

Investigating Female Accessibility and Prayer Space in Mosque Architecture: A Case Study in Dhaka, Bangladesh



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Received: 30.08.2023, Accepted: 23.10.2023

DOI: 10.17932/IAU.ARCH.2015.017/arch_v09i2002

Abstract: The paper aims to investigate the spatial quality and availability of prayer space and accessibility for females in mosques of Bangladesh. The paper examines Islamic scriptures and argues that it is fundamental to consider designing accessible prayer spaces for women while designing mosques. The study proves that despite having religious instructions to allow women in the mosque, women prayer spaces are unavailable in most of the mosques of Dhaka city, resulting women not be able to enter the mosques. Seven sample mosques were selected in total for study within walking distance from a central location point of Kafrul residential area among which, one mosque is under cantonment authority nearby. Non-participant Complete Observation methods were applied for the study of the cases. The study shows that none of the six community mosques have accessibility or prayer space for females, which prevents female worshipers from attending. Only the mosque in the nearby cantonment area has a female prayer space, which was also analyzed to represent the provision for women in the city's mosques where it is available.

Keywords: Muslim urban community; community mosque, Dhaka mosque architecture; female prayer space

Dhaka, Bangladeş'te Cami Mimarisi İçerisinde Kadın Erişilebilirliği ve İbadet Alanlarının İncelenmesi: Bir Vaka Çalışması

Özet: Bu makale, Bangladeş'teki camilerde ibadet mekanlarının ve kadınların erişilebilirliği konusundaki mekânsal kalite ve kullanılabilirlikleri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale, İslami metinleri incelemekte ve cami tasarlanırken kadınlar için erişilebilir ibadet alanlarını tasarlamamanın temel olduğunu savunmaktadır. Çalışma, camilere kadınların girmesine izin verilmesi yönünde dini talimat olmasına rağmen, Dhaka şehrinin çoğu camisinde kadın ibadet alanlarının bulunmadığını ve bu durumun kadınların camilere girmesini engellediğini kanıtlamaktadır. Kafrul konut alanının merkezi bir noktasına yürüme mesafesinde toplam yedi örnek cami seçildi, bunların arasında yakındaki bir kantonment yetki alanındaki bir cami de bulunmaktadır. Vaka çalışmasının incelenmesi için Katılımcı Olmayan Tam Gözlem yöntemi uygulanmıştır. Çalışma, altı topluluk camisinin hiçbirinin kadınlar için erişilebilirlik veya ibadet alanı sunmadığını, bu durumun kadın ibadetçilerin katılımını engellediğini göstermektedir. Yalnızca yakındaki kantonment alanındaki camide kadınlar için bir ibadet alanı bulunduğunu, bu durumun şehirde bulunduğu yerde kadınlar için sağlanan imkânı temsil etmek üzere analiz edildi.

Anahtar kelimeler: Müslüman şehir topluluğu; topluluk camisi, dhaka cami mimarisi; kadın ibadet alanı.

1. INTRODUCTION

Accessibility for women in South Asian community mosques slightly contradicts the guidelines of Islamic origin, including in Bangladesh. Women are not generally allowed to enter any mosque and pray; rather they need to make sure that there is dedicated space for women to pray. Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world in the 21st century in terms of percentage and worldwide spread [1]. Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country containing 150 Million Muslims, which is 91.04% of its total population according to Bangladesh Population Census 2022 [2]. Not only that, the Muslim population has been increasing in the country compared to other religious followers in this country according to Population and Housing Census-2022 of Bangladesh [3]. Accordingly, with the growth of a huge population, the need for congregation, contemplation and prayer space for both Muslim men and women is always increasing in this country. Unfortunately, despite being more than half of the population (50.46% according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics) [4], females in Bangladesh are being deprived of getting into most of the mosques only for not having urban accessibility to the mosques as the consequence of social discrimination. Whereas, most of the scholars of Islam state that women are not prohibited, but rather exempted from going to the mosques for daily prayers, keeping in mind their child-rearing and other domestic responsibilities.

Being a mosque and knowledge-based religion, it is equally important for Muslim females to enter the mosque to learn about the religion which can have a profound impact on their personal and psychological development, enlightenment, and purification. Although women don't need to compulsorily pray at mosques like men, they are unquestionably allowed to enter any mosque, by maintaining the religious norms and etiquette. Women can attend daily prayers with the congregation and take part in the learning and sharing of knowledge according to Islamic guidelines [5]. And thus they need proper space and provision provided in every mosque. Moreover, especially while travelling outside, female accessibility in mosques is highly needed by the female Muslim segment of the country to perform the mandatory prayers at the right prayer schedule [6].

But the practice of women's accessibility as well as participation in the Salah/prayer in the mosques is very rare in Bangladesh. Women in the society are asked not to go to the mosques where there is no separate space allotted for the female Muslims. Mosques that have separate female prayer spaces only allow Muslim women to enter the mosque for prayer. Other mosques do not forbid it though; it is not socially practised. Muslim families even teach their children that a mosque is only for men, whereas women are only allowed if there is a separate prayer space allotted for women. Such Mosques sometimes also consist of a separate entry gate for the women. The architectural design of the mosques along with the entry gate plays an important role in this social practice of no or less participation of women in the mosques of this state. However, being the capital and center of the nation, Dhaka has few Jaam-e-mosques that have female accommodations for prayer in the mosques.

This paper aims to represent the current status of female accessibility in the built community mosques in the capital city of Dhaka. To narrow down the research area, a central residential area near Kafrul Thana was chosen which accommodates a mid-income neighborhood. The research outcome shows that none of the community mosques architecturally have accessibility or allocated space for females, which means women are not allowed to enter those mosques. At the same time, a mosque located in a more planned area, i.e. in the nearby restricted Cantonment area, containing a dedicated female prayer space beside the main prayer hall, was also presented in the paper to represent the characteristics of such mosques in Bangladesh.

The objective of this paper is to highlight the absence or lack of female prayer space in the mosques of the state. Another objective of this research is to ascertain the Islamic regulations regarding women's involvement in the mosque by thoroughly examining the Quranic and Hadith sources in the literature review, which will help to set out religious guidelines for designing mosques with female accommodation.

1. HISTORY, LITERATURE & PERCEPTIONS

This literature review aims to examine the root historical evidence to compare with the current practices in Bangladesh. It also showcases the current research on women's prayer spaces in mosques and their impacts on the experiences and perceptions of Muslim women. The overall historical background analysis and studies from the literature are structured in the following chart to determine the research question and objective of the research.

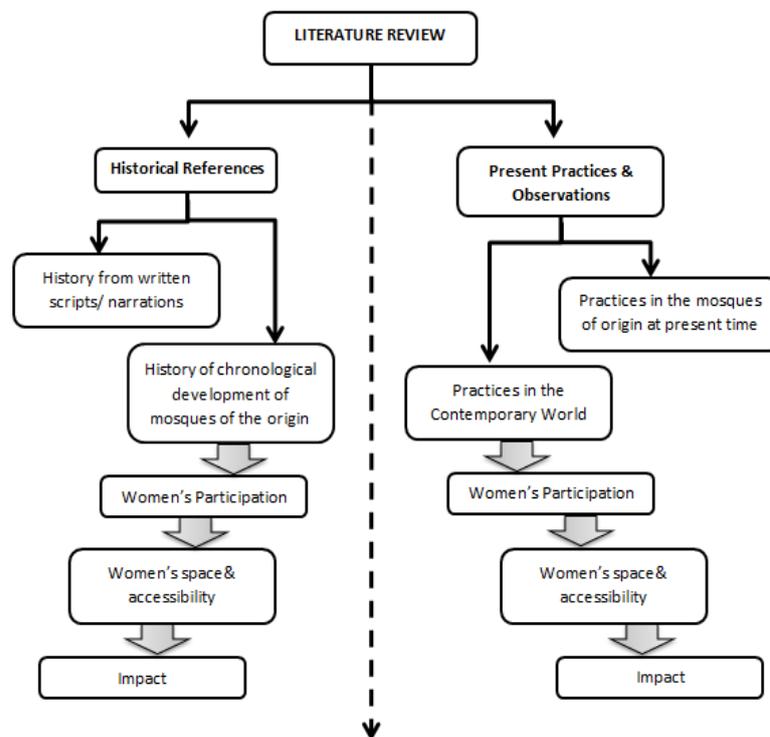


Figure 1: Structure of the Literature Review.

2.1 Historical References

Islam does not directly ask for separate female prayer spaces for the women inside the mosque. This is why the basic mosque architecture consists of a large courtyard at the center of the mosque to gather people for the congregation. “The Messenger of Allah Muhammad (ﷺ)¹ said: Do not prevent the maidservants of Allah from going into the mosque.” This is what we learn from the pure Hadith² as a statement from the Prophet (pbuh) narrated by Ibnu Umar (rah). So, if we want to know the foundation of Islamic Architecture based on its religious ground, we have to know how it was directed and practised during the time of Prophet Muhammad pbuh and his companions, and their direct followers.

‘Salah’ (or Salat) is the fundamental prayer that needs to be performed 5 times a day by every eligible Muslim. It is very important and sometimes mandatory to perform Salah at the mosques for the Muslim males, but it is optional for the Muslim females as they have to take care of the family and little children.

And there is no objection or prohibition for the females to enter the mosque for prayers with proper coverings, norms, and etiquette. For which we get references from pure hadiths from the hadith collection

¹ ﷺ is the Arabic form of ‘peace be upon him’ (pbuh)

² Hadiths are the narrations of the companions and witness of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which are the fundamental guidelines for Islamic religion.

books. Hadiths are the authentic sources of narrations of the teachings, activities, and history of Rasul Muhammad (pbuh), by his companions and witnesses. Below are some Hadiths collected from authentic sources regarding this topic:

a) Hadith regarding women's participation at mosque during Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh)

The following hadiths are from 'The book of the Times of As-Salat' from the translation of the book 'Sahih Al-Bukhari' which is recognized as the most authentic among all hadiths of Prophet Muhammad pbuh to know about the root practice of Islam taught by him. According to Hadith no. 578, 'Aishah (rta)³ reported that the women who believed in Islam used to wear veiling sheets and go to the Fajr prayer with Allah's Messenger. After the prayer, they would go back to their homes and no one could recognize them because of the darkness [7].

In Hadith no. 899 Narrator Ibn 'Umar reported that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Allow women visiting the mosques at night." [7].

In Hadith no 900 Ibn 'Umar(rta) narrated that one of the wives of 'Umar(bin Al-Khattāb)(rta) used to attend congregational prayers in the mosque, despite 'Umar's dislike for women attending. When asked why she had come out for the prayers knowing 'Umar's great self-respect, she countered by asking, what prevents Umar from forbidding her directly? Then the narrator replied by citing a hadith that forbids stopping women-slaves from going to Allah's Mosques -the statement of Allah's Messenger prevents him [7].

Also, there are several similar authentic hadiths in 'the Book of Salah', Sunan Abu Dawud, regarding what has been narrated concerning women leaving their houses for the Masjid, and it establish the practice and permitting the women to go to the mosques for prayers during the time of Prophet Rasul Muhammad pbuh (Hadith no: 565) [8]. There is also a Hadith in Sunan An-Nasa'I narrating that women went to mosques at the darkness of fajr time with properly 'covered' in dress in Hadith no 546 & 547 [9].

b) Hadith regarding women's attire, manners, and etiquette in the mosque

Sunan Nasai, Chapter 37, Hadith no.5131 reports that Abu Hurairah narrated that the Messenger of Allah said women who have perfumed themselves with incense should not attend 'Isha' prayer. (Sahih) [9]. Also, there are Hadiths (Hadith-1334) regarding etiquettes of men sitting for a while after finishing the prayer, so that women could get up behind and leave the mosque beforehand, so no mixing in the crowd happens on the gate while leaving [9]. Another Hadith collection book of Imam-Muslim compiled many Hadiths that prove the presence of women in mosques and their manners while praying behind men in congregational prayers [10]. So it was not prohibited, rather a set rule was guided to the believer women about how to get prepared for the mosque.

c) Hadith on women's activities in the mosque

There are hadiths in Sahih Bukhari- '8- The Book of Salat' Hadith no. 458 & 460 and Sunan Nasai- 'The Book of Masjid' Perfume in the Masjid: Hadith no 729 proves that women are allowed to do cleaning work in the masjid. On the other hand 'The Book of Menstruation' contains hadiths Hadith no 383, 384, 385 that prove even menstruating women are allowed to enter a mosque while not participating in the prayers. Which proofs that women used to clean and sweep the main hall room of the mosque at the time of Prophet Muhammad pbuh [7]; [9]. So it wouldn't be possible to happen if women were not at all allowed to enter the main hall room of the mosque.

³ rta= Radiallahu ta'la 'anhu means may Allah be pleased with him

d) Hadith on women's participation in the Eid Congregation

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) encouraged women to go for participate in the Eid Congregation at Eidgah⁴. There are several Hadiths as proof of this.

The Book of Jami' At-Tirmidhi, which is another source of authentic hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, contains hadiths that establish that the Prophet Muhammad pbuh encouraged young and mature women, even the menstruating women to participate in the Eid Congregations. The Hadith itself indicates the great importance of this participation [11].

Umm 'Atiyyah narrated that Prophet Muhammad would instruct women, including virgins, mature women, secluded, and menstruating women, to attend the two Eid prayers. Menstruating women were to refrain from entering the Musalla but could still participate in Muslim supplications. When one woman asked what to do if she did not have a Jilbab, the Prophet responded by suggesting that she borrow one from her sister [11, 7].

So we can see that the root practice of Islam always allowed women to participate in the congregations with proper dress codes and never thought it as a 'prohibition'. At times, during the Eid Congregations, when it is a matter of a big social gathering, even then women are advised and encouraged to participate in the congregation prayers by the noble Prophet Muhammad pbuh.

e) Hadith about the entrance gate and accessibility of women in the mosque

Although there is no evidence of separating the room of prayer in the main hall room of the mosque, it has been reported by Prophet's companions in hadith that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) asked them to separate the entry gate of the women to enter the mosque, so that women do not get disturbed or get crowded with the men to avoid impudence and indiscipline, and practised it throughout his lifetime [8].

In the 'Book of Salat' of Sunan Abu Dawud, in chapter 17, titled 'Separating the Women from the Men in the Masjid' contains Hadiths that prove women used to enter the mosque at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Prophet asked to let one door of the mosque assigned only for the women [8].

In Hadith no 462, A narrator named Abdul Warith reported from Nafi' from Ibn Umar that, The Messenger of Allah asked to leave one door solely for the women, and for this reason his companions did not enter from that door until they died [8]. This indicates that the Islamic ruling for women to enter the mosque is not only permissible but also has been given such importance that they deserve a separate door for undisturbed and uninterrupted entry.

f) Hadith regarding objection on women's going to mosque without proper dress code

Sunan Abu Daud, described in his Hadith compilation book this issue as 'a severity case'. In Hadith no 569 in his book, according to 'Amrah bint 'Abdur-Rahmān, 'Aishah (RTA) said that if the Messenger of Allah saw what women are doing now, he would have prevented them from going to the Masjid, like the women of the Children of Israel were prevented. (Sahih) [8].

Hadith no. 570: Abdullah bin Mas'ud narrated that the Prophet said, "The prayer of a woman in the innermost room of her house is better than her prayer in the middle room, and her prayer in the middle room is better than her prayer in the outermost room." [8].

⁴ Eidgah= A place set apart for public prayers on the two chief Muslim feasts.

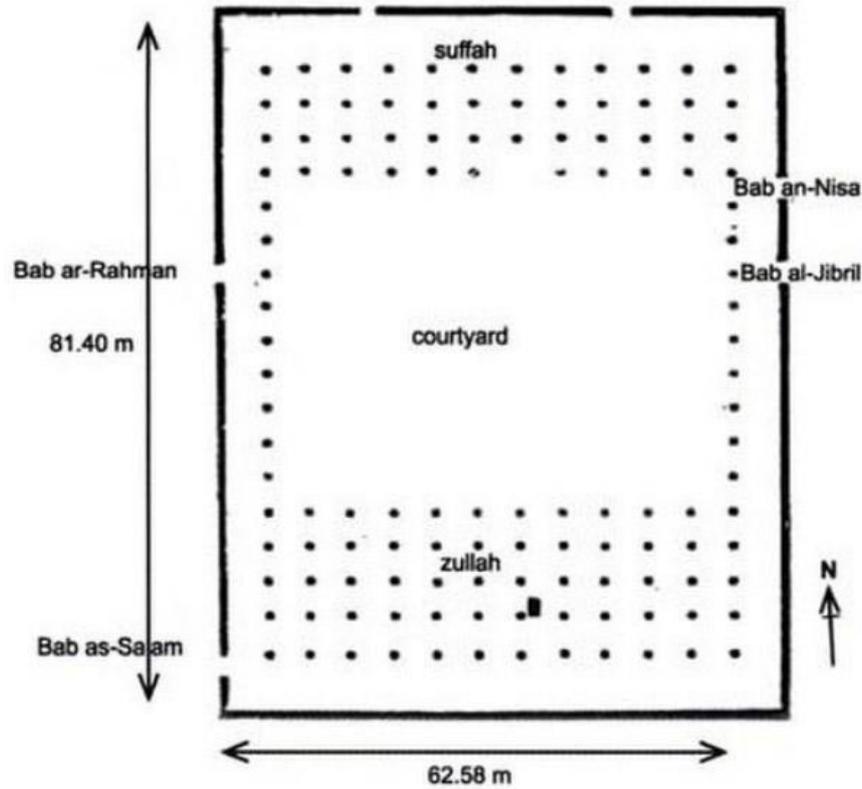


Figure 2: Plan of the Prophet's mosque, Masjid an-Nabawi in Medina, during the time of the Prophet's companion and 3th Caliph Uthman in 650 AD; the entrance gate of women is named as 'Bab-an-Nisa'. Source: HajjUmrahPlanner.com [12].

Despite many Hadith reports that women used to go to the mosque and attend everyday prayers during the Prophet's time, the mentioned alike few Hadiths are present which claim that women can be prohibited from the mosque if the authority thinks there is a chance of disrespecting the mosque environment due to lack of discipline. But only one or two hadith in a severity case, do not diminish other hundreds of hadiths that prove the participation of women in the mosque activities and prayers during the Prophet's time. So this must be also a part of practice among the Muslim communities in the mosques.

So from these guidelines of the Islamic teachings, we can come to the point that women should not be prohibited from attending daily or congregational prayers in any Masjid, as long as they follow proper dress codes and refrain from using perfumes. An architectural planning solution of the entrance gate, accessibility and covered (separated) or uncovered prayer space allocated for women is important to provide this facility in every mosque according to the Islamic teachings.

2.2 Present Practices & Observations

The role of women in mosques has been a topic of debate within the Islamic community for centuries. The concept of having a prayer space for women in mosques is a controversial issue within the Islamic community. While some argue that women should have equal access to prayer spaces in mosques, others believe that separate spaces for men and women are necessary for cultural and religious reasons. Many Muslim communities have historically designated separate areas for women in mosques, which were often smaller and lacked the same facilities as the men's section. During the 20th century, some mosques began to create separate spaces for women that were more accessible and accommodating.

A variety of studies have explored women's experiences and perceptions within mosques. These studies prove that the quality of women's prayer spaces in mosques is a significant factor in determining their overall satisfaction with the mosque experience. Women who have access to high-quality, well-maintained spaces with good lighting, air circulation, and proper ventilation are more likely to feel comfortable and welcome in the mosque.

In addition, studies have shown that women's prayer spaces that are physically separated from the men's section are perceived as more inclusive and welcoming. This is because women who are able to pray in a space that is not visible to men can focus on their worship without the distractions or potential harassment from men.

However, other studies have indicated that women who are not physically separated from the men's section may feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in the mosque, especially if they are subjected to unwanted attention or discrimination.

The research paper "An Analysis of Women's Access and Participation in the Mosques in the Contemporary World" comprehensively examines women's access and participation in mosques globally [13]. The authors begin by acknowledging the historical and ongoing debates over women's place in the mosque and present an analysis of the current state of women's access to mosques and their participation in religious activities in a variety of cultural and regional contexts [13]. The article has given great emphasis on the importance of the participation of women at mosques in religious activities as well as prayers by reference to authentic historical sources. According to the Authors [13] in Muslim countries, mosques have designated prayer areas for women, which may be in small rooms in the basement, on the ground floor, on a closed balcony, or in a small building attached to the mosque. That is also a practice in the mosques that give female provisions for prayer in Bangladesh.

The findings of the study indicate that despite progress in some areas, women still face significant obstacles in securing equal access and treatment in mosques. Cultural norms, religious interpretations, and political considerations continue to shape the experiences of women in the mosque, and there is a need for ongoing activism and advocacy for women's rights in religious spaces [13].

In a different study, Dr. Line Nyhagen conducts research on the participation and influence of women in modern mosques located in Western Europe. According to the study, Women's participation in mosque prayer is influenced by social, cultural, and religious factors. The study, published in the journal 'Religions', provides a comprehensive examination of the experiences of Muslim women in different cultural and regional contexts, shedding light on the diverse practices and interpretations of Islamic teachings regarding women's participation in prayer [14].

The author notes that while some women can participate fully in prayer at mosques in some countries, others face significant obstacles in accessing these spaces or are restricted to separate or inferior areas for prayer [14]. Dr. Line argues that these differences in access and participation reflect broader gender inequalities in Muslim societies and that there is a need to increase awareness and promote greater equality and dignity for women's space in the mosque.

Overall, the study by Nyhagen offers crucial insights into the ongoing challenges Muslim women face in accessing and participating in prayer at mosques. It underscores the need for greater awareness and advocacy on the issue and highlights the important role of women's activism in challenging gender norms and promoting greater equality and dignity in religious spaces. However, the study somehow overlooked the norms and regulations women need to maintain for participation in prayers at mosques, which is necessary to understand why women are restricted in such a way at mosques in most countries.

Nawawi et al. (2017) studied the mosques located in Malaysia, which is another contemporary Muslim country in the world, to investigate the character of the space provided in the mosques for women [15]. The study aims to investigate the space requirements for women in mosques based on the original sources of Islam, such as the Quran and Hadith, and how these requirements are applied in mosques in Malaysia. The

review is based on qualitative research methods, including analytical analysis of layouts and observations of traditional and contemporary mosques in Malaysia.

The study finds that the design of mosques in Malaysia is often gender insensitive towards women. There is no specific guideline on space provision for women in mosques, which results in obscured access, temporary prayer spaces, and a lack of accessibility for disabled and elderly women. The review also highlights the importance of women's participation in mosques, as they are an integral part of the community and engage in various activities such as education and socializing.

The study suggests that the design of mosques should take into consideration the needs of women, such as segregation and privacy. It is important to provide proper spaces and access for women, including separate entrances, prayer areas, ablution areas, and toilets. The review also emphasizes the importance of maintaining hijab (modesty) and privacy for women in their movement from ablution to prayer space as it instructed by the Islamic teachings [15].

If we look at the practices in the two holy mosques of Islamic origin, Masjid Al Haram at Mecca, and Masjid-un-Nabawi at Medina, and also the other mosques in Saudi Arabia, have separate entry-exit gates for the women to enter the mosques and separate prayer spaces for praying the everyday salah [16]. Whilst during the weekly Congregation on Friday and also in the Eid congregations, women are used to pray behind the men's last line, or there is a separate rowed section for the women to pray in the mosque courtyard or on the Eidgah⁴ courtyard.

In summary, according to different studies, the contemporary practices of women's participation in mosques do not always completely follow the root practice guidelines of Islamic origin.

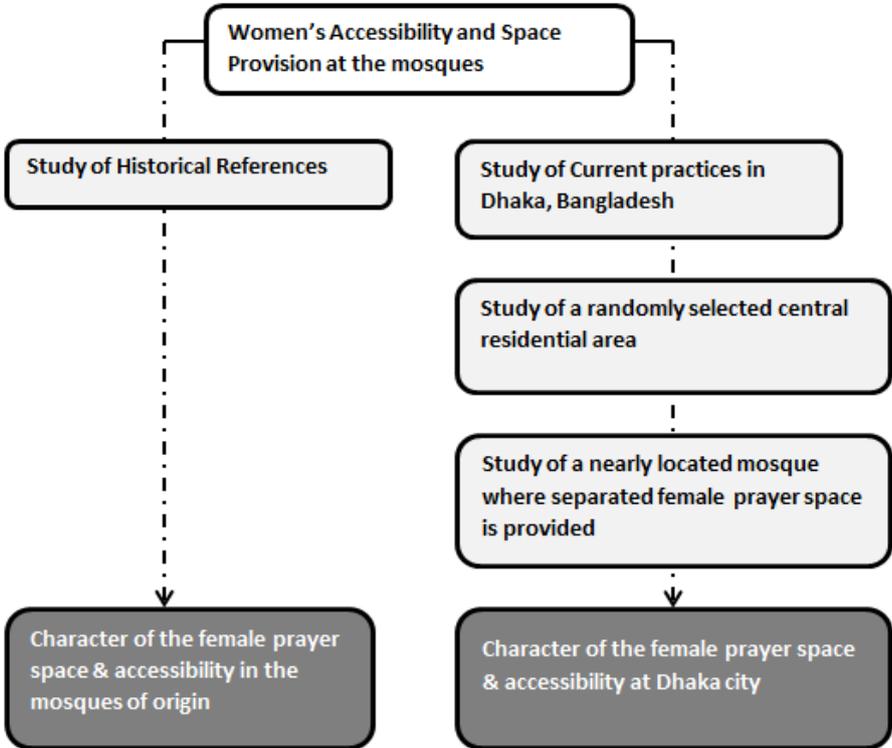


Figure 3: Step-by-step phases of the literature study

2. METHODOLOGY

A covert type non-participant complete observation method [17] was chosen to observe available samples of community mosques within walking distance from a central residential area in Dhaka. The reason behind the selection of a study area within walkable distance is that communal mosques need to be within walking distance for the ease of access of the community people and sustainability [18]. A randomly selected central point was chosen inside the residential area to start from and a circle of 10-15 min walking distance was drawn around it to determine the walkable area. The study was conducted by selecting the mosques around that point and as such we found 7 mosques around that walkable area. The data collection method includes covert type Non-participant observation of the cases [17] of the seven selected community mosques. The data was gathered within a period of around 14 days. The objective of the research is to investigate if the mosques welcome or have accessibility for females in the common prayer space or have separately allocated space for females. The evaluation was based on the following specific criteria:

- 1) Whether the mosques have allowance or accessibility in the main hall room for women.
- 2) Whether there is a designated area for women to pray during regular or Friday prayers.
- 3) In case women have access to a prayer space, the assessment considers evaluating the percentage of female prayer space compared to men's prayer space and what amenities are available for the female.

3.1 Selection of study area

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is one of the world's largest Muslim cities. Kafrul is located almost at the center of Dhaka metropolitan city. The Kafrul Thana area covers 7.89 square kilometres and is situated between 23°45' and 23°49' north latitudes and 90°22' and 90°23' east longitudes. It is surrounded by Cantonment Thana to the north and east, Tejgaon Thana to the south, and Mirpur Model and Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Thana to the west. The area holds a residential mid-income community consisting of a total population of 272939; among which males 147793 and females 125146 [19]; Hence female population is 46% of the total population in this area. The total Muslim in this community is 269163 which is 98.6% of the total population of the area [19].

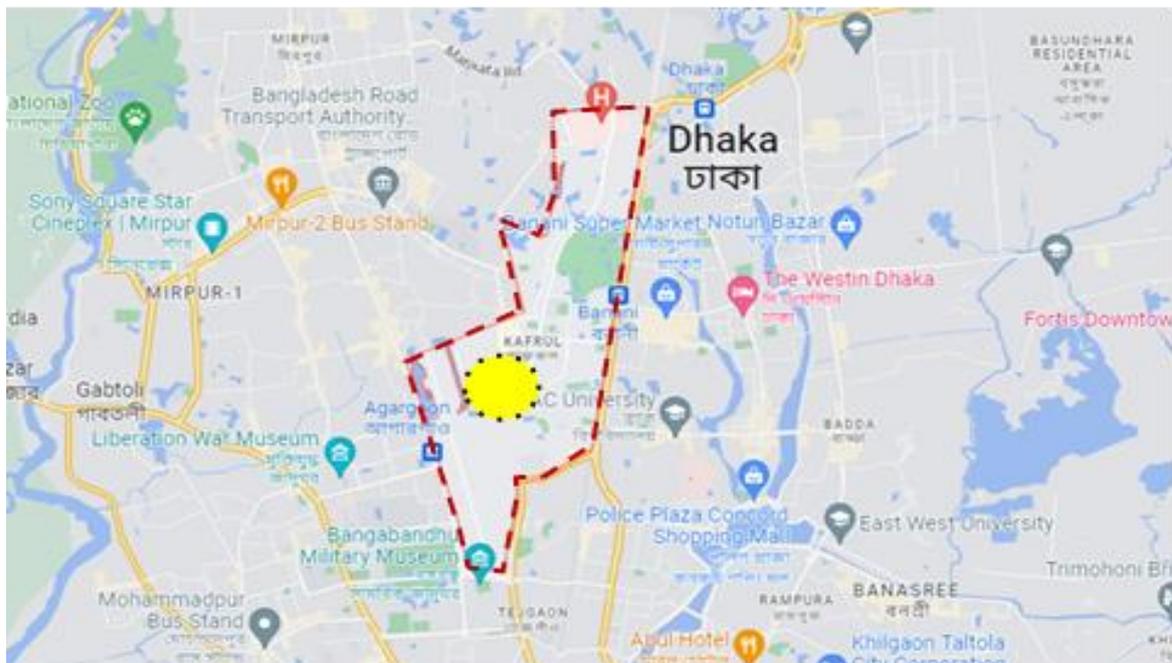


Figure 4: Kafrul Thana in Dhaka City, the yellow marked zone is the study area. (Illustrated from Google Map by authors)

2.2 Selection of sample mosques

To narrow down the vast research area, seven mosques were chosen within walking distance from the central residential area of Kafrul Thana. The mosques were selected within a 10–15-minute walking distance based on information collected from Google Maps and the Mosque Directory of Bangladesh [20].

According to the mosque directory of Bangladesh, in Kafrul Thana there are a total of 109 mosques, among which some mosques are located in the nearby cantonment area [20]. Among the seven selected mosques, the mosque named Rajanigandha Officer's Quarter Jam'e Mosque is situated in the nearby Cantonment area and is restricted for the civil people to enter at specific times. The selected seven mosques are shown in Figure 5 and are listed below:

1. North Kafrul Central Jame Masjid
2. Ahmodia Jame Masjid
3. Purbo Kafrul Kendriyo Jame Masjid
4. Tara Masjid
5. Uttar Kafrul Jame Masjid
6. Baitun Nur Jame Masjid
7. Rajanigandha Officer's Quarter Jame Mosque (located at Cantonment area)

2.3 Data collection method

From the central point of the residential area, 7 mosques were in walking distance, so at first the mosques were visited through the process of site reconnaissance method [21] either by walking or by rickshaw to observe if any women get access to the mosques. As for women's participation in daily prayers mosques are needed to be within walking distance, so the distances were counted by walking time. The mosque authorities were asked if women have space for prayer inside the mosque or not. The mosques were also checked during random prayer times to see if any women participated in daily prayers.

A non-participant complete observation was done to examine Rajanigandha Officer's Quarter Jame Mosque, which has a female prayer space in it. The Mosque is situated in a restricted zone under Dhaka Cantonment, which is restricted for the common people at times but opens at scheduled times. The observation included (1) plan analysis, (2) measurement of the male and female prayer spaces, (3) the availability of facilities such as ablution areas and restrooms, (4) women's participation during daily prayers and Friday Prayers, and (5) the overall accessibility of the mosque for women.

3. FINDINGS & RESULTS

The research outcome shows that only the mosque located in the nearby cantonment area has a female prayer space, but that is usually restricted to entry for the public. Except for that one, none of the selected six communal mosques within walking distance of this residential area have a separate space dedicated to women. Consequently, women cannot participate in daily 5 times prayers in those community mosques or Friday prayers because of the social practice or prohibition. Also, women are not used to participating in the Friday congregations or daily prayers by making separate lines behind the men's line according to the narrations on hadith in these general mosques. There is even a lack of space for the male on Friday prayers. Male devotees need to stand for prayer on the outside of the mosque due to the limitation of space during the Friday congregation (Figure 6). The reason behind this is not having adequate space for the mosque territory due to the lack of space and population density in the residential area in the overcrowded city.

On the other case in Rajanigandha Officer's Quarter Jam'e Mosque, located in Dhaka Cantonment Rajanigandha Residential Area in Kafrul Thana, which is partly restricted for civil people, has separate accessibility and prayer space for females to attend daily prayers and Friday congregations.

The female prayer zone in Rajanigandha Officers' Quarter Jam'e mosque is enough to accommodate 65-70 females. The quality of the female prayer space is good and well-maintained. It also has separate female

ablution space and washrooms attached to the outdoor of the female prayer room. But the female prayer space is so small that one has to pray outside the mosque in case women worshipers come over 70 persons, whereas, the male prayer space includes the whole main hall room of the ground floor of the mosque as well as the first floor of the structure. During the Friday congregations, the corridors and sometimes the outdoor spaces are also occupied by the males as it is mandatory for the males to come to the mosque for prayer on Friday. Female prayer space is not fully occupied on daily or Friday congregations may be because of lesser accommodation and restriction on public access.

The percentage of female prayer space (including the services) compared to the whole territory of the mosque (including the outside courtyard) is less than 4% whereas women’s count is 46% in this residential area (Figure 9). It is visibly clear that on Fridays, women do not feel the urge to go to the mosque as there will be a shortage of space for prayer. The shortage of space indicates that women are not welcomed or encouraged to come or participate in daily and Friday prayers.

The summary of the findings is, firstly, none of the six community public mosques within walking distance in the selected study area had any separate spaces for women. Women do not pray their daily prayers or participate in Friday congregations in these mosques. The findings represent the scarcity of female prayer space in the mosques of Dhaka. Secondly, the research included a case study of a mosque that has a separate prayer space for women. However, women were confined to a small area beside or adjacent to the mosque and they were not allowed to enter the main prayer hall. The area given for the female prayer zone does not reflect the female population of the area either.

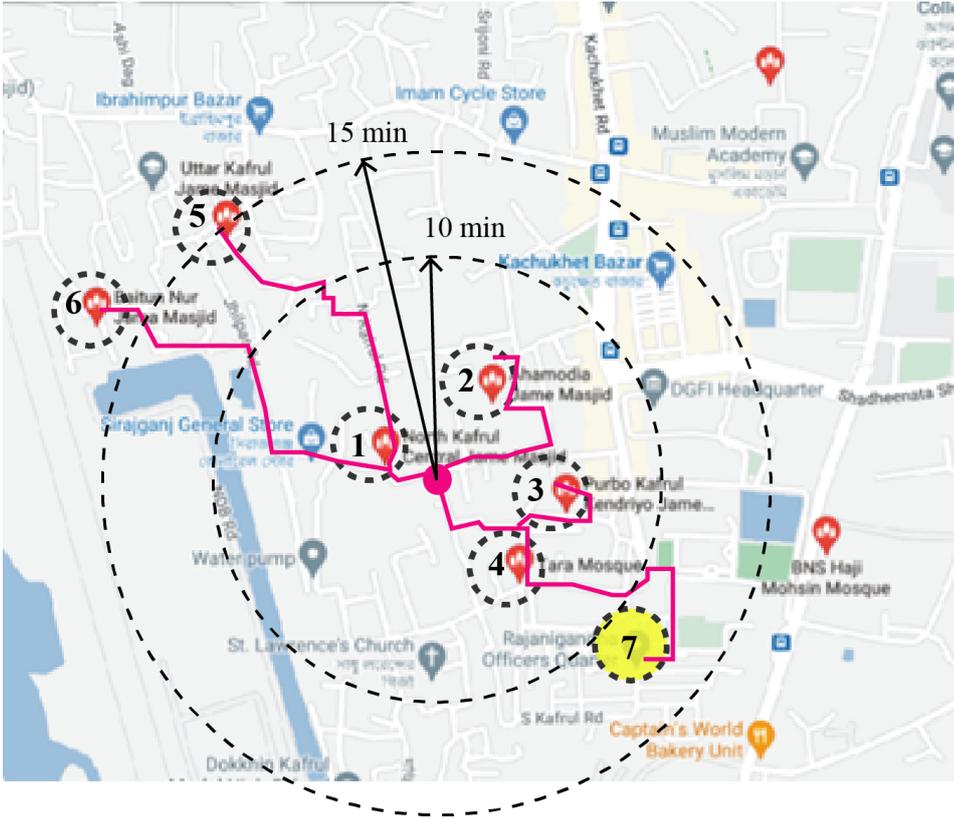


Figure 5: Selected six mosques’ locations within 10-15 min walking distance from the center point of Kafrul residential area; the yellow circle denotes the location of Rajanigandha Officer’s Quarters Jam’e Mosque which contains a well-maintained female prayer zone. (Illustrated from Google Map by authors)



Figure 6: Selected sample mosque pictures; the last one is the entry road in front of Tara Masjid, which is occupied by the Musallis⁵ during Friday congregational prayer. (Bird's eye view images sourced from Google Map, perspectives images are taken by the author)



Figure 7: Female prayer space quality of Rajanigandha Officer's Quarter Jam'e Mosque. [From left: separate access, separate entry gate, separated prayer space, separate toilet and ablution space for the females. (Photo credit: Authors)



Figure 8: Top view of Rajanigandha Officer's Quarter Jam'e Mosque. (Source: Google Earth)

⁵ Musalli means one who performs Salah prayer.

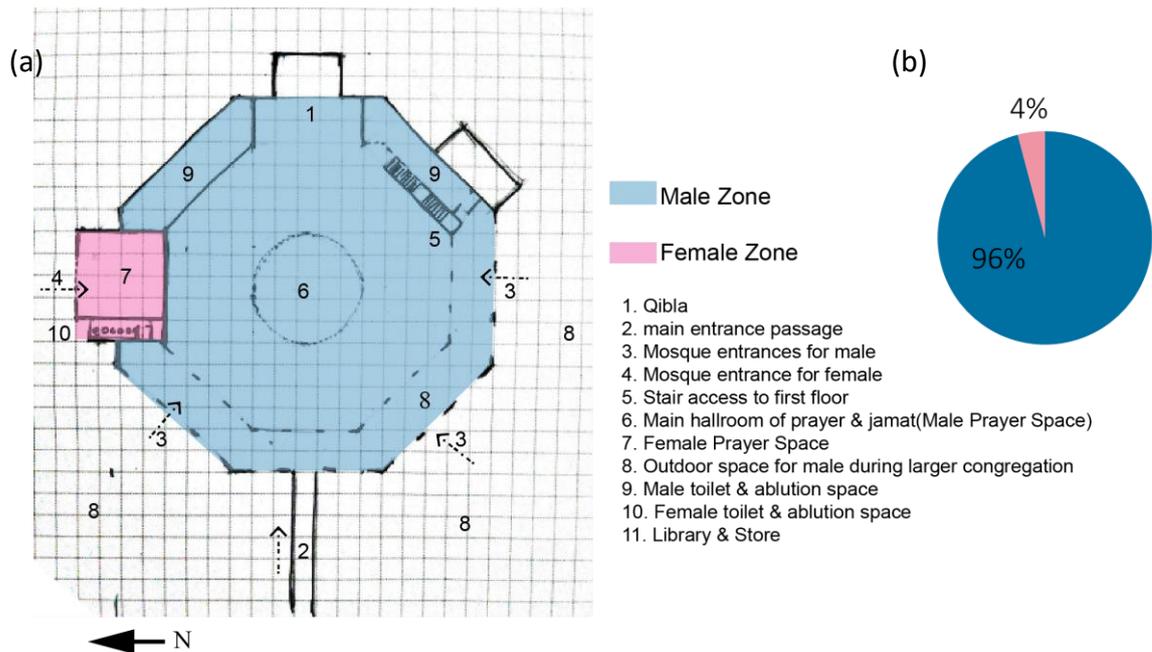


Figure 9: (a) Schematic plan of Rajanigandha Officer's Quarter Jam'e Mosque; the color code shows male and female prayer space divisions in the mosque. (b) The ratio of female and male prayer spaces. (Both are developed by the authors)

4. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPES

The research only could cover the mosques within walking distance from the central residential area of Kafrul. A larger study area could sum up a greater view or result of the overall situation. There was only one mosque for study as an example of a women's prayer space in the mosques of Bangladesh. There are the number of big central mosques in the city of Dhaka which include female prayer spaces, which are not included in the study.

5. DISCUSSION

The study highlights the lack of female accessibility in mosque architecture in Bangladesh and the importance of incorporating separate female prayer spaces in the design of community mosques. Not all the mosques have accessibility options for the females to enter the mosques as directed by authentic Hadiths.

In this regard, the question may arise, is the practice of mosque architecture in this region solely liable for this situation? The answer might be both yes and no. Scholars back in the past eras when Islam was flourishing in this region established that women did not need to go the mosques, and believed women needed to stay at home as they could not wear proper coverings and were not aware of the proper Islamic attire. Consequently, Muslims in this subcontinent generally believed that women are not allowed to go the mosques. But with time people have gained knowledge and especially women in this region are now aware of their religious right to go to the mosque and participate in prayers and congregations. People are getting more educated in this regard, and thus the demand and requirement for providing space for Muslim females in the mosques is getting high in the educated Muslim societies of Bangladesh.

The literature reviews and thorough study in this paper indicate that the quality and accessibility of women's prayer spaces in mosques are important factors in determining women's participation in mosques for religious dedication. When women have access to high-quality, well-maintained spaces that are separate from the men's section, it can lead to increased attendance and participation in mosque activities by devoted women with utmost comfort. On the contrary, when women's prayer spaces are limited in size or quality, it can have a negative impact on the mosque community, leading to decreased attendance and participation by women.

At present situation, due to the dense population in the city, Friday congregational prayers attended only by males is a rational consideration for existing mosques for limited space. However it is important to set guidelines for including female prayer spaces in mosques, considering the privacy and basic rights of Muslim women in the community.

The outcomes of this research also indicate a need for more research in this area to develop guidelines and standards for the design of female prayer spaces in the mosques of Bangladesh. Additionally, the paper exemplifies the implications of the social and cultural bindings of Bangladesh, which limit the accessibility of Muslim women to residential, social, and public spaces for daily prayers and congregations.

6. CONCLUSION

A mosque is a social hub for Muslim communities to acquire knowledge and wisdom which can help build a better society by the development of mental and psychological well-being for individuals and society. Islamic religious education focuses on building strong moral character, emphasizing both personal and national values [22]. Scholars proved that an Islamic religious setting with the practice of mosque-based daily praying habits and other Islamic activities can help prevent childhood obesity [23]. Scientific studies have also found that Islamic education positively influences motivation to prevent suicidal behaviours in society [24]. A mosque is a place of knowledge sharing and space for inspiration, motivation, and contemplation. Overall, a mosque has huge benefits and positive impacts on society if used appropriately by the community people and the young generation. While men are often engaged in outdoor activities or long-distance employment, women are often left alone with their children in the house, leading to unproductive use of technology and smartphones.

Instead, they could use their time more productively by visiting the mosque every day for self-enlightenment, improvement, and social interaction. If girls, virgins, pregnant women and women in society are abandoned from participating in this place of sanctuary, the kids i.e. the future generation will not learn to accommodate this culture into their life too. Excluding Muslim women from mosques deprives the feminine society and young children i.e. the future generation of Islamic teachings, ethics, beliefs, social activities etc. Above all, entering the mosque is an Islamic and religious right for women in a society that we cannot obstruct just by ignoring their space and accessibility in designing a mosque architecturally or socially. Urban planners and designers should also keep in consideration the inclusion of women's participation in the mosque while designing and planning roads and pathways surrounding the mosques within the housing estates and public places which is usually not in practice in the country.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the current status of female accessibility and prayer space in mosque architecture in Bangladesh. The increasing need for research on women's prayer spaces in mosques and their impact on Muslim women's experiences and perceptions is undeniable, particularly among educated Muslim families and females in this region. Further research is needed to understand the challenges Muslim women in Bangladesh face while accessing mosque spaces and to develop strategies for creating inclusive and welcoming environments for them. Additionally, research can be conducted to explore how women perceive, participate in, and experience this issue in the country. Design guidelines and standards should be established for female accessibility and prayer spaces in mosques, based on information from scriptures and historical sources such as Hadith and the Prophet's biography, many of which are already cited in this study.

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