

A Review on the Fundamental Aspects of Female-Friendly Prayer Areas in Shopping Centres

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ABSTRACT

Performing the five-time prayer is an obligation for every Muslim, no matter where they are. The provision of prayer rooms in commercial buildings is one of the facilities offered by building managers to accommodate Muslim buyers in most Muslim countries. However, the *muşallá* provided is often remote, placed in a small or poorly planned space that most users, especially women, will feel uncomfortable and uncomfortable. This article aims to identify the feasibility of places of worship facilities for women in malls. The method in this study is qualitative with a descriptive-analytical approach. The results showed that the problems that came to the fore included the unresponsiveness of prayer rooms for the needs of women, inadequate entrance locations, uncomfortable ablution places, not being equipped with the necessary facilities, and some even not being child-friendly for parents. From this literature search, several research recommendations to investigate features and facilities in prayer rooms to make the area more responsive to the needs of Muslim female buyers. The results of this research have contributed to the development of Islamic education, namely increasing mutual awareness about the importance of providing decent worship facilities, especially for women.

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Introduction

The 5 daily prayers (*Salat*) are obligatory acts for Muslims. It is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and this act of worship is for Muslims to maintain their faith and devotion to the Almighty creator. By imposing the five prayers on Muslims, it does not mean that the religion is restricting the movements of the believers to go about their daily lives, in fact, mosques and prayer halls (also called *muşallá*) are created for Muslim worshippers to have better accessibility to the prayer facilities. Mosques are continuously being built every year to cater to the growing number of Muslim populations around the world. With the evolving nature of modern lifestyle in particular, Muslims not only perform prayers in mosques but also in prayer areas situated in different amenities such as shopping malls, buildings and rest stops. Such is provided for the convenience of Muslims to address issues of being able to perform the prayer

within a specific and required time frame. The Muslim citizens in Brunei Darussalam are blessed to have access to more than a hundred mosques and prayer areas located all around the country. However, it is notably realized that the prayer area offered to male and female are significantly different in terms of facilities, space area and location. It was observed that some prayer areas are not responsive to the female needs as compared to the male gender.

This conceptual paper therefore aims to analyze factors to be taken into consideration in providing a conducive and women-responsive prayer areas in shopping centers. Muslim women in Brunei especially, will benefit from this research as it is with the intention of making women's experience more convenient and easier when they have to perform prayers outside their homes. Furthermore, the women's perspective on their experiences of going to the mosque or any designated prayer areas can be further understood and consequently improvements can be made by the relevant authorities when maintaining the existing prayer areas. From this research, those who intends to build prayer spaces can factor in the issues that are emerging from this research and therefore, be able to offer a more conducive environment for female users to perform religious duties and other activities such as learning the Quran.

Gender segregation is an issue that continues to persist in the contemporary world, whether in the workplace, in school or in public sphere generally. Many efforts are made in order to achieve gender equality of which one of them is by creating gender-exclusive spaces to meet the demands of the public where both genders are allowed to do what they need to do. Moreover, this has resulted in factors that contribute to the difference in gender treatment. In this paper, the researcher will be identifying the facilities that are provided in the prayer areas located in commercial buildings and relate them to how women are not able to make full use of the amenities due to the difference in gender treatment. Moreover, it becomes additionally challenging when trying to locate certain amenities especially when it is not an amenity that is a need by the majority. For example, a designated prayer room in commercial buildings for Muslim shoppers. The purpose of the paper is to promote better awareness of the needs demanded by the females.

Problems that will be addressed are for the prayer areas in shopping centers around Brunei. It is undeniable that Brunei has many mosques and prayer areas given that the official religion is Islam and the majority of the population is Muslim (CIA The World Factbook, 2021). Despite this abundance, there is still the concern for female prayer spaces that may not be conducive for them. Such matters include the location of the female prayer spaces placed in a much more secluded area compared to male prayer area, and it may be hard to locate for some women. Further observation shows that several facilities provided for females are restricted

in few prayer halls such as far ablution area from the prayer room, not family-friendly and sharing spaces for both genders when there is the 'awrah factor in Islam.

Following the statement of problems mentioned above, this paper intends to review literature to address the following questions:

RQ1: What are the challenges that women face when going to the prayer area in shopping malls?

RQ2: What are the factors to consider in a prayer hall that can make it women-responsive?

RQ3: What are the facilities being provided in shopping malls?

Method

This research is qualitative research with a descriptive-analytical approach. The data collection method is to conduct observations, interviews, and documentation. In addition, the author also attempts to browse some of the earlier literature related to this theme. To collect previous literature, this search keyword is used to find existing literature on discussion topics: prayer rooms, gender spaces, shopping malls, mosques, women's access, and women-friendly facilities. The scientific search engines and academic databases used to search for academic sources of literature are Google Scholar, Google Books, Mendeley, ResearchGate, and ScienceDirect.

Findings and Discussion

Gender Segregation in Public Spaces

The 21st century is a witness to the world that is constantly evolving and providing solutions that our ancestors could not have thought about in the early century. Despite that, Quinn (2010) claims that issues such as gender gap is still a universal challenge for the rest of the world, whether in politics or in public life. In this research, the initiatives and approaches that are currently being raised and formed will be discussed in order to reduce the gap of gender inequality. United Nations (2015) have stated in the Sustainable Development Goal 11.7 that by the year 2030, we should be able to "provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities".

There has been a considerable amount of literature suggesting that the history of gender segregation is rooted from the majority number of men being the main wage-earner in a household. Therefore men are expected to spend more time accessing the public spaces compared to women (Güney, 2014). Güney (2014) agreed that the emerging public spheres have been designed to cater more towards the interests of males without considering the effect

it would have on females and their needs. This theory of ungendered urban spaces is further affirmed by the studies such as Terraza et al. (2020) and Mortazavi (2020) which shows that the roles of architects and town planners were previously conquered by men in the past.

On another note, conservative opinions were formed regarding the rightful place of women, in that they should remain only in private space and in their homes, and these women are expected to attend solely to household matters (Güney, 2014; Kanes et al., 2019; Khamnoi & Ayuwat, 2019). According to Kanes et al. (2019), the formation of gendered distinctions in a public sphere could also be due to the gender bias, religion or custom (Khamnoi & Ayuwat, 2019). However, with the rising issues of gender discrimination, Kanes et al. (2019) claimed that more spaces catering to women are being built with hopes to reduce the inequality that women are experiencing.

First, *The Treatment of Women in Public Spaces*. Exclusion of women in spaces of public power is rooted from the patriarchal system where men are seen to be threatened by the possibility of women's independence (Sadiqi, 2017). The difference in public treatment of men and women are apparent. To this day, the movements of some women in the Gulf are still restricted where they are not allowed to travel with a family member (Golkowska, 2017). Women are expected to not be outside of their home for a long period of time without valid reasons (Khalili & Fallah, 2018). However, some countries are seemingly progressing towards achieving gender equality by accepting the presence of women in public spheres.

Second, *Initiatives for Gender-Exclusive Spaces*. Various initiatives have been created in order to achieve a gender-sensitive community such as allocated seating area in public transportations (Kusters, 2017), women-only parking spots in shopping malls (Peters, 2013), breastfeeding rooms in shopping malls (Mohammad Nor & Hussein, 2018), women-only café (Amin & Ahmed, 2020) and women-only parks (Iqbal, 2018). Increasing reports of unpleasant experiences that women have faced such as theft, harassment and other culturally inappropriate acts in public spheres are grounds for the establishments of these gender-exclusive spaces (Peters, 2013).

In countries such as India, Japan, China and Malaysia, a designated women seating area in buses, trains and subway carriages for female commuters are created to ensure the safety of these commuters and to avoid the possibility of sexual harassments when they need to travel at peak or odd hours (Shah et al., 2017). Ceccato et al., (2016) emphasizes that unreliable public transportation will further restrict a woman's mobility. When South Korea first started the "Women-friendly Seoul" project in 2009 by introducing a women-only parking space (Zaragovia, 2009), this great initiative was then followed by other European and Asian countries in providing a designated parking area for female drivers that is well-lit and located

near entrances of the shopping centres with functioning monitoring systems for the same reason, that is establishing security and convenience for the female shoppers (Budd et al., 2016).

In addition to that, women-related facility such as lactation rooms is in demand especially by hustling mothers who require those facilities to make their daily activities easier, whether in their workplace or in public spheres. A study carried out by Hauck et al., (2020) showed that being able to breastfeed in public should be normalized and prioritized and that includes the setting up designated areas for these mothers and their infants.

Women and Places of Worship

With the difference in treatment received by women when in public spaces, Vishnoi (2018) recognized that there is also the dispute on whether to accept or oppose to women being barred from entering the places of worship across religions and this matter has been apparent since centuries ago. The strong causal factor to justify the restriction is the women's menstruation which is feared to affect the purity of the place (Ibrahim, 2020). First, Women's Presence in Mosques from The Islamic Perspective. Mosques have been built to welcome people of both genders regardless of age or race. In the beginning of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had never restricted women to come to the mosque but rather welcome women to participate in any religious activities and he also provided an appropriate space in the mosque to allocate certain times to listen to the issues of women without any interference from men (Utaberta et al., 2018).

Prayer spaces other than in mosques are created for the convenience of everyone to perform the daily prayers. The environment should be conducive for all users to hold any religious activities (Sarial et al., 2015). Other than praying, a recent study by Nyhagen (2019) showed that women are motivated to frequent the mosques to obtain a better sense of belonging and also for reasons such as learning about the religion while strengthening relationships within the community. However, there are still perceptions that women are expected to pray at home while men are obligated to perform their prayers at the mosque especially during Friday prayers (Prickett, 2015). Like other public spaces, some mosques are designed without taking into account the proper requirements for the women, in terms of "awrah" and accessibility of the prayer area. A study on Istanbul that housed approximately 3,000 mosques reported that half of the places of worship are not women-friendly (Batuman, 2018).

Second, Challenges that Women face in Prayer Area. Prayer area in this paper is not limited to just mosques as there are *muşallá* and other prayer areas such as in shopping malls. Designated areas are offered for the use of both genders in public locations to accommodate

Muslims in performing their prayers. Despite that, there are challenges that have been identified when women congregants go to these prayer areas. While there is limited research identifying challenges that Muslim women experience in the prayer areas, these gaps need to be acknowledged and become the motivation for this research.

Limitations found in female prayer areas are manifold as recognized by a number of authors and these limitations are the factors leading to the unresponsiveness to women's needs such as smaller prayer area compared to men's, secluded entrance, locked doors to the room, poorly ventilated area, unequipped with the necessary items such as prayer hijab and prayer mat, inconvenient location of the ablution area, and not child-friendly for the mothers (Hamid et al., 2015; Ibrahim, 2020; Nyhagen, 2019; Snijders, 2019; Utaberta et al., 2018). As a result of these issues, it has significantly led to women feeling less welcomed and uncomfortable as they are being greatly inconvenienced when they needed to pray outside of their homes (Utaberta et al., 2018). Prior research also shows that from the layout of the prayer area, the 'awrah factor of women is not being considered when the privacy of women became unguaranteed especially when they are performing ablution in which the act of it requires women to take off their veils to prevent from wet clothing (Suratkon et al., 2018).

Third, Design Aspects of a Proper Prayer Area. A proper area for one to perform his or her prayer in shopping malls should be designed with the aspects of providing convenience, comfort and safety (Peters, 2013). From the Table 1, the design of a *muşallá* should be fulfilling the needs of the individual, communal and environment. It can also be seen that a *muşallá* serves various purposes other than what it is commonly known for, which is praying.

Table 1 Three main aspects that incorporate the truly and functional *muşallá*.

A <i>muşallá</i> to an individual	A <i>muşallá</i> to a community	A <i>muşallá</i> to its environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place of solace • A place to seek refuge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place for gathering • A place for learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place for shelter • A place to complement nature
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place to find inner peace • A place to rest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place to conduct discourse • A place to mourn and take heed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place of harmonious composition and tranquility • A place to balance the element
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place for physical and spiritual cleansing • A place of humility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place to fulfill duties and obligations • A place to express 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place to begin or continue a journey of righteousness • A place of serene juxtaposition between creation and the created
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place for reflection of one's deeds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place to celebrate and solemnize 	

* Adapted from "Gender and Sustainable Urban Mobility." By D. Peters, 2013, p.153 (<http://www.unhabitat.org/grhs/201>)

Conclusion

This paper has found that there is still very few research conducted on the challenges that Muslim women face when going to the prayer areas in shopping centers even though it is an issue that can bring inconvenience to a woman's daily life. Therefore, the researcher aims to bring into light the perspective of women and have the needs of women be further understood through the provision of existing and future facilities. Future research intends to investigate the Muslim women's experience when going to the prayer area and the extent to which these prayer areas are responsive to women's needs as well as study the details of facilities provided in the existing prayer area in commercial buildings. Providing a convenient and comfortable prayer area in shopping malls is important in order to give more satisfaction to users, especially female. Thus, a proper design guideline and standards should be implemented and complied with so that the purpose can be achieved in providing better facilities. In conclusion, the purpose of this paper is to raise awareness that more research is needed to find out about Muslim women's needs especially related to prayer areas. By identifying the causal factors that lead to the lack of facilities, it can help relevant parties of the management to be more considerate when building prayer areas in their shopping centers.

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