CHAPTER 2.7

WOMEN, LEADERSHIP, AND PARTICIPATION IN MOSQUES AND BEYOND: NOTES FROM STUTTGART, GERMANY

Petra Kupping

Every Saturday morning, a group of about fifteen teenage girls meet in the al-Nour Mosque in Stuttgart to study the Qurʾān, discuss different topics, watch films, drink tea, and enjoy each others’ company. Occasionally they bake pizza together, or go on outings in the city. The group has existed for a few years. Originally it was run by the mosque’s imam, but he decided it was better for the group to be run by a young woman who spoke German (he did not). The imam could then withdraw and only do the theological parts of the group meetings. It took some effort to find a young woman who was willing and able to run this group. The imam eventually approached Rahma, a university student who had only a few years earlier come to Germany, but whose German was impeccable. Rahma notes, “I initially refused since I had never done such a thing and I had no idea what to do and how to run the group. But I agreed to give it a try.” Two years later, Rahma still runs the group with great enthusiasm. She sums up her experience: “It was hard in the beginning, but I learned a lot and really like the work, the group, and the girls.”

Rahma’s example of taking a leadership role in a German Muslim community illustrates larger transformations wherein Muslim women are increasingly taking over significant roles in communities, other

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All place, group, and personal names are pseudonyms. I changed a few small additional facts to protect the anonymity of individuals.

2 The fact that by early 2010 the mosque had three instead of the earlier two teenage girls’ groups bespeaks the success of these groups.
Muslim contexts, and the larger public sphere. These women participate in the concrete everyday making and remaking of communities, in the articulation of a rapidly growing German Muslim public sphere, and they participate and act as pious Muslimahs in the public sphere. They work to create a legitimate space for Muslims and Muslim concerns in different social settings and they mediate in difficult contexts between religious discourses and the pragmatic needs of everyday lives. These women work hard to create meaningful religious and social communities, to construct platforms for debates that are of relevance to them, to foster activities and engagements they deem important, to participate in larger public debates, and to speak up for the rights and needs of Germany’s growing Muslim community. Moreover, they contribute to the construction of local Muslim identities, practices, and networks. By becoming social or religious leaders, public participants, and activists, women like Rahma take over responsibilities of running particular groups or activities, and also become religious, cultural, and social mediators and translators. They encourage and maintain debates in their groups about relevant subjects; attempt to address conflicting demands and concerns; try to formulate new positions, practices, and relationships; encourage participation in new spheres; and, finally, they situate themselves, their groups, and communities in the broader public sphere.

Analyzing the specific contexts of Rahma and two other women and their formal or informal leadership in Stuttgart, I argue that these women are central in the construction of not only Muslim communities, but also Muslim identities, practices, modes of living, and ways of civic participation in a European urban context. While these women’s involvements and activities are often unrecognized, they constitute relevant forms of citizenship in a multicultural and multireligious society.

_Becoming Part of the City_

Like other European cities, Stuttgart has in the last decades witnessed the emergence of a rapidly growing Muslim population.³ As the state

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