphasize ... the Muslim’s resistance to change ... to the development of men and women out of archaic, primitive classical institutions and into modernity” (Said 1979: 263). Perhaps it is owing to this reason that despite such burgeoning scholarship on mosques serving as gendered spaces, there is still a superficial understanding of what this gendering constitutes. Muslim women’s experiences are accounted for insofar as they point out glaring problems with Islamic ideologies and subsequently justify problematic policies (Brown 2008: 472) like increased securitization. There is still a substantial gap in our understanding of women’s, especially migrant women’s experiences in

a nuanced manner within these gendered spaces of the mosque. In the following text, I focus on these issues: What roles and activities do migrant women participate in within a mosque? How do they cultivate a sense of belonging with the host community through their activities within the mosque? This article seeks to fill this gap through a qualitative study of halaqa gatherings of Muslim migrant women in Al-Firdaus Mosque in the Czech Republic. The study is primarily based on participant observation sessions over a period of two months. Using the framework on belonging provided by Yuval-Davis (2006), I have shown how women create a community of belonging through shared narratives and stories.

Even though belonging is considered a naturalized process – one, of course, belongs! It gains salience against the backdrop of migration (Yuval-Davis 2006: 197). And why is it that we should consider Muslim migrant women's sense of belonging through creation of social communities and gatherings like halaqa? Simonsen (2019) posits that “belonging to a social community is found to enhance individuals' sense of meaning in life, while experiences of social exclusion lead to lower self-worth, and even meaninglessness.” Therefore, to understand the constitution – the roles and activities – of halaqa gatherings at Al-Firdaus Mosque in the Czech Republic and sense of belonging of Muslim migrant women, I have also used a framework of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006) to map the experiences of women.

## Muslim Migrants in the Czech Republic

The Muslim Religious Community in Czechoslovakia was officially set up in Prague in 1934. (Drbohlav and Dzúrová 2007) Subsequently, after several impediments, the Center of Muslim Communities was founded in 1991 but remained a citizens' association until 2004. To be a religious association in the Czech Republic and to be eligible for state subsidies, the law required at least 10,000 signatories for the petition (Schneider 2006: 128), an impossible feat given the low numbers of Muslim residents in the country and an even lower rate of participation in community activities by members of Muslim community (Ostřanský 2010). Around the same time, the Islamic Foundation in Prague was also started. In 1994, the Islamic Foundation in Brno resulted in the creation of an Islamic center along with a mosque. While mosques have been a part of Czech urban landscapes for a couple of decades, there is little account of how mosques facilitate and organize diasporic communities around welfare activities, charitable events, and social gatherings (Nyhagen 2019).

There are three mosques in Prague. They are often euphemized as Islamic centers and are devoid of architectural motifs associated with mosques as found

in regions with sizeable Muslim populations. The mosques host Muslim members of different ethnic, racial, national communities. While studies have discerned and acknowledged the presence of migrants from different sub-sects of Islam leading to the creation of separate Sunni and Shia (predominantly, Sunnis and Shias) (Nyhagen 2019), the Czech Muslim population is relatively very small to allow for such demographic concessions. From my visits to the Halaqa gatherings and through conversations with people present there, I could however gauge that the members hailed from Sunni sects which harks us back to the Soviet Era ties with largely Sunni-majority regions (Hamdani 1994).

Ostránský (2010) classifies the Czech Muslims into three categories: a) those who are Czech converts to Islam, spouses of Muslim foreigners; b) foreigners, holders of permanent or long-term residence permit; c) those who hold Czech citizenship having migrated in the 1970s and 1980s from the states that shared their ideological outlook with the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and studied engineering and medicine at Czech-Moravian higher education institutions. During period of communism, Czechoslovakia maintained exceptional trade and political ties with these countries (Kovář 2020; Slačálek & Svobodová 2018).

Over the past decade, several sociological studies have been conducted in the Czech Republic to understand the integration of Muslims into Czech society. The studies have concluded high levels of integration into Czech society (Felčer, 2020, p. 9). While the integration of the larger Muslim community is smooth, there has been lower level of integration of women, citing a need for socio-cultural and Czech language courses (ibid.)

## Halaqa Gatherings: A Background

Halaqas or halaqa (singular) loosely translates to learning circles whereby disciples gather around a teacher and discuss and deliberate upon the teachings of the Qur'an. This method of pedagogy dates back to the origins of Islam when Prophet Muhammad would sit in the mosque with his disciples and disseminate the teachings of the Qur'an which the audience members would then memorize and spread further (Boyle 2004: 11). Elsewhere, Ahmed (2017: XVI) has defined halaqa as "originally an Islamic oral pedagogy instituted by the Prophet Muhammad" which has effected social change and justice through empowerment of both individuals as well as communities (Zaimeche 2002). Munadia (2016) describes halaqa in reference to a group of Muslims-usually 3 to 12 who regularly undertake reviews of Islamic teachings. This pedagogical technique emphasizes critical thinking and reasonable argumentation in the face of taqlid (blind faith) and "uncritical tradition of pre-Islamic society", objectives as espoused in the

Qur'an (Munadia 2016: 3). From a contemporary perspective, halaqa provides an alternative model to Western ideologies of critical reasoning. While in the present study, the halaqa takes place in the mosque, such gatherings can take place in other suitable settings namely homes of teachers or disciples, community, and educational institutions. The composition of a halaqa may vary – divided based on gender and age if need be.

The halaqa gathering at Al-Firdaus Mosque in Prague, Czech Republic, is an all-women, multi-ethnic, multi-generational event with attendants being migrants from countries like Syria, Somalia, Lebanon, and Pakistan. The women gather on the first floor of the mosque, and it remains exclusively reserved for them for the duration of the halaqa. All the women at the halaqa come with their family members, most of them accompany their husbands. The husbands or other male members gather on the second floor of the masjid and mostly discuss politics. The men's gathering is quite informal, nobody comes prepared with notes on the Qur'an, and men sometimes even leave the mosque to meet the husband of one of the halaqa women, still working at a nearby kebab shop. While it would be understandably fruitful to analyze the gendered differences in such gatherings, during the two months of my attendance, I confined my focus to the women's gathering on the first floor.

Haw (1998) asserts that the Qur'an bestows equal rights upon women and men when it comes to acquiring knowledge, even though women and men may have different roles (in Srimulyani 2007: 87). As a matter of fact, Islamic principles led to an improvement in the status of women during the life and times of Prophet Mohammad (Haw 1998 in Ryan 2003: 136). Then, why is there a segregation of spaces for women and men when it comes to learning the Qur'an? Azra (Azra 2003: 10 in Srimulyani 2007: 88) suspects that this segregation began with codification of Islamic jurisprudence by Islamic jurists around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, nearly 200 years after the inception of Islam. During this process of codification, among other things, the jurists underlined the segregated roles of women and men which have come to be considered indisputable. Under this system, a woman could only educate herself with the assistance of a close male kin or with the help of a religious figure. The intermingling of female and male pupils in an educational space was supposed to have a greater negative effect than a positive one (Srimulyani 2007: 88). The present halaqa is the legacy of such a codified tradition, where a man would only enter the women's gathering space in order to lead the salat (prayer) in the prayer room which is basically a portion of the same hall where halaqa is carried out.

Islamic society has always held the acquisition of knowledge and education in high regards (Lichtenstadter 1958: 135). Halaqas were instrumental in the

expansion of Islam and mosques, at times, would have multiple halaqa (Boyle 2004: 11). In the initial days, the teachings at the halaqa were not limited to discussion of the Qur'an but came to include sciences – algebra (from “al-jabr” in Arabic which means “the reunion of broken parts” (Algebra: 2013), geometry, physics, chemistry – and humanities like grammar and philology (Bin Omar, 1993 in Boyle, 2004: 11).

## Halaqa Commences, Topics Discussed

During my fieldwork, the halaqa at Al-Firdaus Mosque was held weekly, every Sunday when everybody could be relatively free from their jobs – while the adult women of halaqa were either housewives or had jobs like preparing food to supply to restaurants, the younger women and girls were school or college students. Fatima,<sup>1</sup> an elderly Syrian woman, had assumed the role of the teacher for the lack of an Imam (leader of the mosque). Despite mosques traditionally being the dominion of men, Muslim women have justified their place by invoking examples of recurring role of women as teachers and religious authorities in Islamic texts. One such example recounts how the Prophet Muhammad allowed a woman to act as an “imam to mixed jama't” (Spahić-Šiljak 2010: 137). The halaqa in the Czech Republic is organized entirely by the women and has met no resistance from the male community members, according to Mikel (kin of one of the halaqa participants), given it is held at a mosque. This lack of resistance is in stark contrast with how women's presence has been received in mosques in other countries within Europe (Nyhagen 2019).

During my research, each halaqa was attended by around 8–10 women. Fatima, her granddaughter, Faiza, who chaperoned the former to the mosque, and Fatima's daughter, Saba, were the permanent fixtures. Other women presented varying degrees of attendance owing to their work or familial commitments. Since a few members, like Fatima herself, came from cities outside Prague, they arrived just in time for the evening prayer (maghrib), and everybody stayed for the last prayer (Isha)<sup>2</sup>. Everybody brought home-made food, sweets or snacks or fruits which they set on the table around which they settle. By 16:30, the session begun and lasted for almost an hour and a half. The purpose of the halaqa is to recite the verses of the Qur'an in Arabic, followed by an explanation from the teacher/moderator, Fatima, and concluded by a discussion among the women in attendance. The

<sup>1</sup> The names of all the participants have been anonymized.

<sup>2</sup> The hours of the prayers are determined by the position of the earth relative to the sun, which differs greatly in winter and summer months.

women referred to each other as “sister”. The sisters read the verses (suras) of the Qur’an. Once a verse is read, Fatima explained the sura from her notes in Arabic. Rashida, a Lebanese student of the sciences, studying in the Czech Republic, translated the explanation to English for non-Arabic speakers. In the absence of Rashida, Faiza and Saba assisted in the process of translation. Subsequently, the floor was open for discussion which involved questions or anecdotal experiences. During the two-month period which this article captures, the sisters went in an orderly fashion to cover the verses in the text – they would pick up from where they left off in the previous week. Such an organization as a cohesive unit with mutual respect, support and learning among the members resonated with findings which posit mosques as places where Muslim women can learn about Islam and enjoy a sense of community (Ehrkamp 2016). Being an account of merely two months, my coverage of their discussion is, by no means, exhaustive. Certainly, more time would have given us greater insights and a more holistic account of issues that are covered.

Studies with Islamic religious congregations in the Western context indicate that a key motivator for migrant women to participate in such gatherings is a desire to acquire practical knowledge about appropriate “Muslim” conduct (Ferrero 2018). This was exemplified through a variety of discussions which covered a range of issues, during participant observations. One week the sisters discussed the story of Prophet Muhammad’s journey to Ta’if where he was ruthlessly turned away by all the villagers. It is a parable of kindness and compassion because the Prophet did not retaliate for the attack on his person, although he had the opportunity to do so. The primary objective of such gatherings is to centralize the acquisition and learning of Islamic ethics.

Over one meeting, the practice of Hajj, the annual pilgrimage, was discussed. In summary, it can be conducted in two ways a) throughout a person’s lifetime as many times as they want b) at least, once in their lifetime, compulsorily. Now the word of advice was that persons should not undertake this pilgrimage as many times as they want to satisfy their own desire. This is considerably wrong. Instead, what was recommended was that the said persons should conduct charity or help someone out with the resources they would have otherwise used to carry out the pilgrimage. And once they have helped somebody or multiple people thus, they may undertake the pilgrimage again but only with good selfless intentions.

After some discussion about the ethics of Hajj pilgrimages and under which circumstances it can be rightfully undertaken, Rashida noted the importance of knowing about the writer of a particular text as many scholars may have illogical views. This is a reference to how Islamic practices are portrayed in many texts. Such critical literacy at a small communal scale encourages the Halaqa members



to check the credibility of their sources in order to detect stereotypical, homogeneous labels and claims advancing misinformation (Deroo 2021). The basic underlying principle behind this teaching can have far-reaching consequences in this age of persistent Islamophobic propaganda. The call for referencing and investigating of multiple sources of information may serve a two-fold purpose of- a) cultivating critical faculty of halaqa members through sharing of religious and social knowledge (Nyhagen 2019), and b) organizing as a Muslim collective to tackle the persistent Islamophobia rhetoric in their surrounding culture. Such an evolution can lend a sense of entitlement to the community to practice their own culture – promoting, celebrating, and sharing it with the host community (Trucios-Haynes 1996).

On another occasion, the prohibition of alcohol was discussed through the story of the drunk imam who made a mistake while conducting the Maghrib prayer. The issue of alcohol consumption gains salience in the context of Czech Republic, and other European states, where the sisters perceive a clubbing culture associated with young adults consuming alcohol. Mahmood (2004) explores how the 1980's religious movement in Cairo can be considered as a response to increased westernization in Egypt brought about the policy of economic liberalization. The practices of the women – habits, bodily rituals, traditions – aim to make the abstract idea of Islam tangible for its practitioners, by making it a part of their daily lives to differentiate it from other belief systems (Mahmood 2004: 44–45). This ties well with a miscellaneous discussion I once found Saba, Amreen, and her daughter embroiled in. The central point of contestation was modern music and Amreen's complete rejection of it owing to its morally corrupt lyrics, which, according to Amreen, disfigure life into an insignificant and despicable quantity ever in the pursuit of ends that does not lend itself to being appropriate spiritual food for humankind.

## Socialization

Following Haideh Moghissi, women who are first-generation migrants “construct” their histories through stories, traditions, and rituals (Moghissi 2006: 171). The halaqa serves the two-pronged purpose of being both a pedagogical and a socialization space. Given most of the women in the Prague halaqa, both young and old, were first generation migrants from different countries, united by their religiosity, they became the proprietors of cultural reserve. While there was a celebration of their different ethnicities, they unite over their common goal of bringing Islam into their daily lives. Since a particular geographical location does not define a diaspora, “lateral connections” (Clifford 1994 in Canagarajah



and Silberstein 2012: 82) come to characterize the sense of community. Based on Andersonian imagination of a community, such connections are negotiated with the help of language. Even though the migrant women of this study hailed from different ethnicities, cultures, and nation-states, they achieved a “sense of “community” situationally through the language of religiosity (Canagarajah and Silberstein, 2012: 82). One of the objectives of halaqa is to impart the knowledge of Arabic language in order to read the Qur’an as it is considered linguistically and religiously impossible to translate the sacred text (Siddiek 2012: 18). Therefore, the women made sure to use the halaqa platform to perfect their linguistic skills through the means of active participation. However, given that the women possessed different levels of proficiency in Arabic and not everybody could know and understand Czech, English was used for general communication. Amreen, hailing from Africa, often asked to recite the verses in order to improve her pronunciation of the Arabic words. Fatima and Saba were ever-present to assist in case of faulty elocution. One time when Amreen’s youngest son, about 7–8 years of age, started praying in the adjacent prayer area, the women halted the discussion, allowing a moment of silence to encourage the young boy to practice worship in Arabic.

So far, I have spoken about how the halaqa operated in a strictly formal sense – where discussions were based around the contents of textual material. However, the role of halaqa is more expansive. Becoming a virtuous Muslim necessitates one to embody a certain lifestyle which involves satisfaction of already predefined requirements. One such requirement is undertaking salat (prayer) five times in a day at stipulated time periods. The above-mentioned instance of Amreen’s son being given the floor to practice the prayer is indicative of how the adult women cultivate such behaviors in the young children. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out here that young children like Amreen’s son and Saba’s daughter did not participate in halaqa discussions. The group of children interacted with each other over games in the play area in the direct view of the women. Therefore, the socialization is a slow process designed in such a manner than the young children do not feel overwhelmed. However, it is not simply a matter of following through the defined requirements, one must approach such exercises with a righteous inclination, in that they should be humble, sincere and in awe (Mahmood 2004: 123). This also explains why the rules are not particularly strict for young children as the aforesaid are higher emotional faculties still in the process of development (Echols & Finkbiner 2013). On countless occasions, I have heard Faiza and Amreen conduct either soft or awe-inspired iterations of God-phrases which are simply phrases that allude to God like “Mashallah” “Inshallah” (Welji 2012) to identify their on-going tryst with a pious lifestyle. Salat, praying five times a day is only one of the five

pillars of Islam that the adherents must recognize, the others being – shahada, which refers to asserting one's faith to Allah, zakat (almsgiving), sawm, which means fasting during the month of Ramadan/Ramzaan, and hajj (pilgrimage to the holy site of Mecca).

An integral component of the socialization process at the halaqa is the food. For the older generation of Muslim women, the process of reconstruction of their culture is marked by an attitude of hospitality, care and such viewpoints are manifested through food (Moghissi 2006: 171). The table around which the women gathered on a weekly basis could always be seen weighing down with an assortment of home-made snacks, sugary treats, and fruits. During one such halaqa session, I caught sight of Gulnaz, a middle-aged Pakistani woman, with whom I had once before talked to in Urdu/Hindi which was our common mother tongue. I saw her after a couple of weeks of that day and she immediately presented me with a tray of subcontinent snacks called Pakoras, made of deep-fried potatoes or other vegetables. She said she had made them for me. Of course, what she meant was that she had made them keeping me in mind, perhaps in apropos of our last conversation about our countries. One of the main benefits of such a tradition is to delineate the crucial points of differences among different kind of foods. According to Islamic jurisprudence, practicing Muslims must consume only halal (lawful) food, that has been produced in line with the Islamic tradition. Key among the prohibited food items are dead animal carcasses, pork, blood, animals that have not been sacrificed in the name of Allah and alcohol or other similar intoxicants. While evidently the list of prohibited items is short, it can so happen that a derivative from the above-mentioned haram items (like oil derived from pig fat) can be used on halal items rendering them inedible (Kashim et. al. 2015). This issue finds urgency in the context of the Czech Republic where pork accounts for more than 50 per cent of the total meat consumption (Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic 2018: 13). Thus, the older women encourage cooking of home-made food or consumption of food items only from halal shops, for example, the ones belonging to Muslim migrants.

The older migrant women usually try to ideate social mores, customs, traditions in the host community, in spite of cleavages and departures between the younger and the older generation in terms of their choices (Moghissi 2006: 171). While Fatima and her daughter, Saba ritualistically wear the hijab, Saba's daughters – Jameela and Aisha – do not. Yet once I still found Jameela use her sweatshirt hood as a headscarf by tightly tying the lace to the point of covering the chin and forehead when she prayed in the mosque. Certain departures are not necessarily negatively commented by elder women like Faiza's experimentation with a ketogenic diet. When Faiza shared this, in one of the parallel conversations

after the completion of a halaqa session, Amreen expressed curiosity and her own interest in trying the same. She joked about how brutal it sounds to let go of all her favorite foods if she were to take up that diet. When other women displayed their concerns over potential nutritional deficiency, Faiza, Saba and Rashida – all of whom had a background in scientific studies – helped clarify their doubts.

## **Belonging and the Politics of Belonging**

On my first visit, briefly interrupted by my arrival, the sisters resumed their discussion. The little kids were juggling between the play area and the discussion area. They were afforded complete freedom in that sense. Meanwhile, an old lady to my right side started circulating a box of brownies. I customarily took one. At the moment, the discussion based on the Qur'an texts centered around individuals' responsibilities in society. The crux of the discussion was that certain members of the society had the responsibility to practice civic careers like being doctors in order to help others. By doing this they free the others to pursue different things and the society at large does not suffer. "Islamic scholars have agreed that the study and practice of medicine is an obligation that falls upon Muslims to have sufficient numbers of followers to practice (Fard Kifayah)" (Chamsi-Pasha & Albar 2016: 121). This seemed to be a shared sentiment among the members as the young adults, like Faiza and Jameela. Saba's daughter had been nudged in the direction of medical careers. Yuval-Davis (2006) points out that the construct of belonging is reified through an individual's attachments to certain stories and narratives that are passed down through generations, told and retold over the years to become modalities of what it means to belong to a collective – diaspora, religion, race, culture, etc. In demarcating the roles and responsibilities of individuals within a society through parables, the women underlined the modalities or ways of belonging to the Czech Muslim migrant diaspora. Additionally, becoming a doctor solves the dual purpose of persevering to become a good Muslim along with securing respect as migrants; Saba herself pointed out how doctors command a lot of respect from the members of the Czech society. Under the guise of a noble profession, a high-skilled job like that of a medical doctor unquestionably also comes with substantial financial dividends effecting change in the individual migrant's social and material worth.

Such investments to narratives and stories are further expressed through what Butler called performance of identity. In upholding certain traditions like meeting every week, bringing food, gathering and praying at certain hours, the women construct belonging through performance of identifications. Through such performances, one "operates to recall and reconnect with places elsewhere

that, through those very movements, are re-membered; at the same time, a site of diasporic belonging is created” (Bell 1999: 3).

However, such identifications or identity narratives are dynamic in nature and prone to change. While the sustenance of these collective narratives heavily relies on their performance by groups or individuals, it is this very element of reiteration that causes these practices or stories to be altered or appropriated for times (Butler 1997: 14). During one halaqa, the discussion of a verse (sura) was centered around the roles and responsibilities along gender lines. Suddenly, the dialogue became animated. The topic was personal, intimate, and the first question of how the money should be spent was hotly debated. One’s own money could supposedly be used as and how the woman pleases. A woman to my right promptly asked, “Even mehr?” Mehr refers to the monetary payments made to the wife by the husband, as decreed in the Islamic law (Chowdhury, Mallick & Chowdhury 2017). “Yes, of course. It’s your own money!” Saba replied. “She does not even need to inform her husband because it is her own money. Such recapitulations of private ownership” (Saba resounds while thumping her chest “my money, my money!”) and private space is intriguing. What I was witnessing was that these women were sharing the aspects of their lives where they were at complete liberty to mark their territories, without reserve (Field notes, 17.11.2019). Halaqa, thus became a safe space for deliberation and debate on issues pertaining to gender based on their personal experiences. Through an intersection of their gender and religious identities, the women pronounced personal as political or vice-versa. Thus, a benign exercise of belonging at times became a political project thereby bridging the gap between Yuval-Davis’ “belonging” and “the politics of belonging.”

So far, it can be gauged that the learning from halaqa sessions was, by no means linear. The women read the religious texts but also engaged in active reflection and critical discussion – retaining tenets that enhanced their lives in practical – literacy to identify and critique incorrect sources of information – and spiritual ways – abstaining from the consumption of haram items; while revising tenets that require updating – intersections of gender and religious identities. This project of learning and creating a sense of belonging was further finessed by further re-imagining the very “community of belonging” to bring into its fold all willing participants.

Fatima, Faiza’s grandmother, came with pages upon pages of notes on verses (suras) from the Qur’an. During one such discussion, Rashida narrated a story of help, kindness and compassion, a parable with a message that Muslims need to be helpful, kind, compassionate towards other Muslims... “other people,” as Amreen corrected herself looking at me (Field notes, 24.11.2019). During my

first visit, as the sisters sat in a circle, I was offered a seat, positioned directly opposite Fatima, the teacher, which was a rather humbling experience. The halaqa gatherings are, by the participants' admission, open to all willing participants. Besides myself, on three separate occasions, I saw a Czech woman, a recent convert to Islam, partake in the discussions. The scope of the discussions became expanded and secular to incorporate presence of not just me as a non-Muslim but also recent adherents like the Czech woman. I noticed how Rashida would practically conduct entire translations while mostly looking to our side, ensuring that we understand the subject matter (Field notes, 24.11.2019). Through such gestures, I became aware of the centrality of my position in the circle. Thus, the halaqa lessons did not merely serve as moral stories for good conduct but they also serve as a collective representation of a community and their values, and in being meticulous, dedicated, and sincere toward each lesson (be it contributions of a snack or mere attendance or general hospitality) each member showcased responsibility toward this common goal of representing Islam which would serve to strengthen pan-community ties.

Such reimaginations of what the halaqa should look like, a fluid space for members of any and all walks of the society, the Muslim women challenged what Yuval-Davis called "the boundaries of community of belonging" (2006: 205). The halaqa became the epicenter of multiple projects, unwittingly so. Mahmood's (2004) seminal work on women's revival (da'wah, meaning "call" in Arabic) movements in Egypt is a telling exploration of different approaches to agency, expanding the feminist scholarship and focus on political projects that upset and re-signify the dominant discourses on sexuality and gender. The study holds clues on how to analyze women's involvement in religion in this manner. The weekly halaqa gatherings served to continue to challenge the idea of religious spaces such as the mosque being the prerogative of the men, to challenge the narratives that intersect with their gender identities, to negotiate with the secularization that surrounds them in the larger Czech society in order to maintain a pious lifestyle and to contest the boundaries of belonging. In doing so, women used the platform of the halaqa meetings to create a space for the Muslims and even interested non-Muslims in the Czech milieu, thereby creating, and extending belonging within the host society.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to explore the roles and activities of Muslim migrant women within Al-Firdaus Mosque in Prague, the Czech Republic. Through participant observation sessions of weekly halaqa gatherings at the

mosque over a period of two months, I have further inquired about the ways in which the migrant women create a sense of belonging within their host community. The article outlines the organization of halaqa as an all-women cohort, assembling in an orderly fashion with a predetermined agenda. I go on to delineate the two main purposes served by halaqa – a) to share knowledge from Islamic texts to enhance the lives of the halaqa participants in both practical and spiritual ways, b) create avenues for Muslim migrant women to socialize in a new place after migration.

Using the framework on belonging provided by Yuval-Davis, I have shown how women create a community of belonging through shared narratives and stories about civic responsibilities of Muslims because of which the community members – especially the young adults – are persuaded to enter respectable career domains. By urging their young community members to pursue noble profession like medicine, the women inadvertently strive to affect the social and material well-being of all the stakeholders involved – the individuals and the Muslim community at large. Furthermore, the study has explored how the women discuss certain religious narrative that intersect with their gender identities and re-signify the narratives through both the mere act of practicing them across different time-space continuum – private ownership of wealth – and actively deliberating on them as in the case of wearing the hijab.

Subsequently, I have explored how the act of belonging unknowingly turns into a political project with the members of the halaqa creating a fluid space for anyone even from outside the community to participate, contesting the boundaries of the community of belonging. This borrows from Mahmood's work with religious movements in Egypt wherein she calls for analysis of agency beyond the limited binaries of subordination and resistance; how projects like such can be political without its participants ever considering them such.

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