

## Private in public space: The needs of Muslim women in Mosque spaces Case study: Al-Barkah Mosque, Bekasi, Indonesia

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| ARTICLE INFO  | ABSTRACT  |
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| <p><i>Article history:</i><br/>Received May 27, 2025<br/>Received in revised form June 30, 2025<br/>Accepted July 22, 2025<br/>Available online August 01, 2025</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i><br/>Islamic sharia<br/>Mosque<br/>Muslim women<br/>Privacy<br/>Public space</p> <p><b>Corresponding author:</b> Samsu Hendra Siwi<br/>Universitas Tarumanagar, Indonesia<br/>Email: <a href="mailto:samsus@ft.untar.ac.id">samsus@ft.untar.ac.id</a><br/>ORCID: <a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3050-5566">https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3050-5566</a></p> | <p><i>Mosques, as public spaces, function as places of prayer and centers of social, educational, and cultural activity. According to Sharia, Muslim women are not required to worship in mosques, but in some cases, many Muslim women still carry out activities in mosques. Islamic Sharia rules regarding Muslim women in public places, including mosques, should also be applied. The need for privacy for Muslim women in public spaces (mosques) is the subject of this research. This is related to Islamic law, mosque spatial planning, and the use of boundaries in space. The research problem is how the boundaries of mosque spaces accommodate the needs of Muslim women according to Islamic law. The case study is the Al-Barkah Mosque, a grand mosque in Bekasi City. The research method employed is a qualitative descriptive approach with theological analysis, based on Islamic Sharia. Observations were made on the mosque space, including zoning, circulation, and height and material limitations. Interviews were conducted with several Muslim women as users and managers of the mosque. The results of this study are in the form of evaluations and recommendations for mosque space according to the privacy needs of Muslim women at the mosque.</i></p> |

### Introduction

The mosque also functions as a public space that accommodates a wide range of community-oriented activities, including social, educational, and cultural engagements (Gusni 2023). As a communal domain, the mosque contributes significantly to both the intellectual and spiritual development of the Muslim community. Serving as one of the central pillars of Islamic spiritual life, the mosque not only operates as a place where congregants assemble to perform communal prayers but also embodies a symbolic representation of unity and togetherness in the practice of religious rituals (Astrini, Kurniawan, and Abdillah 2020; Suud Sarim Karimullah 2023).

Within Islamic teaching, Muslim women are not obligated to perform prayers in the mosque. Nonetheless, various circumstances encourage their participation in mosque-based activities that extend beyond ritual prayer, such as involvement in educational initiatives and social programs. The theological foundation for women praying in mosques is based on the *Hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad (Rangga F et al. 2020) wherein Umm Humaid, the wife of Abu Humaid As-Sa'idi, expressed her desire to pray with him. The Prophet responded: "I know that you like praying with me. However, your prayer on your bed is better than your prayer in your room ..." (HR Ahmad and Ibnu Hibban) (Nabilah 2023).

From a cultural perspective in Indonesia, Muslim women also serve as mosque participants, although the majority of attendees are men (Febriani 2025). It is undeniable, however, that

the presence and active participation of Indonesian Muslim women in mosque life are highly significant, even if not mandated under Sharia law. Many women routinely join in congregational prayers (*shalat al-jamaah*) and engage in mosque-based educational and social activities (Aryanti and Achmadi 2024). Another hadith, narrated by Ibn Umar, states: “I (Ibn Umar) heard the Prophet say: If your wives ask permission to go to the mosque, then grant it to them.” This demonstrates that there is no explicit prohibition against women’s participation in mosque activities.

For men, prayer in the mosque is considered obligatory, comprising the five daily prayers as well as *shalat al-Jum’ah* (Friday prayer). In particular, the Friday prayer establishes the mosque as an exclusively male congregational domain. Although men are the dominant users of mosque space, women also continue to engage in mosque activities, subject to religious principles that govern their presence in public domains.

The participation of Muslim women in public spaces, including mosques, is theologically regulated by the *Qur’an* and *Hadith*, particularly with regard to the spatial articulation of the mosque (Febriani 2025). The central issue of this research is the privacy needs of Muslim women in relation to mosque spatiality an essential concern that intersects with Islamic jurisprudence, spatial design, and architectural boundary-making.

Accordingly, the research addresses the problem of how mosque spatial boundaries can be designed to accommodate women’s needs for privacy while remaining consistent with Islamic law. The case study selected is the Al-Barkah Mosque. The methodological approach employs qualitative descriptive analysis, with theological interpretation grounded in Islamic law. Field observations were directed toward the mosque’s spatial organization, including zoning, circulation, and limitations concerning height and materiality.

Complementary to these observations, interviews were conducted with several Muslim

women, both as users and administrators of the mosque, to gather insights into their spatial experiences and perceptions of the mosque environment. The findings of this study take the form of evaluations and recommendations for the spatial configuration of the Al-Barkah Mosque, serving as design input that harmonizes with Islamic principles while addressing the privacy requirements of Muslim women in mosque spaces.

#### A Theological Review of Women in Public Space

Theologically, the regulations governing Muslim women in public spaces including mosques are closely connected to the principles of *mahram*, *aurat*, *hijab*, and spatial zoning. The concept of *mahram* in Islam is applied not only within domestic spatial arrangements (Siwi 2023), mosque rooms (Siwi, Mustajab, et al. 2013), and is also related to inheritance matters. *Mahram* denotes an individual whom one is prohibited from marrying and/or a person who is permitted to view specific parts of a woman’s or a man’s body (Sabiq 2004). The body parts that may be exposed to non-*mahram* individuals are restricted solely to the palms of the hands and the face (Sabiq 2004). The term *aurat* refers to the body parts that must remain concealed from others (Saaidah 2022). However, some Muslim women believe that the face is also considered as *aurat* (Fadilah 2024), which leads them to adopt the use of a veil for complete coverage. Meanwhile, the *hijab* functions as a divider or spatial partition that establishes separation and prevents direct visibility. Its regulation is derived from the *Qur’an*, particularly Surah Al-Ahzab: 59, which conveys that *hijab* can be understood both as a veil that acts as a barrier and as clothing that covers a woman’s body in order to conceal her *aurat*. Collectively, these three theological principles *aurat*, *mahram*, and *hijab* carry direct implications for the zoning and spatial organization of architecture (Siwi 2023) particularly within mosques as public spaces.



Figure 1. A warning banner for Muslim women's clothing (*hijab*)

The concept of “seeing but not being seen”

The architectural concept of “*seeing without being seen*” emerges as a spatial implication of the theological principles of *mahram*, *aurat*, and *hijab* (Siwi 2023). Within this framework, boundary theory for Muslim women extends beyond the notion of gender segregation or spatial division; rather, it constitutes a mandatory boundary tied directly to the preservation of visual privacy (Siwi 2023). Accordingly, Muslim women are prohibited from exposing their intimate parts to anyone other than their *mahram*. This establishes “seeing without being seen” as the foundational principle guiding the spatial zoning, placement, material selection, and circulation patterns in mosque design (Siwi 2023).

The application of this concept in public architecture, particularly mosques, can be realized through the spatial separation of men's and women's areas by means of opaque boundary materials. In practice, its implementation requires careful consideration of three interrelated aspects (Siwi 2023):

#### 1. Elements

Privacy may be ensured through the integration of spatial-dividing elements such as walls, windows, doors, floor levels, and partitions (Ardener 2016). The balance between solid and open surfaces must be critically evaluated concerning the angle of vision from the observer (men) toward the observed (Muslim women).

#### 2. Materials

Materiality plays a central role in preserving privacy within mosque interiors. Doors, windows, and partitions may employ frosted glass, wooden panels with lattice openings, or human-height curtains, all of which are commonly utilized in mosques to demarcate male and female zones.

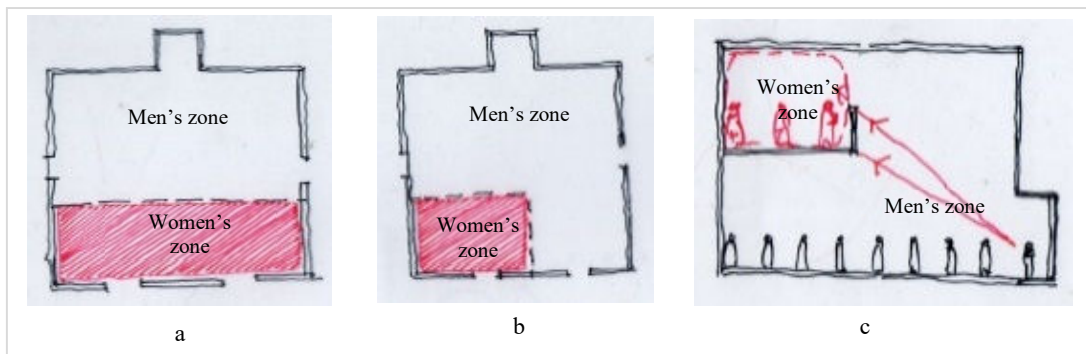
Importantly, the flexibility of such dividers must also be considered, particularly during Islamic educational activities, to ensure that congregants are still able to see the speaker.

#### 3. Design

Vertical differentiation through floor separation or voids offers an architectural strategy to obstruct direct visibility. This configuration allows for a public zone on the ground floor and a private zone on the upper floor, ensuring that women may safely remove their *hijab* when appropriate. Such spatial planning must rigorously adhere to the requirements of safety, comfort, and theological compliance.

Zoning within mosque architecture is therefore not limited to distinctions between *clean* and *unclean* or *sacred* and *profane* areas (Siwi, Yatmo, and Atmodiwirjo 2020), but also includes the essential demarcation of male and female domains. This theological foundation is supported by the Hadith: “*The best row for men is the first row, and the worst for them is the last row; and the best row for women is the last row, and the worst for them is the first row*” (HR Muslim) (Sabiq 2004). This principle of prayer-space

organization is illustrated in the following schematic representation:



**Figure 2.** (a) and (b) are the women's and men's accessibility zones at a single-storey mosque, and (c) is for a double-storey mosque

Accessibility within the mosque is thus regulated by the theological rules of *shaf* (rows for prayer) for men, children, and women, including specific regulations for women's *shaf* (Siwi, Mustajab, et al. 2013). This spatial arrangement has direct implications for circulation, as women's access routes to the mosque are deliberately separated from those of men (Siwi, Mustajab, et al. 2013). Separate entrances and circulation paths into the prayer hall are therefore designed to prevent interaction between the genders, a principle also extended to the design of ablution facilities.

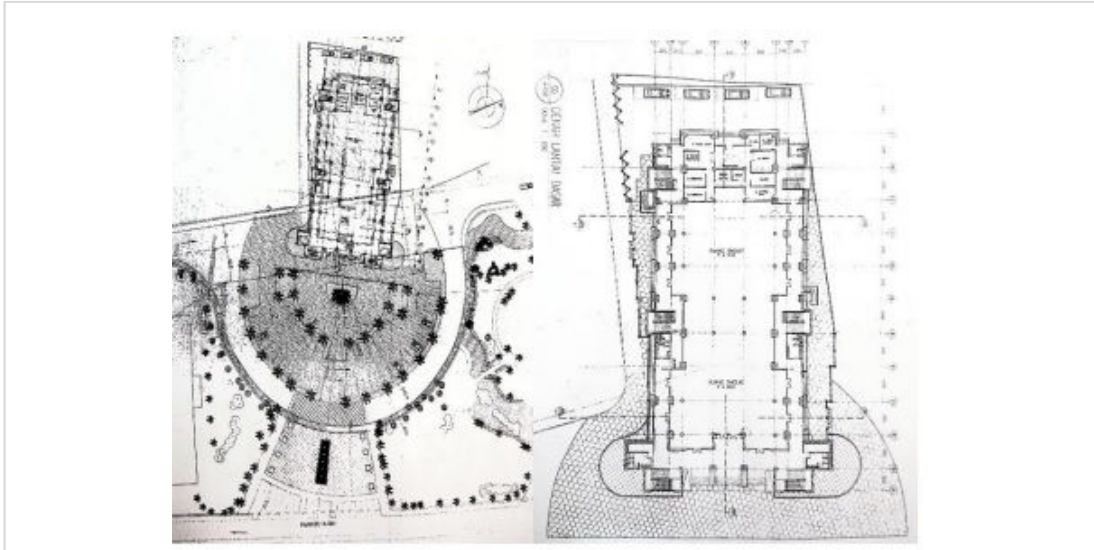
Review of Al-Barkah Mosque, Bekasi as a case study of research

Al-Barkah Mosque is a prominent religious landmark in Bekasi City, occupying an area of

3,370 m<sup>2</sup> and located at Jalan Veteran No. 46, Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia. Strategically positioned in the heart of the city, this mosque was selected as the case study due to its historical legacy and spatial significance. Originally established in 1890 by H. Abdul Hamid on land endowed by H. Barun, the mosque first functioned as a *Surau* a modest prayer and instructional facility known as *Surau* Al-Barkah. Subsequent expansion was initiated under the leadership of Subandi, who was serving as the Regent of Bekasi at the time. Later, in 1997, during the administration of Achmad Zurfaish, the Mayor of Bekasi, the mosque underwent a major renovation program and was officially designated as the Grand Mosque of Bekasi (Queenie 2025).



**Figure 3.** Jami' Al-Barkah Mosque, Bekasi



**Figure 4.** Al-Barkah Grand Mosque plan, Bekasi  
Source: (Fajar 2023)

## Methods

Bekasi is a buffer city in the Jakarta metropolitan area. This study adopts a descriptive qualitative method (Creswell and Creswell 2018), with Al-Barkah Mosque serving as the primary case study. The mosque was chosen based on its historical relevance and its symbolic function as the principal mosque of Bekasi, which elevates its status as an architectural and cultural icon within the city's identity. Data collection was carried out through direct field observations and in-depth interviews (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Respondents consisted of mosque administrators as well as female worshippers encountered during the study. A total of seven Muslim women were interviewed, five of whom wore the *hijab* (excluding the *niqab* or face veil) and two who did not. Additionally, the mosque manager was interviewed to provide institutional insights. The collected data were classified according to key analytical indicators: the principle of “seeing without being seen”, zoning, accessibility, and circulation. The research analysis was framed through theological perspectives and privacy theories related to gender, with particular emphasis on the spatial experiences of Muslim women. On this basis, recommendations were developed for the articulation of mosque spatial boundaries (Siwi 2023), to accommodate the privacy requirements of Muslim women while ensuring compliance with Islamic law.

## Results and discussion

Al-Barkah Mosque, as the grand mosque serving the Muslim community of Bekasi City, necessarily accommodates a wide spectrum of congregants representing various levels of religious understanding and diverse schools of thought (*mazhab*) in the application of Islamic law (Adiputra and Salura 2021; A. et al. 2020). Within Indonesia, the most widely practiced *mazhab* include the Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali (Alfatoni et al. 2024). Interpretations regarding the covering of *aurat* (intimate parts) differ across these traditions. For example, the wearing of the *niqab* (face veil) as part of the *hijab* derives from interpretations in the Hanbali and Shafi'i schools. However, in Indonesia, these *mazhab* are applied with relative flexibility (Rahmawaty 2024). For Muslim women, both *hijab* and *niqab* serve as boundaries between their bodies and the public sphere (Siwi 2023), constituting the smallest form of private space within a shared environment (Siwi 2023). Gender boundaries are visibly articulated in mosque architecture, particularly in communities where women adopt the veil and strongly uphold such principles. In this context, privacy emerges not as separate from, but rather through, the establishment of spatial boundaries (Siwi 2023). Privacy for Muslim women is thus inseparable from theological concepts such as *mahram*, *aurat*,

and *hijab* (Siwi 2023), particularly within public settings such as mosques.

During *Shalat al-Jum'at* obligatory for men mosque spaces are largely occupied by male congregants. This necessitates flexible management of spatial boundaries, with movable partitions used to separate male and female areas (Dekleva 2002). Such practices reflect the principle of spatial flexibility in mosque design, where areas may shift between “feminine” and “masculine” use, exemplifying the notion of

gendered space (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2001).

a. Implementation of the concept of “seeing but not being seen” at Al-Barkah Mosque, Bekasi  
At Al-Barkah Mosque, the principle of “seeing but not being seen” is most clearly implemented in the women’s ablution facilities. The mosque provides two separate ablution areas for women one located outside the main building and another inside.

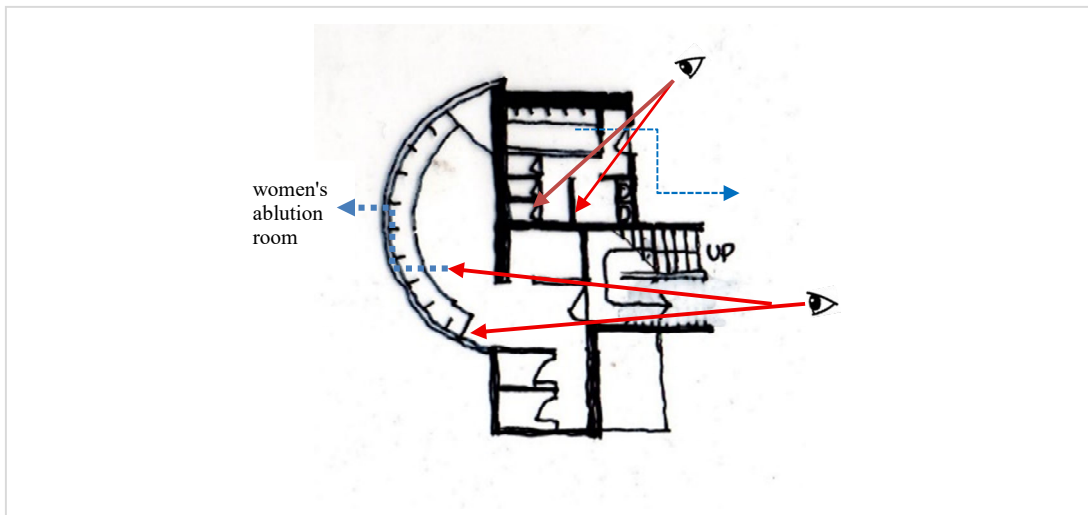


Figure 5. Position and elements of the boundaries of women's ablution rooms 1 and 2

The first ablution room features a circular enclosure with its upper section covered in green fiberglass to obscure exterior visibility. Despite this, some users expressed discomfort, feeling exposed to view from the outside. Conversely,

women who performed ablution while still wearing their *hijab* reported no issues. This aligns with boundary theory for Muslim women, which identifies the *hijab* itself as the most intimate form of privacy (Siwi 2023).



Figure 6. Women's ablution room 1

The second women's ablution facility, located adjacent to the female prayer room, is more effectively designed. With its solid wall dividers and doors, it prevents external visibility. The

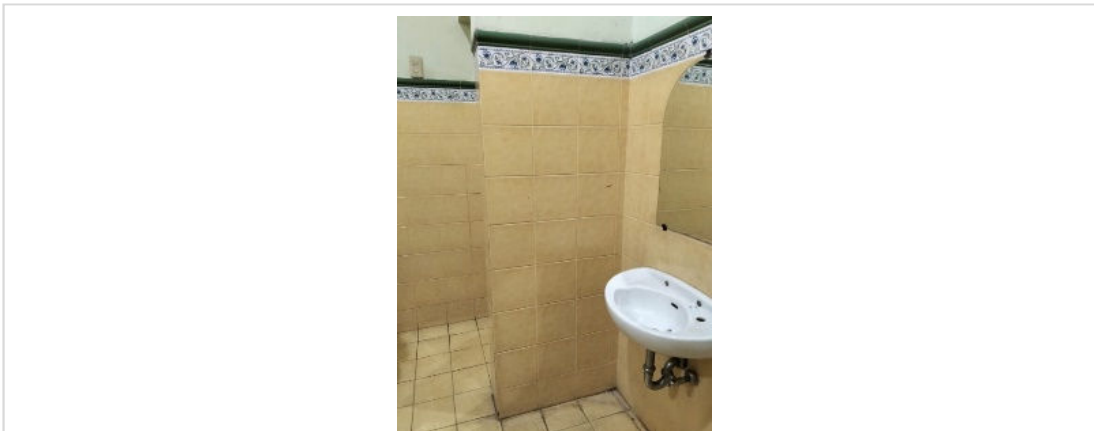
thoughtful use of opaque wall elements demonstrates successful consideration of sightlines, enabling privacy during ablution.



**Figure 7.** Entrance to women's ablution room 2



**Figure 8.** Women's ablution room 2 with a wall element design that makes the women who perform the ablution invisible from the outside



**Figure 9.** Dressing room in the women's ablution room 2. Usually used to tidy up clothes after ablution

By contrast, the prayer hall employs semi-permanent partitions of rattan and wood, approximately 175 cm in height. Interviews revealed that five respondents (wearing *hijab*) and two without *hijab* expressed little objection to

these dividers, citing the fact that women are already veiled during prayer. However, two respondents preferred a stronger, non-transparent separation, ensuring freedom of movement and activity within the female prayer zone.



Figure 10. The prayer room divider for men and women is only made of semi-permanent and transparent

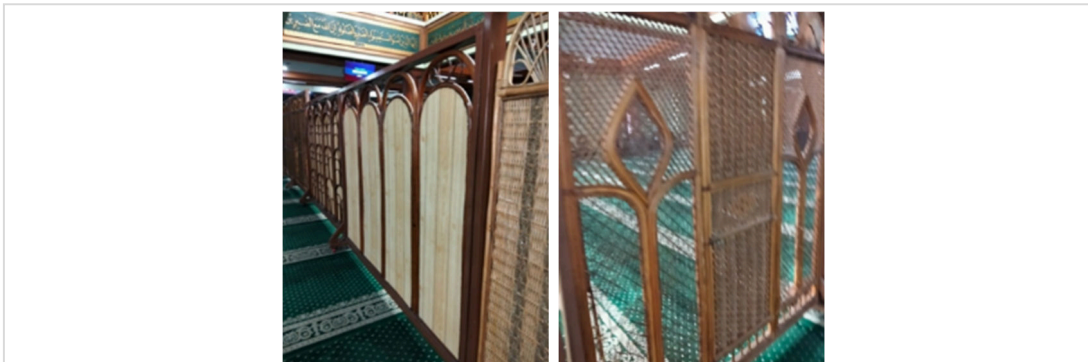


Figure 11. Boundary elements between male and female prayer rooms made of translucent material

b. Zoning of the Al-Barkah Mosque, Bekasi  
The mosque employs a zoning system beginning with the segregation of ablution areas.

Signage prohibits access to women's zones, including ablution areas and sandal storage.

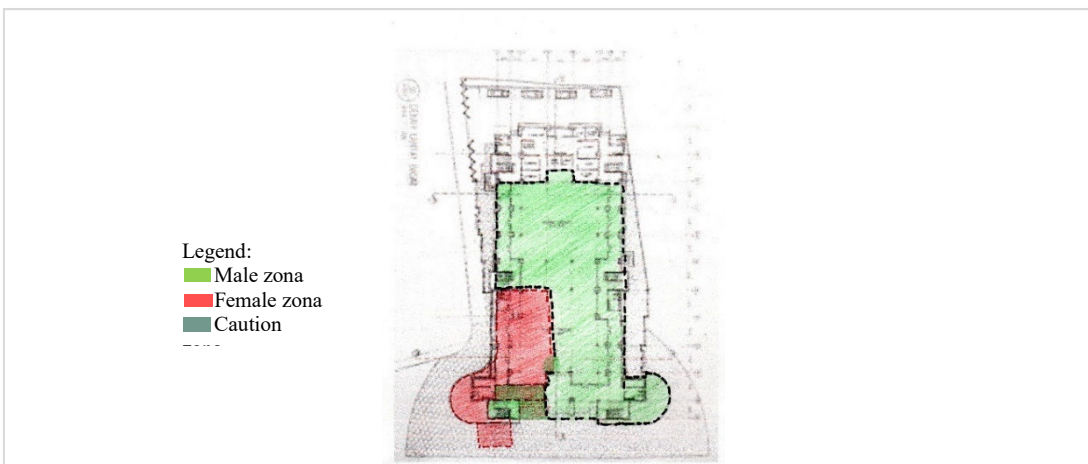


Figure 12. Men's zone and women's zone at Al-Barkah Mosque



**Figure 13.** Women's and men's zones (ablation area)

However, visibility issues persist. Along the corridor connecting the ablation area to the

women's prayer room, open doorways allow male congregants to view female worshippers.

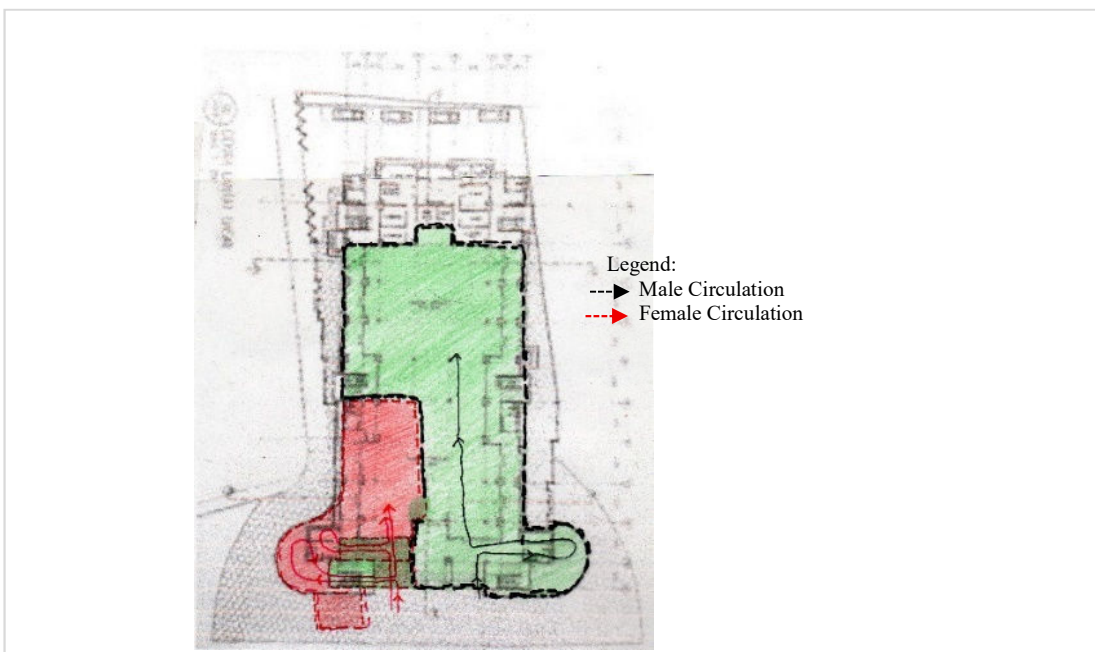


**Figure 14.** The corridor between the ablation area and the prayer room that male worshippers can see

c. Accessibility, circulation for Muslim women at Al-Barkah Mosque, Bekasi

areas through entrances into the mosque and finally to the prayer rooms.

Accessibility and circulation are organized separately for men and women, from ablation



**Figure 15.** Accessibility and circulation by gender

Nonetheless, along certain corridors, women must remain vigilant in covering their *aurat* from male view. Interviews indicated that women typically don their *hijab* immediately after ablution to mitigate this risk. A mosque administrator acknowledged these concerns, noting that management intends to strengthen the boundaries and zoning to ensure greater privacy.

The novelties of this research are as follows: (1) offering recommendations that the design of a *jami'* mosque should take into account the schools of thought (*mazhab*) acceptable to all community groups; (2) reinforcing the theoretical perspective that the most significant boundary and private space for Muslim women lies in the practice of wearing the *hijab*; and (3) proposing flexibility in the spatial arrangement of prayer areas to accommodate both activities and gender-related needs, whereby the boundaries employed are not conceived as rigid, permanent elements.

## Conclusions

Mosques in Indonesia particularly the Al-Barkah Mosque, a *jami'* mosque in Bekasi City accommodate diverse schools of thought (*mazhab*), including Shafi'i, Hanbali, Hanafi, and Maliki. This plurality results in variations in the interpretation and application of the laws of *hijab* and *aurat* for Muslim women. Consequently, the spatial configuration of the mosque is affected, particularly concerning gender-based zoning and the use of boundary elements. In the context of a mosque that functions as a venue for *shalat al-Jum'ah*, spatial design requires a degree of flexibility, with boundaries that are non-permanent. The separation elements between men's and women's prayer areas should be constructed from non-transparent materials, with a recommended height of approximately 175 cm, and positioned in a manner that allows for adaptability. Furthermore, the privacy requirements of Muslim women extend beyond the prayer hall. During the performance of ablution (*wudhu*), for instance, privacy within the ablution facilities is essential, with boundary elements designed to uphold the principle of "seeing but not being seen." In addition, several women also express the need for privacy in circulation zones, accessibility pathways, and within the prayer hall itself. To accommodate these requirements, spatial zoning strategies and

boundary elements must be deliberately integrated into the architectural design.

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