

Prayer Room to Women's Public Sphere: 'Aisiyiah's Mushollas and the Reconfiguration of Sacred Space in Indonesia

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Abstract

Women's access to Muslim sacred space is often framed as a question of inclusion in male-governed mosques. 'Aisiyiah, the women's movement associated with Muhammadiyah, offers a different historical trajectory: since 1922 it has maintained mushollas designated for women in Yogyakarta. This article examines how these spaces reconfigured Muslim women's piety, religious authority, and civic participation. Rather than presenting a systematic literature review, the study employs historical-documentary analysis. The primary corpus consists of organizational histories, official biographies, heritage narratives, and contemporary institutional reports concerning the Kauman, Karangkajen, Suronatan, and wider Yogyakarta network of 'Aisiyiah mushollas. These materials are triangulated with ethnographic scholarship on 'Aisiyiah women's mushollas and comparative research on gendered mosque space. The analysis identifies six functions: devotional autonomy, women-centred religious learning, the production of female speakers and organizers, cadre formation, neighbourhood welfare coordination, and the preservation of a gender-specific institutional network. The findings show that the musholla did more than provide a separate prayer room. It transferred control over schedules, speech, pedagogy, and organization to women, converting sacred space into infrastructure for collective competence. This arrangement nonetheless contains a productive tension. Gender separation can preserve the assumption that the main mosque is male, but it can also create authority, safety, and continuity unavailable in peripheral women's sections of mixed mosques. The article conceptualizes the 'Aisiyiah musholla as an autonomous sacred public: a religious space in which women organize worship and knowledge while building capacities that travel into education, welfare, and public leadership. The case complicates the equation of gender equality with spatial integration and demonstrates that gender-specific sacred space may function as a historically situated strategy of institutional transformation.

Keywords: *Aisiyiah; musholla; sacred space; Muslim women; religious authority; gendered space; Yogyakarta.*

INTRODUCTION

Mosques are never merely containers for ritual. Their doors, prayer lines, entrances, teaching circles, management committees, and schedules distribute visibility and authority. The built environment communicates who belongs at the centre, who enters through a secondary route, who speaks, and who is expected to listen. Scholarship on Muslim women and mosques has therefore moved beyond the legal question of whether women may attend. It examines how access, architecture, governance, and ritual practice shape women's religious identity and collective power (Katz, 2014; Nyhagen, 2019). In many settings, women are formally permitted but spatially peripheral: they pray behind curtains, on upper floors, or in rooms disconnected from the main congregation. The inequality is not always prohibition. It may be expressed through inferior facilities, irregular programming, limited authority, or the presumption that the mosque's normal public is male (Ghafournia, 2020; Woodlock, 2010).

A common response to gendered religious space is integration. From this perspective, the solution is to give women equal access to the same mosque, governance structure, and religious program. Integration is normatively important, especially where separation is used to marginalize women. Yet it does not exhaust the possibilities of spatial reform. Women may also appropriate or create gender-specific spaces in which they control worship, teaching, speech, and organization. Such spaces can offer protection and belonging, but more importantly they can become sites of religious self-making and collective capacity (Prickett, 2015). The relevant question is not simply whether a space is separated by gender. It is who governs the separation, what resources are located within it, and whether the space expands or narrows women's authority.

The women-only mushollas associated with 'Aisyiyah in Yogyakarta illuminate this alternative trajectory. The Indonesian term musholla refers to a prayer place that is generally smaller and institutionally different from a Friday mosque. The first Musholla 'Aisyiyah in Kauman is conventionally dated to 1922 and connected to the educational and organizational activities of young Muhammadiyah women. Before the building became a dedicated prayer space, the house of Haji Irsyad served as a centre for Siswa Praja Wanita. Its activities included religious study, speech practice, dawn congregation, Islamic commemorations, and programs for girls (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2023a; Pimpinan Wilayah Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah Jawa Tengah, 2024). The transformation of a domestic building into a women-centred musholla therefore materialized an institutional process that was already underway: women were being trained to worship collectively, interpret religion, speak publicly, and administer organizations.

The historical importance of the musholla lies in its relation to the social location of women in early twentieth-century Java. Women's movement beyond the household was restricted by gendered expectations, educational inequality, and a public religious sphere dominated by male officials and teachers. 'Aisyiyah emerged in 1917 from earlier study circles and educational initiatives that sought to make women subjects of religious reform rather than only recipients of male instruction. The musholla gave this project a durable spatial form. It placed women's piety in a visible institution, gave recurring activities an address, and linked worship to literacy, preaching, education, and social service. Later sites, including the Karangajen musholla established in 1937, indicate that the model diffused beyond Kauman into neighbourhood-level infrastructure (Suara 'Aisyiyah, 2023).

Recent scholarship has begun to recognize the distinctiveness of these spaces. Jenner's (2024) ethnographic study of two 'Aisyiyah mushollas in Yogyakarta shows that their value cannot be understood only by measuring them against male-dominated masjids. Women attendees used the spaces for worship, learning, community, and forms of participation that were not reducible to the experience of being placed in a women's section of a larger mosque. That insight has major theoretical consequences. A women-only space can be gendered without being subordinated. Its meaning depends on governance, resources, ritual centrality, and the authority produced through repeated use.

Despite this significance, 'Aisyiyah's mushollas are often mentioned as a milestone in organizational histories but rarely analysed as an institutional technology of gender reform. Historical narratives typically list the 1922 foundation alongside schools, literacy programs, health services, and charitable initiatives. This treatment recognizes achievement but underexamines mechanism. How did a small prayer building help transform women's position? What forms of authority did it make possible? Why did the institution persist when many women gained access to mixed-gender mosques, schools, universities, and professional organizations? What does its persistence reveal about the relationship between separation, autonomy, and equality?

This article answers those questions through a historical-documentary analysis of 'Aisyiyah mushollas in Yogyakarta. It treats official biographies, organizational histories, heritage descriptions, and contemporary institutional reports as primary documentary evidence. The documents are read comparatively across time to identify how the musholla's functions are narrated, preserved, and expanded. Ethnographic and comparative mosque scholarship is used for triangulation and theory, not as a substitute for primary analysis. The article argues that the 'Aisyiyah musholla should be understood as an autonomous sacred public: a gender-specific space where women control access, religious learning, collective speech, and organization, and where competencies developed through worship circulate into wider educational and civic fields. This concept avoids two simplifications. It does not romanticize separation as automatically emancipatory, and it does not assume that equality can only be achieved through spatial integration. Instead, it evaluates what a gender-specific institution enables, which hierarchies it interrupts, and which limitations remain.

Space is socially produced. A prayer hall becomes gendered not only because men and women occupy different locations, but because architecture and routine assign unequal legitimacy to their presence. Central entrances, audible sermons, visual access to the imam, quality of ablution facilities, child accommodation, and participation in governance all shape the experience of belonging. Nyhagen (2019) describes mosques as spaces that can simultaneously support women's religious identity and reproduce male authority. Ghafournia (2020) similarly shows that segregation has multiple meanings: some women experience it as exclusion, while others value privacy and gender-specific sociability. A spatial analysis must therefore examine material quality, decision-making, and symbolic centrality rather than treating separation as a self-explanatory condition.

This study uses the term spatial governance to describe the rules and practices that determine who controls a sacred place. Five dimensions are central. Access concerns who may enter and at what times. Ritual authority concerns who organizes prayer and religious observance. Epistemic authority concerns who teaches, interprets, and selects religious material. Organizational authority concerns who manages resources, schedules, and institutional relationships. External reach concerns whether capacities generated inside the space influence education, welfare, advocacy, and neighbourhood life. A women's room in a male-governed mosque may offer access while withholding the other dimensions. By contrast, a women-only musholla may limit male access yet give women control over the full institutional cycle.

The framework distinguishes autonomy from isolation. Autonomy means the capacity to set collective purposes and organize resources. Isolation means disconnection from broader institutions and recognition. A women-only religious space can be autonomous and well connected, or separated and marginalized. Prickett's (2015) analysis of African American Muslim women shows how women appropriate gendered space to build solidarity and perform religious identity. Katz's (2014) historical work also demonstrates that women's mosque practices have often exceeded legal prescriptions and produced their own social patterns. These studies direct attention to practice: women do not merely occupy space; they make space religiously and institutionally meaningful.

The concept of a sacred public builds on this practice-oriented view. Publicness does not require unrestricted access to everyone. A space becomes public when it supports collective address, shared knowledge, recognized roles, and action oriented toward a community. Women's religious gatherings can therefore constitute publics even when participation is gender-specific. The 'Aisyiyah musholla is sacred because worship and religious learning authorize its activities. It is public because women speak, deliberate, organize, educate, and connect devotional life to collective problems. Its gender specificity can function as a boundary that protects autonomy rather than a wall that removes women from public life.

This formulation also recognizes ambivalence. Separate women's institutions may relieve pressure on male-governed mosques to reform. They may be treated as supplementary rather than equal. Women's authority developed in an autonomous space may not automatically transfer to mixed institutions. The same boundary that permits frank discussion and leadership can also contain recognition. The empirical task is therefore to identify both the transformative effects and the persistent limits of the musholla model.

METHOD

The study employed qualitative historical-documentary analysis. It did not use a systematic literature review because the research question concerns the meanings and institutional functions of a specific set of primary documents and historical practices. Documentary analysis is appropriate when organizations produce records that define their own history, values, and activities. These records are not transparent windows onto the past; they are institutional representations that select events and assign significance. The analysis therefore examined both the historical information contained in the documents and the way later 'Aisyiyah narratives interpret the musholla as part of women's advancement.

The primary corpus comprised organizational and public-history documents that directly described women's mushollas or the women's formations that preceded them. These included official 'Aisyiyah biographies of Siti Umniyah and Siti Munjiyah; organizational histories of Sapa Tresna, 'Aisyiyah, and Siswa Praja Wanita; the 2023 Suara 'Aisyiyah account of the Karangkajen musholla; a 2023 Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah report marking the Kauman musholla's centenary; and a 2024 Suara Muhammadiyah report on the Suronatan musholla and the current network in Yogyakarta. A heritage narrative concerning the Kauman building was used to corroborate the date, prior use of the site,

and architectural continuity. These texts were selected because they identify concrete places, dates, activities, organizers, or contemporary functions.

Jenner's (2024) ethnography was treated as a triangulating source because it provides direct evidence concerning contemporary participants' experiences in two 'Aisyiyah mushollas. Comparative scholarship on mosque access and gendered religious space was included to sharpen interpretation (Ghafournia, 2020; Katz, 2014; Nyhagen, 2019; Prickett, 2015; Woodlock, 2010). These academic works were not counted as primary documents about 'Aisyiyah's institutional history. The distinction is important: official narratives show how the movement remembers and legitimates the spaces, while ethnography shows how women experience and use them.

The unit of analysis was a statement or narrative segment concerning place, access, activity, authority, management, learning, organizational formation, or community function. Coding combined deductive categories derived from spatial governance with inductive categories that emerged from the documents. Deductive codes included access, ritual authority, epistemic authority, organizational control, material resources, and external reach. Inductive codes included dawn congregation, speech practice, cadre formation, girls' education, neighbourhood service, women-friendly space, continuity, heritage, and expansion. A chronological matrix was then constructed to compare the early formation period, institutional consolidation, neighbourhood diffusion, and contemporary preservation.

Three procedures strengthened trustworthiness. First, dates and institutional claims were cross-checked across more than one source whenever possible. Second, historical description was separated from analytical inference. For example, documents support the claim that SP Wanita used the Kauman site for study, speeches, and congregational prayer; the interpretation of these activities as epistemic and organizational capacity is the article's analysis. Third, negative-case analysis was applied to the equality claim. The existence of women-only space was not automatically coded as empowerment. The analysis asked whether women controlled resources and speech, whether activities extended beyond ritual, and whether the spaces remained institutionally connected. Limitations were recorded where the documents did not identify leadership procedures, financial arrangements, or the diversity of participants.

The research has an important boundary. It does not claim to reconstruct every women's musholla established by 'Aisyiyah or to measure their social impact. The current number of sixteen sites in Yogyakarta is taken from a 2024 institutional report and should be verified through future field mapping. Nor does the study claim that official memories reproduce the full complexity of local history. Its contribution is interpretive: it identifies how a recurring institutional form converted gender-specific sacred space into a durable platform for women's religious and civic agency.

Table 1. Documentary and contextual corpus

Source group	Examples included	Function in the analysis
Organizational histories	Histories of Sapa Tresna, 'Aisyiyah, Siswa Praja Wanita, and Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah.	Reconstruct the institutional formations and activities that preceded the first musholla.
Official biographies	Profiles of Siti Umniyah and Siti Munjiyah published by Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah.	Identify women's preaching, education, leadership, and organizational networks.
Site and heritage narratives	Accounts of the Kauman and Karangajen buildings, dates, prior uses, and physical continuity.	Connect organizational transformation to concrete sacred architecture.
Contemporary institutional reports	Reports on Kauman's centenary, Suronatan, and the sixteen-site Yogyakarta network.	Examine continuity, present-day legitimation, and network diffusion.
Ethnographic scholarship	Jenner's study of two 'Aisyiyah women's mushollas.	Triangulate documentary claims with contemporary experiences and practices.
Comparative theory	Research on women's mosque access, religious space, and gendered authority.	Situate the case within wider debates on separation, inclusion, and autonomy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. From Women's Study Circle to Devotional Infrastructure

The Kauman musholla did not begin as an architectural solution detached from organization. Its genealogy runs through women's collective study and cadre formation. Sapa Tresna, established before the formal founding of 'Aisyiyah, brought women into recurring religious instruction. 'Aisyiyah's establishment in 1917 gave that collective a formal organizational identity. Siswa Praja Wanita, developed from the youth formation established in 1919, used the house of Haji Irsyad as a centre for activities that combined religious devotion with public competence. Organizational histories consistently mention Qur'anic study, speech practice, dawn congregational prayer, Islamic commemorations, and programs for girls (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2023a; Pimpinan Wilayah Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah Jawa Tengah, 2024).

This sequence matters because it reverses a common assumption about women's sacred space. The building did not first exist and then attract women. Women's collective activity generated the need for a building. The space materialized an already emerging public. Speech practice is particularly significant. It indicates that participants were not only learning private piety; they were learning to address audiences. Dawn congregation created disciplined collective presence at a time when women's mobility was socially constrained. Religious commemorations linked the group to the wider Muslim calendar, while activities for younger girls reproduced the community across generations. The future musholla therefore combined ritual, pedagogy, and organization before it received its permanent sacred form.

The establishment of the Kauman Musholla 'Aisyiyah in 1922 converted this pattern into durable infrastructure. The date appears in organizational and heritage narratives and is associated with the initiative of Ahmad Dahlan and Siti Walidah. The building's earlier use by SP Wanita connected the physical site to young women's organization. Its dedication as a women's prayer space formalized women's collective religious presence within the urban religious geography of Kauman. The move from borrowed domestic space to an institutionally recognized musholla altered the status of women's gathering. It was no

longer an activity tolerated in a private house; it became a named, enduring, and reproducible component of Muhammadiyah-'Aisiyiah life.

The transformation also changed the relationship between domesticity and public religion. A house is associated with kinship, privacy, and the authority of its owner. A musholla is oriented toward a congregation and a continuing religious purpose. Converting the site therefore shifted the basis of access from personal invitation to organizational membership and communal use. Women were not simply leaving the domestic sphere; they were transforming domestic property into collective sacred infrastructure. This process complicates the binary between private and public. 'Aisiyiah created a public through the reclassification and institutionalization of a familiar local space.

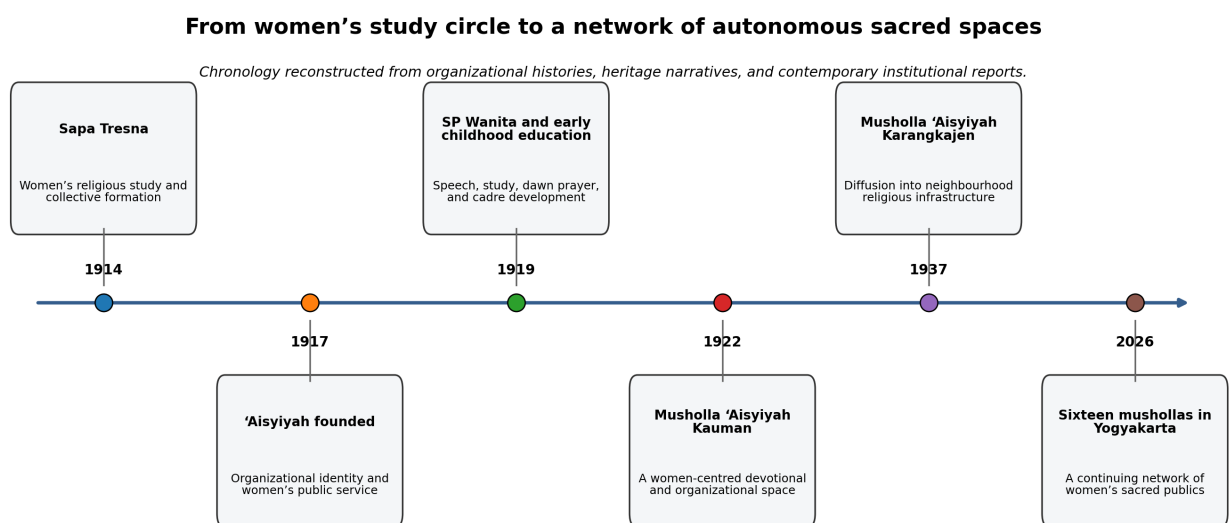


Figure 1. Historical development of 'Aisiyiah's women-centred sacred-space network.

2. Devotional Autonomy and the Collective Formation of Piety

The most immediate function of the musholla was to enable women to worship collectively on terms not determined by the spatial priorities of a male congregation. In many mosques, women's presence depends on secondary rooms, irregular access, or programs designed after men's ritual needs have been satisfied. The women-only musholla made women the normal congregation. Their presence was not supplementary, and the quality of the gathering was not contingent on unused male space. This shift is analytically important even when the ritual performed is conventional. Control over time, cleanliness, seating, sound, children, and teaching can transform the embodied experience of worship.

The early practice of dawn congregation illustrates this autonomy. Collective subuh prayer required women to coordinate time and movement outside conventional domestic routines. The practice also carried a public signal: SP Wanita members reportedly used a

kentongan to awaken residents for prayer. The activity joined disciplined piety to neighbourhood address. Women's devotion became audible beyond the walls of the meeting place. Rather than defining piety as quiet domestic observance, the practice gave women a role in organizing the religious time of the community.

Contemporary accounts preserve this understanding of the musholla as a women-friendly devotional environment. The 2024 report on Musholla 'Aisyiyah Suronatan explicitly recalls the founding purpose of providing women with space for worship and good works when their social roles were restricted to domestic expectations (Suara Muhammadiyah, 2024). The retrospective language is reformist, but it identifies a continuing institutional memory: the musholla is not justified by women's ritual incapacity or seclusion. It is justified as a resource through which women strengthen worship and social agency.

Jenner's (2024) ethnography confirms that attendees value dimensions that are difficult to capture through formal access statistics. A women-only environment can produce comfort, intimacy, social support, and the confidence to participate. These affective conditions are not secondary to authority. A congregation becomes sustainable when participants experience recognition and belonging. The musholla's autonomy permits women's bodily needs, life stages, and conversational priorities to be treated as normal rather than exceptional. Its sacredness is therefore produced through repeated collective care as well as prayer.

3. Epistemic Authority: Women as Teachers, Speakers, and Religious Subjects

The documentary corpus repeatedly links the musholla genealogy to learning and speech. Women studied religion, practiced public speaking, organized commemorations, and taught younger participants. These activities redistributed epistemic authority. In a male-centred religious order, women may receive knowledge from male scholars while lacking recognized platforms from which to interpret or transmit it. The women's musholla created a recurring audience for female speech. Even when the content followed Muhammadiyah's reformist teachings, the performance of teaching and addressing a congregation changed who could embody religious knowledge.

The connection to Siti Umniyah is illustrative. Official 'Aisyiyah biography presents her as a product of Ahmad Dahlan's educational network and as a leader of Siswa Praja Wanita. The group's centre moved from the house that became the Kauman musholla to a location behind her home as its organization developed (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2023a). This detail reveals a mobile network of women's spaces rather than a single monumental building. Religious authority circulated through homes, schools, meeting places, and mushollas. The institution's power lay partly in its ability to stabilize and connect these sites.

Siti Munjiyah's career further demonstrates how religious education could travel into national public speech. She represented 'Aisyiyah in the first Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928 and spoke on women's position in Islam (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2023b). The musholla cannot be treated as the sole cause of such leadership, but it

belonged to the same institutional ecology: women learned religion, spoke before groups, managed associations, and entered wider forums. Sacred space functioned as rehearsal and authorization for public competence.

This process may be described as epistemic scaling. Knowledge first circulates in a protected and familiar congregation; speakers acquire confidence and recognition; organizational channels then carry their authority into schools, congresses, social services, and publications. The scale changes, but the religious legitimacy produced in women's collective spaces remains important. The musholla thus challenged patriarchy not primarily by declaring women identical to male mosque authorities, but by building an alternative chain of learning, recognition, and transmission.\

4. Organizational Incubation and the Expansion of Social Action

The musholla's historical functions extended beyond ritual and instruction because 'Aisyiyah understood religious reform through organized good works. Early women's gatherings were connected to children's education and care for disadvantaged groups. Sapa Tresna and 'Aisyiyah developed in an environment where Qur'anic teaching was expected to generate schooling, welfare, and disciplined organization. The women's prayer space therefore became part of a broader institutional repertoire that included early childhood education, literacy, preaching, health, and charity.

The relationship between the musholla and early childhood education is especially visible in local institutional history. Siti Umniyah and other young women were involved in the early development of what became 'Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal. The same women's networks that organized study and worship created programs for children. This pattern shows how sacred space supplied organizational density. Regular gatherings allowed participants to identify needs, distribute responsibilities, recruit volunteers, and sustain trust. Social services did not emerge outside devotional life; they were coordinated through it.

The Karangkajen musholla, established in 1937, demonstrates neighbourhood diffusion. A 2023 institutional account describes it as a spiritual oasis and a continuing centre of women's empowerment (Suara 'Aisyiyah, 2023). The language of empowerment is contemporary, but the site's longevity shows that the model could be embedded in local branches. A branch-level musholla gives an organization a stable meeting point and public identity. It becomes a place where formal leadership and everyday neighbourhood relations meet. Women can organize recitation, mutual assistance, education, and responses to local problems without waiting for access to a larger male-administered institution.

The 2024 report identifying sixteen Musholla 'Aisyiyah sites in eight Yogyakarta districts suggests that the model has become a network rather than a singular heritage object (Suara Muhammadiyah, 2024). The listed sites include independent neighbourhood mushollas and spaces associated with 'Aisyiyah educational institutions. This variation is analytically important. It indicates that the institutional form can be attached to different

organizational nodes: a branch, a school, a historic neighbourhood, or a local women's association. The network makes women's sacred presence geographically distributed and administratively repeatable.

A networked interpretation also changes the meaning of heritage. The Kauman musholla is important because it is a founding site, but its significance is not exhausted by preservation. Its model has been translated into other locations. Heritage is active when a historical institution continues to generate organizational forms, narratives, and claims. 'Aisyiyah's contemporary celebration of the Kauman centenary and revitalization of other sites positions the musholla as evidence that women's public religious agency has deep roots in Indonesian Islam (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2023c).

Table 2. Historical phases and dominant functions

Phase	Institutional development	Dominant spatial function
Formation, 1914–1919	Sapa Tresna, 'Aisyiyah, and Siswa Praja Wanita created recurring women's gatherings.	Temporary and domestic spaces supported study, speech, prayer, and cadre formation.
Institutionalization, 1922	Kauman site became a named women's musholla.	Women's collective piety acquired durable sacred architecture and organizational recognition.
Neighbourhood diffusion, 1930s onward	Sites such as Karangajen embedded the model in local branches.	The musholla became neighbourhood infrastructure for worship, learning, and mutual assistance.
Organizational expansion	Mushollas were connected to schools, preaching, welfare, and women's leadership networks.	Sacred space functioned as an incubator for institutional competence and public service.
Heritage and renewal, 2022–2024	Centenary narratives, revitalization, and a reported sixteen-site Yogyakarta network.	Historical memory legitimates contemporary women-friendly worship and civic programming.

5. The Productive Tension of Gender-Specific Space

The women-only character of the musholla cannot be evaluated through a simple opposition between segregation and equality. In some contexts, separation is imposed by men and accompanied by inferior facilities. In the 'Aisyiyah case, women's institutional ownership changes the power relation. The space is not a remainder after the male congregation is accommodated. It is a primary venue with its own history, programs, leadership, and symbolic legitimacy. Separation therefore produces autonomy rather than only distance.

Nevertheless, autonomy does not dissolve the broader gender order. The existence of women's mushollas may leave the main mosque coded as male. Religious authority acquired within a women's congregation may not be fully recognized in mixed institutions. Women may carry a double burden: sustaining autonomous spaces while male-controlled mosques retain greater resources and public visibility. The documentary sources celebrate the musholla but provide limited information on land ownership, finance, formal authority, and relations with male Muhammadiyah structures. These questions are essential for evaluating substantive equality.

The case therefore supports a conditional rather than universal argument. Gender-specific sacred space is transformative when women control its governance, possess adequate material resources, produce knowledge, and connect the space to wider institutions. It becomes restrictive when it is underfunded, externally controlled, or treated as a substitute for women's rights elsewhere. The same architectural separation can carry opposite political meanings. Analysis must move from form to institutional relations.

The 'Aisyiyah musholla also challenges the assumption that integration always precedes authority. In many reform projects, women are first admitted into existing institutions and then seek representation. Here, women developed authority in their own space and used that capacity to enter broader public arenas. The sequence is from autonomous formation to public engagement. This does not make integration irrelevant, but it suggests that equality may require both shared institutions and spaces of self-organization.

Table 3. Thematic synthesis of the musholla's institutional effects

Theme	Documentary evidence	Interpretive significance
Devotional autonomy	Women's congregation, dawn prayer, recurring study, and women-friendly worship.	Women become the normal religious public rather than a secondary congregation.
Epistemic authority	Speech practice, teaching, preaching, and transmission to girls.	Religious knowledge is embodied and circulated by women.
Organizational competence	Scheduling, meetings, local management, and cadre formation.	Sacred routines generate administrative and leadership capacity.
Intergenerational reproduction	Girls' programs, Siswa Praja Wanita, Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah, and early childhood education.	The space links women's piety to a continuing leadership pipeline.
Civic and welfare reach	Education, mutual assistance, social service, and neighbourhood coordination.	Religious gathering becomes infrastructure for public benefit.
Heritage and network identity	Centenary narratives and a reported sixteen-site Yogyakarta network.	Historical sacred space legitimates contemporary women's public religious agency.
Ambivalent separation	Women exercise autonomy inside a distinct institution while the main mosque may remain male-coded.	Transformation is real but bounded; institutional relations determine whether separation empowers or contains.

Discussion

1. The Musholla as an Autonomous Sacred Public

The findings support a conceptual shift from prayer room to autonomous sacred public. A prayer room is usually understood functionally: it accommodates ritual. A sacred public is understood relationally: it gathers people who address one another, produce shared knowledge, allocate roles, and act toward collective concerns. 'Aisyiyah's mushollas performed both functions. Their devotional legitimacy enabled women to gather regularly; regular gathering made teaching and organization possible; organization connected the congregation to education and social service. The space therefore generated capacities that exceeded its physical boundaries.

The adjective autonomous does not mean independent from Muhammadiyah or from Islamic authority. It describes women's control over a meaningful range of practices within the space. 'Aisyyah women could organize activities, cultivate speakers, educate younger members, and maintain local networks. This autonomy was relational and institutionally supported. Ahmad Dahlan and male Muhammadiyah allies were important in the founding narrative, but the institution's continuity depended on women's organization. The case resembles Nyhagen's (2019) emphasis on the importance of male allies while also showing that durable reform requires women-controlled structures rather than benevolent access alone.

The model differs from the peripheral women's section of a mixed mosque. Peripheral sections frequently reproduce a hierarchy between the main congregation and an auxiliary audience. Sound, visibility, and programming flow from the male centre. In an autonomous sacred public, women are the centre of address. Their questions set the agenda, their life experiences shape religious discussion, and their organizational needs determine scheduling. This distinction helps explain why some women may value a women-only musholla even when a mixed mosque is available. The issue is not fear of men or rejection of common worship; it is the quality of agency produced by different institutional arrangements.

The concept also clarifies the relationship between piety and empowerment. Secular accounts sometimes treat religious devotion as a private identity that precedes public action. In the 'Aisyyah case, devotional discipline itself generated public competence. Congregational prayer required coordination; study required interpretation; speech practice required confidence; teaching required recognized knowledge; charitable work required administration. Empowerment did not occur after religion was set aside. It emerged through the organization of religious practice.

This pattern is consistent with broader studies showing that Muslim women use religious spaces to develop autonomous selves and collective identities (Ghafournia, 2020; Prickett, 2015). Yet the 'Aisyyah case adds historical depth and organizational scale. The musholla was not a recent response to multicultural minority conditions or contemporary feminist activism. It emerged in colonial Java as part of an Islamic reform movement and persisted through major changes in education, politics, and women's employment. Its endurance suggests that gender-specific sacred publics can become stable organizational institutions rather than temporary refuges.

2. Reinterpreting Sacred Space through Practice

The musholla reinterpreted sacred space less through doctrinal declaration than through institutional practice. The sources do not present a developed theology of women-only mosques. Instead, they describe activities: women pray, study, speak, teach, organize, and care for the community. Repetition normalizes women's religious authority. The space becomes legitimate because it works, because it supports piety, and because its participants produce recognized social benefit. This pragmatic pattern is characteristic of

'Aisyiyah's wider reform tradition, in which theological commitment is institutionalized through schools, clinics, associations, and welfare services.

The term reinterpretation should therefore be used carefully. 'Aisyiyah did not redefine the legal category of the mosque in a way that displaced male Friday prayer. It created a different sacred institution with a distinct ritual and organizational profile. The innovation was spatial and social: it refused the assumption that women's religious gathering had to remain inside private homes or at the margins of male institutions. The musholla made women's presence architecturally permanent and organizationally public.

This distinction helps avoid anachronism. Evaluating the 1922 institution only through contemporary debates about women imams or mixed congregations would obscure its historical achievement. The crucial intervention was to give women a stable place from which to learn and organize at a time when their formal public roles were sharply constrained. At the same time, historical context should not shield the model from present evaluation. As women's access to education and mixed institutions expands, mushollas must continue to justify their resources, governance, and relationship to broader mosque reform.

The contemporary network suggests adaptation rather than fossilization. Some mushollas are linked to early childhood schools; others remain neighbourhood spaces. Their programs may include religious instruction, social support, and organizational meetings. A network can diversify functions according to local needs. It also creates opportunities for coordination, digital communication, documentation, and heritage education. Future development could strengthen the sites as centres for women's scholarship, family support, disability-inclusive worship, youth leadership, and community disaster response.

The case thus expands the meaning of spatial justice. Justice is not only equal square metres inside a mosque. It includes the capacity to shape religious programs, interpret tradition, control budgets, preserve institutional memory, and connect sacred life to public action. An integrated building can remain unjust if women lack authority. A separate building can advance justice if it provides resources and recognition. The decisive question is the distribution of institutional power.

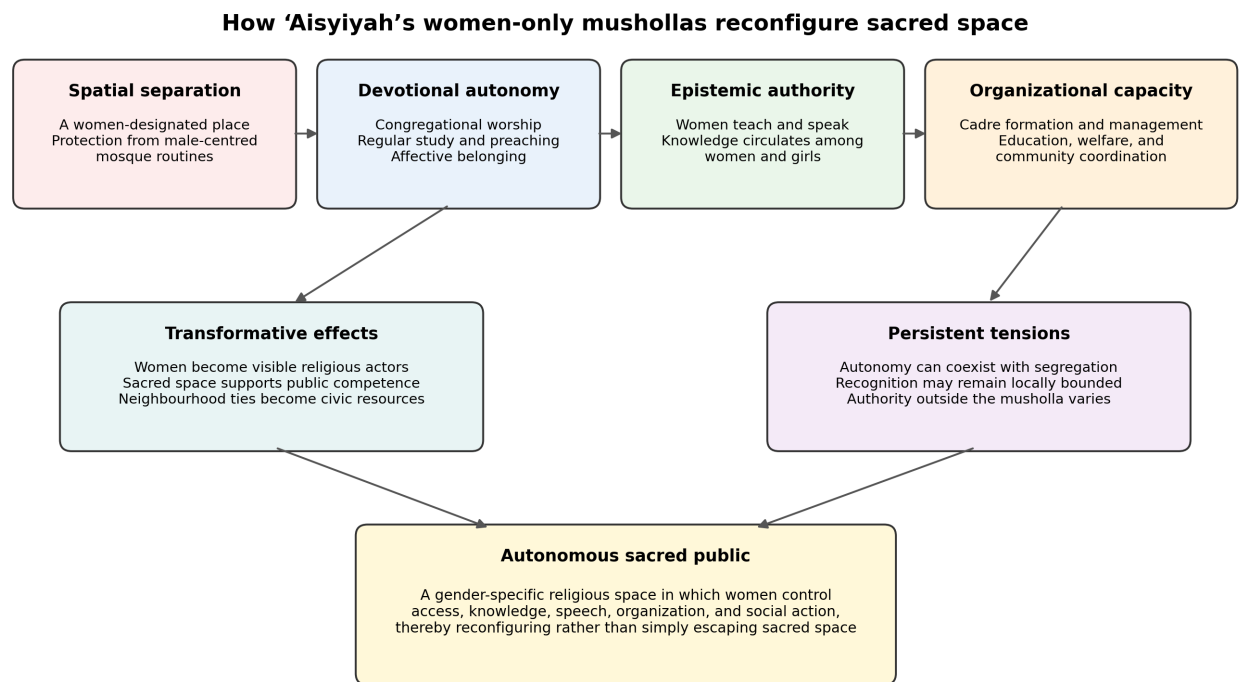


Figure 2. The autonomous sacred public model of 'Aisyiyah's women-only mushollas.

Conceptual Propositions

Proposition 1: A gender-specific sacred space is more likely to expand women's agency when women control programming, knowledge production, and organizational resources rather than merely occupying a separate room.

Proposition 2: Regular devotional gathering produces civic capacity when worship is institutionally linked to speech, teaching, cadre formation, and community service.

Proposition 3: The transformative value of women-only sacred space depends on network connectivity: autonomous spaces generate wider authority when they are connected to schools, welfare organizations, publications, and public forums.

Proposition 4: Spatial separation has ambivalent effects. It protects women's autonomy but may preserve the male coding of central mosques unless authority and resources also circulate across institutions.

Proposition 5: Historical memory strengthens institutional legitimacy when heritage is mobilized for contemporary programming rather than preserved only as symbolic commemoration.

Table 4. Analytical criteria for evaluating women-centred sacred spaces

Dimension	Empowering condition	Risk or limiting condition
Access	Women have predictable, dignified, and life-stage-sensitive access.	Access is irregular, hidden, or dependent on unused male space.
Ritual centrality	Women are the normal congregation and their practices structure the space.	Women remain an auxiliary audience to a male-centred ritual order.
Epistemic authority	Women teach, select topics, interpret, and train other women.	Knowledge is imported without women's interpretive participation.
Governance	Women control schedules, finances, maintenance, and institutional relationships.	A separate space remains externally governed and materially dependent.
Material quality	Facilities are safe, accessible, visible, and adequately resourced.	Separation is accompanied by inferior infrastructure.
External reach	Skills and networks connect to education, welfare, advocacy, and public leadership.	Authority is confined to an internal devotional circle.
Interinstitutional equality	Autonomy coexists with women's rights in mixed and central institutions.	The women-only space becomes an excuse to preserve male monopoly elsewhere.

Implications

For 'Aisiyiah, the historical network offers both a heritage asset and a contemporary institutional opportunity. Documentation should move beyond commemorative narratives toward a verified archive of sites, land status, founding actors, renovations, programs, and women leaders. A digital map of the Yogyakarta network could preserve local histories and make visible the scale of women's religious infrastructure. Oral histories with senior congregants and managers are urgent because much operational knowledge is not contained in formal documents.

Programmatically, the autonomous sacred public model suggests that mushollas should be evaluated by the authority they produce. Indicators might include the number and diversity of women teachers, youth participation, disability access, leadership rotation, community partnerships, social-service referrals, and the proportion of programs designed from women's expressed needs. These indicators are more meaningful than attendance alone. They measure whether the space develops religious and civic capability.

For mosque governance more broadly, the case cautions against a single solution. Women need equal rights and adequate facilities in mixed mosques, but they may also benefit from autonomous women-centred spaces. Policy should not force a choice between integration and self-organization. The two can be complementary when resources and recognition are fairly distributed. 'Aisiyiah's experience demonstrates that women-specific space can be an institution of leadership rather than a sign of withdrawal.

For scholarship on Indonesian Islam, the mushollas invite greater attention to ordinary buildings. Major mosques and national organizations dominate historical research, while small neighbourhood spaces are treated as background. Yet institutional change often occurs in places where recurring routines are organized. The study of architecture, schedules, sound, teaching, and management can reveal how reform becomes durable. Sacred-space research should therefore connect textual history with ethnography, material culture, and organizational analysis.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its documentary basis. Official sources tend to emphasize continuity, achievement, and exemplary figures. They rarely record conflict, failed programs, financial constraints, or differences among participants. The article therefore cannot determine how consistently women controlled governance across all sites. Jenner's ethnography provides valuable contemporary triangulation, but two cases cannot represent the reported Yogyakarta network.

The historical record is also uneven. The founding date of the Kauman musholla is well established in institutional memory, but detailed minutes, budgets, architectural plans, and participant lists were not available in the corpus. The relationship between the musholla and neighbouring male mosques requires archival and oral-history investigation. Future research should compare Kauman, Karangkajen, Suronatan, and newer school-based sites using observation, interviews, spatial mapping, and analysis of governance documents.

Comparative research would further clarify the model. 'Aisyiyah mushollas could be compared with women's mosques in China, women-led mosque initiatives in Europe and North America, female prayer spaces in pesantren, and women's sections of Indonesian urban mosques. Such comparison should not rank cases according to a universal scale of progress. It should examine how different combinations of theology, architecture, organizational ownership, and political context produce distinct forms of authority.

Finally, future studies should test whether capacities developed inside the musholla transfer into mixed religious institutions and public decision-making. Leadership trajectories, intergenerational participation, and the inclusion of women from different class, disability, and educational backgrounds are especially important. The autonomous sacred public is an analytical proposition; its scope and limits require empirical testing across sites.

CONCLUSION

'Aisyiyah's women-only mushollas emerged from a process of collective formation rather than from architecture alone. Women's study circles, Siswa Praja Wanita, speech practice, dawn prayer, and girls' education created a community that required durable space. The Kauman musholla institutionalized that community in 1922, and later sites embedded the model in neighbourhood and educational networks. The historical record shows that the musholla was simultaneously devotional, pedagogical, organizational,

and social.

Its significance lies in the redistribution of spatial governance. Women became the normal congregation, religious learners and teachers, organizers, and transmitters of institutional memory. The musholla did not merely grant access to worship. It gave women control over the conditions through which worship generated knowledge and collective action. These capacities supported wider participation in education, welfare, women's organization, and public leadership.

The women-only character of the space remains ambivalent. Separation may coexist with the continued coding of central mosques as male, and authority created within women's spaces may be bounded. Yet separation cannot be equated automatically with subordination. Where women possess governance, resources, epistemic authority, and institutional connections, a gender-specific sacred space can become transformative. The 'Aisyiyah case demonstrates a historically grounded strategy in which autonomy preceded and enabled broader public involvement.

The article has conceptualized this institution as an autonomous sacred public. The concept captures a space where women organize piety and simultaneously develop the competence to speak, teach, manage, and serve. It also directs evaluation toward power rather than architectural form. The future relevance of 'Aisyiyah's mushollas will depend on whether their heritage is converted into inclusive contemporary programs, documented leadership, and stronger connections across religious and civic institutions. Their century-long history shows that sacred space can be reinterpreted not only by changing doctrine or opening doors, but by giving women the institutional means to build a public from within.

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