



Contesting marginalisation and claiming agency: place-making strategies of Muslim women in Switzerland

GEO 511 Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Muslims in Switzerland are a contested topic that remains relevant to national and local politics. Anti-Muslim racism continues to shape the everyday reality of many Muslims, reproducing patterns that generate difference and otherness legitimising excluding power relations and inequalities. Muslim women experience discrimination disproportionately: they are the most visible members of a religious minority in Switzerland, and at the same time face exclusion within Muslim structures. The conflation of women's rights with debates over immigrants' rights has produced a contradictory duality in secular-liberal societies, often reducing Muslim women to apolitical and powerless victims of their own cultures and limiting the potential for inclusive feminist discourse.

The approach with feminist geography offers here the actor-centred lens to recognise agency in those spaces. This thesis contributes to emerging literature on Muslim women in Europe. Drawing on insights from unstructured interviews in Zurich and the surrounding area, this thesis analyses the navigational strategies and place-making efforts through which Muslim women produce places of belonging and contestation. Muslim women in Switzerland navigate a dual burden of confronting internal inequalities while simultaneously defending their community against external misrepresentation. Through embodied practice, selective participation and community building, they affirm belonging in both the wider Swiss and the Muslim context. With the expression of agency, invited spaces provided by various institutions are turned into invented spaces, contesting hegemonial structures and redefining agency. In navigating life, Islam serves as a framework of limitation and source of orientation, shaping how Muslim women engage in strategies and tactics of place-making through community engagement and redefining boundaries of privacy to shape their surroundings, aiming to stabilise an uncertain future.

Abstrakt

Muslim:innen in der Schweiz sind ein umstrittenes Thema, das von der nationalen und lokalen Politik nach wie vor als relevant erachtet wird. Antimuslimischer Rassismus prägt weiterhin den Alltag vieler Muslim:innen und reproduziert Muster, die Unterschiede und Andersartigkeit erzeugen und damit ausgrenzende Machtverhältnisse und Ungleichheiten legitimieren, Muslimische Frauen sind ungleich von dieser Diskriminierung betroffen: Sie sind die sichtbarsten Mitglieder einer religiösen Minderheit in der Schweiz, und gleichzeitig mit Ausgrenzung innerhalb muslimischer Strukturen konfrontiert. Die Vermischung von Frauenrechten mit Debatten über die Rechte von Einwandernden hat in säkular-liberalen Gesellschaften zu einer widersprüchlichen Dualität geführt, die muslimische Frauen oft zu unpolitischen und machtlosen Opfern ihrer eigenen Kultur reduziert und das Potenzial für einen inklusiven feministischen Diskurs einschränkt.

Der Ansatz der feministischen Geographie bietet hier eine akteurszentrierte Perspektive, um die Handlungsfähigkeit in diesen Räumen zu erkennen. Die Arbeit leistet einen Beitrag zur aufkommenden Literatur über muslimische Frauen in Europa. Auf der Grundlage von Erkenntnissen aus unstrukturierten Interviews in Zürich und Umgebung analysiert diese Arbeit die Navigationsstrategien und Bemühungen von 'place-making', durch die muslimische Frauen Orte der Zugehörigkeit und Auseinandersetzung schaffen. Muslimische Frauen in der Schweiz haben die doppelte Belastung, sich mit internen Ungleichheiten auseinanderzusetzen und gleichzeitig ihre Gemeinschaft gegen externe Falschdarstellungen zu verteidigen. Durch verkörperte Praxis, selektive Teilhabe und Gemeinschaftsbildung bekräftigen sie ihre Zugehörigkeit sowohl im weiteren Schweizer als auch im muslimischen Kontext. Durch den Ausdruck von Handlungsfähigkeit werden von verschiedenen Institutionen bereitgestellte 'invited spaces' zu 'invented spaces', die hegemoniale Strukturen in Frage stellen und Handlungsfähigkeit neu definieren. Bei der Navigation des Lebens dient der Islam als Rahmen für Einschränkungen und als Orientierungsquelle und prägt die Art und Weise, wie muslimische Frauen Strategien und Taktiken des 'place-making' durch gemeinschaftliches Engagement und die Neudefinition von Grenzen der Privatsphäre anwenden, um ihre Umgebung zu gestalten und eine unsichere Zukunft zu stabilisieren.

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1. Introduction

With the start of the year 2025, the ban on veiling officially came into force nationwide in Switzerland. While it officially concerns every form of face covering, the Swiss public took to calling it ‘the burka-ban’ and most of the discourse leading up to the vote in 2021 centred around religious face covering, focusing on the dress of Muslim women. This constitutes the general political and social context surrounding Islam in Switzerland, and a lot of debates follow a similar pattern. They revolve around women, their clothing and their alleged powerlessness in Islamic structures (Kaya 2012). This is also seen in media discourse, where the tonality has become increasingly negative over the years (Ettinger 2018). The fixation on the Muslim headscarf is not unique to Switzerland, but has instead become the focal point of many national debates across Europe, distorting discussions on immigration, Islam, and so-called Islamic extremism (Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Gökarıksel 2012). The duality between women’s rights and immigrants’ rights within these debates in secular enlightened society has hindered the development of a fruitful feminist discourse (Bilge 2010; Sancar 2010).

Islam is by far not a new concept in Switzerland but is still no less contested than it was twenty years ago. Anti-Muslim racism shapes the everyday reality of many Muslims, reproducing patterns that generate difference and otherness in order to legitimise power relations and inequalities (Trucco et al. 2025). Due to the system of direct democracy in Switzerland, political actors can use initiatives and motions to keep the issue salient and on the agenda, continually positioning Islam as a politically contested topic. Over the past two decades, several political initiatives aimed at restricting Muslim visibility and everyday life have been successfully passed, further intensifying public discourse on the (in)compatibility of Islam and Swiss society (Lindemann 2021; Sancar 2010).

The public discourse and debate often position Islam as one homogenous ‘Other’, using it to paint the picture of the malevolent immigrant disrupting the Swiss culture. It is informed by the notion of a ‘clash of cultures’, which relies on an essentialist understanding of Islam characterised by homogenisation and generalisation (Bilge 2010; Trucco 2021). Within this discourse, the figure of the Muslim woman, and particularly her ‘veil’ is used as a symbol of radical Islamism and oppression of women, denying women their own agency in the process (Kaya 2012; Lindemann 2021). Different biases and prejudices colour the discourse on the place of Islam in Swiss society, linking it with terrorism and using it for anti-immigration politics to mobilise against an impending security threat (Ettinger 2018). It constructs ‘the

Muslims' as a uniform group attributed with common properties such as uniform values, world views and even political orientation, ultimately portraying them as incompatible with Swiss society (Bilge 2010; Gianni 2010; Trucco et al. 2025). The generic term 'Muslim' is often used interchangeably with other denominators of 'the other' and often associated with violence (Gianni 2010), further reinforcing processes of differentiation and exclusion. This homogenisation of 'the Islam' denies individuality and positions religious affiliation as the primary marker of identity.

This thesis approaches the topic from a geographical perspective with the conceptualisation of space as relational, produced through social relations and embedded within structures of power. Politics are seen as means of exerting power across the geographical space (Storey 2020:199), and religious minorities contest exclusionary contexts by producing places of belonging within it. Religious buildings, for instance, provide a visual reminder and legitimisation by literally occupying space, and often face difficulties in their phases of planning and construction (Öcal 2022). For minorities such as Muslims in Switzerland, the negotiation of spatial visibility is not merely an aesthetic or cultural issue but a political act that challenges dominant narratives of belonging (Dwyer 2015). Place-making, moreover, extends beyond formal religious architecture to smaller-scale and often temporary forms of spatial practice, frequently expressed through embodied actions and everyday interactions (Vásquez and Knott 2014). These practices of claiming and redefining space become strategies through which marginalised groups contest political hegemony and reshape how power is distributed and experienced. Political geography extends this analysis across scales ranging from the home to the global, focusing on how power circulates across these scales through networks, movements and institutions (Agnew et al. 2015; Storey 2020).

Building on this conceptual understanding of space as relational and politically charged, Muslims in Switzerland are continuously confronted with marginalising practices that reflect broader power structures. Switzerland's public spaces, often perceived as neutral and secular, are historically and culturally embedded within Christian traditions and social norms that shape the boundaries of inclusion (Allenbach and Sökefeld 2010). On the one hand, this becomes evident in public debates surrounding the construction of mosques, the visibility (and symbolism) of minarets, and the broader question of religious symbols in public space (Antonsich and Jones 2010; Baumann 2009; Haenni and Lathion 2011). On the other hand, it is experienced on a personal level through everyday encounters with exclusion, discrimination,

and racism (Gianni 2010; Trucco et al. 2025). These processes reveal that public space in Switzerland is not merely a physical arena but a site where boundaries of belonging and identity are continuously negotiated, and where the place of Islam within Swiss society remains a subject of ongoing contestation.

The controversial presence of Islam, and further the fixation on Muslim women's bodies and dress, is by no means unique to Switzerland, similar debates are found across Europe, where questions of visibility, belonging, and secularism have become central to political and academic discussions (Dwyer 2015; Fabretti and Tateo 2025; Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Lindemann 2021; Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020; Russo Spena 2010). Scholarship on Islam and spaces of Islam has explored how Muslim presence is negotiated within secular and often exclusionary environments (Baumann 2009; Burchardt and Giorda 2021; Dwyer 2015; Öcal 2022). Research in urban religion and feminist geography demonstrates how Islam's visibility in public life, through mosques, veiling, and everyday practices, both challenges and redefines boundaries between the sacred and the secular (della Dora 2016; Gökarıksel 2012; Siraj 2011; Vásquez and Knott 2014). Within these debates, feminist scholars have further illuminated how Muslim women, who often experience intersectional exclusion based off both gender and faith, engage in spatial and political negotiations that unsettle assumptions of passivity, revealing how embodied practices become acts of agency and belonging (Bhimji 2009; Bilge 2010; Falah and Nagel 2005; Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Mesarič 2015; Najib and Hopkins 2019). Public discourse frequently portrays them as passive or apolitical subjects, objects of discussion rather than active participants in shaping their own religious and social worlds (Bilge 2010; Cooke 2007; Finlay and Hopkins 2019).

While the issues surrounding Islam, gender, and visibility have been researched in other European contexts, they cannot be translated directly into the context of Switzerland (Finlay and Hopkins 2019), and the need for research with Muslim women has been recognised (Aidenberger and Doehne 2021; Lindemann 2021; Trucco et al. 2025). The Swiss context presents distinct political and social specificities that shape how these dynamics unfold: Switzerland's system of direct democracy and its federal structure foster highly localised debates on religion, integration, and identity as well as distinct processes of political agenda (Trucco et al. 2025). These political and cultural conditions profoundly influence social life and everyday interactions, shaping how Muslim communities, and particularly Muslim women,

navigate questions of belonging, visibility, and participation. There remains a clear need for empirically grounded research to document and understand these social injustices.

I aim to contribute to these broader and deeper understandings by addressing these issues in the Swiss context. Therefore, this thesis is guided by the following research question:

In what ways do Muslim women in Switzerland use place-making strategies to negotiate their religious and personal identities within both the Islamic context and wider Swiss society?

To answer this question, this thesis examines women's experience within mosque communities and other religious spaces, analysing how these settings become places of identity negotiation, social belonging, and the reconfiguration of gendered and religious roles.

The research question draws on the key concept of place-making. This concept builds on the relational understanding of space, emphasising that it is not only as an empty backdrop but an ongoing configuration of interrelations (Cresswell 2020; Massey 2005). It refers to the process through which people actively create, shape, and give meaning to spaces through their everyday practices, interactions, and experiences. Place-making thus foregrounds agency: it highlights how social actors continuously shape and negotiate spatial arrangements within broader power structures.

The thesis is grounded in feminist geography. Feminist geography examines how power, social relations, and identities such as gender, race, class, and religion are produced and experienced through space by foregrounding subjectivity and situated knowledge, challenging the male-dominated "gaze from nowhere" and emphasising that gendered experiences are spatially produced and politically significant (Calkin and Freeman 2020; Haraway 1988; Moss 2002). Feminist approaches extend the scope of political geography to encompass a wider range of experiences, including care work, domestic spaces, and diverse mobilities (Amoore 2020; Kofman 2005; Sharp 2007). By focusing on everyday practices, emotion, and subjectivity, it reveals how politics is enacted not only through formal institutions but also in informal and personal spaces (Amoore 2020; Hyndman 2004). Highlighting the perspectives of those historically marginalised, feminist geography exposes how social norms and spatial arrangements reproduce inequalities and shape agency (Calkin and Freeman 2020; Fluri 2015). Methodologically, it emphasises situated knowledge, reflexivity, and multi-scalar analysis, recognising that research is never entirely neutral and must account for the researcher's

positionality (Moss 2002). This framework underpins the thesis, providing the tools to examine how Muslim women navigate, contest, and articulate agency within the everyday spaces they inhabit.

Intersectionality provides a both complementary and fundamental analytical framework that examines how the multiple social categories, such as gender, religion, race, and class, interact to shape individual experiences and access to power (Davis and Lutz 2023). It highlights the context-dependent and dynamic nature of identities, revealing how privilege and marginalisation are produced and negotiated across social and spatial context (Valentine 2007; Yuval-Davis 2023). In research, an intersectional lens allows for complex analysis of those overlapping structures, questioning how identities and inequalities manifest differently across specific social and spatial contexts (Ramírez and Rios 2022).

Before I present the overview of the thesis, some points need to be addressed. In this research, the intersectional lens allows for an analysis of how Muslim women's experiences and practices of belonging and exclusion are formed through the entanglement of gendered, racialised, and religious dynamics within Swiss society. At the same time, it is crucial to engage critically with the category of Muslim women itself (Bilge 2010; Cooke 2007). While religion is a key dimension through which the participants of this thesis articulate identity, reducing them solely to their religious affiliation risks reproducing the very essentialisms this thesis seeks to challenge.

I therefore approach everyday Islam through “notions of ambiguity, uncertainty, and even failure”, recognising the multiplicity and fluidity of religious expression (Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020:657). Religion is understood as a vital medium through which migrants and minorities negotiate spatial regimes in daily life and that opens possibilities for alternative modes of belonging (Vásquez and Knott 2014). It is important to note that when I speak of Muslim men and women in this thesis, I refer to a heterogeneous grouping of people who identify as Muslim in diverse ways. Additionally, the terms hijab, veil and headscarf are often used interchangeably (Lindemann 2021). I follow the terminology used in interviews and thus use hijab, engaging with its cultural and religious significance while seeking to avoid Western ascriptions commonly attached to the term ‘veil’.

The thesis is structured as follows. After this introduction, I build the theoretical framework with feminist geography and intersectionality, through which I develop the main conceptual tools of this research: place-making, invented and invited spaces, and social navigation. This is followed by a review of the existing literature on religious spaces in general, and on Muslim spaces and women in particular. The methodology chapter outlines my approach to fieldwork, the qualitative methods employed, and the process of data analysis. Before turning to the findings, I situate this thesis within the spatial and political context of Switzerland. The empirical chapter is organised thematically: I first discuss the place of Muslim women in Switzerland, then analyse the significance of the mosque, engage with different conceptualisations of community, and, lastly, explore how religion influences trajectories in life. The concluding chapter synthesises the main findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the current state of research, answers the research question, and reflects on the broader contributions and limitations of the thesis.

2. Theoretical Framework

To follow the train of thought of this thesis, certain concepts need to be introduced. This chapter begins by discussing the theory of feminist geographical research and intersectionality before moving on to explore research on religious spaces. I firstly work with the different conceptualisations of sacred spaces in general religious studies, and then I review the academic literature on Muslims in Europe, with particular attention to Muslim women, in order to situate the thesis within existing scholarship. The body of research works with the production of space and individual perspectives. For this purpose, I will introduce the key concepts of space/place making and invited/invented spaces used in the thesis and explain their relevance to the topic of Muslim women in Europe. With the intersectional frame, I will also discuss the concept social navigation, as it interacts with the spatial understanding of how life is constituted.

2.1 Feminist Geography

In this thesis, feminist geography provides the framework for analysing how power operates across spatial and social scales, addressing asymmetrical relationship among people that arise from real or perceived social and cultural difference, such as religion (Hyndman 2004). This perspective rejects the tendency to treat the state and other scales of research as separate, focusing on their interconnectedness instead (Kofman 2005; Sharp 2007). It asks how the political is perceived in the personal, and conversely, how the personal constitutes a site of political meaning, reflecting the feminist recognition of informal and everyday spaces as political. By examining the spatial experiences and perspectives of Muslim women, this thesis seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how political, social, and economic systems are created, maintained and contested, while situating knowledge and spatial conventions (Hyndman 2004). Feminist approaches encompass a wide set of research practices, conceptual frameworks and political commitments. For this thesis, I will not explain all of them but focus only on what is most relevant.

Political geography examines “the spatial concentration of power and the ways in which power is exerted across geographic space” (Storey 2020:199). Central to this is the recognition that space is not an empty container, but filled with objects, people and their relations. Initially, it centred around questions of the state and explored its and its elite’s success and actions bound by physical locations and resources. In the 1960s, radical geographers began to ask more explicitly political questions about the distribution of wealth and power (Storey 2020),

reorienting the discipline towards questions of inequality and social justice (Agnew et al. 2015). Core concepts such as territory, borders, political identity, and resistance became analytical tools to analyse the distribution and legitimisation of power (Agnew et al. 2015) as well as the ways in which patriarchy, racism, and class exploitation shape power imbalances (Storey 2020). Today, political geography extends this analysis across scales ranging from the home to the global, focusing on how power circulates across these scales through networks, movements and institutions (Agnew et al. 2015; Storey 2020).

Feminist geography adds to this critical lens, emerging as both an extension and a critique of political geography's foundational concerns with power and space, recognising the influence of gender in the processes of power ascription and legitimisation (Storey 2020). Rather than rejecting the core concepts, feminist approaches critically engage with them to encompass a wider range of experiences, including care work, domestic spaces, and diverse mobilities (Amoore 2020; Kofman 2005; Sharp 2007). It examines how gender relations are manifested and reinforced through the ordering of public and private spaces, while simultaneously challenging disciplinary boundaries that have historically limited what counts as legitimate sites of geographical research and contesting earlier assumptions that ignored or denied the spatial and embodied dimensions of knowledge (Amoore 2020; Calkin and Freeman 2020; Moss 2005; Sharp 2007). Over the subsequent decades, feminist political geography played a central role in broadening the subdiscipline, disrupting the binary of the public as political and the private as apolitical, and including embodied and everyday political practices in the spatial negotiation of 'the political' (Agnew et al. 2015; Sahar 2022). Feminist scholars thus reframe political geography's central questions to include the everyday, the embodied and the emotional as integral sites of political meaning, showing how these spaces are dynamic, interactive and constantly traversed by bodies, practices and political acts (Fluri 2015).

This active engagement with space and politics in the everyday cannot be seen, let alone studied or understood, as long as individual perspectives are disregarded (Moss 2005). By foregrounding subjectivity, emotion and everyday practices, feminist work has reconfigured what counts as political and politics in geography (Amoore 2020; Sharp 2007). Through attention to intersectional social differences such as gender, class, race, age and religion, feminist geography uncovers how space shapes experiences of identity and power (Hyndman 2004). This perspective highlights the socially constructed nature of these categories, showing the heterogeneity of the category of 'woman', and challenges disciplinary biases such as

assumptions of a unified women's experience (Calkin and Freeman 2020). Societal expectations and norms related to gender shape how individuals use and experience public space, often privileging men at the expense of women. It is therefore essential to interrogate who benefits from unequal gender norms, how such power structures are maintained and how they are contested in the everyday spaces (Cislaghi and Heise 2020). In doing so, feminist geography reconfigures agency itself, extending it beyond liberal, exclusionary models and positioning it as central to emancipatory politics in anti-racist, feminist and anti-colonialist movements (Bilge 2010). This framework informs this thesis' focus on how Muslim women exercise and articulate agency within the everyday spaces they inhabit where their experiences and political subjectivities are often overlooked.

The critical examination of power is not limited to the studied field but also questioned in the production of knowledge itself, rejecting claims of neutrality, acknowledging that no research is ever entirely value-free (Calkin and Freeman 2020; Storey 2020). From this perspective, feminist geography functions not only as a field of inquiry but also as a methodological approach, questioning "who are knowers, what can be known, and how do we know what we know" (Moss 2005:45), and will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

At the heart of feminist geography is the commitment to making and keeping women's lives visible, rooted in a critical feminist vision that recognises social space as uneven, gendered, and shaped by intersecting power relations. Feminist geography extends and critiques political geography by revealing how gendered and other social inequalities are embedded in spatial arrangements, challenging assumptions of scale, public and private separation, and neutral knowledge production (Amoore 2020; Kofman 2005; Sharp 2007; Storey 2020). By foregrounding the experiences of those historically marginalised, feminist geography highlights how power operates in everyday life, showing that politics is enacted not only through formal institutions but also through informal and personal spaces, reconfiguring concepts of agency beyond traditional, exclusionary frameworks (Bilge 2010). Feminist methodological approaches emphasise standpoint epistemologies and situated knowledge, and the recognition of the diversity in agency underlines the actor-centred research I employ, where the experiences and opinions of the people constitute the foundation to understand how social realities are shaped and navigated.

2.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a critical framework for examining how overlapping systems of power, such as gender, race, class and religion, interact to shape experiences of marginalisation and privilege. This thesis engages with this scholarship by examining the intersection of religion and gender among Muslim women in Switzerland, analysing the salience of their identities across different social and spatial contexts. The concept was introduced to the broader academia in 1989 by Crenshaw when she wrote about the interaction of sex and race in marginalisation processes (Crenshaw 1989). In her initial work, she highlights how the conceptualisation of gender and race as discrete spheres excludes and erases Black women from feminist theory. This understanding denies women to be Black, and Black people to be women, therefore “marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination” (Crenshaw 1989:140).

Initially, intersectionality has been theorised by scholars as additive. Different forms of oppression would simply add on top of each other, resulting in a possible ranking of differences. However, this approach has been contested as being essentialist. The danger herein lies in the way it postulates the white, heterosexual and able-bodied man as the baseline, upon which fixed, static identities are added (Valentine 2007:13). The recognition of the interplay between race and gender has since been expanded and the axes most often added are age, disabilities, class, sexual orientation and religion (Davis and Lutz 2023; Yuval-Davis 2023). However, identities are not always constituted in relation to a baseline but rather form their own constellation, and privilege is just as produced as marginalisation (Yuval-Davis 2023). Identities are dynamic, context-dependent and may vary in salience across different situations. As emergent properties produced through interaction, they resist essentialist or static role-based understandings of social difference. Building on Crenshaw’s critique of the “conceptual single-issue analyses” (1989:149), social divisions are not reducible to a single one, but instead constitute and shape each other in historically, geographically, and personally specific contexts (Valentine 2007; Yuval-Davis 2023).

As becomes apparent, the varying interaction of identity axes across different contexts highlight their inherent spatiality, aligning the concept with key concerns in feminist geography (Bauriedl et al. 2019; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018; Valentine 2007). In feminist geography, numerous studies have explored specific intersections across diverse contexts, demonstrating the spatial and situational variability of identity (Hopkins 2018; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018).

Fundamental to the theory of intersectionality is the subjectivity of experiences, shaped by the interconnectedness of various power systems and resisting broad generalisations. Intersectionality can be understood as “an analytical approach to understanding social, economic and political realities, which is based on a dialogical epistemology” in which “no single standpoint – neither the most privileged nor the most marginal – can have full authority [in] understanding the true state of the world” (Yuval-Davis 2023:86). This resonates with feminist standpoint theory, which emphasises the positionality of social agents, both researcher and the researched. Similar to feminist geography, it highlights how spheres of action are legitimised while others are marginalised, intersectionality draws attention to how identities are situated within these spaces. The lack of recognition afforded to those who act outside normative frameworks ultimately works to depoliticise their agency (Amoore 2020; Valentine 2007). While feminist research has challenged the universalist frame that portrays religion solely as a site of male domination and denies any agency to veiled women, it often fails to meaningfully engage with their religious motivations (Bilge 2010).

To think about and with the concept of intersectionality also means to reconsider what constitutes discrimination. As Crenshaw (1989) argues, dominant legal frameworks narrowly define discrimination as wrongful action directed toward a single, identifiable category. With this, they exclude forms of oppression that implicate multiple identities simultaneously. Such a monodirectional understanding fails to account for situations where discrimination is produced through overlapping expectations and exclusions, particularly when individuals do not conform to dominant social norms (Peretz 2020). In Switzerland, racism and anti-Muslim sentiment are understood and legitimised differently: racism is denied as structural and reframed as an individual problem, while hostility to Muslims is excused as an understandable reaction to societal change. This framing overlooks the ways in which restrictive measures intersect with racist stereotypes and sustains dismissive narratives that label critique as exaggerated or as ‘racism hysteria’ (Boulila 2019). Through an intersectional lens, however, it becomes clear that discrimination often operates at multiple levels simultaneously, as overlapping axes produce unique and compounded forms of marginalisation.

Engagement with intersectionality as an analytical tool in research enables a more nuanced understanding of how the social and political spheres are established. It allows scientists to describe and explain differences between perceived categories, such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’, and to analyse how different masculinities, femininities and other identity dimensions intersect and

interact. The approach of the case study is particularly suited to intersectional research, as it commences from the individual context and works outward to untangle the interactions of the categories in practice. This enables the researcher to consider the multiple and dynamic ways the self and other are represented and produced and to account for how identities are weighed differently depending on the specific context (Valentine 2007). Recognising the continuous construction and negotiation of identity also means understanding how “privileged and powerful identities are ‘done’ and ‘undone’” (Valentine 2007:14). It comes back to the necessary dismantling of the overarching “gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988), as discussed in the previous chapter, which permeates our understanding of the world and whose conception as given and not produced renders us incapable of reaching true equality.

When it comes to my research, intersectionality is inherent in the structures I question, as the situated production of identity and the interplay of different identity categories form a central part of the explored lives. While the researcher ultimately determines the analytical categories, a critical approach remains attentive to the persistence of multiple inequalities (Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018). My particular interest lies in the intersectional dynamics surrounding a minority religion that is publicly framed as oppressing women, and the lived experiences of these said women navigating different spaces under this perception. This aligns with critiques of treating women as an undifferentiated category (Amoore 2020) and follows the calls in feminist geography to advance intersectionality studies by analysing how spatial contexts shape intersectional relations and their specific manifestation (Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018). The following chapter introduces the conceptual and analytical tools employed to approach the field and data analysis from a geographical perspective.

2.3 Concepts

Research on Muslims in Europe comes from a diverse backdrop of disciplines. Especially religious studies experienced a spatial turn, where sacred and secular spaces are understood as the production of networks. This thesis, however, focuses not on the production of religion, but rather the lived experiences with religion. For this, the approach with geographical concepts offers a new perspective on how to understand religious life in Switzerland. First, the concept of space/place making will be introduced. The second key concept, Miraftab's '2004 invited and invented spaces' expands the notion of political engagement beyond institutional settings. Finally, the chapter introduces the concept of 'social navigation' by Vigh (2009), which, though not strictly geographical, illuminate life trajectories and complement the spatial framework of this thesis.

2.3.1 Place-making

Since Place-Making has been conceptualised in multiple ways across different disciplines, this necessitates a demarcation of the version that informs my work (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). The conceptualisations are shaped by distinct theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches in their respective field. As I made apparent through earlier theorisations, my approach is grounded in feminist geography, while also drawing on debates around space and place that emerge in scholarship on Muslims and sacred spaces. I begin by defining the two key terms space and place, before turning to a discussion of how these have been applied in (political) geography. The chapter concludes with the working definition I apply in my thesis.

When talking about space and place, space is considered the bigger, more abstract concept of the two, creating the environment in which events take place (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). The concept itself underwent various transformations over the years and is still not conclusively specified. Early on, space was talked about with a mathematical view as a three-dimensional container with fixed dimensions in which things happen. However, scholars started to contest this view, and space has been argued to not be empty but rather a dynamic landscape imbued with relations and social structures (Elden 2020; Smith 2020). With this conceptualisation, space is understood not only as an empty backdrop but as a configuration of interrelations. As Massey (2005) emphasizes in 'for space', the significance of objects lies not in their isolated presence but in the relationships that connect them. Motion is thus not only measured through space, but as in constant relation to and with other bodies, creating a web of relationships of

objects (Elden 2020). The ways in which people interact with and produce these relations mark the transition from the concept of space to that of place.

While space is the contextual landscape, place is understood primarily through embodied experience. Places are not given but produced and practiced. Such practice can be long-term, forming habitual places of everyday life, or short-term, creating temporary places that people leave after completion of their objective. “Space becomes a place when it is used and lived. Experience is at the heart of what place means” (Cresswell 2020:117), and is different for different groups such as women, children or minorities (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). With the focus on the active participation in the production of place, geographers and others have revealed how these constructions are contested and resisted by the excluded (Cresswell 2020). This active engagement with space relates to feminist geography, where the people are recognised as actors and shape their own environment, creating places of belonging through social practice and connections (Agnew and Livingstone 2011; Cresswell 2020). This conception of place is also central to my thesis.

The inherent produced nature of place constitutes the central point of the concept space/place making, which offers a lens to analyse and understand the interaction between these two, and how different people engage with their context in different ways. The concept names the process of creating places of belonging and identity within the constructed spatial framework of society (Akbar and Edelenbos 2021). The places can either be conforming to or contesting the social structures of space, depending on the people themselves and their aims. The agency of the person determines how the body moves through space, what paths are being chosen and where places of dwelling are produced. The recognition of this movement as active forms the making of place from space. The two concepts are however not distinct, as things seldom are, but interactive and reciprocally transformative. In my usage based in feminist geography, place-making is used to analyse practices of resistance and identity formation, engaging with the production of political arenas and agency outside the formal spheres (Mollett 2017; Peretz 2020; Wilhoit Larson 2018). To reassert place is a political move in feminist geography, revalorising sites from the domestic to meeting places with political agendas (Agnew and Livingstone 2011).

The concept space/place making has found its way into various analyses across different fields of research (Akbar and Edelenbos 2021). Scholarship in religious studies recognised not only

the production of power through and in space but also the ways it is contested (Burchardt and Giorda 2021; Fabretti and Tateo 2025; Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Gökarıksel 2012). The definition of sacred spheres through their separation from the secular illustrates how religious places are made, with religious practice being inherently spatial, involving boundaries as well as centres (Burchardt and Giorda 2021; Vásquez and Knott 2014). Yet these boundaries are often blurred, and the meanings of sacred places to different people can be conflicting (Jenner 2024; Sheringham 2010). This is congruent with place-making, as it enables the consideration of individual perspectives. The production of place from space is this imparting of significance through interpretation and appropriation (Burchardt and Giorda 2021).

Place-making for minority religions centres on producing places of belonging and legitimisation, both individually and collectively. Through the embodiment of religiosity, believers create and affirm their faith through bodily practices that may include disciplined routines or the marking of sacred and profane spaces. The spatial management of difference and belonging involves navigating space as a minority with practices of visibility, creating legitimacies of their belonging while maintaining differences. Although spirituality can be seen as individual, the practices of visibility and negotiation are often an effort of the community (Vásquez and Knott 2014). Ultimately, The concept revolves around the relation between space and place: while space refers to the broader, oftentimes physical but also underlying social context, place emerges relationally through the lived practices and interactions of individual within it (Akbar and Edelenbos 2021).

As I work with Muslimas in Switzerland, the space both I and they engage with is constituted of the predominantly secular political context, in which Islam constitutes a minority, both as a religion in relation to the wider secular society and within the landscape of dominant religious traditions. These social contexts carry their own norms and expectations, further nuanced by my interviewees' position as women. Place-making offers here the lens to understand and analyse the ways in which Muslim women produce places of belonging in these different contexts. This recognition emphasises how lived religious experiences and interpretations are shaped by personal perspectives and how imaginaries not always coincide with normative traditions. The perceived space of religious tradition, together with the everyday routines of religious practice, provides women both a means of connecting with God and of positioning themselves in relation to others (Speelman 2017). With this framework, placemaking serves as

the conceptual lens through which the places women create and inhabit can be analysed in terms of their production and significance.

2.3.2 Invited and invented spaces

As I discussed, my conceptualisation of place-making foregrounds individual agency, enabling me to recognise places women create outside formal frameworks. The concept of invited and invented spaces builds on a similar recognition of informal arenas as spaces of political discourse. Miraftab (2004) highlights and conceptualises how forms of community-based activism operates as a space of politics and citizenship construction, one in which women and disadvantaged groups are often the most active and effective participants. With invited spaces, she denominates spaces that have been legitimised by institutions of power, in her case donors and government interventions, but nevertheless occupied by grassroots and allied non-government organisations. Invented spaces, on the other hand, consist of those that are also occupied, but openly challenge institutional power structures. The latter especially is established through collective practice, producing their own place (Miraftab 2004). While she works with the notion of citizenship, the concept can be translated to my work with a minority religion, as both deal with the motif of legitimacy and identity.

Feminist scholars have highlighted the importance of informal arenas of politics, ensuring that the activism of women outside the formal structures is accounted for (Velásquez Atehortúa 2014). A parallel can be drawn here with the recognition of religious spaces outside officially sanctioned sacred sites. Such ‘unofficially sacred spaces’ are those upon which sacredness is temporally or informally imposed, manifesting in places of worship, pilgrimage sites, shrines and education. They may also emerge when secular places are transformed into arenas of religious experience, as seen in procession through public streets, religious instruction in schools or museums, or worship and gatherings within the home (Woods 2020:298). The informal aspect can manifest on different levels: both as community efforts within profane spheres where religious activities are practiced either authorised or not, as well as individual practice that do not conform to the community inflicted norms.

Miraftab (2004) emphasises the importance of recognising the dynamic circumstances in which the informal spaces of grassroots politics form and how they adapt to them. She stresses the flexibility of such strategies and rejects a rigid divide between invited and invented spaces.

While the former seek strategies to prevail within existing structures, often working in collaboration with them, and the latter challenge and transform them through resistance, both are ultimately directed toward change and inequalities. Similar concerns are echoed in other contexts. The existence of state-approved categories that dictate how Islam should be practiced reflects an invited space shaped by secular power. At the same time, Muslim communities often create alternative practices and interpretations that operate as invented spaces, resisting or reworking these state-imposed boundaries (Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020). Activism can also transform from one into the other, starting as participation in invited spaces that evolves into invented spaces of resistance (Velásquez Atehortúa 2014). In both contexts, political and religious action highlights how informal and formal arenas intersect, demonstrating the contested and adaptive nature of power.

For my thesis, I extend the concept to less direct forms of resistance, such as religious life outside official structures or the rejection of their centrality for religious fulfilment. As I show in the following chapters, this is particularly relevant in Islam for women, both in relation to wider public space and within Muslim contexts, as their religious practice can occur outside and contest formal structures. One could argue that the act of claiming space in public with their own bodies constitutes a form of resistance to prevailing norms. As a study on Muslim communities in Indonesia shows, women create their own networks and educational spaces within gendered settings, yet certain aspects are seen as belonging to men. Therefore, such spaces remain ambivalent, as they may simultaneously provide opportunities for community and learning while also reflecting power asymmetries (Jenner 2024). Gendered spaces often originate from arrangements imposed by those in authority, limiting the access of marginalised groups to power and knowledge while preserving privileges for dominant actors. With the acknowledgement of informal spaces, often invented outside these structures, it is possible to recognise agency of the marginalised. In my research context, this concept helps to identify how Muslim women in Switzerland navigate and reshape secular and religious boundaries through engagement in invited spaces and creating invented spaces that emerge through self-organised, often resistant practices of belonging and expression.

2.3.3 Social navigation

With motion squared, Vigh (2009) conceptualises social navigation as a twofold process: life as a dynamic and interactive process, in which individuals continuously move through, and are simultaneously moved by, shifting social, political and spatial environments. This ongoing interchange between the people and the world they live in highlights that individuals are not merely reacting to change but actively orienting themselves within it, emphasising the agency of the individual people. Through such engagement with their surroundings, individuals create and negotiate places of belonging and identity, which in turn shape how they express themselves and interact with others. As these processes unfold within broader, and often volatile, political contexts, the production of place requires constant adaptation to changing conditions and power relations. By framing movement as an active and relational process, social navigation provides a lens for understanding how and why people navigate their lives the way they do.

The concept of social navigation has been taken up in academic debates to describe how people act in difficult situations, negotiating the influence of multiple factors. Vigh argues that this insecurity must be accounted for when analysing how life is structured under such conditions. To capture this, he extends the concept by emphasising that individuals are not traversing a fixed terrain but are instead continually adapting their movement to shifting and everchanging circumstances. Navigation is designated in this concept as “motion within motion” (Vigh 2009:420). The consideration of movement within motion has since been applied beyond conflict studies. In geography, for instance, the concept has been applied to contexts of climate change adaptation, where actors continually reposition themselves socially and strategically while engaging with changing environments and attempting to act advantageously amid uncertainty (Stacey et al. 2025). This navigation can be distinguished into strategies and tactics. Strategies involve creating and stabilising spaces, while tactics concern the process of navigating existing spaces to one’s advantage. Seen this way, political action can take the form of establishing domains and structures, or a migratory effort to create trajectories within the spaces shaped by others. Both perspectives highlight the dynamic interplay between structure and agency that defines navigation in social life. Central to this approach is its temporal dimension: Navigation entails not only responding to the present moment but also planning for possible futures, as strategies are always informed by imagined goals and prospective positions (Vigh 2009).

Using the image of the shifting horizons, Vigh conveys the notion of the movement of the social landscape by depicting it as a seascape, marked by depth and constant motion. Within this metaphor, multiple forces act simultaneously, some more instant and hectic than others, some cyclical or relatively static with slow movement. This image makes visible the ways in which the social environment is continually in flux on different levels, even if change occurs at different speeds that allow people to internalise and routinise certain shifts over time. He designates the concept squared because the movement of individuals and the movement of social forces interact and multiply with each other. The necessity of navigation thus varies with the speed and volatility of change, as well as the degree of shelter or vulnerability afforded by social position and forms of capital (Vigh 2009).

The concept can also be used in a less precarious context that nevertheless influences lives. Socio-political uncertainty is also relevant in Western societies, where shifting social contexts also affect minority communities. For young Muslim women, religiosity intersects with these changing circumstances, shaping outlooks on life and how they orient their practices toward shifting possibilities. In this thesis, I adopt the concept in line with Stacey et al. (2025), who stress its value for examining micro-level dynamics, including how broader structures intersect with individual agency in everyday decision-making.

The strength of the concept lies in its capacity to capture ‘motion within motion’, enabling analysis of both collective experiences and individual agency as people adjust their activities and positions in response to shifting and unpredictable social environments (Stacey et al. 2025). Crucially, social navigation is not only about being subjected to change but also actively participating in it. This approach enables analysis of the navigation of women in secular, religious, and gendered spaces, producing places of belonging and identity while adapting to changing social and political contexts. Vigh’s notion of motion squared (2009) further clarifies that navigation not only involves anticipating and responding to change, but also recognising how shifting horizons continuously reshape perspectives and attainable social positions.

3. State of research

Having established the theoretical framework of feminist geography and outlined the key concepts used to analyse the field, the chapter now turns to the state of research on geography of religion, first in the conceptualisations of religious spaces, followed by an overview of studies on Muslims with a focus on women. From there, I will continue to set up the methodological context in the next part.

3.1 Religious spaces

Religious spaces as a concept and site of research emerged in religious studies, where space was adopted as a central concept in diverse projects, centring geographical thought in research about minority communities, transnational belonging and belief. The spatial turn influenced how researchers look at and work with religion. Early work focused on the physical conception of space, natural and cultural, mapping the distribution of religious phenomena (Sheringham 2010; Woods 2020). Later research, however, expanded this focus to include the relational conceptualisation of space, turning attention to religion in space and the ways spatial practices shape and are shaped by religious life. Researchers in geography of religion now engage in the active and contested formation of space and the negotiation of power that takes place within it (Luz 2013; Vásquez and Knott 2014). This shift led to an increase in inter- and multi-disciplinary works, connecting concepts across religion and space (della Dora 2016; Falah and Nagel 2005; Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Woods 2020).

While religion studies turned to geographical concepts, religion was increasingly taken up by geographers (Falah and Nagel 2005; Richardson 2022; Sheringham 2010; Woods 2020). Like so many other aspects, religion, and by extension the study of religion, has been significantly transformed by increased human mobility and migration (Burchardt and Giorda 2021; Sheringham 2010). The understanding of space as continually produced and negotiated enables analysis of how religious spaces are constructed and actively used, and how they can, in turn, become sites of competition, disputes and conflicts (Richardson 2022; Woods 2020). The interactive connection of space and power is no less valid for sacred space, and “the ways in which power is expressed are often a function of majority-minority group dynamics” (Woods 2020:398). Following this understanding, research on sacred spaces works with how space is made, be that in ritual practice, narrative construction or through the sensory and affective experiences that imbue a site with meaning (Binte Abdullah Sani 2015; Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020; Woods 2020). Religious spaces are both analysed through the power negotiations within

official sites, but also how they are produced outside this context in the everyday (Luz 2013; Sheringham 2010).

This has brought new areas of interest into focus, including minority religions, multi-faith spaces, and the practice of religion within secular contexts. Research on multi-religious spaces examines how plural religious institutions coexist within shared, fixed environments, producing unique encounters shaped by the diasporic context and by the need for immigrant religions to find their place alongside local traditions (Burchardt and Giorda 2021; Fabretti and Tateo 2025; Gravelle, Medeiros, and Nai 2021). Another important dimension concerns the maintenance of religious spaces within secular contexts, where diaspora communities navigating the ambiguities of religious life and create places of belonging and identity through the negotiation of space (Becci and Hafner 2023; Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020; Vásquez and Knott 2014). Interdisciplinary enquiries have worked with the making of sacred space both in and through ordinary spaces, where sacred spaces are not considered territorially fixed but rather seen as expressed and sustained through embodied performance and lived experiences (della Dora 2016; Falah and Nagel 2005; Gökarıksel 2009). Feminist geography offers an important perspective by interrogating gender relations and the contestation of power, expanding the understanding of sacred spaces to include the dynamics of everyday life.

Aspects of historically dominating religions remain deeply embedded in collective memory, values and institutions. They became unseen, but the religious subconscious still shapes how we order the world, as well as how we talk about it (della Dora 2016). The spatial arrangements we see today root in the hierarchies of power shaped by both public and religious authorities, which govern access, ownership and the use of space while legitimising particular practices within them (Burchardt and Giorda 2021). As the subjects who embody those practices move through different spaces, they interweave the religious with the secular, creating an inextricable tapestry of exchange and experiences. This understanding of permeable space has also been applied to the dichotomy of public and private space. Rather than viewing these as fixed categories, research explored how religious place-making occurs through everyday life in the secular sphere, highlighting the fluid and individually shaped nature of these spaces, shaped through diverse networks (Abisaab 2005; Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020). Muslim Women, for instance, create sacred space with their dress within public space (Dwyer 1999; Gökarıksel 2012; Siraj 2011). Feminist thought offers a valuable lens here, through which individual

agency within such processes can be emphasised and gendered differences alongside other axes of identity can be dissected.

Through this approach, the continued relevance of contemporary sacred spaces can be better understood, as it allows for the consideration of embodied practices, their materialities and “the affects and immaterialities entangled in these spaces” (della Dora 2016:46). Furthermore, the public sphere has increasingly been recognised as a gendered space in religious studies, prompting scholars to examine how the body shapes religious experiences (Bilge 2010; Jenner 2024; Mesarič 2015; Vásquez and Knott 2014). This challenges structuralist narratives and sociological determinisms by engaging with the spiritual and emotional dimensions of personal experiences in the production and continuation of sacred spaces (della Dora 2016; Sahar 2022; Woods 2020). It further acknowledges the transformative potential of sacred space on their users in turn, adopting the understanding of space as interactive and relative.

The feminist geographical lens on space allows research to reconfigure notions of boundaries and observe the dynamic ways people redefine, alter, reinforce as well as dismantle them. It questions the production of both exclusionary structures and the contesting places within them. The establishment of spaces through hegemonic structures means that they are codified by those groups with more resources in accordance with their ideologies and political aims (Calkin and Freeman 2020; Storey 2020). Consequently, as a minority religion, Islamic spaces in Europe are inevitably linked to resistance and counterhegemonic politics (Jenner 2024; Luz 2013). Unofficially sacred spaces often emerge where religious presence is restricted, situating them in politics of legitimacy and competition for public space (Fabretti and Tateo 2025; Vásquez and Knott 2014; Woods 2020). In secular contexts, such spaces can form temporal extensions of mosques or homes, accommodating religious practice beyond formal institutions (Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020). These dynamics generate new tensions, as secular public spaces are contested and reshaped by religious presence. Muslim women are frequently positioned at the centre of these debates, as the veil not only transforms public space by making religious identity visible but also challenges lingering assumptions of secular neutrality (Mesarič 2015). My thesis starts here, analysing the agency of these women in navigating and participating in both religious and political life, and examining how their embodied practices interact with and reshape the spaces they inhabit.

Some studies on religious spaces have employed an approximate feminist perspective, examining, for instance, differences in the attribution of importance to official religious spaces (Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020). Mosques, as formal religious institutions, function as places of authority, however, the perception and significance of these spaces differ among people from different backgrounds, whose religious formation has been shaped by diverse traditions. While such studies consider more nuanced differences, they often lack true feminist engagement with questions of situatedness and agency. Incorporating these considerations open up new ways of understanding interactions of power, revealing how the space of the Mosque cannot be separated from the notion of gender, as it is emmeshed in religious and cultural understandings (Jenner 2024). The normalised assumption that the mosque is for the men leaves a range of spaces outside of it, “where women have the privilege of prayer space, leadership, and knowledge attainment, much like men enjoy in their masjids” (Jenner 2024:135). However, the spaces formed through this separation are explicitly gendered spaces, where access to knowledge and power is allocated along several axes.

Research on religious spaces is diverse and works to different degrees with geographical and feminist perspectives. Studies on religious spaces and their communities work predominantly with the broader (re-)presentation of minority religions but overlook the intersections with gender, race and other axes. Yet, religious spaces and the visibility of religion in public space are deeply gendered (Bilge 2010; Woods 2020). This visibility of religion complicates dominant notions of a secular public and challenges assumptions of neutrality in secular societies. In my thesis, I draw on feminist geography to explore this deeper, analysing agency and the production of place of Muslim women.

3.2 Spaces of Islam

This section focuses on research on explicitly Muslim spaces and how they are constituted, especially in the Western European context. Research on this topic has not only been conducted in religious studies, but also been of interest to other fields, such as sociology (Bilge 2010; Siraj 2011; Woods 2020), political science (Baumann 2009), and geography (Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Gökarıksel 2009, 2012; Sahar 2022). Many studies work with Islam as an immigrant religion, particularly in Western Europe but also in the United States and Eastern Europe. Another branch raises some points of interest in discussions on Islam as a minority religion in Southeast Asia (Jenner 2024; Schenk and Hasbullah 2022). When examining Islamic spaces, scholars have focused not only on official religious institutions, but also on spaces outside these

formal settings. As discussed, sacred spaces are imbued with meaning and in turn influence how people operate (Di Puppo and Schmoller 2020; della Dora 2016; Woods 2020). However, the individual experience and navigation of space recognised in feminist geography applies also to religious spaces. For example, women often ascribe dissimilar meanings to mosques compared to men, making it essential to recognise these differentiated experiences (Jenner 2024), and they experience marginalisation not only in the broader society but also within Muslim structures (Dehbi 2023).

Scholars have emphasised the need to understand what it means to be Muslim in specific European contexts, turning their attention to the spatial dimensions of Muslim life (Burchardt and Giorda 2021; Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020). Research on mosques in urban contexts explores questions about visibility, conflict, and belonging (Becci and Hafner 2023; Öcal 2022). Mosques function as key sites through which diasporic communities articulate their presence and identity in European cities, and the research of these official religious sites offer insight into how faith communities actively negotiate their presence in public space (Behloul 2016; Dwyer 2015; Kahera and BakamaNume 2015). These debates frequently revolve around questions of public space and *laïcité*, reflecting ongoing struggles over the visibility of religion and the boundaries of secularism in European societies (Boulila 2019; Ettinger 2018; Sancar 2010; Trucco et al. 2025). Some studies approach the issue through the lens of migration and integration, examining how spatial conflicts emerge around the perceived compatibility of Islam and European social values (Gravelle et al. 2021; Lizotte 2020; Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020; Russo Spina 2010). Others, however, focus on Muslim perspectives, exploring processes of community building, the production of sacred spaces, and the lived experiences of Muslims in secular environments (Boulila 2019; Chatagny 2021; Gökarıksel 2012; Petersen 2019; Schenk, Gökarıksel, and Behzadi 2022).

While much of the research on Muslim spaces has focused on institutional and collective expressions of faith, attention has also turned toward the more intimate and affective dimensions of how Islam is perceived and contested in everyday life. The visibility of Muslim presence in public space shapes how individuals experience belonging, safety, and recognition. The veiled Muslim woman, in particular, is paradoxically represented as both a passive victim of patriarchal culture and religion, and as an active threat to Western modernity and freedom (Bilge 2010; Cooke 2007). Such a framing erases the diversity not only among Muslim women, but also among Muslims more broadly, reducing them to a monolithic body. Recognising the

interconnectedness of gender, space and embodied practices is therefore crucial for challenging simplistic portrayals of Muslim women as oppressed. Feminist research from this perspective thus highlights their agency and active engagement with religion, as well as the ways they negotiate and transform public space through embodied religious practices (Bhimji 2009; Jenner 2024; Najib and Hopkins 2019; Woods 2020).

While religious identity is assumed through far more than bodily appearance, public discourse continues to fixate on the figure of the veiled women (Nagel 2005). In this framing, being Muslim and being Woman is merged into the single political identity of ‘the muslimwoman’ that overshadows national, cultural and philosophical diversity. Constructed by external gazes, this creates a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’, whether from non-believers or Islamist men (Cooke 2007). The visibility of Muslim bodies in public space, and particularly of veiled women, thus becomes a focal point through which Islamophobia, secularism, and gender politics intersect. Building on this, discussions of Islamic embodiment in public life reveal how the categories of the secular and the sacred are not separate but rather overlap and permeate one another (Gökarıksel 2012).

Rather than viewing visibility as a marker of oppression or conflict, it can be interpreted as a form of presence and agency. With the veil, in particular, everyday acts become means through which Muslim women assert belonging and negotiate their right to occupy secular space on their own terms (Binte Abdullah Sani 2015; Gökarıksel 2012). In doing so, they challenge the notion of public space as purely secular, revealing how power is inscribed in everyday geographies and how the hijab itself can be understood as producing space. Veiled women move through secular spaces in ways that permeate and transform them, as their presence reconfigures the boundaries between the religious and the secular. In this process, a “woman’s bodily space is marked as specifically Muslim and sacred, even in public spaces” (Siraj 2011:720).

However, while the hijab enables women to affirm their religious practice, it is also frequently seen as restricting their mobility and freedom in public life (Dwyer 1999; Najib and Hopkins 2019; Siraj 2011). Biased attributions to the veil by non-Muslim observers often deprive women of their agency, framing them as passive subjects rather than recognising their active role in negotiating identity and belonging (Bilge 2010). The veil has been transformed into an overdetermined symbol of cultural difference, through which broader anxieties about gender, modernity, and national identity are projected (Dwyer 1999). Debates whether veiled women

should be tolerated or banned in public spaces thus illustrate deeper tensions surrounding religious visibility and autonomy.

Recent research has also sought to position veiled Muslim women within the political sphere, responding to popular framings that portray them as disengaged, submissive, and apolitical – women who allegedly adopt the views of their oppressors and are therefore unable to redefine the meaning of the veil (Bilge 2010; Finlay and Hopkins 2019). This body of work challenges such assumptions by recognising Muslim women’s agency not only as religious subjects but also as active citizens within secular societies. Positioned in marginal and often precarious spaces, they experience multiple forms of discrimination rooted in the intersections of gender, race, religion, and class. Through the feminist reconceptualization of what counts as political, Muslim women’s participation in public and political life has been reclaimed (Bilge 2010; Finlay and Hopkins 2019). Gendered Islamophobia, socio-economic status, and the political geographies of the specific context are central in shaping both political identities and forms of participation. The particular dynamics relevant to this thesis will therefore be discussed in greater depth in chapter 5.

While research on religion and space has expanded significantly since the 1990s (Burchardt and Giorda 2021), important gaps remain. Scholars have highlighted the need to better understand what it means to be Muslim in specific European contexts, and how Muslim populations are positioned within them (Behloul 2016; Dwyer 2015; Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020; Öcal 2022). A substantial body of work has centred Muslim women and their negotiations of space, emphasising religion as a mobile and adaptive phenomenon, particularly within immigrant communities (Bhimji 2009; Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Jenner 2024; Woods 2020). Experiences of in- and exclusion occur both within and outside religious spaces, and the extent of exclusionary practices depends on national traditions, such as different strands of Islam practicing different understandings of including women in their joint prayers (Dehbi 2023; Jenner 2024).

A relational understanding of space further enables analysis of place-making practices of Muslim women, through which they produce belonging and forms of authority across formal and informal contexts (Gökarıksel 2012; Jenner 2024; Speelman 2017). This perspective further underscores the permeability between public and private spheres, challenging their traditional separation. Feminist approaches challenge the collapse of gender and religion into a

homogeneous identity rooted in bias, making visible diverse and situated forms of agency that emerge from women's lived religious and spatial practice (Bilge 2010; Cooke 2007; Dwyer 1999).

By situating these embodied and personal narratives within broader political and spatial contexts, my work contributes to the study of religion and space while offering new insights into how Muslim women navigate, contest, and reshape the boundaries of belonging in contemporary Switzerland. The configuration of agency, or the presumed lack thereof, ties back to the feminist frameworks discussed in chapter 2.1. Across these studies, context emerges as central: the negotiations of space and religious practice are deeply shaped by the socio-political environment (Bilge 2010; Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020). This emphasis on situated experiences resonates with my thesis, which examines the embodied, personal dimensions of Muslim women's lives in Switzerland. Building on this research, my work contributes by centring personal narratives and the lived politics of everyday life, showing how individual experiences are inextricably tied to broader political structuralities and state dynamics. Rather than approaching Islam as a uniform belief system, my analysis recognises the constellation of practices and ideals that vary across individuals and communities. These experiences are inherently complex and often contradictory, marked simultaneously by subordination and opportunity, mobility and immobility, security and insecurity. By recognising informal and everyday spaces as sites of political expression and place-making, my work highlights how Muslim women actively cultivate belonging and collective identity, using these practices to contest and reconfigure the exclusionary structures that shape their social and spatial realities.

4. Methodology

After setting up the theoretical framework of my thesis, I continue here with the methodology. My thesis is grounded in feminist geography, and I commence by describing my research approach within the feminist methodology. After, I present the selected method and data collection, as well as the analysis of my data. Finally, I address my positionality and possible limitations from this methodology.

4.1 Research approach

The critical examination of power in the production of knowledge itself is central to feminist methodologies and rejects claims of neutrality by acknowledging that no research is ever entirely value-free (Calkin and Freeman 2020; Storey 2020). The assumed neutrality of the ‘gaze from nowhere’ falsely grants authority to observe and define others while escaping its own representation, subsequently discarding difference and diversity (Amoore 2020; Haraway 1988). This methodological lens also encourages multi-scalar analysis, tracing how global and state processes manifest at the scale of the body and how politics are experienced in everyday life (Moss 2002). By foregrounding diverse perspectives, such as gender or religion, feminist geography provides the framework for understanding the complex ways in which knowledge, power, and experience are mutually constituted, offering the conceptual and methodological foundation for this thesis’ focus on the everyday experiences and agency of Muslim women.

Within the methodology of feminist geography, the actor-centred approach was the most important aspect to me. The approach focuses on the perspectives, motivations and especially the agency of individuals involved in a particular context, be that social, cultural or political. Rather than analysing a social phenomenon solely from a structural or systemic perspective, the individuals are understood as actors that actively respond to and shape their environments (Fluri 2015; Hopkins 2018). Furthermore, research participants are regarded as experts in their field, because they have invaluable information about their lives and perspectives as “living, moving, breathing archives”, providing alternative narratives to institutional hegemonies (Ramírez and Rios 2022:300). Within feminist epistemology, I am interested not only in hearing women’s voices, but also in the ways that gender and the way it is constructed in social relation affects lives and choices (Cislaghi and Heise 2020; Cope 2002).

As I discussed in the chapter on feminist geography, one’s positionality influences all aspects of research, including the approach one takes to it and shaping expectations of the field (Breuer

2009; Koefoed and Simonsen 2022). Scientific investigation is always entangled in the subject it studies, and producing knowledge outside the “doctrines of objectivity” requires situating it (Haraway 1988:578, Calkin & Freeman 2020). Reflections on the positionality help understand and analyse the relationship of power between researcher and research participant and serve as a tool to mark scientific knowledge as situated and constructed (Gilliéron, Hilscher, and Racleş 2025). The intersectional analysis can be extended from the research object to myself as a researcher, as it helps to understand the limitations in my own understanding of others and can thus provide fertile ground for knowledge (Davis and Lutz 2023; Gilliéron et al. 2025). This will be discussed in my positionality.

High involvement of the affected people has been a priority throughout the work on this thesis. It was important to me to hear the narratives of the Muslimas, rather than add to the stream of discourse about them. To address the research question, I employ qualitative methods that prioritise openness and responsiveness to participants’ perspectives. Openness and comprehensive interpretation are undisputedly central characteristics of qualitative research (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022). Building on the work on intersectionality and broader feminist theory, I draw connections between larger social structures and the individual life. Working on a small scale preserves and enables individual dignity, while the indignities imposed on the collective are made visible (Ramírez and Rios 2022). The individual narratives allow to highlight the diversity of voices and lives that Muslim women in Switzerland lead. To adequately grasp the lived reality, the experiences as the person lived them is of greater importance than describing it from a theoretical standpoint (Bevan 2014). Because of this, from the beginning I was very transparent with my work. It was important to me that the interviewees would feel comfortable and that they understood that their accounts were the central part of my work.

4.2 Methods

The empirical research consists of semi- to un-structured interviews. Unlike in a standardised survey or structured interview, neither questions nor answers were preformulated, evading dictating the frame of reference (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022). This approach is warranted because it resists imposing rigid categories, instead engaging participants as co-producers of knowledge (Fluri 2015). This foregrounds the partial, situated nature of understanding and knowledge (Haraway 1988). The unstructured nature enabled participants to shape the direction of inquiry in ways that may exceed or even challenge my initial framing beyond my personal

interests and prior knowledge (Ramírez and Rios 2022). However, completely unstructured interviews are a theoretical construct, the uncritical assumption of which paints an inaccurate picture, since even very free interviews are still oriented towards the phenomenon under investigation (Bevan 2014).

Central to this is critical self-reflexivity and positionality, which challenge assumptions of research objectivity and acknowledge the mutual constitution of researcher and participant. Such approaches reject rigid subject-object binaries, recognising that knowledge emerges through interaction and can be shaped by connections or differences in identity between researcher and participants (Fluri 2015). My approach to the field is shaped by my position as an outsider with limited prior knowledge (see chapter 4.3), which made me reliant on the insights and guidance of inside voices. The participants in my research are not only actors when it comes to the management of their lives but also inform the direction and focus of my work. I began fieldwork with preliminary conversations with contacts within. These served two purposes: first, as I said, I wanted to collect pointers on topics for my interviews and talked with the family of a close friend about the main concerns that Muslims in Switzerland face today. Second, I strived to avoid reproducing prevailing structures or biases within my research and sought advice from researchers that worked with Islam in Switzerland on how to approach the field as an outsider.

Especially in earlier interviews, the content was kept deliberately open. However, some structuration occurred naturally, as I informed my partners of the goal of the interviews (see appendix) and prepared possible topics to talk about. Although these orientational topic points were not meant as fixed points, as in a structured interview, I used them as a guide in many interviews when the conversation paused. Additionally, they served as an orientation to help connect the narratives between the people. Nevertheless, the conversations were largely unstructured, and I encouraged the interviewees to talk freely, even if they could not see any geographical relevance in their topics. Over time, I adopted some terminology of my research participants in order to provide a translation from the theoretical framework to their everyday life (Bevan 2014). I also explored some points that had been raised in previous interviews, which structured the interviews at later stages more than the initial ones.

With the informed consent form (see appendix 9.3) the study goal and research question were explained fully to the participants in advance, and further clarification of geographical concepts

were given when requested. I maintained anonymity as much as possible between interviewees, however, some had informed each other of their participation or actively referenced acquaintances during the conversations. Two interviews were conducted as a walking interviews, where the participants took me along on a walk through spaces they considered important to their religious life (Mason et al. 2023). In walking interviews, more aspects such as the chosen route or the behaviour in different contexts can be considered, and especially in my research on different spaces, the visit of those enabled a more spatial understanding of what my participants told me (Evans and Jones 2011). The two participants agreed on the format of a walking interview beforehand. They were not recorded, and I took fieldnotes directly after.

4.2.1 Access to the field

I started the recruitment process in the middle of February 2025. Initially, I contacted potential interview partners through personal contacts and through websites of official groups. The start of Ramadan on the 1st of March influenced the recruitment both positively and negatively. On one hand, it is a time in Islam for gathering, contacting peers and holding events in the communities, on the other hand, it meant less free time to spend in interviews. In the beginning, I had expected a more diverse group of participants in regard to age and education, but because of Ramadan, the official organisations declined my requests to meet in that month. With the method of the snowballing sampling technique, I asked my initial interviewees for other possible participants. While emphasising the voluntary referral and participation, I explicitly stated I was also interested in women above 30, but most still referred me to their peers. Additionally, I attended official events at university, where I could present my call for participants to the attendees in an informal manner. Within the context of the interviews, I was also taken along to three iftar (fast break) events, where I was able to recruit further interviewees. Furthermore, I drafted a call for participants, which was distributed in several group chats, and participants also responded to this. Recruitment requirements regarding their religiosity were kept open on purpose to enable a diverse pool of interviewees. In the beginning, I only met with women, but towards the end, I decided to meet with a man for an alternative perspective on topics I had discussed before. He was recruited through the call in a group chat.

I continuously emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and made it possible through repeating the option for them to withdraw their consent at any stage. Through the nature of my recruitment process, overlap in connections and acquaintances was inevitable, and I sometimes

struggled in my interviews with the degree of anonymity I could guarantee between conversations, especially when referring to points of other conversations.

The interviews were conducted in Swiss German and English. I audio recorded when possible and fully transcribed the interviews to enable later textual analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:42). The majority of the interviews was conducted in Cafés on the university campus, with me conforming to their preferred area, and one interview took place at the home of a participant. However, several interview partners underwent longer distances to talk with me, emphasising their interest in my thesis. Where not agreed previously, I discussed with them the location of the interview at our meeting point, as Cafés are public spaces where others could listen in. In two instances, we moved to a more private location at the request of the participants. To protect the confidentiality of my interview partners, pseudonyms are used.

Over the course of my fieldwork I talked to 12 interview partners, out of which one identified as a man and the other 11 as women. The age ranged from 20 to 35, with the majority in the early twenties. As I relied on personal connections to encounter the research participants, this skewing towards young students was to be expected, as well as some overlap in their social circles. All interview partners either have or are in pursuit of a tertiary education. They come from varying backgrounds. The shortest time spent in Switzerland at the point of our interview was six months, by an international student pursuing her master's degree. Another participant had moved here as an adult, while the rest was either born in Switzerland or immigrated at a young age (up to 12 years old) with their parents. The thesis takes place in Zurich and the surrounding German-speaking part of Switzerland. All study participants had this region as their focal point at the point of the interviews, regardless of the language that they speak. Their relationship to Islam is just as diverse and has been called conversion, reconversion or simply as having always existed. An overview of the interview partners is provided in the appendix.

4.2.2 Data Analysis

For my analysis, I used a qualitative content analysis with its core phases of forming categories, coding the data and then analysing the coded data. Qualitative content analysis goes beyond purely descriptive approaches and enables the discovery of underlying connections within the material. At its core lies the systematic approach to interpreting material by assigning the content to the categories of a category system. With inductive coding, categories are first

uncovered and then further developed and refined as the analysis progresses. I combined topic-oriented and case-oriented approaches to structure my data and analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022). I conducted my data analysis in MAXQDA 24 (Version 24.9.0), a software that facilitates coding in textual documents and transcripts with a license of the University of Zurich.

The categories were developed through an explorative approach, aimed at identifying common themes across participants' accounts. Rather than imposing predefined structures, I developed categories inductively from the data, putting attention on the new angles participants bring forward. With the aim of this thesis being the alternative perspective; one that challenges and rebalances the portrayals that have so far dominated media representations and prior research, using existing codes was not a favourable mean. I began with thematic categories, applying descriptive codes to the material in segments in order to gain an initial overview. Through hermeneutic iteration, they were grouped and summarised, further refining them into more analytic categories, which enabled deeper engagement with the data. Drawing on intersectionality as an analytical tool, I traced individual biographies to examine how different dimensions of inequality developed over time and how they intersected (Gilliéron et al. 2025). The development of ordering categories to identify overarching topics and narrative arcs structured the content, and in the final step I worked closely with the material, focusing on the development of case examples (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022).

Qualitative content analysis refers to the systematic and methodologically controlled analysis of texts, images, films, and other forms of communication, encompassing both manifest content and the latent meanings embedded within it. In the walking interviews, I captured more than spoken words by actively attending to places, events, and embodied experiences, however, I ultimately transcribed the material into text for analysis. The text analysis and coding remain inseparable from human comprehension and interpretation and are thus shaped by the researcher (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022).

4.3 Positionality

Recognising the influence of one's standpoint is twofold: it involves not only acknowledging the special position of insiders as experts but also reflecting on my own role as a student in this relationship, being taught, guided and required to continually rethink assumptions.

I am a White woman and grew up mostly secular, but in a Christian context in Zurich, Switzerland. My family celebrated the official holidays but has always been critical of religion.

I adopted these views and still do not fully understand the motivation to be religious, independently of which religion. My personal contact to Islam came later through a friend in high school, with whom I discussed diverse topics regarding her religion, religiosity and growing up in a society that positioned itself as secular yet remains embedded in Christianity (Burchardt and Giorda 2021). Those discussions influenced my perception of religious people, and they also showed me how small my knowledge of Islam was. With this, I encountered the dissonance what I was being told through media and public opinion versus the life my friend lived and the experiences she made because of this.

I am shaped by the structures that marginalises the lives of my interviewees and felt apprehensive that I would unwittingly reproduce those very structures in my interviews and later in my analysis. Muslim people in Switzerland are often collapsed to a collective religious identity, with little acknowledgement of the more complex and multifaceted identities they hold. At the same time, this very reduction and their religious identity draw my interest as a researcher, creating a certain dissonance in my position. For this reason I chose an actor-centred approach (discussed in chapter 4.2.1), which minimizes decisions solely made by me and instead allows for greater guidance from the field.

My outsider position also served as an advantage. It enabled interview partners to outline their own position in a framing of their choosing and through the explanation of the different procedures involved in their religious life provoked a reflection of those, which sometimes ended in a critical analysis of their own habits. When it comes to interviews, assumptions are made by both participants and organiser (Koefoed and Simonsen 2022). I was transparent about my research aims, which included not only providing participants with an opportunity to voice their experiences but also critically examining existing structures. The limited scope of publication offered an additional layer of security. Nevertheless, I experienced my conversations with the interview partners as a welcome outlet for them, regardless of the eventual outcomes (Bevan 2014). With the framing of my research and approach, they perceive me as sympathetic to their situation, which further facilitated sharing information (Yip 2024).

Other important aspects of my positionality are my gender and age, as well as my status as a student. With my interviewees, it helped that I am a young student like them, as we were able to bond over life at university and the semester workload. Furthermore, me being a woman helped them touch on more intimate aspects of their lives as women themselves (Yip 2024).

Sometimes, we lost the setting of the interview and ventured over into friends-like conversation, enabling us to cover topics that they would otherwise not have felt appropriate to talk about in an official interview. At the same time, there were things they felt comfortable telling me as a person, but not on the record. This off-the-record information shaped my understanding and perspective on the topic, but I sought to avoid using it directly as data for analysis.

With the trust placed in me comes the responsibility to handle the information and trust with the appropriate care (Speelman 2017). I remain critical of religion per se, but this makes the experiences and lives not less real, and the recognition of them no less important. Additionally, the recognition of my viewpoint and linked beliefs makes it possible to ‘split’: to encompass and interrogate contradictory positions, recognising the heterogenous multiplicities in life (Haraway 1988). Through experience and being told by my interviewees, I learned that asking is almost always preferred over retreating to your own assumptions. I kept a research diary and noted reflections accompanying the interviews and other stages continuously, which further helped me to remain aware of my influence on the research process, to trace the development of my perspectives and to engage more critically with both the material and my own assumptions. I learned not to only see differences, but also parallels, and to understand diversity more personally.

“It sometimes feels like this one fantasy novel I read as a child, where multiple worlds overlap, and only a few are able to cut the veil between the worlds to travel through. They live in the same city as I do, some even grew up here, and yet we do not encounter. It took my thesis to prompt this meeting, and it allows me this glance, sometimes even a prolonged view into those parallel lives, sometimes so similar but with those clear distinctions that separate our lives from each other. This eerie parallel feeling struck most clearly with my last interviewee, who also grew up in this city and with whom I shared not only places but also certain ideas and notions that made us so *from here*. We could have met before, but we didn’t” (research diary, 07.04.25)

4.4 Limitations

To conclude the chapter on methodology, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of my research. While the small scale focus enables in-depth analysis and allows for the incorporation of heterogeneity, it also limits the generalisability of the findings. Nonetheless, the results remain transferable when mindfully situated in other contexts.

As for the method of interviews, the data are inevitably shaped by what participants were willing and able to share with me. My position as an outsider also meant that I did not always know when to probe further, while keeping the interviews unstructured occasionally led to digressions and meandering away from the central themes. Moreover, some of the concepts I employed, such as place-making or the relational understanding of space, were unfamiliar to participants, which complicated their engagement with these ideas. However, I explained where I felt it was necessary and as I noted before, the variability of topics was also a desired effect.

The scope of participants also represents a limitation. My access to the field primarily came through one entry point, resulting in a concentration of young students. On one hand, this narrowed the range of perspectives represented, on the other hand it allowed me to grasp and display the heterogeneity within this group, shaped by individual backgrounds and characters equally.

Finally, the analysis itself carries limits. Qualitative content analysis, although systematic, is always shaped by the researcher's interpretive decisions (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022). Nuances and contradictions may be lost in the process of coding and categorisation, and the findings remain inevitably subjective to some degree. Yet this recognition also carries strength: as feminist scholarship emphasises, situated knowledge does not lose its validity or claim to truth – though partial, it is no less so than any other form of knowledge (Haraway 1988).

5. Situating Islam in Switzerland

To situate this thesis more explicitly in the Swiss political context, this chapter provides an overview of Islam in Switzerland and its place within the political landscape (Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Vásquez and Knott 2014). In Switzerland, Islam is predominantly a religion of immigrants, with a vast diversity in both spatial distribution and religious expression. It makes up only part of the religious landscape, which has undergone several changes over the years (Audergon and Müller 2025; Baumann 2009; Bundesamt für Statistik 2025). The discourse surrounding Islam in Switzerland is marked by homogenisation and generalisation, presenting ‘the Muslims’ as a uniform group. This tendency is apparent in the different political initiatives aimed to restrict Muslim life in Switzerland (Allenbach and Sökefeld 2010; Haenni and Lathion 2011). Several studies have examined the representation of Muslims in the Swiss media, highlighting further the objectification of the Muslim subject and the negative tonality (Ettinger 2018; Trucco 2021). Underlying it all is the notion of public space in Switzerland as allegedly neutral, which is disrupted by the visibility of religious symbols that open debates on belonging, identity and the place of Islam in Swiss society.

The immigration of Islam in Switzerland began in the 1960s and initially accompanied waves of labour migration. Later, it shifted more towards waves of refugee movements from different Islamic regions (Allenbach and Sökefeld 2010). Through bilateral agreements and in response to labour shortages, Switzerland welcomed the first wave of mostly young male workers from the former Yugoslavia and Turkey as temporary residents. However, subsequent family reunifications and the later predominance of refugee migration rendered Islam a more permanent presence in Switzerland (Stegman 2020). With these demographic and structural changes, the desire for official representation at different levels grew, driven by a need to have their religious rights heard. As the regulation of religion in Switzerland takes place at the cantonal level, this prompted Muslims to establish cantonal umbrella organisations to exercise their democratic rights, in which complex cooperation between Muslims of different currents and traditions was required. This also had the effect of weakening the influence of the states of origin on Muslim communities, which is unique in the European context (Banfi 2025). The Zurich cantonal umbrella organisation VIOZ (Vereinigung der Islamischen Organisationen von Zürich) is the oldest of its kind, and roughly one quarter of all Muslims in Switzerland live in the canton of Zurich (Tunger-Zanetti 2021).

While the first immigrants largely came from the Balkan states and Turkey, later migration waves increasingly included people from the Maghreb. These differing origins are reflected not only in the various schools of faith and modes in which Islam is lived in their everyday lives. Some of this heterogeneity is also evident in the spatial distribution of Muslims across the linguistic regions of Switzerland. While up to 97% have a migration background, over a third are Swiss citizens (Roth and Müller 2020). In the German-speaking part, Muslims with ties to the Balkan region make up the majority while in the French-speaking part the nationalities derive more from the Maghreb region (Allenbach 2010).

Switzerland's religious landscape has transformed profoundly over recent decades, marked by both increasing diversity of faith traditions and declining religiosity overall. In 1970, almost 98% of the population belonged, at least on paper, to Christian churches or communities, but by 2025, this share had fallen to about 55%, while other religions progressed in their numbers (Baumann 2009; Bundesamt für Statistik 2025). Today, Christianity remains the dominant religion, followed, with a considerable gap, by Islam, whose numbers reside at around 6%. At the same time, nearly 36% of Swiss residents now identify with no religion (Audergon and Müller 2025). Nevertheless, the increasing numbers of Muslims in Switzerland are a regular topic in political debates, while other faith traditions receive comparatively little attention (Trucco et al. 2025).

In Switzerland, the principle of *laïcité* frames religion as a private matter that should remain separate from the public sphere. This strict separation seeks to preserve a supposedly neutral public space, yet it overlooks how space is socially and historically constructed, filled with social norms, symbols, and competing claims of belonging (Baumann 2009; Massey 2005) (see chapter 2.1). Churches and their towers remain integral to the Swiss landscape and are just as much a part of the classic image of a Swiss city as newer commercial buildings. However, with the diversifying evolution of the religious landscape the hegemony of Christian symbols is increasingly contested, and the perceived neutrality criticised (Baumann 2009). The Ahmadiyya mosque in Zurich, with its minaret overshadowed by a nearby Protestant church, exemplifies this paradox of visibility and selective representation (Allenbach and Sökefeld 2010). It is within this tension between perceived neutrality and growing pluralism that political initiatives to regulate Islamic visibility have emerged.

The structural discrimination in Switzerland is further enabled due to its system of direct democracy (Lindemann 2021). The three major political initiatives targeting Islam are the 2009 minaret ban, the 2014 mass immigration initiative, and the 2021 veil ban. The 2009 initiative to prohibit the construction of new minarets marked a turning point of Islam being instrumentalised by politicians. Minarets were framed as symbols of political power and a threat to Swiss democracy, and the debate employed the narrative of the ‘clash of cultures’ (Antonsich and Jones 2010; Baumann 2009; Trucco et al. 2025). The initiative passed with an exceptionally high participation percentage, however, “this decision has since generated widespread criticism, with various politicians, human rights associations, and international organisations (notably the United Nations and the Council of Europe) openly criticising the initiative and opposing its implementation” (Antonsich & Jones 2010:57).

The 2014 initiative against mass immigration did not explicitly target Muslims, but it played with ideologies of ‘the other’, reinforcing exclusionary notions of national identity, and the protection of ‘Swiss culture’ (Boulila 2019). The next culmination in national politics was the 2021 ban on veiling. Officially justified by security concerns, the campaign centred almost exclusively on Muslim women, and the dubbing as ‘burqa ban’ evidently framed the initiative in a religious context. Feminist actors were opportunely drawn into the debate, where they were confronted with the argument of the oppressed woman. By directly contrasting the rights of migrants with the rights of women, the two are suggested as incompatible, effectively marginalising the existence of migrant women and others and making the veil a contested topic among different strands of feminism (Bilge 2010; Sancar 2010). The ban came into force on the 1st of January 2025, reopening public discourse on the topic (Fargahi 2024).

Political and media discourses often reproduce simplified imaginaries of ‘the Islam’, collapsing a diverse population into a single category of ‘the Other’ with attributions of being ‘backwards’, positioning it against the ‘modernity’ of Switzerland (Allenbach and Sökefeld 2010; Baumann 2009; Boulila 2019; Trucco 2021). This framing denies individuality and positions religion as the primary marker of identity, disproportionately affecting women, both through their portrayal as presumed victims of oppressive structures and, particularly in relation to the hijab, as bearers of the most visible markers (Aidenberger and Doehne 2021; Bilge 2010; Lindemann 2021). Marginalising structures of Muslim institutions further affect Muslim women (Dehbi 2023), but cannot be addressed sufficiently in this framework.

As public opinion is informed and influenced by media, studies in Switzerland have concerned themselves with its representation of Muslims, both providing an overview over the years as well as an analysis of positions (Ettinger 2018; Trucco 2021). Political initiatives and motions enable political actors to keep the topic salient and on the agenda of the wider public (Trucco et al. 2025). Research in political and communication science consistently highlights the objectification of Muslim subjects, who are rarely invited to speak as autonomous actors. When they do appear, it is most likely within a polarised setting or as already known controversial figures to engage provocative thought (Ettinger 2018). Furthermore, media coverage tends to increasingly associate Islam with specific, negatively connoted themes. The visibility of religious symbols and the radicalisation and the threat of terrorism were the two domineering topics at the time of the study. Coverage on the latter increased from 37% in 2014 up to 54% in 2017, meaning that more than half of the reports about Muslims linked them to security concerns (Ettinger 2018). Consequently, media depictions of Islam remain largely negative, offering few counter-narratives.

The discourse on Islam in Switzerland is further characterised by the broader societal tendency to view hostility towards Muslims as a legitimate response to immigration and social change, rather than as a form of racial discrimination (Boulila 2019). This legitimisation of bias is enabled through anti-racism and anti-racist discourses obscuring the historical and structural history of racism by redefining it as an individual ideology rather than a systemic disadvantage (Boulila 2019). This shift depoliticises racism, portraying it as irrational behaviour of the individual, allowing the state to distance itself from it while maintaining existing hierarchies. The narrow definition of racism employed by the Swiss Federal Commission against Racism, for example, ultimately frames the naming of racism as excessive, normalising racial hierarchies that marginalise Muslim identities (Boulila 2019). Combined with the aforementioned homogenisation and alienation of Islam, these mechanisms render the political context dangerously uncritical of the ordained marginalisation.

Together, the discussed factors constitute the contemporary Muslim landscape in Switzerland. They reveal two broader dynamics. First is the persistent tendency to speak about Muslims rather than with them, presuming authority over their experiences and stripping them of agency. This not only obscures internal diversity but also legitimises bias within public debate, forming systems of power that shape knowledge and justify inequality (Nagel 2005). The homogenisation of 'the Islam' renders individual trajectories circumstantial and marginalises

them as political actors. Second is the notion of public space and its alleged neutrality as a projection of the conceived secularity of the Swiss state. The visibility of religious symbols disrupts the supposed secularity of Swiss public life, revealing that neutrality itself is socially constructed. Multi-religious places can either generate tension and contestation or foster coexistence, depending on the social conditions that shape them (Burchardt and Giorda 2021). This contextual overview forms the foundation and motivation for this thesis. The lived and institutional marginalisation of Muslim women does not reflect their identities or everyday realities. By situating these dynamics within their political and spatial contexts, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Muslim women actively navigate, contest, and reshape the conditions of their belonging in Switzerland.

6. Discussion

In the following, the results of the interviews, evaluated through qualitative content analysis, are presented. The chapter aims to shed light on the participants' individual and diverse perceptions and perspectives. In relation to the central research question, the discussion focuses particularly on four key aspects: experiences of intersectional discrimination, expressions of agency, the production of places and the articulation of belonging. These run through the various parts and inform the different parts of analysis. In the previous chapter, I outlined the current political and social context in Switzerland. This context profoundly shapes how Muslim women navigate the world around them. Building on this, the following analysis explores how the participants experience and negotiate politics within their personal lives. Specifically, it examines when and how religion becomes a primary factor in social interaction and how participants actively engage with and respond to their broader context.

The second section turns to internal structure within the Muslim organisational landscape and discusses how the mosque, as an institution, provides varying meanings and possibilities of engagement for Muslim women. The mosque often emerges as a relational and liminal space, one that can simultaneously enable and constrain belonging. From there, the discussion moves to the notion of community. This concept is treated as an open empirical question as it cannot be defined conclusively and will be discussed according to the different expectations and experiences tied to it by participants. Community can serve as a network of support and trust with its own place-making practices. However, sentiments of belonging depend on the practices of in- and exclusion used to affirm the collective identity.

Finally, the chapter addresses the participants' biographical trajectories in their anticipation of the future. Through these narratives, I explore the various navigational practices that emerge between religious and secular spheres, highlighting where and how Muslim women create space for their religion in their daily lives.

An overview over the research participants in my fieldwork is provided in the Appendix. The key details of the participants are listed here, together with their most prevalent topic points. The interviews will be discussed in both similarities and differences. Quotes from interviews in German are translated by me and are kept as close to the mode of expression in the original language as possible.

6.1 Lived realities

The everyday life of Muslimas in Switzerland is influenced in multiple ways by their religion. Their experiences illustrate the specific context in which they navigate daily situations as members of a minority within a secular society. A recurring theme in the interviews is the perpetual existence of bias and prejudice, which continues to influence social interactions, forming an ongoing reality for Muslim women, not so subtly permeating their daily lives (Lindemann 2021). The Muslimas are very aware of the public climate and regularly engage with it, monitoring changes to track shifts in the landscape that constitutes their everyday. These experiences are so embedded in their routines that they were often mentioned only indirectly, yet emerged consistently in every conversation, constituting the lived realities of Muslim women in Switzerland. In the concept of motion squared, the tracking of ones surroundings constitutes a central point of social navigation (Vigh 2009).

In this first section I look at where and how Muslim women encounter their religion as the primary factor for interaction, be those positive, negative or neutral. It ties the political and public sphere into the personal lives and makes visible how the different scales interact as the political context discussed in the previous chapter is encountered in the everyday (Moss 2002).

Early on in their lives, Muslim women are taught that they are a minority and different, and that certain standpoints warranted discussions for others. The intensity of the experiences of exclusion differs between the interviewees. For example, Mina reports experiences of her time in high school as sometimes outright hostile, where peers justified their actions with their own conservative family upbringing. These marginalising practices reduced her expression of identity:

“I never used words like Mashallah and Inshallah and so on, and the others just used them for fun, and I never really knew whether I should laugh along, join in, not join in, and then they would say ‘oh yes the Muslima’. And there were quite a few who were a bit right-wing and a bit racist. And then I just didn’t dare to live it [her religion] out like that” (Mina)

Interactions of prejudice can also happen in less ostentatious ways, and Yara points out how the less confrontative approach still registers to her. In her account, she voices the sense of always being watched, always being held to standards. These passive ministrations rob her of the chance to contest and challenge presumptions:

“But in Zurich, I feel like the racism comes from ignorance [...] It just feels like the people have a lot of stereotypes in Zurich about Muslims [...] in Swiss German culture,

it's not really OK to like, discuss like personal things with other people or like to ask personal things. From what I've seen. Like so people never actually discuss the stereotypes they think so they never actually get rid of those stereotypes. Like, for example, I've been one year at this school. The school I'm at. And not once did anyone ask me anything about my religion. Not once did anyone ask me what my religion even was. Or like not. It's like they see the 'Kopftuch', but they don't want me to notice that they see it» (Yara)

The interview was held in English, and her deliberate switch into German underlines her awareness of the connotations that are tied to the term, and how they are projected onto her person. Farah on the other hand recounts that she never had such experiences and offers the possible explanation that you wouldn't 'be able to tell just by looking at her'. These accounts exemplify the perception of the general public in which Islam is being denounced, noting the attributions to visible markers. They position themselves accordingly (Vigh 2009), and Yasmine recounts how, over the years, she has become more aware of those experiences as actually excluding practices and makes sure she is prepared for confrontations:

“And that's something where I increasingly feel that if I had grown up in Algeria, I would never have had these thoughts, because it's not an issue there at all. Here, you're confronted with it much more and you have to deal with it and come up with an answer, because otherwise you look stupid” (Yasmine)

As the political climate is monitored continuously by the Muslim women, changes are often noted and reflected upon with other Muslimas, engaging with a network structure to assess whether instances are personal or indicative of broader patterns. Such exchanges function as means of orientation within and judgement of the prevailing social climate, providing a basis for evaluating possible responses. They produce a place of reference and alternative belonging. Mina, who has otherwise a solitary approach to religion still takes to exchanging information about instances of hostility, and Yasmine's regular exchange with friends within ordinary conversation exemplifies the continuity that arises with it: the motion of the context they live in (Vigh 2009). Their exchanges also highlight the perception of larger scales such as national politics on the personal level, where patterns of discrimination become the lived realities, and international tendencies in the handling of migration also directly impact on the interviewees' personal lives:

“I realise it at the moment, I also think with all this stuff about foreigners being deported everywhere, I have the feeling that doesn’t do any good for the right wing, because they feel now it is like, yes. They feel like they can do anything” (Mina)

When the wider context increases in marginalising efforts, such alternative places offer the

For some, orientation towards other religions, especially the Christian majority, can serve to diminish the sense of difference and provide common experiences detached from the notion of Islam contrasting the secular. Aisha and Elif, for example, emphasise that they do not seek friendships exclusively with Muslims. For them, what matter are the shared values that religion instils, which has led both to form close relationships with non-Muslim friends as well.

“God makes everything the same normally. Humans change it a little, but religion is completely equal” (Elif).

The common ground lies in their religiosity itself rather than in a specific faith-tradition. Observing others, especially of the majority religion, who lead an openly religious lifestyle provides a sense of belonging and affirmation. Encountering people who embody values and practices similar to those she envisions for herself and openly displaying them forms a point of identification and contributes to establishing a place of identification in Switzerland. She recounts how the marriage of a fellow student in her age created connection for her:

“I rarely see people who aren’t Muslim living the way I understand it. And then I found out ‘ah okay he’s a Christian [...] It’s nice to see that there are others who also look European, look Swiss, and live that way. That gave me back a bit of, that feeling of connection” (Aisha)

By commenting on his looks, she touches upon the intersection of race and religion, where being perceived as Muslim becomes inseparable from being perceived as ‘foreign’ (Behloul 2016; Trucco et al. 2025). The bridging of faith traditions continues in other contexts where shared religiosity transcends denominational boundaries (Fabretti and Tateo 2025). The ‘quiet room’ at university provides such an interfaith space. Yara, who attended different universities throughout her career, remarks on the difference:

“But in [university], everyone uses the Raum der Stille, like there's people. Actually, I think it's quite cool, like while I'm praying like the Muslim way, there's people like praying the Christian way. There's people meditating. There's people just taking a nap. So it's very cool that it's really used by all faiths” (Yara)

Through these interactions, the boundaries between religious communities become porous, and shared practices of devotion or contemplation produce places in which difference is

acknowledged yet integrated into a broader experience of spiritual coexistence (Burchardt and Giorda 2021).

6.1.1 Lived politics

The mitigation of negative experience through embedding them in the bigger context and situating individual incidents within the broader climate allows the Muslim women to disconnect the aggression from their person. They actively provide contextualisation and attribute structural motives rather than personal motivation. This occurs with the awareness for Swiss and international politics that allows them to produce a map of and with their identity (Vásquez and Knott 2014). In the conversations about politics, their political awareness was also expressed in other ways, revealing a diversity of opinions and how deeply embedded the interviewees are in the Swiss political landscape. Their answers also challenged my assumptions: I had expected them to respond primarily in terms of Islam and politics, yet most initially spoke about fundamental aspects of Swiss politics, such as voting and consuming political information, positioning themselves first and foremost as Swiss citizens, inadvertently contesting the label of being apolitical (Bilge 2010; Lindemann 2021). Only when prompted with more specific questions did the conversation shift toward Islam-related politics.

In everyday life, aggressions on grounds of their religion are recognised as inevitable. Yasmine comments how everything is interlocked, and Islamic concerns cannot be separated from overarching politics. Farah is also attuned to such experiences and therefore withholds her religious affiliation in situation where it is not required to mention, actively negotiating her place in the interaction and reducing discriminatory experiences.:

“It’s always like that, even when I meet someone for the first time, it’s always a bit of a question where they stand. And you can’t really judge that, and maybe that’s why I don’t say I’m a Muslim at the beginning, because then I just don’t have the energy for people being against it or something” (Farah)

Many interview partners provide a contextualisation of their experiences by comparing it to situations in other countries that they experienced either on vacation or on trips to visit their family abroad:

“Of course, discrimination and exclusion also exist in Switzerland, especially in institutions, where it is subtle, but you know it’s just there. So, you know, people here

don't say it to your face as bluntly as they might in Germany or England, but it's still there" (Aisha)

The more nuanced and underlying discrimination proves difficult to directly interact with. It manifests in less obvious ways and is often observed as an increased scrutiny of them rather than direct interaction.

The intersectional understanding allows closer analysis of certain instances, such as in Mina's experiences as a red cross worker in the context of refugee centres:

"Very often, the headscarf is no longer discriminated [directly] but rather directly associated with refugee [...] people see me as a refugee, it's like there's this connection, headscarf, directly refugee. And it's just, it's like. You're immediately degraded, like a refugee, someone who can't speak German. [...] That's just how it is, you're immediately looked down on, automatically" (Mina)

The space in which these dynamics unfold highlights the inherent spatiality of intersectional mechanisms (Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018). The space of the refugee centre, for instance, is inscribed with specific attributes concerning expression of religiosity. It constitutes a relative space (Massey 2005) in which certain behaviours are expected of different groups, and where some identity markers lose significance while others gain salience. Through continuing her work, Mina challenges such generalising assumptions, producing a place containing a multiplicity of Muslim identities.

Both Mina and Aisha recount how the degree of diversity within a given setting shapes the form of marginalisation. In more heterogeneous contexts, where multiple forms of difference manifest, being Muslim becomes less salient and does not single them out in the same way: the presence of multiple social axes of difference can alleviate the weight of any single one.

"And then you just realised, okay, that you're a bit different again, like that. But it wasn't such a big deal, in secondary school it was already quite, how do you say, diverse" (Aisha)

Mina seeks this diversity in her selection of locations to study at, making her place by mitigating experiences of marginalisation in spaces where the aspect of her being Muslim becomes less salient. She commutes between from a more homogeneously White city to Zurich for her studies and observes clear differences between the two environments. Exercising agency over her body as a means of place-making, she adapts her outward appearance accordingly.

The participants expressed criticism of the political climate and debates in diverse ways. All were familiar with the initiative concerning the ban on veiling, but our conversations seldomly dived deeper into it. Their criticism targeted multiple actors, including feminist groups, whose involvement in religious matters was perceived as an overreach. Many do not feel recognised as legitimate participants in the political and social context that nonetheless directly concerns them. As Aisha notes:

“I find that ironic, because, you know. Are we being asked? Or is it just being decided?”

This points to a lack of recognition of her personal agency, as has been stated in research (Bilge 2010; Finlay and Hopkins 2019). She recounts an instance of her sister at work in which her male employer denied her the right to wear the headscarf, framing the decision as an act of benevolence despite her clear articulation of her own motivations. In doing so, he effectively denied her the freedom of choice. Aisha reflects on what she calls the helper syndrome of Swiss society, arguing against the perceived backwardness of Islam and exemplifying the othering dynamics discussed in chapter 5:

“we help them, they can then be freer” (Aisha)

Such paternalistic logics in the broader public discourse concentrate debates about Islam on Muslim women and their dress. For those affected, these debates are not abstract but acutely personal, shaping everyday life (Boulila 2019; Lindemann 2021).

The intersectional perspective highlights the difference between being positioned as a woman or as a Muslim woman. Expectations around dress make this particularly visible, the hijab especially working as a salient marker of ‘Muslimness’ and playing an important role in discrimination, racialisation and the reduction to an attributed foreign identity (Lindemann 2021). As Yara observed:

“As someone that wears the hijab, I'm always aware that I attract attention like I am not going to go unnoticed. That's not a privilege that I have. I can't be transparent or like I can't be anonymous” (Yara)

While women in general are subject to social norms, with feminist discussions also engaging with the freedom to dress how they want, Muslim women are seen as not free willed in dressing choices. The intersection between their gender and their religion produces a distinct set of expectations and constraints, raising the question of how being a Muslim modifies, amplifies or transforms the norms imposed on women’s bodies more broadly. Ultimately, the rhetoric of help reproduces stereotypes and strips Muslim women of their agency, thereby reaffirming the very power imbalances it claims to dismantle (Cooke 2007; Lindemann 2021).

At the same time, the Muslim women are approached as representatives of an undifferentiated mass, and the boundaries of what is considered private are redrawn or overstepped under the guise of inquiry:

“Because then you feel a bit forced to give up parts of your privacy for academic purposes. And you’d rather not do that, you’d rather not have to give anything up for nothing” (Yasmine)

A recurring theme in those accounts is the perception of ignorance. The discrepancy between the informed, often respectful engagement of their immediate social environment and the generalisations circulating in public discourse was raised by several participants. As Farah states:

“To be honest, it annoys me. I feel like a lot of people don’t know much about Islam. Or they don’t want to know much about Islam, and then they end up sprouting ignorant things in the media, and that really annoys me. Because I know that it’s not like that, and everyone around me knows that it’s not like that, but the vast majority of people apparently don’t” (Farah)

They separate interactions in their private lives from experiences with strangers who trespass into their private sphere, producing and maintaining their place of belonging with their social circle. This situated knowledge of everyday awareness and negotiation illustrate how the local and intimate tie into forms of agency, resistance and action (Amoore 2020). Religion also works relationally as a matter of people’s encounters, negotiations and intimate lives across the secular/religious divide. These encounters are undeniably shaped by dominant narratives of discrimination and exclusion, yet they also exceed them, producing complex forms of belonging and self-positioning.

6.1.2 Institutional impediments

Since the majority of the interview partners are currently students, their lives at university constitute a central sphere of experiences. As an institution, the university imposes its own set of rules and norms to which individuals adapt, and the experiences vary between institutions, where different forms of religiosity are tolerated by the authorities and recognised by the students body. For many, university represents a new beginning, marked by the transition from the rigid structures of school to a more autonomous environment. This shift requires navigation of new social landscapes: while the university offers opportunities to form friendships and

networks free of the structures of school, it simultaneously introduces unfamiliar restrictions and boundaries that must be recognised and negotiated (Vigh 2009).

With an association at university, Muslim students formed a social space especially for other Muslim students. While it belongs to the official structures, follows university regulations and norms, and benefits from official recognition, it operates largely independently, shaping its own activities and is free to design the space it wishes to provide. As such, it constitutes an invited space, where a place of religiosity is created within a secular academic context. The motivation lies in the provision of an alternative space with a common goal: sharing, experiencing and practicing their religion among likeminded people (Miraftab 2004).

A look inside the organisation reveals that space is also negotiated on this organisational scale. While the university provides the formal framework within which the association operates, the internal dynamics are shaped by the diverse expectations and positions of its members. As a student-led initiative, the association reflects the priorities of those currently active, rendering it a fluid and contingent structure.

Internal discussions about organisation and direction are deliberately contained within the group to maintain a coherent outward image and protect the collective from external scrutiny. This tension is particularly evident in Yara's account, which highlights the difficulty of addressing internal gendered issues in a climate of heightened public scrutiny:

“I'm usually not very comfortable to talk about this situation specifically with people that aren't Muslim. [...] because the association already receives so much hate, you know. And that is the problem. The problem with Muslims receiving hate, is that women really suffer from that. Why? Because we do have problems within our community, that need to be addressed like this Friday prayer situation. But I cannot talk about it. Why? Because everyone is already suffering so much from the Islamophobia and there's already the stereotype that Muslim men are monsters, and they beat their wives, and they, they beat up their sisters, and they force them to wear their hijab and everything, you know. So, if I were to come and say that I lived something sexist in the student Muslim community. Then what is going to happen? People are going to be like you see, this is exactly why [...] Blah blah blah, I mean, there's already been articles” (Yara)

Her reflection illustrates the precarious position of both the association itself to remain recognised by the university and of Muslim women who navigate the dual burden of confronting internal inequalities while simultaneously defending their community against

external misrepresentation. The awareness of this precarity shapes both the internal governance of the association and its members' strategies of self-presentation in the broader secular environment.

During the organisation of the fast-breaking events, the association encountered institutional limitations from the university for the first time some. Yasmine, as an organisational member, had to invest personal resources in dialogue to secure approval for the events. This came as a surprise to her, as she conceived their activities as a continuation of previous practices of the group. The experience altered the perception of the association's acceptance within the university, prompting Yasmine to adjust her approach. In negotiations with university representatives, she deliberately minimised explanations of Islamic practices, weighing the effort required (time, energy and potential contestation) against the anticipated outcome of event approval. She explains how the seasonal changes and frequency of religious events are often unintuitive to outsiders, and, in this instance, a full explanation would have necessitated delving into gender-specific rules. Anticipating that raising the issue could provoke a gender-focused debate, Yasmine chose to gloss over it. Here, Yasmine shows how she negotiates her place within the university context, navigating between visibility, legitimacy, and restraint. This moment also exemplifies how invented and invited spaces cannot be fully disentangled (Velásquez Atehortúa 2014). While the association operates as an invited space, legitimised by the institution, its practices can lean into the logic of the invented space, appropriating the formal structure to serve its own communal purposes and, at times, subtly contesting its implicit boundaries (Miraftab 2004). Through these adaptive practices, members engage in ongoing spatial negotiations that both reinterpret and redefine the parameters of belonging within the university context. Yasmine's adaptation to the change in contextual rules demonstrates also a personal agency: she navigates her own goals in this shifting landscape and reorients the perspective towards the future.

These examples show the expression of the underlying structural bias that informs interactions of structural representatives with Muslim women. As can be seen, Muslim women engage differently with it and develop, often in communities, strategies to adapt to those biases. Mina and Farah limited their expressions in certain contexts, pursuing a more inconspicuous path to avoid conflict situations. Aisha broadened her horizon of identification and was able to form a sense of belonging with religious expressions of others from other religions, while Yasmine actively navigated changing requirements and adapted her behaviour accordingly.

This chapter has traced how Muslim women experience and negotiate everyday life within the secular Swiss context, highlighting the ways in which public discourse, social interactions and institutional frameworks shape their agency and self-positioning. The most explicit counterpart to the secular public is the mosque as a distinct and explicit Muslim space. The following chapter will therefore turn to the significance of the mosque, examining how it is conceptualised, inhabited and given meaning in diverse ways.

6.2 Significance of the Mosque

In this chapter, I examine different notions of the mosque and its role in the lives of Muslim women. The mosque constitutes an explicitly sacred space in which community place-making is central and provides an alternative space of belonging in the secular context. Yet its significance is deeply personal and diverse. For some, the mosque represents a central point of orientation and belonging, while for others it plays only a marginal role in their life. These varying positions are closely tied to individual biographies and the specific experiences that shape each woman's relationship to the mosque. In what follows, I outline the main approaches to understanding the mosque as both a religious and social space.

The question of what a mosque represents for my interviewees elicited diverse responses and expanded the conventional understanding of the mosque as a straightforward Islamic equivalent to the church. In this thesis, I conceptualise the mosque relationally, following the multiplicity of forms in which I encountered it during fieldwork. The term mosque is a translation from the Arabic masjid, which derives from the verb 'sajada', denoting the act of prostration before God. In this sense, the mosque is not confined to a fixed building but is constituted through the practice of prayer itself, which transforms a given space into a place of worship and connection. Maha, who grew up in a Muslim majority context, illustrates this understanding:

“so wherever you can do that [prostrate before God], then it's a Masjid, you know, yeah, I guess this is my understanding of what a mosque is“.

For her, the mosque is not necessary as a physical spatial container, but rather a produced place of religiosity independent of formal premises. Yet Elif, who grew up in Turkey within a Muslim majority, emphasises a more literal interpretation persists:

“I practice my religion everywhere. We don't think that the mosque is very important to us”

Here, the mosque is a determinable space, be that a whole building or a room, where prayers are being held. Although she prays in different locations, that does not transform them into mosques. Nevertheless, both entertain a certain independency from the religious building, instead relying on their own production of religious place.

Muslim women who grew up primarily in Switzerland articulate a different perspective and rarely distinguished between explicit mosques as the prayer rooms and gatherings organised through Islamic organisation. The distinction is not natural to them, and the refusal of the dichotomy makes apparent how the feeling and meaning of the mosque tie into the practices of the people in it. For many of them, the mosque is associated above all with their Islamic education and with social gatherings. It serves as the religious space in their otherwise secular context. Maha, who lived in Switzerland and England for her studies after having grown up in Saudi Arabia reflects on this dynamic from her position as an outsider within:

“what I realized or what I noticed is that in the west, like the Muslim communities in the West participate in these prayers more and they do maybe go to the mosque more. [...] maybe it is the interpretation of the Muslim community here is different. I don't know, but I guess like people practice the religion in different ways, yeah” (Maha)

This conceptualisation of transferable sacred space was also evident in some of the events I attended. When the collective required a larger venue for special occasions, they temporally relocated their activities to a local community centre. Through decoration, organisation, and collective religious activities, the embodied practice of religion transformed this otherwise secular space into the place of the mosque.

“I rarely go to a mosque just because I feel like it. I go more often when there's an event, or when something is happening, such as an info event or an interesting topic, then I go” (Aisha)

They expanded the understanding of the mosque to a community centre with broader social and educational attachments, producing a place of and for their religion in which women actively participate (Jenner 2024; Vásquez and Knott 2014).

6.2.1 The mosque as a community centre

Among the group of interviewees, the degree to which the mosque has been naturalised as a fixture of religious life varies considerably. For some, it represents a familiar institutional setting integral to community life, for others, it remains a more peripheral space. Both Farah and Mina grew up with only little experience in the mosque. Farah's experience of religion was

initially shaped by her mother at home, with only limited participation in Islamic educational formats. They used the privacy at home to learn about their religion, and her mother relayed it on small instances over her life:

“Sometimes when we just sit on her bed and she’s doing something, or she just starts to tell us something and then we touch on religion and then she just explains stuff” (Farah)

For much of her childhood she did not engage deeply with religion, and although she always believed in God, she reflects that this alone did not feel sufficient to ‘make her Muslim’. Her visits to family in Morocco have inherently been marked by Islamic influence, yet the structures in the practice of the religion differ from Switzerland, and while it seems more intuitive to visit spaces of prayer in a country where that religion is more embedded in society, social norms prevented her. The intersection of her gender and religion obstruct the access.

"To be honest, I've never been to a mosque in Morocco [to visit], nor have I ever prayed in one. But I think it would be nice, I'd like to do it. But as a woman, it's a bit more difficult” (Farah)

Both instances relay how she and her mother produced their religious place on their own, while simultaneously expressing a desire to participate in more communal religious practices.

Mina’s account reflects similar aspects. She explains that for Pakistani, it is uncommon for women to attend mosques or communal prayer in general. As a child, she recalls only going occasionally to religious events with her family, where prayer was not part of the program and which her mother regularly criticised to be not sufficiently religiously motivated. Mina learned to associate prayer with the private sphere of the home. Her first experience of communal prayer occurred only later at university, and she visited a mosque with a friend for only a few times since. These experiences left her feeling out of place:

“I did everything wrong that you can do wrong” (Mina)

Nevertheless, the mosque represents a potential place of belonging for her, one she wishes to integrate more fully into her life, even if this runs counter to her family’s practice.

“When you go there to pray, to be part of the community, yes, then I think it’s nice [...] with Muslim friends from other countries, they don’t see that at all, they were so shocked that I had never been to a mosque before. Islam is really limited to my room. I do everything in my room for myself. [...] I could definitely go to the mosque more often” (Mina)

The development of prayer at home enabled her to create habits and practices on her own, forming her own approach to rituals. Nevertheless, the desire for communal practice is clear,

and the exchange with fellow young Muslim women enables her to situate this desire more explicitly (see also chapter 6.2.3).

Yasmine, Yara and Zeynep all have close ties to the mosque. To them, it serves as a place for community and a site where the collective practice materialises belonging. They grew up with the mosques and link many personal aspects to it. Language and religious tuition often took place in premises of a mosque or in spaces organisationally affiliated with them, making the mosque both a physical and symbolic anchor of socialisation.

“The mosque I grew up in Geneva, I would say would be my main community [...] I grew up with them, so obviously am attached to them, you know. [...] For example, in religious holidays, like, I go to my mosque in Geneva. Because it means a lot to me”
(Yara)

Through these spaces, they not only acquired religious and linguistic knowledge but also cultivated friendships and a place of communal identity, illustrating how spatial, educational, and affective dimensions of belonging intertwine in the production of Muslim place-making. At the time of the interviews, these three were actively engaged in some community activities, either through organising events themselves like Zeynep or Yara, or by participating in lectures at the mosque like Yasmine.

When the women use the mosque as an educational centre, trust in the source of religious knowledge becomes essential. Milica researches the formation of possible teachers when choosing which lectures to attend and holds religious authorities accountable for their positions. After reading an interview in which the imam of her previous mosque discussed his leisure activities in a way she found inappropriate, she reevaluated her opinion of him. She relies on rules of conduct that are as close as possible to the Quran and selects her religious leader also this way.

With continuous interaction, the mosque serves as a community centre in which people from different strands of life meet, form bonds and are able to keep tabs on each other. In the conversation with Yasmine, she conceptualised the mosque like a village square where people meet and care for one another. This metaphor captures the place within space, describing the relational essence of what produces the place of her community (Vásquez and Knott 2014). The aspect of the relational space is also apparent in other interviews, and Polina says:

“It’s where we pray, talk to God and usually socialise a lot. To meet a lot of people [...] And here in Switzerland it's also for me, a place, like if I see a mosque, whenever I see a mosque in a non-Muslim country, it’s a sign for me of acknowledgement. People know we exist. Yeah, it is a safe place, comfort place” (Polina)

However, beautiful and architecturally prominent mosques remain the exception in Switzerland. Most are situated within repurposed buildings or office complexes. This raises the question of what motivates women to frequent such spaces despite their inconspicuous or utilitarian character. Maha, for instance, expressed her reservations clearly:

“I did the research, and I saw that all of the mosques are essentially floors in a building, and I saw the pictures of the buildings, yeah, and I didn’t really like it. [...] It wouldn’t be a place I think I would feel comfortable in, you know. It just looked like a random building with a place, and I didn’t want it”

The significance of the mosque also changed through the lives of the Muslim women. For Aisha, it only started to become relevant in her adult life, as before it was always connected with a sense of obligation from her family:

“Only now have I started going to the mosque myself, or praying in a mosque, or simply meeting up in a mosque, stuff like that” (Aisha)

I had all my interviewees asked where they would be willing to take me on a walk through their Islamic life (see chapter 4.2). Zeynep was one of the two that took me up on it and showed me the place she considers most central to her Muslim identity. It was not a mosque, but a building housing an Islamic organisation explicitly connected to her national background. For her, it also carried a familial dimension, representing the main point of community to which she felt a strong sense of responsibility. The transnational character of this space is both expressed and enacted locally through its everyday practice: local attachment is produced through the collective maintenance of transnational identity (Behloul 2016; Öcal 2022; Sheringham 2010). In this building, the Masjid, clarified by Zeynep to refer specifically to the prayer room, is located in the basement, forming a separate yet integrated space.

However, Zeynep rarely attends prayer there. This is due to two main reasons. First, for her, her religion is less about ritual participation and more about her active involvement in the organisation; what she can do for and with the community. Second, the building itself holds less significance for her than what it represents. Zeynep underscores its communal dimension in practice and greets every person we meet during the interview but simultaneously remains aware of the supervising aspect of it. While she feels at ease in the building of her organisation,

my presence as an outsider is immediately registered by others, and Zeynep remarks how she noticed one of the men judging her close cut trousers she chose to wear that day instead of the baggy ones she normally wears. In this sense, the mosque as a physical site recedes in importance, while her sense of belonging and religious expression is realised primarily through communal and organisational work. She primarily works with other women and produces through her engagement places of inclusion within the organisation both for her and for others.

6.2.2 Accessibility of the mosque

The mosque constitutes a formalised space. Within the adapted conceptual framework of chapter 2.3.2, it can be understood as an invited space, one defined by norms, rules, and forms of legitimisation from above. This structure is dually at work in the mosque's position as both a recognised place of worship within the secular hegemony and, simultaneously, as an internationally acknowledged site of prayer and communal encounter within Islamic communities.

These intersecting layers of legitimacy are reflected in how the Muslim women in this thesis perceive and navigate such spaces. Yet, the mosque's accessibility is not universal. As the examples of Mina and Milica illustrate, mobility in religious practice is often constrained. Both women struggled to find mosques that offered spaces for women when travelling to other cities for appointments. Despite preparing their journeys in advance, they found that available information online was either insufficient or misleading. Upon arrival, the mosques they visited did not provide space for women. This constitutes a critical point of exclusion, as it denies women access to the communal space of worship, and Milica notes:

“Actually, that should be normal. That there should also be room for women” (Milica)
She adds how even a screen that could be temporarily put up would suffice. Even though they had anticipated restricted access and actively sought to evade this situation, lacking information made it impossible to fully avoid exclusion.

Many women strategically use the voluntary nature of communal prayer to their advantage, engaging in a selective use of the mosque that allows for both participation and withdrawal. This expression of agency functions as place-making, as they choose to enter or refrain from a specific, bounded space. Nevertheless, within the Muslim community, the mosque also serves as a form of public space (see chapter 6.2.1). Limited access to it implies limited access to

power and knowledge. As the mosque remains a gendered space, unequal power dynamics persist (Jenner 2024). Although educational settings within Swiss mosques are often mixed, the broader and systematic exclusion of women from certain mosque spaces continues to limit their participation in the public dimension of religious life.

The intersectional perspective reveals how multiple dimensions of identity and social position intersect to produce a set of structural barriers. While the national affiliations of many mosques in Switzerland contribute to the formation of diasporic belonging in transnational localities (Sheringham 2010), the extent and nature of this belonging vary considerably. For some women, such as Zeynep and Yasmine, mosque communities serve as important nodes of connection and are embedded in their transnational identity. As Yasmine reflects:

“Whether at university or in your private life, you always feel the need to build a stronger connection with the language. You know it will benefit you and that it will also connect you with the culture and with your family abroad” (Yasmine)

Through these linguistic and cultural practices, she reinforces with her transnational ties a sense of rootedness and belonging that transcends the national context.

Yet, this same dynamic also reveals its boundaries, and Mina’s experiences exemplify how such forms of belonging can become exclusionary. Although she identifies as Pakistani, Mina belongs to an ethnic minority within Pakistan and does not speak Urdu. As women in Pakistan typically do not attend mosques, Pakistani mosques in Switzerland lack designated prayer rooms for women. Moreover, the events she attended in her early teens were conducted primarily in Urdu, which she does not understand. All these factors intersect and hinder her ability to participate meaningfully in communal or religious life. She visited mosques with different national ties, but has not felt fully comfortable there.

Elif articulates the sense of apprehension this can create:

“But of course there are so many Albanian women and people there. That’s not a problem for me. But the mosque belongs to this community, and well, yes. I feel good, but of course I don’t want to behave inappropriately or do anything [wrong]” (Elif)

Polina likewise describes how linguistic accessibility shapes her sense of belonging:

“the Khutba that you heard last time? It was in English. In Zurich, I don't know any other place where the Khutbah is in any language that I understand, and in Geneva it's in French so I understand. So, it's, that's also why I have felt home there in this mosque instead of here” (Polina)

Each mosque also follows particular ritual practices and social conventions shaped by denominational and cultural traditions, which further define the boundaries of inclusion. Boundaries, which Mina's brother polices through his notions of what is appropriate, comparing them to his view. Spatial factors further exacerbate these restrictions for Mina: her hometown hosts only a few mosques, making regular participation contingent on temporal and geographical accessibility. Nevertheless, she negotiates her right to the mosque space and initiated visits with a friend, reclaiming her agency over her religious expression (see chapter 6.2.3). By contrast, Yasmine reflects on her privilege in navigating these spaces. Having already established connections within the mosque landscape, she is able to expand her participation more independently:

“I'm now at the point where I'm looking for it on my own, but if I hadn't already had the ready-established system, if I wasn't already in it, it would be much more difficult to get in there and make the effort to look for something and everything” (Yasmine)

Taken together, these examples illustrate that while transnational mosque communities can facilitate belonging and continuity for some, they also reproduce exclusions along linguistic, cultural and spatial lines. As Yasmine points out, the habituation to mosque spaces further shapes these dynamics. Regular and confident participation is predominantly encouraged among men. Women, by contrast, often express caution when approaching unfamiliar mosques. This gendered pattern of socialisation contributes to uneven access: while men tend to move with ease between mosque spaces, women's participation is more contingent, negotiated and marked by uncertainty.

6.2.3 The mosque as a place for spirituality

If we return to the origin of the word mosque as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the mosque constitutes not only a social and communal institution but also a sacred space in which ritual practice, religious authority, and embodied devotion converge. It is within this spiritual framework that individual engagements with the mosque take on layered significance, shaped by both aspiration and constraint. Despite the limitations in access discussed before, Mina expresses a sustained desire to attend more frequently for reasons of spirituality and community:

“Her brother also told her ‘just stay at home, why, it’s not even mandatory for you¹.’ We talked about it on the bus. We lose so much sense of community because of that, and then there are just all these rules upon rules upon rules, pray five times a day, do this, do that. The spiritual part is just missing” (Mina)

Polina likewise articulates a wish to visit the mosque more often. Her Islamic education after her conversion took place at a mosque in Geneva, and other praying styles do not suit her. To experience adequate spirituality, she makes the effort to attend occasionally, despite practical challenges related to time and distance:

“Sometimes I got to Geneva for Ramadan to get the vibes” (Polina)

Through conversations with a friend, Mina learns to contextualise her experiences and strengthens her confidence in asserting her position within her family. By invoking Islamic history and cross-cultural norms such as the collective prayer in Mekka during the pilgrimage, one of the five pillars of Islam, Mina actively negotiates her place, challenging restrictive interpretations of gendered religious practice. As she recounts:

“My mother really tries to understand our feelings. I can’t blame her when she’s known something different for her whole life. [...] But now she’s starting to see it a bit. I told her: ‘Mum, this year during Ramadan, I’m going to the mosque whether you like it or not.’ And she said: ‘ah okay maybe I’ll come along some time’” (Mina)

Through these negotiations, Mina enacts a form of everyday resistance. By asserting her right to interpret and inhabit religious space, she actively participates in its redefinition. The network of Muslim friends she is building at university provides both informational support and a sense of belonging. Her search for accessible spiritual spaces thus becomes a practice of place-making: an act through which she claims agency, articulates identity and reconstructs the mosque as a space that accommodates her own lived religiosity.

Milica likewise reclaims agency within the mosque context. As discussed above, women’s participation in the public dimension of religious life is often constrained by gendered spatial structures. Milica’s experience, however, offers a contrasting perspective. She regularly attends her chosen mosque, having selected it both for its alignment with her theological orientation and for its spatial characteristics. She often spends extended periods there, valuing the seclusion the space affords. For her, the solitude is not experienced as exclusionary but as conducive to concentration and spiritual reflection, standing in marked contrast to Mina’s perception of

¹ Jumah, the joint Friday prayer at the mosque is mandatory for men, women are allowed to pray at home. For the daily five prayers, prayer in community is recommended for all, but not a duty

constraint and desire for company. At the same time, the spacious women's area functions as a comfort zone, a familiar and welcoming environment in which she has cultivated meaningful ties with other regular attendees. Through these interactions, Milica transforms the gendered spatial arrangement of the mosque into a site of belonging and affirmation. Yasmine expresses a similar opinion and appreciates the separation of men and women, as it allows her to concentrate more fully on her religious practice.

The sentiment of belonging and the affirmation of identity constitute central motivators for Muslim women to visit mosques. The mosque, as a communal space, is deeply entangled with its function as a site of legitimisation, rendering it simultaneously social, spiritual and political. Participation in mosque life thus extends beyond religious practice, the mosque also acquires emotional significance and operates as an affective space that reinforces processes of place-making. This sense of belonging unfolds on two interrelated scales: first, as belonging within the Islamic community itself, and second, as the belonging of that community within the broader social fabric of Switzerland (Behloul 2010). As Aisha observes:

“you feel like you have a place in this community that is somehow recognised, versus when you get a storage room [to pray in]” (Aisha)

Her recognition is materially and symbolically embedded in the mosque's physical attributes. The architecture and public presence of mosques translate into a perceived legitimacy of Islam in the Swiss landscape. Through its status as a space of a minority, yet legitimised from above, it forms an invited space that is institutionally sanctioned yet constantly negotiated (Miraftab 2004). For minority communities, the production of such spaces is inherently political, as the act of place-making simultaneously asserts legitimacy and contests dominant secular and cultural hegemonies (Luz 2013; Vieyetz 2017). Maha, positioned as a temporary resident, recognises this politicised dimension and deliberately distances herself from communal religious spaces:

“For me, especially as a traveller and not like someone from the country, I try and avoid any religious communities or groups or gatherings, because, you know, it gets political sometimes. And then I just find it easier to do my religion alone and [...] I wouldn't like to join a community” (Maha)

Mina, by contrast, consciously weighs the emotional and practical value of mosque attendance, concluding:

“It's [prayer] easier. Because of this, I think the mosque has so many advantages. More advantages than disadvantages”

For many women, the idea of community is inseparable from their understanding of the mosque. The mosque therefore often functions less as a sacred architectural space and more as a locus of social connection, recognition and shared identity. From this discussion of the mosque as a spatial and symbolic site, the analysis now turns to the theme of community, a concept that extends beyond the physical confines of the mosque and is negotiated across multiple everyday spaces.

6.3 Communities

The concept of community has already surfaced throughout the preceding chapter on mosques, but as the conversations have shown, extends far beyond it. The discussion of community is closely enmeshed with different desires, places of belonging and experiences of exclusion. During the process of content analysis, it became evident that community constitutes a central point of discussion in its own right. In alignment with the inductive and participant-oriented methodology of this thesis, the following chapter develops the discussion of community from the empirical material itself rather than through the application of a predefined conceptual framework. It explores how interlocutors construct, negotiate, and contest notions of community, tracing both convergences and divergences across their narratives. These empirically grounded insights are subsequently situated within broader theoretical debates on belonging, spatiality and social formation.

Initially, the concept of community appeared self-evident within both the literature and my own interpretative framework. This entailed the assumption that minorities naturally seek and value attachment to communal structures, ascribing an inherent desire for community to migrants and religious minorities (Baumann 2009). However, as my fieldwork progressed, it became evident that such assumptions risk oversimplifying the complex and often ambivalent ways in which Muslim women in Switzerland relate to belonging and collective identification. In this context, community can denote a wide range of formations, from informal groups engaged in knowledge exchange and shared meaning-making (Wilhoit Larson 2018) to more formal expressions of institutional affiliation such as membership in a mosque or Islamic organisation. It may also refer to adherence to a specific Islamic tradition or evoke the broader sense of belonging to the umma, the global community of Muslims.

6.3.1 (Trans-)national communities

As discussed, mosques and the communities surrounding them are often organised along national or ethnic lines, a structure that can yield both positive and negative effects (Behloul 2016; Vásquez and Knott 2014). Such affiliations can foster particular forms of attachment, as illustrated by the example of Zeynep (see chapter 6.2.1), whose engagement in community work constitutes a central aspect of her Muslim identity. For her, faith and community involvement are inseparable, each reinforcing the other. She previously held a position in another Islamic organisation she dubs ‘the mosque’ and once it had ended swiftly accepted her current engagement. The familiarity of the space and the social environment are deeply ingrained. “She grew up within this community and feels comfortable, moving through the house comfortably” (fieldnotes, Zeynep). Her position allows her also to be critical of the community and to discuss structures she does not agree with, while providing space for younger women to express themselves. She also emphasises the independence of the organisation from the Turkish state, while at the same time criticising the portrayal of its political events in Western media.

Elif contrasts these experiences. As a political refugee from Turkey, her nationality is a double edged sword for her. She is very conscious of which mosques receive financial aid from the Turkish state or are otherwise related to it:

“There is also a Turkish mosque here, but we don’t go there, it belongs to our state, Erdogan” (Elif).

Nevertheless, is Turkish her mother tongue in which she feels most comfortable, and she found fellow Turkish friends with whom she forms a community outside the structures of the mosque.

“We got to know them here. I didn’t know about [the neighbour] her below, and then we saw ‘ahh you’re Turkish too’” (Elif).

Although it can form a barrier for some, as the example of Mina in the chapter before showed, language is also for others a big driver for their sense and interaction with community. Most visited some language classes, of which all included certain hours on Quran studies. Through those classes, bonds of connections are formed and maintained into adult age:

“It was always the same group. It was a closed circle, and I still know the people, I’m still in touch with them. Two of them have just got married and had children. And you’re always in touch a little bit, you see each other at weddings, you go and congratulate them on their children” (Yasmine)

Prior to her conversion as a young adult, Polina already maintained friendships with Muslim individuals, and through the structured educational process accompanying her conversion, she developed additional connections in the Muslim sphere. Following her relocation to a different city, the specifically Muslim network gained further significance in her daily life. Having adopted the Islamic lifestyle, she now seeks to engage more within these social and religious spheres. Polina reflects on this time and her social integration:

“Yeah, I was always surrounded by people, so it was easy [...] there were other converts too. Yeah, and that we also stayed friends” (Polina)

For her, Islam represents a profoundly social framework, characterised by a familial sense of responsibility and mutual care. Her account underscores the extension to the umma, a conceptualisation which encompasses all Islamic believers as one imagined community. Simultaneously, Polina’s orientation is shaped by gendered dynamics. She deliberately directs her personal interactions toward women, navigating spatial and social separations in ways that allow for selective engagement:

“You can assume everyone I talk about are girls. Except the imam” (Polina)

This case illustrates how religious communities can promote inclusion and social stability by facilitating shared practices and reciprocal support.

Religious communities can foster inclusion and stability through shared activities and mutual support, creating environments in which members can find belonging and security (Fabretti and Tateo 2025). Aisha, for example, reflects how her desire for community in a time where things were new, and her own position required new orientations:

“I personally only started looking for the community when I went to university after finishing high school. Then I looked for the community” (Aisha)

This showcases how the pursuit of community is often shaped by life transitions and situational needs, further strengthened by the fact that the majority of the interviewees are young students. The depth and nature of the networks vary considerably. Many women develop meaningful connections outside the formal institutional structures, cultivating bonds with which they often feel a stronger sense of identification. These diverse forms of community correspond to distinct spatial expressions, frequently taking shape beyond officially recognised settings such as mosques or associations. The most immediate and tangible manifestation of community for many is a circle of friends with whom they exchange experiences, advice, and Islamic studies.

For Yasmine, this network emerged through her involvement the Muslim university association and now constitutes her primary point of social and religious orientation. She describes the relationship as grounded in shared values and long-term commitment:

“It really is the first group of friends where I feel like ‘OK I know this is for life’ [...] There’s a saying in Arabic that comes from Islam [...] basically the symbolism is that good friends make you a good person and bad friends make you a bad person [...] As a Muslima, it’s important to me that my friends bring me closer to God” (Yasmine)

Their friendship extends beyond everyday interactions into joint experiences such as shared travel. Yasmine recounts a group trip to Spain as emblematic of their collective identity:

“That was also kind of fun, we’re all really interested in cultural backgrounds, so I’d say Spain is the perfect reflection of our group of friends. We all have this background and are at home here [in Switzerland], and that’s exactly how Spain is. It’s at home in Europe but has a Muslim background. And that’s really, I’d say, symbolic” (Yasmine)

Similarly, Aisha’s engagement with her friends includes a collective study group which met regularly online, accommodating differences in social capital and life circumstances. Despite her earlier negative experience with Islamic education, she reappropriated her sense of Islamic education, cultivating a personal and supportive environment for religious learning. This orientation toward community of both Yasmine and Aisha exemplifies a private approach to religiosity and religious education, through which members create their own places of religion. Such networks create affective and symbolic spaces of belonging that reinforce both personal and collective Islamic identities. Through everyday practices, such as casual conversations, shared study sessions, or collective decisions such as vacation planning, religion becomes embedded in the mundane (Woods 2020). These practices highlight the ways in which informal peer networks function as both educational and relational spaces.

6.3.2 Absence of community

In the interviews, community is not only defined through its manifestations, but also through its absence. In discussions of belonging and collective identification, moments of disconnection and critique are equally revealing. Mina, in particular, articulates a profound sense of loneliness in relation to her religion. When she decided to wear the hijab, the lack of support was most acutely felt in her family:

“And they all reacted really weird. My father was against it. My brother was also like ‘No what will the teacher say, what will the students say, you won’t find a job’. [...] and

it just made me really insecure, and then I went to bed crying, and then got up on Monday. I just went through with it. [...] My brother has become more religious over the last three years, three and a half years, and he supported me a lot afterwards and apologised profusely [...] Of course, it's nice, but at that time, I still had to go through everything on my own" (Mina)

What and who was expected to provide her with a sense of community and belonging instead failed to offer the support she sought for her decisions. In response, she developed a more self-reliant and individualised form of religiosity, expressing her agency shaped precisely by and despite the lack of communal anchoring.

The self-reliant form of religiosity is not unique to Mina. Farah's mother, whose husband had converted for their marriage, long embodied the sole bearer of religious life within the household. She prioritised the education of her children above their religious expression, such as fasting, while her husband remained largely indifferent toward Islam. Over time, she reclaimed religious rituals by herself, undertaking the pilgrimage to Mekka first alone and later accompanying various family members. Through these acts, she recentres her religious identity on individual agency rather than communal validation, creating a personally defined place of belonging.

Similarly, Elif solidifies her presence and sense of belonging in Switzerland by adopting the framing of religion as private. She participates in a communal association without Islamic affiliation. Members of the communal association are religious, but from other faiths, and their connection grounds in a more abstract understanding of their religiosity:

"I am part of an association here. It is not a Muslim association. We also have a relationship [...] they know us, they trust us" (Elif)

She is conscious of the bias against Muslims and produces her place of belonging through interpersonal relations, making sure that others 'know her'. Through the mutual support, she can practice her Islamic rituals in this community while engaging in inter-faith interactions. With this, Islam becomes a flexible, personally authored practice, embedded within broader social engagement rather than strictly institutional frameworks.

Similarly, other women's experience reveal that community may exist without fulfilling the needs they associate with it. Expectations regarding the functions of community vary: for some, it represents and affective sense of togetherness, while for others it implies an institutional

structure that should provide specific forms of religious engagement. Milica, for instance, criticises the limited scope of the association at university:

“[the activities] are mostly centred around food and eating, and I would prefer more activities where we study and discuss Islam” (Milica)

In response, she pursues a dual strategy and attends lectures at an Islamic school while simultaneously founding a Sister’s department within the association, where she can organise events aligned with her own interests. Through such initiatives, she not only asserts agency over her religious practice but also actively reshapes the spaces and structures of community to better reflect her aspirations.

Mina provides a complementary illustration of this process. Initially hesitant to participate in mixed-gender activities due to discomfort and preexisting biases, she was motivated to engage when women-only initiatives were introduced:

“Now they said, yes, we’re doing a book club just for women, and I was like, ah, that’s my cue, I’m going there. Only women, no men, and then I went there [...] And now I’m thinking about becoming a member myself. Because now it has what I want” (Mina)

Such experiences underscore the relational dimension of religious identity, and community is not only constituted through connection but is also shaped by moments of disconnection, absence, and personal negotiation of religious practice. These cases illustrate how the absence of supportive community structures can foster forms of religiosity that are highly individualised, yet still meaningful as they reappropriate their faith outside formal structures. In negotiating their legitimacy of being religious outside formal structures, the Muslim women produce their place on their own in the wider secular space of Switzerland.

6.3.3 Community responsibility and expectations

Another dimension of community emerged through a sense of responsibility and the negotiation of boundary. Most of the women articulated an awareness of an inside/outside dynamic, in which internal criticism of community structures is typically kept within the group. This reflects their broader sensitivity to how Muslims are perceived collectively, shaping the ways in which personal or communal struggles are communicated to non-Muslims or the public. Simultaneously, responsibilities apply internally, where community spaces shape expectations of interactive behaviour. In this way, community is continually reproduced and made tangible through the everyday enactment of shared norms, care, and mutual accountability.

The recognition of how Muslims are collectively perceived influences how personal or communal struggles are communicated to non-Muslims and the broader public. Zeynep, for example, “makes certain that I will anonymise sufficiently” (fieldnotes Zeynep), conscious of potential negative repercussions her words might provoke. This dynamic also manifests on smaller scales. Yasmine, for instance, emphasised her commitment to shielding her family:

“No matter what argument or fight I had with my parents, that stays within the family, and I would never share it with anyone outside it” (Yasmine)

Such awareness of the boundary between internal and external spaces is accompanied by a desire to preserve the integrity of the inner community. As noted in the fieldnotes accompanying our walking interview, Zeynep “recognises the effort the survival of the community requires and is willing to put in her weight – also sees it as her responsibility” (fieldnotes Zeynep).

Yara articulates this tension between internal critique and external perception particularly vividly:

“This is the problem. It's like when we receive so much hate, and hate that is not justified. It makes it so that we are not able to fix the problems and focus on the problems that actually need to be fixed, because then instead of addressing those issues, those sexist issue. You know, we have to stick together. We have to stick together like glue and be a community that's very strong, you know, in order not to be discriminated against by others. And so it makes it that if you turn around to this glue that you're stuck to and you say, hey, we have this and this problem. You know, it feels like you are, like, you know, kind of hurting your community at the same time, yeah. Do you know what I mean?”
(Yara)

Her reflection captures the moral and emotional complexity of communal responsibility: the need to maintain solidarity in the face of external discrimination often constrains the possibility of internal critique. She evaluates multiple factors in negotiating not only her place within her community, but also of the community in the context of Switzerland, taking up responsibility and thus agency, positioning herself on the playing field.

This sense of visibility and representation is particularly pronounced in discussions surrounding the hijab, where individual expression is often perceived as collective signification. The hijab functions thus as an act of community place-making, rendering religion visible and spatially active in the everyday rather than confined to formal sacred settings (della Dora 2016; Vásquez and Knott 2014). In this context, the hijab functions simultaneously as a marker of difference for outsiders and a signal of belonging for insiders. Through subtle practices such as exchanges

of greetings in public spaces, hijab-wearing women enact forms of community place-making. These gestures, sometimes non-verbal, sometimes articulated through the Arabic ‘as-salaam alaykum’, function as micro-performances of recognition and solidarity. They produce and sustain a sense of Muslim presence in the public sphere, translating embodied visibility into spatial practice. The hijab, as an embodied performance, carries religion through secular space, the greeting, as an interactive gesture, transforms that space into a site of belonging. However, the gendered dimension of these interactions reveals a more complex negotiation of solidarity. As Mohammad describes:

“When you see Muslim women wearing headscarves, as a man you don’t know whether she is open to saying hello. You just don’t know. And I mean, the whole point of the headscarf is to create a certain distance, a certain modesty”

Mina, who wears the hijab, frames this spatial and bodily dynamic as a form of empowerment:

“Muslim men just know this way directly that they are not allowed to shake my hand, or if they offer it to me, I will not accept it. There really is a kind of control over your body, over what you do” (Mina)

The hijab becomes both a visible sign of religious identity and an instrument of agency, mediating interactions and delineating boundaries through which Muslim women assert autonomy over their presence, bodies and participation in public space.

Some communities have more explicitly defined physical spaces belonging to them that both express and reinforce their collective identity. A youth centre in Zurich, established through a collaborative initiative among several organisations, exemplifies how the provision of reliable physical spaces enables community formation in the first place. Through expectations towards others, the relational aspect of the space becomes apparent and the place within it is made. Participants transform the invited space into an invented one through the performance and community-specific norms (Miraftab 2004; Velásquez Atehortúa 2014):

“You expect people to know or have certain boundaries in this setting, in this space. You know, it may be that as a Muslim, you live your life differently outside. Okay. You can do what you want, but when you’re in that space, then I feel like there are boundaries that people should be aware of” (Aisha)

Aisha shared this reflection after describing an incident of obtrusive behaviour. By contextualising the event for herself, she articulated how the space itself shapes social interactions and expectations. Within explicit Muslim spaces, she expects different behaviour towards her as a woman from fellow Muslims than in the secular environment. In doing so, she

delineates boundaries and participates in defining and reproducing the moral order of the community. This exhibits how Aisha is not merely part of the community but actively holds it to standards and shapes it.

The negotiation of norms is similarly evident in discussions regarding the Muslim association at university, one of the most explicitly stated forms of community in this fieldwork. As discussed in chapter 6.1.2, the association functions as an alternative space by and for young Muslim students, characterised with flat hierarchies and collective organisation. While the association has not established formalised rules, behavioural norms are implicitly shared and collectively upheld:

“If, for example, a young woman, a student, who I have never seen before, comes in and does things that suggest she has not been here to pray very often, [...] I then address this and ask ‘hey are you new here?’ and most of the time they say yes, because I have interpreted it correctly” (Yasmine)

Within the limited space available to them, members collaboratively develop arrangements to best accommodate the community’s diverse needs. The articulation of behavioural expectations varies according to context. Rules and boundaries become more explicit in areas directly associated with prayer, where gendered norms are more rigorously observed, whereas social events are characterised by greater flexibility and informality. In this way, the members of the association continuously negotiate between sacred and social functions, adapting their spatial practices to maintain inclusivity while preserving religious propriety.

These examples illustrate how women play a central role in shaping communal spaces. By managing inside/outside dynamics, Muslim women carry social responsibility and are compelled to contain critique, especially regarding gendered dynamics, within the group. Spatial arrangements and behavioural expectations that uphold standards not necessarily shared by the wider society work together to produce the place of community. Through the negotiation of norms and the active maintenance of boundaries, women transform physical environments into moral and social spaces, making community a lived and continuously redefined practice.

6.3.4 Community negotiations

These spatial negotiations also reveal the deeply gendered dimensions of community life. The organisation of space reflects broader expectations regarding gendered behaviour and authority within Islamic contexts. Although such norms are rarely formalised, they are maintained through mutual understanding and everyday practice, shaping access, participation and authority in space (Elden 2020; Massey 2005). While the association presents itself as a space open for all, the differentiated use of space, particularly between social and sacred settings continues to reproduce gendered boundaries. Everyday operations are largely coordinated by women, whereas the ritual centre of the Friday prayers is firmly maintained by men.

Initially, Yara experienced the association as an inclusive environment where her voice was valued. However, her perception shifted when she expressed a wish to deliver one of the Friday sermons, a request that was swiftly rejected by the responsible male students:

“I thought it was like, the perfect opportunity to kind of like, you know, as Muslim students, like, kind of discuss topics that are important to us or like, over our everyday lives. And so I got really excited and I wrote my own thing and I asked if I could say it. And they weren't very nice about it. [...] Guys have to be the ones that sing and blah, blah, blah. Not the girls” (Yara)

What was particularly disheartening for her was the absence of dialogue and the lack of recognition for her active role in the community:

“I have this whole thing written. I love it. I feel like it's really good. Yeah, I was like OK, like, okay you don't even want me to say it. You don't want me to say it. Fine. Whatever you know, I'll. I'll accept that if you guys really, it's important for you. But like at least read it *you*. If I can't say it because I'm a girl. Even though I don't accept it, but if that is your rule like whatever. But like at least *you* read it, you know like, why am I not allowed to participate to this thing that I do every Friday, every Friday I used to go, I never skipped. Like, why am I not allowed to participate to this?” (Yara)

Yara's experience exemplifies how gendered expectations continue to structure participation even within spaces that define themselves as egalitarian. Her frustration reveals not only a sense of exclusion, but also the emotional cost of negotiating authority and recognition within a setting that simultaneously promises inclusion yet reproduces familiar hierarchies. While women coordinate the day-to-day functioning of the association, their access to ritual authority remains restricted, illustrating the persistent negotiation of gendered hierarchies even in spaces shaped collaboratively by community members.

Female students initiated the Sisters Resort to specifically address the needs of Muslim women within the association, as others had cited the lack of gender-sensitive spaces as a reason for not joining the student organisation (see chapter 6.3.2). As it is fairly new, discussions on funding and the concrete implementation of tailored activities are still underway. While the overall associations' horizontal hierarchy facilitates newcomer involvement, it also distributes responsibility in ways that obscure persistent patterns of gendered labour. Yasmine, an active member, recounts how a new student took it upon herself to organise a series of Iftar events during Ramadan. She herself has organised events before and expresses frustration at the recurring dynamic:

“It’s always the women. It’s no secret that it’s always the women who get things done”
(Yasmine)

The formation of the Sisters Resort can be understood not only as a pragmatic response to institutional gaps, but also as a feminist act of spatial negotiation. By carving out a dedicated sphere for women, they reconfigure existing hierarchies of access and authority, asserting agency in defining the conditions of their own inclusion. Through these practices, women simultaneously reproduce and contest the gendered organisation of religious space, reworking the boundaries of religious participation through organisational strategies that claim their rightful place and legitimacy in male-dominated communal contexts.

In sum, the diverse forms of community observed, from informal friendship networks and unstructured study groups to explicitly institutional spaces, demonstrate that belonging among Muslim women in Switzerland is neither fixed nor uniform, but situationally enacted. Participation in these spaces depends on a complex interplay of access, recognition, and personal negotiation, shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, language and mobility. Community thus manifests as both affective and spatial practice: it is produced through everyday encounters and collective rituals, where gender both functions as a reinforcing aspect as well as the motivation to contest marginalising structures. Within the context of a minority religion, such forms of community place-making also become strategies of visibility and legitimisation in the secular public sphere. Women constantly navigate obstacles including gendered hierarchies, restricted ritual authority, and the need to contain critique internally.

At university, the association provides a platform for exchanging and processing experiences of marginalisation within academic life. Through such critical dialogues, the invited space co-allocated by the university is subtly transformed into an invented one, reappropriated and redefined through communal practice and collective agency. Underlying these negotiations is a

feminist understanding of place as not a static container but a relational process through which women actively construct, contest, and maintain spaces of religious and social meaning.

6.4 Pursuits of and in life

Building on the previous discussion of how community and belonging are situated in space, the following chapter turns to the individual trajectories that both shape and are shaped by these collective practices. It explores how Muslim women pursue meaning, stability, and self-realisation in their personal, educational, and professional lives, tracing how faith and gender intersect in the navigation of life paths and future aspirations (Agnew and Livingstone 2011).

Participants' positions within their life course influence not only their outlook but also their sense of agency and possibilities for change. Growing up and planning their futures in within a context where their religious and gendered identities are highly visible requires continuous negotiation between personal convictions, social expectations, and structural conditions. As most interview participants are young students, the question of the future emerges as particularly significant. Faith often functions as both a guiding principle and a lens through which opportunities and limitations are understood. For some, Islam plays a central role in making life choices, revealing its deep embeddedness in everyday life. At the same time, its status as a minority religion, often negatively stereotyped in broader societal discourse, shapes the structural constraints they perceive in education and employment. Meriem illustrates this tension vividly:

“There was another thing, with the world of work. Even as a child, I always noted, or rather, I was always told ‘you won’t find work with a headscarf, go study, become a doctor, so when you’re older you can be your own boss’. People I knew at the time who were looking for apprenticeships said ‘It’s really hard to find something’, so I didn’t even try. [...] It kinda makes you feel like you’re forced to go a certain way. Because now, when I think back, I would have preferred to do an apprenticeship [...] Because I would be making money now, I would have been independent. And I’m still stuck”
(Meriem)

Meriem’s reflection highlights how directed structural barriers informed by bias can restrict the range of life paths considered feasible. Her experience exemplifies a recurring theme: while religion provides a framework for ethical and personal development, societal perceptions of Muslim women, especially those who visibly express their faith, can significantly limit professional opportunities (Lindemann 2021).

For Polina, one of the reasons to change cities was also her religion, but not the only one. While her faith influenced her decision, it was not the cause of it. When she finished her master's and looked for PhD positions, it presented as a good opportunity to adapt her surroundings. She had made too many restrictive experiences in her old university and selected a university where she would be able to express her faith more freely, making a place of both religion and education. To her, Zurich offered this freedom, and so far, she recounts many positive interactions.

6.4.1 Navigation of their position

This negotiation of possibilities is not only about navigating external barriers but also about shaping self-conceptions and strategies for agency. For many participants, pursuing a meaningful life involves balancing ambitions with safety, visibility, and acceptance, creating a complex interplay between personal desire and societal expectation. I elaborate here on the different positions of the research participants and what these entail, highlighting their intricacy in broader social, cultural and structural context. As Yara states:

“It's scary. It's like, unless you are very highly educated or you work as a cleaning lady. There's no in-between. Like either you're so highly educated and so highly qualified that they have to hire you wearing the Hijab, or like you're a cleaning lady or like, you know, someone that takes care of children, you know, and there is no in-between. Like you're not allowed to be an ordinary person working an ordinary job” (Yara)

In evaluating these structural constraints, participants also articulate aspirations for the kind of society they wish to inhabit, and they engage in small-scale efforts to shape their immediate environment accordingly (Mollett 2017). These ‘microstrategies’ in the everyday are a form of political engagement through challenging stereotypes about Muslim women (Finlay and Hopkins 2019). Yasmine, for instance, describes the effort she invests in educating those around her, often sacrificing privacy and comfort in order to contribute to the kind of space she would like to encounter. At the same time, she acknowledges the difficulties that arise in affirming and justifying her religion to critics, especially while she is still in the process of finding answers:

“I feel like, if I had grown up in Algeria, I would never have thought about this, because it's not an issue there. Here, you are confronted with it much more and you have to deal with it and come up with an answer, because otherwise you look stupid” (Yasmine)

This theme is central to understanding the participants' positions. They differ not only in terms of nationality but also in their degrees of religiosity and modes of expression. Farah and Mina, for example, are both comparatively new to active engagement in religion and express a certain uncertainty arising from their position as relative outsiders. As the only Muslimas in their

immediate surroundings, they have not yet established meaningful connections with a wider Muslim network, despite having individual friends. Farah reflects on this sense of isolation and the desire for exchange:

“I think it would be really nice if I could share a bit with others, people who maybe know a bit more, so that I can learn from them. Because, I don’t see my mother every day, and I can’t bombard her with questions all the time. And I think it would be nice if I also had an external exchange. Maybe people my age, that have a bit of the same... who are at a similar stage in life, that would be nice I think”

Her reflection highlights how social positioning, both in terms of religious knowledge and community presence, affects the capacity to navigate life choices, develop agency, and cultivate meaningful social connections.

While younger participants such as Farah and Mina navigate questions of belonging and religious expression within a predominantly non-Muslim environment, others enter Switzerland with formative experiences shaped in Muslim-majority contexts. In contrast to the experiences described above, Elif and Maha both grew up in Muslim-majority countries, where religion is deeply interwoven with everyday life and the social structures. Their respective positions in Switzerland as an exchange student and political refugee intersect in distinct ways with their religious upbringing and expression.

Maha regards her stay in Switzerland as temporary and integrates this transience into her religious practice. By conceptualising her time abroad as a form of travel, she draws on Islamic rules that apply to travelling believers, allowing her to adapt her lifestyle to Switzerland’s secular rhythm while remaining in alignment with her faith. She is confident in her faith and consciously separates it from political debates.

Elif, on the other hand, fled Turkey as an adult in her mid-thirties four years ago with her family. She is acutely aware of her dual position as both Muslima and refugee and consequently practices her faith with caution. In Switzerland, her master’s degree was not recognised, shifting her horizon of possibilities (Vigh 2009). Although she recently found a position in a school, she continually negotiates how much of her religious practice she can express in the workplace. The school as her workplace constitutes a distinct social space with institutional norms and prospects (Lindemann 2021). Bias is often anticipated, and she carefully balances what she feels she can ask for against what might be perceived as excessive and presumptuous. For Elif, Islam is an integral part of her being, yet its specific practice can feel like an imposition on

others. She negotiates this boundary while keeping open the prospect of change in the future. The precarity of her situation remains a central constraint:

“Fasting, yes, fine. But praying, I haven’t asked. Maybe, if I ask, maybe. I don’t know. But also, I’m an intern now. I don’t think so, not now. Maybe later, I can just do it later»
(Elif)

This evaluation of requests is her assessment of her surroundings, navigating institutional structures at the workplace and practicing a place of belonging. By examining these two contesting positions of Maha and Elif in the landscape, it becomes evident that the negotiation of religious practice and life choices is deeply shaped by prior experiences, migration status, and the structural conditions encountered in Switzerland (Finlay and Hopkins 2019).

What becomes apparent through Elif’s reflections is a certain lack of confidence in her *raison d’être* as a Muslim woman in Switzerland. The greatest contrast between her and Maha lies in their differing senses of security, yet they share the everyday familiarity and banality of faith as part of life’s rhythm. As Elif explains:

“I don’t always need a place, or a room. I practice my religion everywhere”.

Yasmine, by contrast, reflects on her development as a Muslim woman growing up in Switzerland. Although she was always immersed in Islamic structures, she remained acutely aware of the secular context of the city. For her, sacred space was never banal but always contested, which made her particularly appreciative of provided structures:

“And we can even do Friday prayers there. And it’s. Crazy opportunity, I mean, I’d never have thought, if you had asked me five years ago if that was possible, I would have said ‘are you crazy? We’re here in Zurich, not in some other country, I don’t know, France or Saudi Arabia, but Zurich’. And now I’m like, wow, that’s amazing, a very cool opportunity” (Yasmine)

These diverse perspectives illustrate the complexity of the religious landscape in which Muslim women navigate their daily lives, shaping both their expressions of faith and their aspirations within a secular environment. While they recognise the persistence of ignorance and anticipate intrusive questioning from others (see chapter 6.1), their reflections also reveal subtle forms of agency in asserting belonging.

The mere provision of a space for prayer is insufficient, awareness and respect are equally essential. Aisha’s experience exemplifies this tension. Her university provided a designated space for prayer in the form of a temporal reservation in an otherwise regularly used classroom.

When she and a friend arrived to pray, they found people otherwise occupying it and decided to assert their right to use it:

“We were like ‘okay’, and we said ‘you know, let’s stand up for ourselves and make a move [...] But like, of the little right that I had, I wanted to claim that right” (Aisha)

She notes that she would not have taken this step had she been alone, revealing the importance of solidarity and shared confidence in confronting such moments where the act of place-making is also about the place-taking.

These instances of negotiating space and recognition reveal how everyday acts of faith are intertwined with broader questions of belonging and future possibility. In navigating these boundaries, the participants not only claim their right to presence in the present but also envision the kinds of lives they aspire to build.

6.4.2 Navigation towards the future

Many of the participants operate simultaneously on two fronts: their points of orientation are grounded both in secular society and within their religious affiliation. While they navigate the social and political landscape of Switzerland, they also engage with the normative and organisational structures provided by their faith. The question of visibility emerges as a central concern, with many striving for a degree of normalisation in the public expression of their religion. As Aisha notes when talking about mosque buildings:

“And you feel like you have a place in this community that is somehow recognised, as opposed to when you get a storage room like that. Then you feel like, okay, it’s something hidden and closed off again” (Aisha).

Such inconsistencies in institutional accommodation function as destabilising factors, requiring constant reassessment of one’s position and perspective in the moment. While acknowledging the difficulties such as lacking inclusion of women in mosque spaces, many express a desire to participate more actively in religious life in the future (compare chapter 6.2.3). Zeynep, for example, recounts several instances in which she was not able to participate in communal activities resulting from a lack of appropriate women’s spaces. She adapted her strategy to these conditions and sought religious fulfilment outside the structures of Islamic rules in a more spiritual approach, both alone and with her sister.

For several participants, the start at university has served as a stabilising factor for the horizon in life (Vigh 2009), providing structure and enabling movement beyond familiar boundaries. Digital spaces also play an important role in this reorientation, providing more diverse positions and interpretations, opening discourse on norms within Islam. The circulation of online content depicting the everyday lives of Muslim women contributes to normalising changing faith practices. Mina reflects how this visibility has influenced both her and her mother's attitudes and how it helped her argument to attend prayer in mosques:

“And then I come and say: ‘Mama I want to go to the mosque’, and then she thinks ‘hey no it’s like this and that’. But now she has a phone and social media. I think that influences her too. She sees, okay it’s normal. My daughter isn’t the only one who thinks this should be normalised” (Mina)

For Mina, the online exchange aided to situate her desire for communal spaces as a shared and legitimate expression, which in turn empowered her to more confidently claim her place within communal Muslim spaces. The shift of her context enabled her to situate her request among broader changes, and she used this shift in turn to further defend her aims, clearly reflecting this interactive relation with space (Akbar and Edelenbos 2021).

The tension between religious expression and the secular bias of the Swiss context awakens in most interviewees a desire to live abroad. Milica articulates this wish clearly:

“To live abroad, somewhere where you can live your religion more freely. Where it’s a bit more integrated into everyday life, and that simply makes life easier. Yes, it’s definitely a topic” (Milica)

Yasmine also speaks about this possibility, noting that her knowledge of Arabic would enable her to pursue it, while Aisha reflects on how life in a Muslim-majority country might offer a sense of ease and security:

“As a Muslim woman in Switzerland, I sometimes think, ‘okay maybe I’d like to go abroad one day’, [...] somewhere where the majority is Muslim, or a Muslim country, where I feel ‘okay this is now’, you know, where I don’t have to be afraid” (Aisha)

However, such aspirations are not equally attainable or attractive to everyone. For Mina, emigration is not a viable option, particularly regarding future family life:

“My parents are both foreigners, they don’t speak German and all that. And I know how difficult it was for me to grow up here, teach myself everything, learning the language, figuring out education. And I don’t want my children to have to do that, and when you move to a foreign country, that’s what you have to do” (Mina)

Being Muslim informs several of the women's life decisions, especially around career choices and visibility (Lindemann 2021). Aisha, who currently does not wear the hijab but envisions doing so in the future, describes how this anticipation influences her planning:

“Every decision I make is always a bit like ‘where am I gonna be accepted’ or ‘where do I have more chances’” (Aisha)

The desire to wear the hijab in the future was shared by several participants who not yet had done so yet remained open to the possibility of adopting it later in life, though not all expressed this intention. Zeynep, for instance, wears it more freely when on vacation. During our conversation in the car, she explained that she prefers not to be photographed without it, as she sees herself wearing it permanently one day, yet simultaneously questions why she does not wear it now. This ambivalence reflects the balancing act between personal conviction and the anticipation of social backlash in Switzerland's secular environment.

Meriem, by contrast, who started wearing the hijab as a rite of age as an early teenager and is pressured by familial obligation to continue wearing it, adapted her navigation early on:

“As a child, I always wanted to be a teacher, because I liked teaching for some reason. But then I realised ‘ugh it's not possible for me’, and I gave it up”

Building on such negotiations of possibility, Yasmine sought out other Muslim students for guidance and inspiration. She attended an event prior to enrolling at university, describing it as:

“the perfect source to find out what we want to do. You can speak to the people and they are already doing something, and they have more or less the same background, it's perfect” (Yasmine)

Elif likewise draws on exchange with other Muslim women to orient herself in Switzerland. She recalls a friend, also a teacher from Turkey who wears the hijab, being rejected from several schools because of it. This awareness shapes Elif's own cautious approach to professional life, as she recognises that visible religious expression continues to carry risk.

Discussions about how to navigate the workplace are a recurring theme in these networks. Yasmine and her peers speak openly about strategies for making space for religious practice at the workplace, weighing when and how to raise such matters with employers. As she explains, she now approaches job applications “with the awareness that this is an important part of my everyday life, including my working life, and that it's kind of non-negotiable” (Yasmine), which has been a big change since her last employment, when she was less active in her religion.

Education, professional experience, and the support of networks stabilise the participants' horizon and confidence and allow for specific goals in expressing their faith.

Aisha also remembers a teacher who would put on her headscarf only after the school day ended, clearly demarcating the space of her job from the rest of her life. While Aisha finds this practice inspiring, she expresses a certain reluctance to live half-half. Having now gained a sense of security in her job, she describes cautiously beginning to wear the hijab part-time but still fearing being seen by colleagues or students of hers. The memory of her own teacher, who “went outside, put on her headscarf and left” (Aisha) contrasts with her own hesitations and points to the generational and situational difference in how Muslim women negotiate visibility at work.

These narratives demonstrate how religious identity intersects with gender, migration history and future aspirations, forming a shifting horizon of changing perspectives and prospects (Vigh 2009). The navigational tactics and strategies through which interviewees respond to their circumstances vary, reflecting the heterogeneity of their experiences and positions. Their reflections reveal how imagined futures, such as the possibility of living elsewhere, function as both an escape from constraint and a way to reimagine belonging within and beyond the Swiss secular order.

In summary, the women's navigation of everyday life can be understood through a set of subtle strategies: avoiding unwanted attention, finding individual paths within restrictive structures, and asking for only minimal forms of accommodation.

7. Conclusion

Muslim women in Switzerland live a continuous negotiation of legitimacy and belonging on two fronts. On the one hand, the Swiss political and public context persistently marginalises Muslim women (Aidenberger and Doehne 2021; Lindemann 2021; Trucco et al. 2025). On the other, certain structures and norms within the Muslim context itself work to exclude women from Muslim spaces and decision-making processes (Dehbi 2023). Due to Switzerland's system of direct democracy, issues related to Islam and Muslim presence are kept highly visible and politically instrumentalised (Trucco et al. 2025). Political actors often frame such topics to their advantage, and referendums have institutionalised forms of structural discrimination (Lindemann 2021). Public discourse on Islam is deeply coloured by bias and prejudice, frequently linking it with terrorism or presenting it as a security concern within the framework of anti-immigration politics (Ettinger 2018). These narratives are underpinned by the enduring notion of a 'clash of cultures', which depends on essentialist representations of Islam as homogeneous and incompatible with European or Swiss values (Bilge 2010; Gianni 2010; Trucco 2021).

Within this discourse, the figure of the Muslim woman, and particularly her 'veil' is used as a symbol of radical Islamism and oppression of women, echoing a process of attribution of extraordinary sexism and incompatibility with 'modern' democratic values to the 'Other', denying women their own agency in the process (Kaya 2012; Lindemann 2021). The fixation on the headscarf is not unique to Switzerland but part of a wider European pattern that distorts discussions on immigration, Islam, and so-called Islamic extremism (Finlay and Hopkins 2019; Gökarkınel 2012). The conflation of women's rights with debates over immigrants' rights has produced a contradictory duality in secular-liberal societies, limiting the potential for inclusive feminist discourse (Bilge 2010; Cooke 2007). Against this backdrop, the findings of this thesis contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Muslim women in Switzerland actively negotiate their identities, spaces, and forms of belonging within and against these intersecting structures of exclusion.

The research question guiding this study was: In what ways do Muslim women in Switzerland use place-making strategies to negotiate their religious and personal identities within both the Islamic context and wider Swiss society? This question was explored with the theoretical framework of feminist geography and approached through an actor centred perspective. At the heart of feminist geography is the commitment to making and keeping women's lives visible,

rooted in a critical feminist vision that recognises social space as uneven, gendered, and shaped by intersecting power relations (Amoore 2020). By foregrounding the experiences of those historically marginalised, feminist geography highlights how power operates in everyday life, showing that politics is enacted not only through formal institutions but also through informal and personal spaces (Hopkins 2018). In the context of the contested landscape of identity, religion and secularity of Switzerland, this thesis employed a qualitative approach to examine the forms of agency Muslim women exercise in their daily lives. The conceptual lens consisted of the concept of place-making, complemented by the concept of invented and invited spaces by Miraftab (2004) and Vigh's (2009) conceptualisation of social navigation as motion squared.

The findings to answer the research question can be summarised in four overarching topics. First, Muslim women demonstrate an acute awareness of shifts in the political climate, marked by perceived surveillance, stereotyping and exclusion. Their accounts illustrate how the personal is deeply entangled with the political for Muslim women, and how they actively contest the attribution of being apolitical by positioning themselves as engaged citizens, holding Switzerland to its own democratic standards and expressing frustration over persistent ignorance. By selectively mediating the information they share with the institutions providing invited spaces about those very spaces, they transform them into invented spaces (Miraftab 2004), circumventing institutional bias through omission to derive the best possible benefit from the situation.

Second, the mosque functions as an invited space in which community place-making is central, defined by institutional norms, rules, and forms of legitimisation from above (Miraftab 2004; Vásquez and Knott 2014). It occupies a dual position as a recognised and formal place of worship within both Switzerland's secular framework and Islam. Muslim women contextualise their experience by discussing them with others and invoke Islamic history and cross-cultural norms to assert their position in Muslim spaces. With selective engagement and reinterpretation of religious authority, many women actively make their place in the mosque: one that aligns with their own aspirations and lived realities.

Third, Muslim women in Switzerland relate to community and collective identification in complex and often ambivalent ways. Community encompasses diverse formations, from informal networks of knowledge exchange and shared meaning-making to formal affiliations with mosques or Islamic organisations, and even broader identification with the umma. The

pursuit of community often responds to life transitions and situational needs, and moments of disconnection and internal critique reveal that community is constituted not only through connection but also through negotiation and absence. Gendered expectations continue to shape participation, prompting the creation of exclusive spaces as both a reinforcement of and response to exclusion. Ultimately, community emerges as both an affective and spatial gendered practice, produced through everyday encounters and collective rituals, and as a strategy of visibility and legitimisation within the secular public sphere.

Fourth, Islam can play a central role in shaping life choices, revealing its deep embeddedness in the everyday. Yet, its status as a minority religion informs the structural constraints Muslim women perceive in education and employment. The religious identity intersects with gender, migration history, and aspiration, forming a dynamic landscape of change they navigate (Vigh 2009). They engage in small-scale acts of place-making (Finlay and Hopkins 2019) as a strategy to shape their immediate environment. Everyday negotiations of faith intertwine with broader questions of belonging and future possibility: by navigating the boundaries of secular expectations, Muslim women not only assert their presence in the present but also imagine and pursue alternative futures.

Together, these findings constitute the answer to the research question. The analysis revealed that Muslim women in Switzerland engage in complex, multi-layered processes of place-making that extend beyond physical spaces to include social, emotional, and symbolic dimensions (Fluri 2015; Hopkins 2018). Through their everyday practices, they actively challenge and reconfigure the boundaries by both Swiss society and internal community norms. Their actions demonstrate that belonging is not a fixed condition but a continuous process of negotiation across intersecting structures of power, such as gender, religion, nationality, and citizenship. These findings underscore the importance of viewing Muslim women not as passive recipients of social structures but as active agents, who creatively navigate and reshape them. Through this lens, place-making emerges as both a spatial and political practice, one that produces new configurations of belonging and identity. The thesis thus contributes to feminist geography by illustrating how intersectional identities are negotiated through everyday spatial practices, and to debates on secularism and religion in Europe by highlighting the agency and multiplicity within Muslim women's experiences.

However, while this thesis offers an in-depth qualitative analysis of Muslim women's place-making practices, it necessarily operated within certain limitations. The findings both show and call through the heterogeneity of the field for a broader and more nuanced analysis. As with all research, the findings are heavily dependent on the participants and the researcher's positionality (Haraway 1988; Hopkins 2018), and the data is shaped by what the participants are willing and able to disclose.

Furthermore, while the participants represented diverse backgrounds and perspectives, the majority were students or recently finished their studies, and as such constitute a small sample within the broader population of Muslim women in Switzerland. The few alternative perspectives make apparent that there are more points to consider which could be addressed in future research. Additionally, I focused on Zurich and the surrounding area. Expanding future research to include other regions, especially as also the distribution of Muslim communities is spatially distinct in relation to the regions of origin, could provide valuable interregional comparison and future nuance.

More broadly, research on Muslim women in western contexts has often focused on visible symbols such as the veil, while less attention has been paid to the everyday social processes that Muslim women may engage with in order to interpret and practice their faith. In traversing these religious spheres, women transform them from traditionally male-dominated sites into spaces where feminine, political, and cosmopolitan subjectivities are expressed. Future research could build on these insights by exploring such transformative practices across different generations, regional contexts, and transnational networks to further illuminate how Muslim women reshape both their religious and societal landscapes. Ultimately, the experiences of Muslim women in Switzerland reveal that agency, creativity, and resilience are central to the ongoing reimagining of belonging, showing how everyday practices of place-making can transform both religious and secular spaces.

8. References

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9. Appendix

9.1 Overview over interview partners

Name (Age)	Nationality	Occupation	Approach to Islam	Further Info
Yasmine (20)	Algeria, born in CH	In her bachelor	Given by parents, interested in education & community at mosque	Active part of association, attending mosque when possible, married
Milica (ca. 20)	North Mazedonia, born in CH	In her bachelor	Given by parents, rediscovered as teenager, educating herself and with selected courses	walking interview, married, carefully selected her mosque of confidence
Muhammad (32)	Pakistan, immigrated at 12y	Recently completed his masters	Spent formative years in Muslim majority country, changing over the years, sceptical now	Man, accustomed to communal Friday prayer
Zeynep (ca. 20)	Turkish, born in CH	In her bachelor	Given by parents, engagement in the community, more spiritual than ritual practice	Walking interview
Mina (20)	Pakistan, immigrated at 2y	in her bachelor	Given by parents, rediscovered as teenager & educating herself	Part of minority within Pakistan diaspora > language
Meriem (24)	Iran/Iraq, born in CH	In her bachelor	Given by family, critical and unbelieving now	Shiite (minority within Islam)
Elif (ca. 35)	Turkey, in CH for 3y	Intern in educational institution, applying for Swiss master's course	Integral part of her life and family	Political refugee Bachelor recognised by CH (Turkish master)

Polina (ca. 25)	Russia, immigrated at 13	PhD candidate	Converted at 19	Political refugee
Maha (26)	Saudi Arabia	In her masters	Integral part of her life	Temporally in CH for education, Islam separate from politics
Farah (23)	Morocco & Switzerland, born in CH	In her bachelor	Given by mother, rediscovering in process, 'reconnecting'	Only recently engaging with Islam, valuing formal ritual practice
Yara (24)	Lebanon	In her bachelor	Given by family, strong connection to community in mosque through engagement	Grew up in Geneva, strong perception of laïcité
Aisha (26)	Pakistan, immigrated at 5y	Teacher	Given by family, rediscovered as teen	Clash of secular context & religious desire

9.2 Ethical questionnaire

Guidelines on Ethics and Safety in Fieldwork for Researchers in Human Geography

Research framing

Do I want to include my research partners in the development of my research aims, research questions and methodology, i.e. adopt participatory elements in my research design? How will I present/explain my research in the field? If partial disclosure of my research object is necessary, how will I justify this decision? And how will I go about the potential harms of this decision? How will I make sure that my research questions and terminology are respectful? How will go about the possible expectations (and/or frustrations) that my research generates?

I include conversation partners in the development of my research, to define aspects of importance and critical points. As a non-Muslim, I understand my lack of information on their situation and want my research to be led by insiders.

For my actual interviews, I need to formulate the concepts in understandable terminology > explain space/place making and liminal spaces with examples from their lives

The research concerns a lot of contact with criticism, and I need to be careful not to reproduce structures of prejudices in my interview > focus on their experiences and opinions, develop vocabulary in preliminary conversations, ask in interviews how *they* address/name issues/topics, make clear that they can follow up their statements at a later point & that I might contact them again to discuss things further

In interviews, the partners are people with their own lives and matters of importance > what I deem relevant may play no role in their life. I will need to accept this and separate my interests from research > write interview-diary for internal struggles, things I want to address in next conversation, also make use of secondary interviews

Positionality

What power do I estimate to have over research participants from my position as a researcher, volunteer or host? What vulnerabilities and/or dependencies do I have? What perceptions and imaginations do I expect to generate through my background and identity markers (culture, gender, group, nationality, age)? How will I deal with this during as well as 'outside' work? How will I anticipate the possible security risks that this positionality provokes for all people involved (research participants and researchers)?

As white secular woman I am part of the group in society that produces the very structures of marginalisation that I try to address in my research. I will need to pay attention to not reproduce stereotypes/assume that I know better.

Also because of that I expect some hesitation to talk to me. However, as woman and outsider some critic will probably be easier for them to tell me. I will need to formulate my approach and questions with the focus on their agency so I will not be perceived as the 'enemy'

I also intend to enter the field over people they trust, with whom I first established my research focus and who potential interview partners trust if they vouch for me (at the same time I need to evaluate interviews for bias and will try to reach some partners independently)

Doing no harm

What harm could potentially come out of my research? To whom specifically? (e.g. marginalised/social minority groups, research assistants, physically vulnerable groups, myself, other researchers...)? How do I anticipate this? Ethnography and anthropology can be intrusive in people's (including one's own) lives – how can I anticipate this? How can I maximise the benefits emerging from my research? How flexible am I in my research method? Do I have a plan B?

Research will be done solely by me, and I see no potential for harm to happen to me
Harm to participants more in figurative ways: reproduction of prejudice/stigma (through criticising/asking about them) > terms & forms of expression regarding critical points will be formulated beforehand
I will remain at 'public' spaces (mosque or similar space) with my research, make clear to participants that while their experiences are personal, we do not need to enter personal spaces

Informed consent and voluntary participation

Do informants know what their participation in my research entails? Do they understand that they are free to pull out at any time? E.g. do any gatekeepers "force" them to speak with me? Have they become dependent on me – e.g. through research compensation? Do they know what happens with the data (storage, kind of analyses and publications) during and after research (see points 6 and 10)? Do I need to remind them that they can pull out?. Do I need an informed consent form and is the form I suggest using adequate (for instance, using appropriate language)? Do I have to inform others or need an informed consent form of others (e.g. parents in case of doing research with minors or head of an institution in case of doing research with particular employees and so on)? If I am using social media, have I considered the implications on consent and voluntary participation (e.g. blurred boundary between public and private space)? Does my research entail deception of participants at any point? If so, is this necessary and why? How will I anticipate this?

I will inform participants fully on my research and work with a consent form with all necessary information so I and them do not forget important points > send beforehand, speak about their sovereignty within the interview > no obligation to answer, able to finish at any point, withdraw statements
I rely on community mediation about personal aspects/their experiences > no expected compulsion, I also provide no monetary compensation so participation funds on voluntary engagement

Anonymity and confidentiality

How will I communicate to my research participants to what extent my research will be confidential and anonymised (→ see point 4 on informed consent above)? Have I taken the necessary steps to keep promises of anonymity and confidentiality? Is it necessary to anonymise the field site? What harm could come out of (not) doing so?

Goal: to find strategies/practices that are not inextricable from context > with this I can enable full anonymisation and hinder recognition through context
I will probably also criticise statements, so even if participants say they are okay with not being anonym, I will anonymise all as far as possible

The broad location of Zurich will be clear, but closer specifications will be anonymised as far as possible > prevent exposure to inside and outside community (criticism from peers and from politics, depends on findings)

Data protection

What problems could arise with recording and storing my data? How do I protect my data during field work from theft as well as from people who should not have access to them? Who needs access to data during and after research (research team, supervisor)? What will happen with the data after finishing the thesis? Which data can I make available openly and which not? (→ see section D on data protection below)

I work locally in Zürich, keep data on my onedrive (given by uzh so assumed safe?) or GIUZ server
Supervisor access to transcripts

Field assistants

What information do I have to include in the contract with my field assistants (legal, payment, but also informal terms of reference)? What are my available legal options of employing my field assistants? Do I have the necessary documents for employing my field assistant prepared (→ see section C administrative fieldwork preparation and the template contract for research assistance abroad in section E)? What agency and role status does the field assistant have in the research? How do I anticipate potential risks that the research generates in terms of my research collaboration? Do I have a platform to discuss issues that may emerge? Are mutual expectations agreed upon (in terms of overstepping ‘limits’ or taking risks)? What receipt and refund policy for expenses have I agreed upon?

No assistants

University and field country legislation

What permits do I need to conduct this research (visa, research permits, university letters, business cards, government letters etc.)? Do these documents limit my field access in some way? How can this be improved? How does this influence my data? Do these documents put me or my collaborators at risk in any way? How do I avoid this?

Checklist by uni, this questionnaire
more?

Personal health and safety

Do I have the necessary gear? What are my first steps in the field? How do I get from A to B? Do I know what to do if I get sick in the field? Do I have my health insurance and necessary vaccination, medication and first aid gear ready? Am I at risk of becoming isolated? Do I have possibilities to build up a support system (e.g. timetable, places to hang, contacts to pursue, access to internet)? Am I in danger of being harmed by anyone in the field (research informants, assistants, authorities)? Do I know what to do in case of emergency (e.g. embassy, contacts on the ground and at university)? In what case do I mobilise them? If any of my field sites are in

risk-prone areas, do I have a research safety protocol in place with my supervisor (→ see section D below)?

Local > not relevant

Writing and dissemination

Does the information I plan to release based on my fieldwork have benefits and/or contain potential harm? Could my research findings be problematic and for whom? Will I need to censor some results and why? Am I clear about who owns my findings and my data? Am I happy with the confidentiality arrangements I have made? How do I plan to anonymise my informants? Does this influence the kind of analysis I am able to make? Are my research findings openly accessible to the public? Is it possible to make my collected data available to the public or for future research (e.g. by storing it in a digital repository)? Are my plans on how my data will be used and shared in line with what I plan to tell my research participants before asking them for their informed consent?

Can be criticising, depending on findings could be used to further frame Islam in Switzerland as patriarchal/backward, but as Master thesis not relevant to public (but accessible)

Collected data probably will not be publicly available & not stored beyond writing my thesis

> Does the uni own my work? Do I?

Giving back beyond academic writing: sharing results

What is the best format to maximise the benefits of my research findings (to the research participants and other parties who might be interested)? How do I make sure that the knowledge generated travels back to research participants? Does this jeopardise the promises of confidentiality or anonymity I made? How will the information released best benefit the audience? Does it have a potential to do harm?

As I will anonymise, giving back results should not provide rifts within the community. To make results accessible, I plan to compile a flyer (or similar) with key findings/points of discussion to distribute

Depending on ability & findings, I plan to summarise my thesis in a small article for a local magazine to offer up

Also because of this, I will anonymise everything as stated above

Giving back beyond academic writing: supporting research participants

Do I compensate participants? What material compensation can I supply for time and energy? What problems could emerge with compensation (e.g. making participants dependent on me financially and less able to pull out of the research)? How could I handle these? Am I engaging in activism or feeling responsibility to making changes? What are the consequences of my public engagement with the way my research results are perceived in the field?

I will not compensate participants monetary.

Nevertheless I respect them giving me time and information and plan to directly acknowledge time from participants through small tokens of gratitude (bake cookies?)

I feel responsible to find something of use, but I need to be aware that change takes time and/or may not look as expected.

I will not engage publicly or in activism with my research.

> Can I connect interview partners that may profit from each other > do I ask them if they want that?

9.3 Informed consent form



Supervisor: Dominik Müller, Shona Loong
University of Zurich

Lea Gärtner
Student Master
Department of Geography
University of Zurich

Spaces of religion

INFORMATION SHEET

1. *What is it about?*

The goal of this study is to understand, how Islam is practiced and lived in different spaces. The focus lies on the experiences of muslim women in mosques and the Swiss society.

2. *Why me?*

As a Muslim, your experiences in Switzerland are unique and often receive little attention. Your experiences are central to my research - I want to learn from you and gain valuable insights from our conversations. For this study, it does not matter whether you are part of a mosque or not.

3. *Do I have to participate?*

No, participation is voluntary. You are welcome to ask questions before you decide to take part. If you agree, you may withdraw from the interview at any time. All information will be treated confidentially.

4. *What happens if I participate?*

You will meet me (Lea Gärtner) for an open interview that will allow me to get to know you and your experiences better. You should not discuss any topic that makes you feel uncomfortable. The interview will only be recorded if you agree to it.

Possible topics include

- Experiences with religion
- Your understanding of the community
- Places where you live your religion

If you feel comfortable, I would like to visit these places with you so that I can understand them better.

5. *Is there a risk associated with my participation?*

Your data will be treated confidentially and anonymised in the study. If you still feel uncomfortable with the study, you are welcome to talk to me about your concerns. You may terminate your participation at any time.

6. *Are there any advantages to my participation?*

With this study, I hope to be able to paint a better picture of Muslims in Switzerland and thus counteract various prejudices. Your contribution helps to understand the various facets.

7. *What happens with the data?*

All data, including notes, transcriptions and any audio recordings, will be stored on my password-protected computer. Only I, as the researcher, will have access to it and any data will be deleted once the work is completed.

8. *Will the study be published?*

The study will be publicly available as a master's thesis in English at the university. The thesis may be published as an article in a magazine dealing with Islam in Switzerland. I will send you a copy and am also happy to discuss my findings informally.

9. *Who organises the study?*

The study is organised by me, Lea Gärtner, in the context of my Master's Thesis at the University of Zurich

10. *Further information and contact details*

I am available for further questions.

Lea Gärtner

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Dominik (Supervisor)	Müller	Shona Loong, (Supervisor)	Dr. Benedikt Korf, Prof. Dr. (Head of Department)
Department of Religious Studies	Department of Religious Studies	Department of Geography (Political Geography)	Department of Geography (Political Geography)
University of Zurich	University of Zurich	University of Zurich	University of Zurich
Email:	Email:	Email:	Email:
dom.mueller@access.uzh.ch		shona.loong@geo.uzh.ch	benedikt.korf@geo.uzh.ch

I have read the information and I hereby declare my agreement

Date/Place _____ Signature _____

10. Personal Declaration

I hereby declare that the submitted thesis is the result of my own, independent work. All external sources are explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lea Gärtner', written in a cursive style.

Lea Gärtner

Zürich, October 2025

11. Use of AI Tools

AI was used as a supporting tool in this thesis. All thoughts and arguments are my own.

DeepL was used to provide translations, which were controlled and refined by me.

ChatGPT was used to aid formulations, structure paragraphs or formulate connecting sentences. No information was entered that could potentially undermine research participants' anonymity or contradict the ethical considerations (see Appendix 9.2).