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# **The Rise of Feminine in ‘Patriarchal’ Mosques: An Inquiry into The Changing Role of Women in Mosque Architecture**

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# The Rise of Feminine in 'Patriarchal' Mosques: An Inquiry into The Changing Role of Women in Mosque Architecture

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## Abstract

Traditionally, there has been attribution of public spaces to males and private spaces of domesticity to females; moreover, mosques have been seen as 'male' spaces. Since the 90s, both Islamism and feminism have been on the rise, and public places and topics on women's roles are reinterpreted. In contrast to the patriarchal character of Islam and political Islamism, Turkey, under the power of the Islamic party, witnessed an increase in women's role in mosque architecture in the last 20 years. Mosque projects that consider and welcome women are designed, and women as mosque designers became visible. Unlike Islamist feminists' debates around the world, in which the topic is on 'women-only', 'gender-mixed' and 'women-focused/women-led mosques, in Turkey, the debate has been on sharing the same space of the two genders. This research will be an inquiry into the changing role of women and their relation to the production of mosque spaces, focusing on Turkey. It will look into women as the agents, designers of mosques and users of mosques. In this study, Ramazanoglu Mosque, designed by four female architects in Adana, is chosen as a case study. Space analysis is done in the case study, and circulation paths are examined based on gender. Field research, observations, architectural analyses, and literature review are done, and interviews are conducted with the architects. This research aims to contribute to feminist discourse by including Islamic women, trying to understand women's claim and their work on the equal usage of the religious space.

**Keywords:** mosque design, gendered architecture, female designers, Islamic feminism, politics of mosque architecture

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## 1. Introduction

Mosques have been the centre of social life in Islamic societies for years. They are the community's spiritual heart, as well as a place of learning and discussion about important social, political, economic, and religious issues (Ismail, 2002). They are the material representation of Islam in the public sphere; they create a social site, a sense of community and identity through spatio-practical production (Batuman, 2018a). Historically, they mean much more than being only worship places (Ozaloglu & Gurel, 2011). However, the transformation of everyday life can change the position of mosques in society. Moreover, mosques can be used as a tool to transform society.

As the continuation of the attribution of public spaces to males and private spaces of domesticity to females (Rendell, 2000), mosques are perceived as men's spaces. They are patriarchal places; they serve men and favour men's spaces always more than women's. Men would perform

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religious activities at mosques, whereas women are encouraged to pray at home. Mosques allow and restrict Muslim women's religious creation, identity formation, engagement, belonging, and activism (Nyhagen, 2019). It can police women's clothing, voices, and interactions with men (Shannahan, 2013). Women who go to mosques must hide behind curtains or partitions. Sometimes, they have to pray underground, which is treated as a storage room, and sometimes, they cannot even have space in mosques. Even if they may have a room of their own, they may be discouraged due to the lack of ablution spaces and facilities. Today, women are part of the public as much as men. Therefore, the change in women's lives, them getting higher education, working outside of the home, and increasing their appearance in public spaces demands a transformation in prayer halls as well (Yilmaz, 2015).

The world has witnessed the rise of Islamism in recent years. However, unlike the prediction, Islamist parties in Turkey supported the relationship of women with mosques. Not only did the number of women's prayers in mosques increase, but also women mosque designers appeared. The government's aim of increasing women's relationship with the mosque is a political act; it aims to increase the visibility of religion in the public sphere. However, beyond the government's ideology, rising feminism and recognition of it by Islamic women creates new politics. Feminism is a Western-constructed ideology; Islam and feminism coming together have been controversial by both feminists claiming that all religions are patriarchal and Islamic, disagreeing with the Westernization of religion (Ali, 2019; Marshall, 2008). However, Islamic feminism finds a middle ground; it rereads and reinterprets religious sources by women, draws a better position for them in social life, and emphasises equality between genders (Wadud, 2006). As a reflection of the new Islamic perspective, women started to demand better mosque conditions.

Around the World, against the male-dominant mosques, there are implementations of 'women-only', 'gender-mixed' and 'women-focused/women-led mosques in which men and women can pray side by side and female imam can lead the pray (Nyhagen, 2019). In Turkey, women's discussion on Islam differs; instead of whether a female imam can lead the prayers, it focuses on whether women can enter the central area of mosques and pray together with men. Therefore, the debate is about the equality of genders, the usage of space concerning gender, and power relations based on space (Yilmaz, 2015).

In this paper, I will discuss the changing role of women and their relation to the production of mosque spaces through an example of a mosque in Adana, Turkey. The example will elaborate on the agency of women as designers and users. The paper focuses on spatial and architectural aspects. Therefore, leadership and management issues are not examined in detail. The methodology is based on literature review, analytical and creative associations. I conducted interviews with architects and the head of a department of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. I did field research, observations, and architectural analyses of the chosen case study. Below, I will begin with a discussion of the politics of mosques in the Turkish context. Later, I will talk about how women are taking agency so far in Turkey. Then, I will discuss the chosen mosque example designed by four female architects in collaboration with the Directorate of Religious Affairs. I will argue that women are given visibility in public and started to be involved in mosque spaces. However, there is resistance by tradition, and the improvements do not empower women, create shallow relationships and make them pseudo-agents.

## 2 Mosques in Turkish Context

Turkey has had a different relationship with religion in comparison to other Islamic-populated countries. It is a secular country in which, a couple of decades ago, signs of being religious were associated with being backwards. However, it is a country where most of the population define themselves as Muslims and continue their traditions. In Turkey, during the secularisation process in the republic era, religion has been shifted to private spheres and disappeared from the public. Mosques lost their social function and only served for praying purposes (Batuman, 2018a).

Moreover, mosques were not given priority and enough attention because of the difficulties in creating a new nation. There was not only the absence of mosque construction, but many mosques were shut down and turned into other functions or demolished (Moustafa, 2013; Parlak, 2020). The society that seeks mosques had to do it with their capabilities. Therefore, the

architecture of mosques was poor and directly imitation of the Ottoman style.

Since the 1980s, Muslim countries, including Turkey, have witnessed the rise of Islamism (Cinar, 2008), which redefines Islamic identity. As an echo of this rise, Islamist parties started to gain power, resulting in religion becoming visible in the public sphere again. Mosques as public places became the agenda of the Islamist government. Trials of mosques to create a new form of modern architecture in the 1950s by the secular parties (Divleli, 2013) continued at the beginning of the Islamist government. However, it resulted in the preference for the neo-ottoman style. An eclectic approach using modern technology and mimicry of the Ottoman Mosque style is used as a means of nostalgia, submission to Islam and a new representation of the nation (Batuman, 2018a, b).

In Turkey, women were never separated from political ideologies but were always employed as representatives. During Islamism, women's veils played a big part in the debates, and there was an effort to make religion visible in public spaces. As part of the social transformation of mosques, women's involvement, both in terms of their numbers and having a say in the mosque, has increased (Batuman, 2018b). However, the reason that enhanced the support for the appearance of women in mosques was detaching women from the congregation and uniting them under the same religious interpretation by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Diyanet, also increasing the state's control over Islamic practices and their politicisation (Yilmaz, 2015).

Diyanet was established in 1924, aiming to provide religious service, handling morals and worship-related topics and the management and leadership of mosques [1]. Diyanet does not play a role in mosque construction; benefactors construct mosques, and it is a civil area. Diyanet is only responsible for taking over the mosque after its completion. If the benefactor does not want to spend money on the project, it provides type drawings by the architects working under Diyanet (O. Gokcebay, personal communication, April 13, 2021). However, as in the government's agenda, encouraging women to visit the mosque is part of their objectives.

Diyanet makes announcements and speeches to support women in going to mosques [2]. Additionally, in 2011, Kadriye Avci Erdemli, the Directorate of Religious Affairs Istanbul Deputy of Mufti, initiated a project to beautify women's section in mosques in Istanbul. With the project, she aimed to encourage women to go to mosques and create a suitable environment for women to pray in. She also explained that in Islam, there is no need for a physical separation between men and women; women have the right to see mihrab and minbar, which is a necessity of a good mosque environment for women (Erdemli, 2013). In the project, users assessed the condition of mosques based on women's friendliness and initiations for the betterment started.

### 3 Women's Agency in Mosques

The support for women in mosques is not limited to users. In 2009, a woman interior designer gained the title of the first female mosque designer in the World [3]. The opening took place with the attendance of the wife of the prime minister and the Director of Religious Affairs (Demirer, 2017). After that, more examples of women mosque designers appeared. In media, news such as 'Women signature in infinity' [4], 'When the architects of the mosque are women...' [5], and 'This mosque was touched by a woman's hand' [6] became visible. The gender of the designers is used as a political tool as well. In the case of the opposition against the government's ideological mosque style, female designers benefited from overriding the conventions (Batuman, 2018a).

'The first' female mosque designer, Zeynep Fadillioglu, has been criticised for her modern design. Moreover, she is a secular woman and not a practising Muslim who mostly designs bars and restaurants; therefore, such a woman designing a mosque brought questions to the Islamic circle (Demirer, 2017). Even though she was the interior designer and not the architect, the whole project was attributed to her and overshadowed the architect Husrev Tayla. Her becoming a known mosque designer and creating a spacious female section empowered women. On the other hand, it demonstrates the lack of women in mosque architecture. Even though she was given the 'first female mosque designer' title, long before her design, there were numbered women mosque designers [7] (E. S. Umit, personal communication, March 08, 2021). They carried out their jobs in the male-dominated field but got no publicity and were overlooked instead.

There are still not enough female mosque designers; thus, most of them are hired by their relatives. Sakirin Mosque in İstanbul was built by the grandmother of the designer (Batuman, 2018a), Alacaatli Uluyol Mosque in Ankara was built by the grandfather of the architect (E. Moza, personal communication, March 22, 2021), and award-winning Bait Ur Rouf Mosque in Bangladesh is built by the grandmother of the architect [8]. Although their projects become a good reference for their future works, their first mosque experience was obtained by their connections and without that, they may have never had the opportunity. Moreover, it brings up the question of negotiation.

Even though the Turkish Islamist government tries to implement a better relationship for women with mosques, the aim has been the creation of a national identity. Women only played roles in the political ideologies and power struggles between men. Therefore, although it may help women's emancipation and provide them power through space, it still renders them passive actors. Women have agency in how they use mosque spaces, but that agency is constrained by the masculine norms that govern space (Alyanak, 2019).

In the 1990s, feminist discourses increased along with Islam and a new interpretation of the religion. Islamic women gained strength, and new piety that answers women's needs has been constructed (Yilmaz, 2015). It is marked by women's agency and public visibility, and it stands in opposition to conventional Islamic precepts that call for women's seclusion and segregation (Gole, 1997). When they obtained more public visibility, they came into conflict with the traditions, forcing them to create a new self-identity. They started questioning the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran and the imposition of the society that subordinates them. With the new understanding, a claim for equal usage of the mosques appeared, and Islamism tried to redefine modernisation in itself. (Yilmaz, 2015).

Against women's patriarchal formation and subordination, they started to appropriate the mosque spaces; they developed an alternative to change the existing social structures. In the USA, women-only mosques [9], and in the UK, Norway and France, mixed-gender mosques, with men and women praying side by side [10,11] examples appeared. Not as radical as the Western space appropriation, in Turkey, Islamic women demanding equality started to transgress into the men's section, still accepting the position behind men but becoming part of the congregation and being visible. The Turkish case differs from another mosque activism case in Egypt because their concerns are not against secular but conservative powers (Alyanak, 2019). Islamic women in Egypt try to educate themselves on religion and bring Islam to everyday life (Lewis, 2005) and do not show any interest in reinterpreting masculine traditions (Mahmood, 2003), whereas Islamic women in Turkey are against the male privileging of interpretation of Islam and its implementations.

#### 4 Ramazanoglu Mosque Case Study

In light of what has been said, Ramazanoglu Mosque in Adana has been chosen as a case to demonstrate gendered space and power dynamics in the mosque. It was designed by four female architects with a neo-Ottoman style. The mosque construction started in 2006. As in other cases, the mosque got media attention based on its all-female architects, and in the interviews, the architects promoted Ramazanoglu Mosque with its 'women friendliness'. They stated that the mosque exemplifies positive discrimination against women with its lactation room, playground, market, and separate entrances. It will become an example for future designs [12]. What differentiates this project from other women-designed mosques is that the project was a collaboration with the Directorate of Religious Affairs and Religious Foundation. Two architects working under Diyanet designed the project, while the other two freelance architects participated in the construction. Donations covered the costs. Therefore, it took more than ten years to complete.

The mosque is an example of a vertical Islamic-Ottoman social complex; the ground floor is left for a praying space and courtyard, down floors hold ablution rooms, underground car parking, a market, the Quran course, district mufti, a conference hall, and health centre. It has two minarets and a capacity of holding 3000 people, including the courtyard space 10000 [12]. The project is highly influenced by Suleymaniye Mosque in İstanbul by Mimar Sinan.

With a detailed look at the construction process, it is seen that the project is much more complicated than it was represented in the media. Firstly, the project has an ownership problem—so many people are involved in its design and construction that no one can claim the mosque anymore. The mosque was the first mosque designed by the architects working under Diyanet, and they were specifically asked to draw a copy of Suleymaniye. Not so much after the construction phase started, Diyanet architects were decided not experienced enough and removed by the team (N. Karaca, personal communication, March 08, 2021). The problems with static and details led them to reach a more knowledgeable male architect-engineer in mosque architecture (N. Dinc, personal communication, May 06, 2021). Entrances, mihrab, minbar, doors, mezzanine floor and all fine works done by the new architect. While the construction continues, the design has changed by the department of mufti as well; they asked for car parking, shops, and a space for the newly created county mufti (M. Baris, personal communication, March 08, 2021).

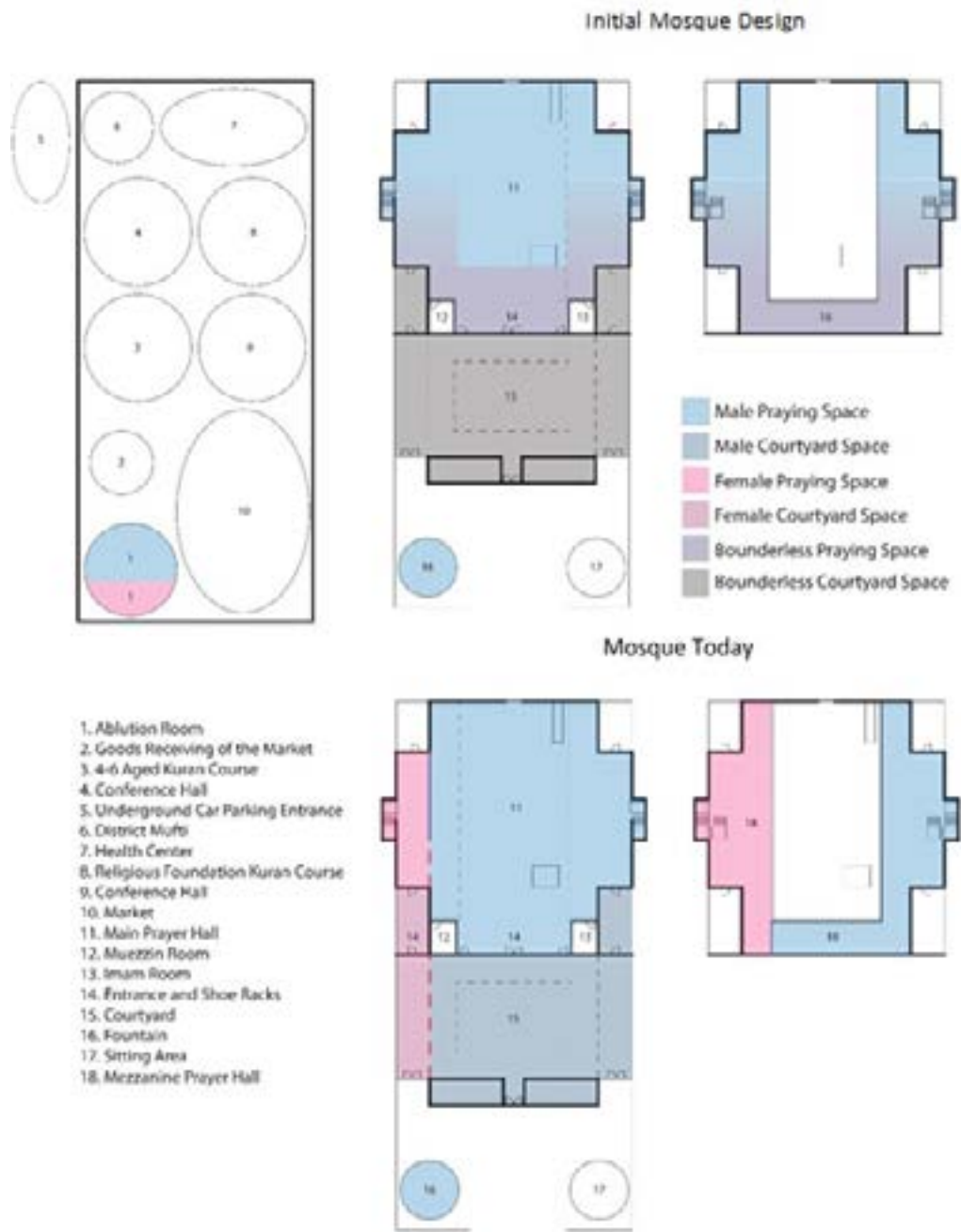


Figure 1. The change in space usage based on gender

Moreover, the mayor also intervened in the design and commented that if the mosque sits two meters higher than the road, it would disfigure the street. The two female architects in the

construction phase continued their work. However, their lack of knowledge of the final version of the mosque shows that they were not the main actors. It would be beneficial to compare the mosque to its previous version and finally to understand the changes influenced by more actors. In recent mosques, the mezzanine floor is generally designed for women to escape from the basement. Ramazanoglu Mosque has a U-shaped mezzanine that is reached by two symmetrical staircases on the sides of the main prayer area. Moreover, the staircases are not close to the entrance but in the middle, making the prayers going to the upper floor visible. In the mosque, there was no separation of women and men sections but two different spaces, the main hall and the mezzanine. Mezzanine was thought mostly for women, but depending on the ratio of the prayers, it could be used by both genders; in Friday praying, the mezzanine was occupied by men in addition to the main hall and women were excluded (E. S. Umit, personal communication, March 08, 2021) (Figure 1).

Many additions that seem not part of the original design are visible today. Currently, the mezzanine floor is divided by blinds. One-third of the mezzanine is separated for women. Moreover, the women's section is covered by high screens that obstruct the view and prevent the gaze from outside. Since the staircases to the mezzanine floor are in the middle of the main hall, blinds are also put downstairs to avoid male and female encounters, which do not allow access from the main hall to one of the staircases. A separate secondary entrance is indicated as the female entrance to access it. If women miss the separate entrance and try to enter the women's section from the main hall, a guidance barrier is placed to the extension of the blinds, which allows passing but indicates it is not an entrance. The blinds on the ground floor create a small space for access to the upstairs and a praying space for women having difficulty climbing the stairs. However, it has no visual connection with the rest of the mosque. The entrance to the women's section is a semi-closed space that is closed on top but open from one side. There is symmetrical space to the entrance that is not used for anything, which strengthens the idea that that space was initially not designed as an entrance either. The gender division starts from the entrance of the courtyard. To separate the way to the women's section, warning strips are placed in the courtyard, which does not prevent any visual connection and still lets access but gives the idea that they are separate (Figure 2). The underground ablution room does not have access to the praying area inside the building. To go from the ablution space to the praying area, one must climb the stairs and walk along the street. Therefore, the separation in the ablution room continues with both genders coming together in the street and separating again in the courtyard.

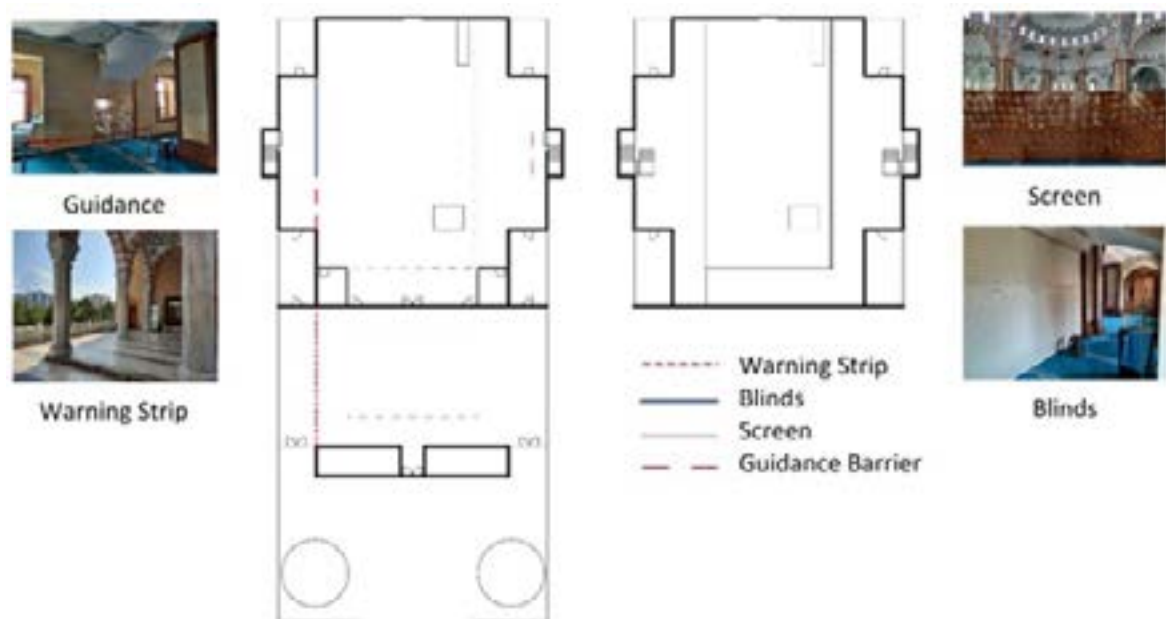


Figure 2. Measures for gender segregation

In the initial design, men and women were not separated by any means other than the ablution and toilets; later, a separation starts before the praying area occurs (Figure 3). Moreover, it is

visible that there is a significant shrink in the women's praying area. However, there was no specific women's section before; the borders were not fixed. The change of women's space in the mosque can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, even though women were not designated strictly in an area and women could take their agency, when there is a crowd of the male congregation, women's space in the mosque could be erased easily. In crowd-praying, such as Friday sermons, men are always given priority. Therefore, in such a plan, women could never have an option to attend the mosque because their space is left over by men. Secondly, the separation of the areas and entrances, usage of blinds and screens, and decrease in the area of women's praying space can be commented as the wish to render women invisible and support their subordination with the secondary spaces. On the other hand, the separation of an area for women and the designation of it for them specifically means acceptance of women in mosques.

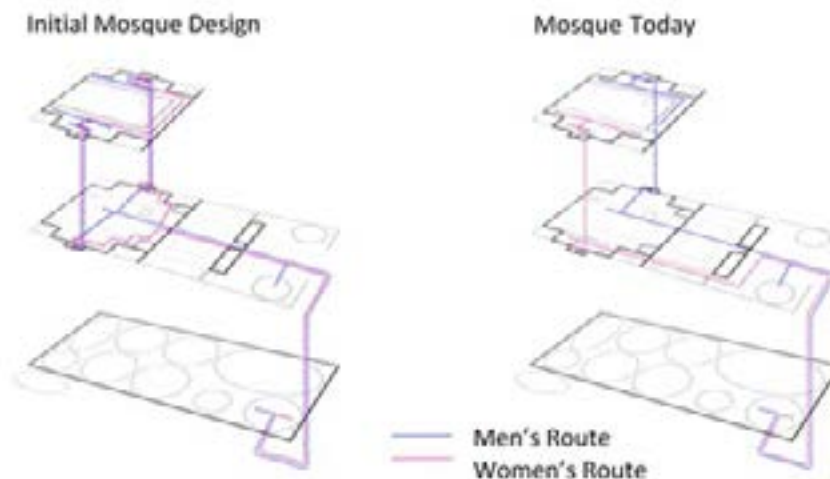


Figure 3. Circulation path for genders

Ramazanoglu Mosque project started with women's inclusion. Consciously or not, four women architects came together and thought of creating a 'women-friendly' mosque space. Although their understanding of women's friendliness is up to question, they could not even have the opportunity to actualise it. Different actors came into the frame, and along the way, women are dissolved. In the end, the mosque held traditional male agents and traditional gendered mosque space.

## 5 Conclusion

In Turkey, there are positive implementations of mosques for women done by the government and mosque designs drawn by female architects. However, it does not always result in the empowerment of women. The politics of the mosque is more complicated than what it has been tried to achieve. Women designers are used as tools of advertisement and legitimisation. Women are gaining space in mosques, but it does not necessarily turn them into agents. They have their own space in mosques but are still secondary compared to men's. They can design mosques, but there is an authority question; therefore, they are pseudo-agents. Moreover, congregation members' collective memory overcomes the improvements in women empowerment in mosques (Ozaloglu & Gurel, 2011). There is resistance by both men and women prayers and designers that prefer to continue the traditional structure of men and women separation.

As Nyhagen (2019) states, in mosques, unequal gender roles are both preserved and challenged. Women accepting sexually segregated spaces provides them opportunities for inclusion but also creates discrimination. In order to make mosques better places for themselves, women negotiate the gendering of space by quietly occupying the back seats of the men's section. Women transgressing the defined borders and appropriating the space by themselves is an excellent example of the actualisation of their agency. A radical space appropriation like in Western countries does not seem possible in Turkey. However, if women continue to claim space and render themselves active agents, there is great hope for Turkey that the patriarchal era in mosque spaces will be over.



## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Endnotes

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