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Spatial Modesty: The Everyday Production of Gendered Space in Segregated and Assimilative Organizations

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ABSTRACT This article explores the relations between organizational spatiality, gender and religion-informed cultural practices. Theoretically grounded in Lefebvre's spatial theory and informed by Islamic feminism, it examines the significance of Islamic spatial modesty in (re) constructing and sustaining gender (in)equalities in financial institutions in Pakistan. The analysis reveals that the work-space of Pakistani banks is gendered in ways that reflect the practices of purdah (Islamic modesty), while being adjusted and resisted to fit with the cultural practices of the organization, in what we call 'selective appropriation of spatial modesty'. The article advances gender and organizational space scholarship by critically assessing Lefebvre's theory of space through the lenses of Islamic feminism and offers a cultural-religious understanding of space theory.

Keywords: banking, gender, Islamic feminism, Lefebvre's spatial theory, organizational space

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the influence of the socio-physical space on organizational processes and relations has sustained the interest of management scholars for decades. As such, the study of organizational space has provided fascinating insights for understanding organizations in novel ways (Weinfurtner and Seidl, 2019) in relation to processes such as organizational change, corporate governance, communication (Kornberger and Clegg, 2004), leadership (Brandstorp et al., 2015), mergers (Ford and Harding, 2004), power and control (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Dale and Burrell, 2008). In recent years, research exploring the spatial dimension of organizing and organizations has

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been marked by the 'spatial turn' that has permeated disciplines including human geography, philosophy, sociology, management and organization studies (MOS) (Kingma et al., 2018; Shortt, 2015; Van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010).

The space turn in organization studies has determined a shift from intending organizational space as a product, to studying space as a process, focusing on the processual and performative practices of interacting actors within spatial discourse and materiality (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012). Authors such as Fleming and Spicer (2003), Hancock and Spicer (2011) have explored the interrelations between workspaces and power dynamics highlighting the role of spatial aspects in (re)creating and sustaining social hierarchies at work. Additionally, in exploring organizational hierarchies, other authors (e.g., Tyler and Cohen, 2010; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015) have recognized the importance of understanding gender differences and how women and men co-construct and experience space at work as well as how space 'materializes subjectivities' (Tyler and Cohen, 2010, p. 178). The gender analysis of space, however, remains limited, with several scholars (e.g., Kingma et al., 2018; Nash, 2018; Panayiotou, 2015) calling for a better understanding of space as entangled in inequality regimes at work. There also remains the need to acquire a better understanding of spatial gendered relations in organizations located in wider geographical areas, and particularly in the Global South where the complexity of how gender inequalities intersect with ethnic, class and religious backgrounds needs further analysis (see Pio and Syed, 2013; Raz and Tzruya, 2018).

In gendering organizational spatiality in the Pakistani banking sector and attending to the aforementioned research gaps, this article addresses the question: how do organizational spaces affect the ways in which Muslim working women perform gender in culturally (including religion) appropriate ways? To do so, it compares configurations of spatialized gender practices in two banks characterized by different cultures but operating in the same location: a multinational Islamic bank and a multinational American bank based in Pakistan. Drawing on two ethnographic case studies of two branches located in a major Pakistani city, the research aims: (a) to theorize the ways in which configurations of organizational space reproduce specific gender meanings and practices that are entangled with religion and cultural precepts; (b) to examine how gendered space is lived by Muslim women bankers in organizations characterized by different cultures.

Theoretically, the article connects Lefebvre's (1991) articulation of space as a productive force to the Islamic feminist ontology, via the analysis of spatial modesty (purdah), thus advancing the theory of space's cultural implications and applications. In doing so, this article advances current theoretical debates on space and gender in two ways. Firstly, it demonstrates how the theorizing of organizational space and inequality regimes may be strengthened and advanced by incorporating institutional ideologies such as purdah, intended as a religious philosophy of space. Secondly, it enriches organizational space literature by integrating Lefebvre's theory, which is heavily focused on class differences, with emerging understandings of Islamic feminism to theorize the gendering of organizational space across cultures (Eger, 2021; Syed and Ali, 2019).

Islamic feminism (e.g., Barlas, 2002) advocates a religiously grounded gender justice in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities for women (Priola and Chaudhry, 2021).[1] It acknowledges the need for differential, though fair, just and equivalent treatment of women and men according to their respective needs and recognizes that social differences between men and women determine their different access to opportunities and resources.

The empirical analysis shows how the practice of spatial modesty (purdah) interacts with organizational objectives and cultures to shape how employees (women in particular) experience and respond to the gendered workspace. It also illustrates how distinct patterns of exclusion and otherness are experienced and moulded by the users of space in a process we refer to as 'selective appropriation of spatial modesty'. Such 'appropriation', acted by gendered subjects, operates differently in the two financial organizations, despite their sector and geo-cultural commonalities. Nonetheless, we define this process of 'appropriation' as selective or guarded because it remains confined within the norms of purdah, which is never overtly challenged or resisted but re-interpreted according to more or less liberal views contained within the boundaries of spatial modesty.

The next two sections offer an overview of the literature concerning space, gender at work and Islamic gender relations. Subsequently, the research methodology section discusses the data collection and analysis. The paper then presents the empirical analysis of the findings showing the relevance of space to complex systems of inequalities in two different financial organizations in Pakistan. The discussion theorizes the research findings by highlighting the significance of 'religious spatial norms' in shaping the gender dynamics of Lefebvre's (1991) framework.

GENDERING ORGANIZATIONAL SPACE

Recent research focusing on understanding space as a key feature of working lives has gradually shifted its focus from conceptualizing space in its physical dimensions (Elsbach and Pratt, 2007) to exploring the lived experiences of space (Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Weinfurtner and Seidl, 2019). This later perspective views space as a social process and supersedes the notion of space as an empty container of organizational activities, moving toward a more dynamic, rich and diversified perspective of space (Skoglund and Holt, 2020; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). It brings space alive through the interpretations of meanings, feelings, imaginations and language rather than seeing it as an 'inert stage on which actions are played out' (Wapshott and Mallett, 2012, p. 67).

The emergence of the social dimension of space in organizations owes to the work of Henri Lefebvre and his seminal text *The production of space* (1991). Lefebvre (1991, p. 10) posits 'the active—the operational or instrumental—role of space as a knowledge and action' and, in doing so, he emphasizes the need for a theory of space that unifies the physical, mental and social fields of space as product and productive force that serves the establishment and capitalism. Space for Lefebvre is the evolving product of a dialectical relation between mental space (Cartesian tri-dimensional space), physical space (nature) and social space. Every society produces its abstract space, which in capitalist societies is characterized by the dominance of the mental space over the physical and social spaces (see the centre of the diagram in Figure 1). By drawing on the philosophy of everyday life, he developed a triadic framework that provides a holistic view of space as a 'precondition' as well as 'a result of social superstructures' (p. 85). Space is embedded within structural power relations, is shaped by

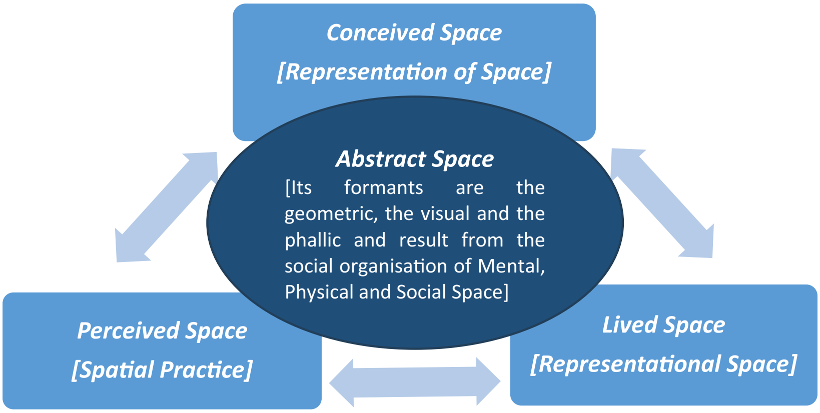
Conceived Space
[Representation of Space]
Abstract Space
[Its formants are the geometric, the visual and the phallic and result from the social organisation of Mental, Physical and Social Space]
Perceived Space
[Spatial Practice]
Lived Space
[Representational Space]

Figure 1. A graphical simplification of Lefebvre's system of space

the interests of contending forces and is produced as scientifically *conceived* by planners, *lived* and appropriated by users and *practised* by users and planners. The potential of this 'system of space', as conceived, lived and practised, is not 'to produce a (or *the*) discourse on space, but rather to expose the actual production of space by bringing the various kinds of space and the modalities of their genesis together within a single theory' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 16).

The *conceived* space is 'the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38), reproduced in the architectural and planner discourse that dominates organizations and societies. The manifestation of the architectural discourse into material artefacts corresponds to the *perceived* space: this is the spatial practice, revealed in the deciphering of space by a society (p. 38). The *lived* space (also known as space of representation) is the space of inhabitants, it is the user's understanding of the space and the ways in/and through which users experience the available space. According to Lefebvre (1991), the specific spatial competence and performance of individuals can only be evaluated empirically, so that the dynamic interconnections of these three realms can bring to the fore the power and control elements of the social space.

The intimate interplay of space with power relations is at the heart of Lefebvre's triad and its examination allows the understanding of how power is 'inscribed upon, collapsed into, defined by and constitutive of psyches and bodies' (Ford and Harding, 2004, p. 828) across the three realms of space. However, while Lefebvre does place the body at the centre of his theory of space, this remains unidentified (or possibly it is a white male body), as he does not engage with how space is inscribed upon and lived by a woman's body, a queer body, a black body or a disabled body. Similarly, much of the work that stemmed from Lefebvre's theory has neglected this critical aspect, including critical work by authors such as Dale and Burrell (2008, 2010), Kornberger and Clegg (2004), who have explored how space can become an instrument for producing, reproducing and resisting power and control in organizations. As highlighted by Wasserman and Frenkel (2015, p. 1501), while 'Lefebvre's theory is deployed by scholars to understand power relations regarding class, his theory has not been extensively used to research gender relations in organizations'. In this paper, we retrace Lefebvre's 'neutral' subject into a minority subject and articulate the ways in which gendered bodies encounter -and are forced into- space differently.

While Lefebvre does not explicitly refer to minoritized bodies, he acknowledges difference, asserting that the abstract space '*classifies* in the service of a class' (1991, p. 375), normalizing particular bodies and practices while rendering others different. We also recognize that gender is embedded in Lefebvre's abstract space. For instance, he suggests that the three formants of the abstract space are the geometric (the mathematical/Euclidean space), the optical or visual, and the phallic formants. This later is the space of capitalism, which 'symbolizes force, male fertility, masculine violence' (Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018, p. 163). In organizational contexts, the phallic aspects refer to the preference of architects and managers for using space as a means to employ control on its inhabitants in order to achieve the desired business objectives. While the phallic formant can be viewed as a metaphor for masculine force associated to power and control, in this paper we show that it can be an actual example of how political power viciously segregates women to the periphery. In fact, in revisiting the theory of space through the lenses of Islamic feminism, we further theorize Lefebvre's incomplete exploration of the limits that space imposes on some bodies over others, providing empirical knowledge of the effect of space on gendered bodies in a religious society. Therefore, this paper not only contributes new knowledge by embedding gender within a theory heavily based on class difference, but also emphasizes the element of religion as a lived practice.

The conceived/architectural discourse of space produces gender hierarchies through the formal segregation and allocation of women's work to narrow and confined spaces (Hancock and Spicer, 2011; Parry, 2024; Wasserman, 2019), or to front-line, open-plan spaces, which are generally characterized by limited career opportunities. These spaces contrast with well-furnished, expansive private offices, mostly occupied by men (Johansson and Lundgren, 2015). Despite evolutions in the design of organizational space (open space, hybrid space etc.), contemporary layouts have resulted in more subtle forms of gendered spatial arrangements (Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018; Panayiotou and Kafiris, 2010; Wasserman, 2012). For example, in Wasserman and Frenkel's (2015, p. 18) study based at the Israelian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'women clearly sense a conflict between their gender identity and the masculine/professional design of space'. In another study, Tyler and Cohen (2010) apply Butler's theory of gender performativity to explore how gender is experienced and materialized through the spatial work arrangements in universities. They showed that women experience spatial constraints through 'spatial invasion' exercised by the 'spillage' of men's bodies and belongings, as men tended to invade the space surrounding their work areas. Other authors, such as Laurence et al. (2013), have shown that women and men are not passive recipients of the conceived space but enact available spatial practices and interpret them according to their subjective understandings. They also manipulate and appropriate the workspace through, for example, the decoration of their desks and the display of personal artefacts, such as children's drawings and pictures, which allow them to dwell in the workspace.

While these studies show how organizational practices contribute to sustaining gendered spatial hierarchies, Panayiotou (2015) argues that this body of work lacks an understanding of the extent to which these spatial practices enable women to *act upon* and *change* their otherness at work. Our study shows how Muslim women working in male-dominated environments can and do affect their otherness by interacting with the ways in which space is conceived, practised and lived.

We now explore purdah as a spatialized gendered configuration practised in Islamic cultures. We view purdah as a social superstructure that regulates gender relations in Muslim societies. It is a system of gender hierarchical order and segregation, whereby women have to cover their bodies, are secluded to private spaces and socially segregated by being prevented from interacting with unrelated men.

Purdah and Islamic Gender Relations

Within MOS, research exploring the workplace experiences of Muslim women has paid particular attention to the veil as a marker of women's subjugation and oppression, and/or an expression of their identity and commitment to the Islamic faith (e.g., Bartkowski and Read, 2003; Essers et al., 2010; Gonzalez, 2013; Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2014; Predelli, 2004; Read and Bartkowski, 2000), often neglecting other aspects of modesty related to the wider institution of purdah. We feel that a deeper engagement with purdah, or spatial modesty, provides the link between the theory of space and Islamic feminism. In fact, we view purdah as the gendered manifestation of Lefebvre's abstract space in Muslim-majority societies. Purdah is manifested through the physical separation of men's and women's spaces, with the woman confined to the boundaries of the house and the man occupying the public space (Shaheed, 2010). Purdah literally means curtain; the Quran emphasizes the 'drawing of the curtain' to avoid the gaze of unknown men and addresses women to stay within the home, to speak softly and to avoid unnecessary exposure to the outside to protect their modesty.

Purdah is, thus, entangled with the concept of female modesty. Modesty refers to the reputation and honour of women (and to a certain extent of religious men) (Syed, 2008). Dressing and physical distance between women and men are the central pillars of modesty, manifested through veiling and spatial segregation. Islamic jurists argue that the practice of purdah is a divine order, as evidenced in the Quran (verses 33:53; 33:31[2]) and the Hadith[3] and that observing purdah is a religious obligation which ensures women's compliance to Islam and their submission to Allah (Vidyasagar and Rea, 2004). In the interests of maintaining morality in society and limiting sexual temptations, free social interaction between women and men is marked as 'haram' (prohibited) (Abdul-Rahman, 2007). As a consequence, women should be excluded from leading and/or participating in public life and are not allowed to travel with non-mahram men (someone who is not a close family member). Islamic orthodox guidance regarding travelling prohibitions has led to the exclusion of women from formal employment and political roles in those countries that impose sharia law (Inglehart and Pippa, 2003; Korteweg, 2008; Prickett, 2014). However, the meaning and practising of purdah remain contested as it is affected by class, level of education, religiosity and regional areas (Chaudhry and Priola, 2018). In fact, as a social-cultural institution, the practice of purdah is complex and not homogeneous and is affected by several factors (Koburtay et al., 2023). Among these, economic prosperity is associated to more stringent practices, as the total seclusion of women cannot be afforded by the poorer class. In rural areas, where women have to work the land to support the family, they are more publicly visible. Similarly, in urban areas, highly educated women from the upper class, are more likely to participate in the labour market. Therefore, while historically purdah was seen as a status symbol afforded by the wealthy, this is no longer the case, as the practice is affected by the intersection of different influences, as the empirical study will also show. We consider purdah a philosophy of space, a religious-based ontology positioning women and men within society.

Islamic feminism. Orthodox interpretations of the sacred texts have been challenged on many levels by Islamic feminists, secular and religious scholars (e.g., Barlas, 2002; Syed and Ali, 2019). By drawing on Islamic scriptures, Islamic feminists (e.g., Barlas, 2001; Badran, 2002; Moghadam, 2012) throw light on the gender egalitarianism of Islamic knowledge, asserting that a more holistic reading of the Quran reveals its foundation on justice and equity. They offer a critique of women's oppression within the teachings of Islam and question whether the feminist movement developed in Western cultures can support the emancipation of Muslim women. Islamic feminism is viewed as part of a wide feminist movement and embraces many secular feminist discourses, not least its central rooting in women's rights. However, Badran (2011) notes that secular feminism is founded on the argument that practices which oppress and marginalize women are introduced by men and institutions set up by men, whereas Muslim women are subjugated in the name of religious norms considered as divine rules and written in the sacred texts. Thus, she argues that a religiously grounded feminist approach is required to support the emancipation of Muslim women.

Islamic feminists interpret the Quran and Hadith centring on their egalitarian roots and encourage the fostering of complementary gender roles that focus on equity and justice, with women having equivalent and fair rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities to men (Priola and Chaudhry, 2021). They contest the exegesis (translation and interpretation) of the sacred texts, emphasizing the need to challenge patriarchal interpretations of the Quran (Barlas, 2002), arguing that it should be historicised and open to criticism, and that exegetes (generally male) were influenced by the misogynist cultures of their time (Aslan, 2005). Therefore, to achieve the emancipation of Muslim women in working, social and political contexts, scholars should return to the original sources, consider who interpreted the text, how and in which context and propose alternative interpretations (Badran, 2009). Challenging interpretations of the sacred texts, Islamic feminists recognize the argument of secular feminists that patriarchal values are the result of historical conditions (Ahmed, 1992) and economic factors (Ross, 2008), and contend that neither Islam nor its normative teachings are patriarchal in nature. Indeed, practices and beliefs associated to women's modesty and honour are entrenched in cultural as much as in religious norms, evidenced by the fact that veiling and the separation of gendered spaces were practised in ancient Indo-European cultures, such as Hittites, Greeks, Romans, Assyrians, Persians and Indians before the advent of Islam (Dashu, 2006).

Just like the feminist movement in general, Islamic feminism is not homogeneous and differences exist between Muslim feminist scholars and activists. For example, Seedat (2016) argues that tensions remain between Islam and feminism, contending that a convergence of the two is not easy, with many refusing to use the two terms together. Differently from Barlas (2002), who argues that equity is a value upheld in the Quran when read holistically, Hidayatullah (2014) applies the discursive approach to the reading of the Quran, suggesting that it is not a 'definitive closed text that "says" things with unassailable authority in the way that Barlas argues the Quran is antipatriarchal' (Seedat, 2016, p. 139). Instead, it remains relevant to the reader, highlighting the value of women's 'experiences as a site of exegetical authority beyond the text' and suggesting that 'equality and the text are never definitive, always discursive, and drawn from the experiences of the reader, always receptive to continuous becomings' (p. 142). Furthermore, Islamic feminism has been critiqued for being a predominantly diaspora and convert phenomenon, often detached from the work of local women rights activists and for excluding concerns about the rights of non-Muslim women in the Islamic world (Badran, 2011).

In our commitment to move away from binary constructions of Muslim women as either victims of misogynist Islamic values or opponents of liberal ideologies (Bilge, 2010; Rootham, 2015), we argue for the need to deconstruct the experience of professional Muslim women within the institution of purdah and uphold the pluralism of Islamic feminism. By incorporating the dynamic perspective of Lefebvre's (1991) space triad, the findings presented below offer a reframing of spatial gender hierarchies in the Pakistani banking sector.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a multi-site ethnographic study aimed at observing the lived experience of women and men working in two banks based in Pakistan. The first was a branch of a large multi-national American bank (we use the pseudonym Western Bank—WB) and the other was the branch of a large Sharia-compliant bank (called here Sharia Bank—SB) present in different countries in Asia and the Middle-East. These branches were based in a major Pakistani city and were chosen because they were among the largest banking institutions in the country. The first author sought internships for 6 weeks in each bank for the purpose of collecting research data.

The ethnographic methodology included overt participant observation of daily operations across different departments, semi-structured interviews with employees and the analysis of company documents (e.g., annual reports, code of work ethics, HR policies) in both branches. The researcher was introduced to all employees by the branch manager who explained that she was conducting a study about women in the banking sector. The researcher then answered questions from employees seeking further clarification. As an intern, she participated in work activities such as serving at the customer services desk, manual data entry and attending the morning briefings, training sessions and informal events. Direct involvement in banking activities enabled the author to have informal conversations with women and men, which helped her understand the everyday working life of employees. A field diary was compiled daily and field notes were organized using Spradley's (1980) nine dimensions model focusing on the macro dimensions that describe the field observed and their micro characteristics. The nine dimensions are: space, actors, activities, objects, acts, events, time, goals and feelings.

While understanding her critical role as an investigator, the author has strategically situated herself in the research setting and managed her 'insider' and 'outsider' roles, engaging in work activities and adapting her participant observer role accordingly. The involvement and the welcoming attitude of employees, as well as her nationality, allowed her to have an 'insider' view. However, as an intern, she was not allowed to work in the cash department, engage in any financial transactions or work on financial data systems. These restrictions created the sense of being an 'outsider' and reminded her of her primary role of observer (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The experience of both insider and outsider treatment allowed the researcher 'to combine participation and observation in a way that enables understanding of the site as an insider while describing it to the outsider' (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 145), which is one of the most critical challenges of participant observation.

In addition to observations, 24 in-depth interviews were conducted with women (six in SB and five in WB) and men (nine in SB and four in WB) across the two banks. All 11 women employed at both banks were interviewed in order to achieve maximum insight into the women's experiences. Men participants were selected through purposive sampling to include workers from different hierarchical positions, ages, departments (at least one from each department, i.e., operations, sales and trade) and availability. Men were dominant in both banks (SB employed 46 men and WB employed 10 men), however, to maintain a gender balance, it was decided to interview a similar number of men to the number of women employed across the two banks.

The interviews were held in private rooms within the bank premises during the last two weeks of the fieldwork. Since English was the official language at both banks, all the interviews were in English, with the occasional sentence in Urdu. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 min (the interviews with women lasted longer than those with men as they spent longer time sharing their experiences, thoughts and ways of working), were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, transcribed verbatim and translated where required. Pseudonyms were used for the banks and the participants in order to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Table I reports the profile of interviewees from each bank.

Data Analysis

The data analysis comprised four stages of data reduction to achieve abstraction (Gioia, 2021). In the first stage, interview transcripts and observation notes were organized using the software NVivo, which allowed the initial exploration of data, creation of codes and identification of relationships between initial codes. In the second stage, through the process of comparing, contrasting, collapsing and emerging, the codes were categorized into broad themes. This allowed us to identify commonalities across the codes and reduce the complexity of the data. Examples of themes were: gendered work practices; women's and men's views of the organizational culture; gendered work spaces; experiences of 'othering'; career development and aspirations; organizational expectations, society impositions and travelling. In the third stage, the themes were further examined by the authors to identify contradictions, differences and consistencies in the views and experiences shared by participants. For example, when referring to travelling to and from work, visiting clients or attending training courses, how were the views and experiences of participants different, similar

Table I. Interviewees in Western and Sharia banks

Name	*Gender*	*Age (years)*	*Marital Status*	*Job Title*
Western bank				
Amara	F	27	Single	Relationship officer in sales
Deeba	F	36	Married	Operation manager
Hina	F	24	Single	Floor relationship manager
Maryam	F	33	Married	Senior relationship manager in sales
Saira	F	25	Single	Floor relationship manager
Imran	M	30	Single	Senior relationship manager in sales
Rizwan	M	44	Married	Branch operation manager
Safa	M	34	Married	Relationship officer in trade
Waqas	M	32	Married	Senior relationship manager in sales
Sharia bank				
Afeefa	F	28	Single	Credit analyst in trade department
Ayesha	F	31	Married	Credit analyst in credit department
Fatima	F	41	Married	Credit analyst in credit department
Helema	F	28	Single	Cashier
Mobeen	F	30	Single	Card processing
Sameena	F	28	Single	Telephone operator
Ahmad	M	38	Married	Sales officer
Ali	M	30	Single	Sales processing
Kashif	M	30	Married	Personal banking officer
Malik	M	43	Married	Branch operation manager
Mubashir	M	39	Married	Sales manager
Mudasir	M	35	Married	Personal banking officer
Rajab	M	54	Married	Credit manager
Raza	M	29	Single	Service quality officer
Waseem	M	28	Married	Audit manager

or were they in contradiction? How do women's views about career aspirations differ from those of men and other women in the same or the other bank?

In the final stage, we reconnected Lefebvre's theory (the conceived, perceived and lived space triad) to the lived experiences of purdah to achieve a level of abstraction from the empirical data toward a theorization of space influenced by Islamic feminism. From this level, we decided to present the analysis organized into three sections that show: (a) how the Islamic practices of purdah interact with the culture of the organization to affect the ways in which the spatial practice (conceived and perceived space) of the bank is manifested; (b) the ways in which the gendered, conceived and perceived space is experienced by women (and men) bankers in sharia and secular banks to ensure (and/or negate) their religious and social capital respectively; (c) how women engaged in a process of 'selective spatial modesty' through a range of 'lived representations' that attempt to meet opposing expectations emerging from organizational and socio-religious pressures.

Conceived and Perceived Gendered Space in Segregated and Assimilative Banks

The single-storey building of Sharia Bank (SB) was divided into a front space – open to clients – and a back space consisting of offices accessible to employees. The front space was large, dull and gloomy, decorated with posters reproducing, in Islamic calligraphy, the verses from the holy texts about the significance of interest-free business and trade products. Figure 2 shows a reproduction of the bank's floor plan, with the public space occupied by cash counters, a customer waiting area and a separate area occupied by the operation manager and several customer service desks. Beyond the closed door, private offices include several departments and socialization spaces.

During the first field visit to SB, it became evident that all customer service positions, including the cash counters, were occupied by men. Later observations revealed that at certain times of the day, one cashier position was served by a woman who only dealt with women clients. As noted in the field diary:

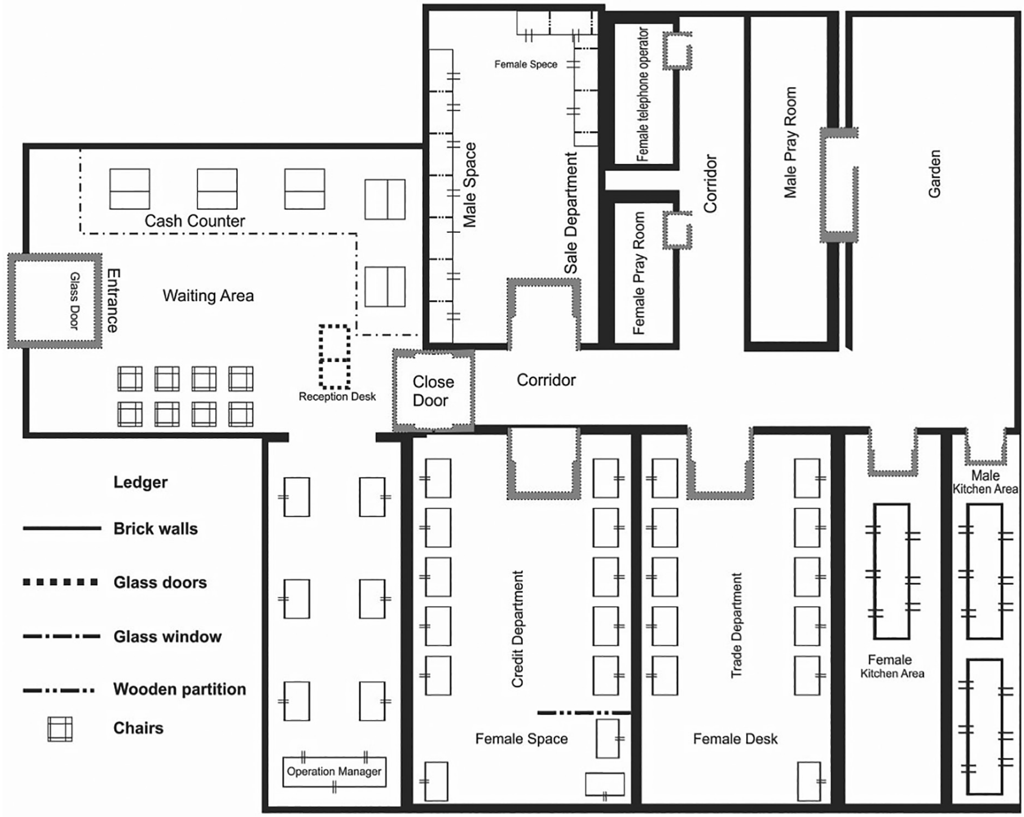
Female Spece
Male Space
Sale Department
Female telephone operator
Female Pray Room
Corridor
Male Pray Room
Garden
Cash Counter
Glass Door
Entrance
Waiting Area
Reception Desk
Close Door
Corridor
Ledger
Brick walls
Glass doors
Glass window
Wooden partition
Chairs
Credit Department
Female Space
Trade Department
Female Desk
Female Kitchen Area
Male Kitchen Area
Operation Manager

Figure 2. The conceived space of SB

> In the front area, there is a small glassed window slightly hidden from first sight. A woman in a black cloak and head scarf is dealing with a woman client.

All six women employed at this branch worked in the back offices, away from the public gaze. The separation of public and private spaces made the sexual division of labour explicit, however, the gendering of this workspace was not limited to the public and private spatial segregation, but it was also reflected in the design of the women's workstations. While the three large open-plan back offices (credit, sales and trade departments) were mixed-gender, women's desks faced the wall and were either situated at the extreme corners of the room or were separated from the men's desks by a big wooden partition (see Figure 2).

Communal places were also segregated, as there were separate kitchens, dining rooms and prayer rooms for women and men. All six women employed had lunch together, whereas the 46 men took lunch in different shifts. During the lunch time, a peon stood outside the women's dining room, ensuring it remained private as it was situated next to the men's dining room. When women were having lunch, the kitchen door remained closed to avoid men's gaze. Women and men explained that the bank followed Islamic principles across all aspects of life, not only on financial matters. Space was designed, used and experienced as serving the power of patriarchy:

> We follow Islamic banking and Islam instructs women to stay in the chardiwari[4] and to have no interaction with na-mahram[5] […]. In our bank, most front desk officers are men. (Rajab, m, SB)

The strict spatial segregation places women in confined spaces to avoid the male gaze in the name of religion. At SB, the objective of the (abstract) space is homogeneity, centrality and alignment between the social system of purdah and the local (physical) space; equally, the visual formant is aligned to reproduce the socio-political hegemony of gender relations according to which women are confined to the periphery and the 'unseen'. The space in its physicality, materiality and abstract sense is clearly employed to control women (Panayiotou, 2015).

In Lefebvre's work, the abstract space is generally viewed as the space of capitalism, which dominates the cultural and social world as well as the world of work (Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018). On the other hand, SB is a sharia-compliant financial institution rooted in Islamic ethics, which prohibits usury, in the form of charge of interests, and high-risk speculative behaviours.[6]

It rejects the capitalist Western ideology applied to banking, while it embraces the antithetic ideology of sharia (Ul-Haq et al., 2022). The abstract space here is not capitalism but the Islamic orthodox ideology that exercises control over women's work and private lives. However, in appealing to the Islamic principle of purdah, the conceived discourse of segregated space paradoxically suggests that men and their lust are subjected to control rather than the women who are to be protected from men, within and outside the workspace.

Compared to the dark and severe environment of SB, Western Bank (WB), on the other hand, has bright-coloured walls, glassed windows and modern and coloured furniture. It is based on two floors, although the top floor includes the kitchen, dining room and other meeting areas that were rarely used (see Figures 3 and 4). Among WB's business objectives, the sales of financial products is very important and all customer-facing positions have sales targets to achieve. During the first field visit to WB, one of the surprising aspects was the dominance of women in the customer-serving area, with the three customer-service desks occupied by women and the senior relationship manager role held by a woman. WB was a much smaller branch than SB, with 15 employees compared to 52, and later it was confirmed that women were mainly employed in front-line roles, with only one woman working as operation manager.The customer service workstations were situated in the main area and built in the form of small cubicles enclosed by half partitions and visible to the visiting public. All cubicles and offices had the same décor, they were colourful and adorned with the organizational logo. While the cubicles were viewed as private places, where customers discuss their financial issues, the interactions between clients and employees could be seen from the outside. The structure of the cubicles, as the conceived space, brought together the two ideological systems of capitalism and purdah as it contributed to increasing work efficiency (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015), while allowing the respect of cultural norms associated with modesty, as the interactions between customer relationship staff (mostly women) and clients (mostly men) are under the continuous scrutiny of colleagues and visitors to the bank.

> I have my small private cabin […] but you can see that everyone can see us sitting and talking and know that nothing wrong is going on in this place […] Oh! closed doors are not acceptable because people wouldn't know what is going on and they could think dishonest thoughts. (Maryam, f, WB)

Differently from SB, at WB all communal places are mixed gender, women and men had lunch in small mixed groups during the week and on Friday all employees had lunch together either in a restaurant or had food delivered to the branch. After Friday prayers, the peon placed the lunch boxes on the dining table and all colleagues stood around the table, offering and sharing each other's food. During conversations with employees, they explained that the working practice and culture of their bank was based on the culture and norms of the head office and that this appealed to them as modern professionals, many of whom had studied in Western countries.

> Our bank follows international standards […]. Here most women work in front-line positions, like in other Western organisations and they have no problems. (Arslan, m, WB)

In WB the 'secular' architectural design of the workspace (conceived space) is shaped by the socio-cultural norms of purdah in specific and subtle ways that are influenced by the organizational culture inspired by the bank's ownership. The manifestations of this bank's objectives (i.e., expansion of client portfolio and the sale of financial products) into the conceived space are revealed in the positioning of the customer service desks/cubicles in a relatively central space, attended by attractive women, dressed in colourful and fashionable attires welcoming clients (generally men).

> Banks prefer women at the customer service desk for increasing the inflow of customers, as more people will come to the bank if it is a woman who serves them. […] that is also why we are expected to be presentable. (Salma, f, WB)

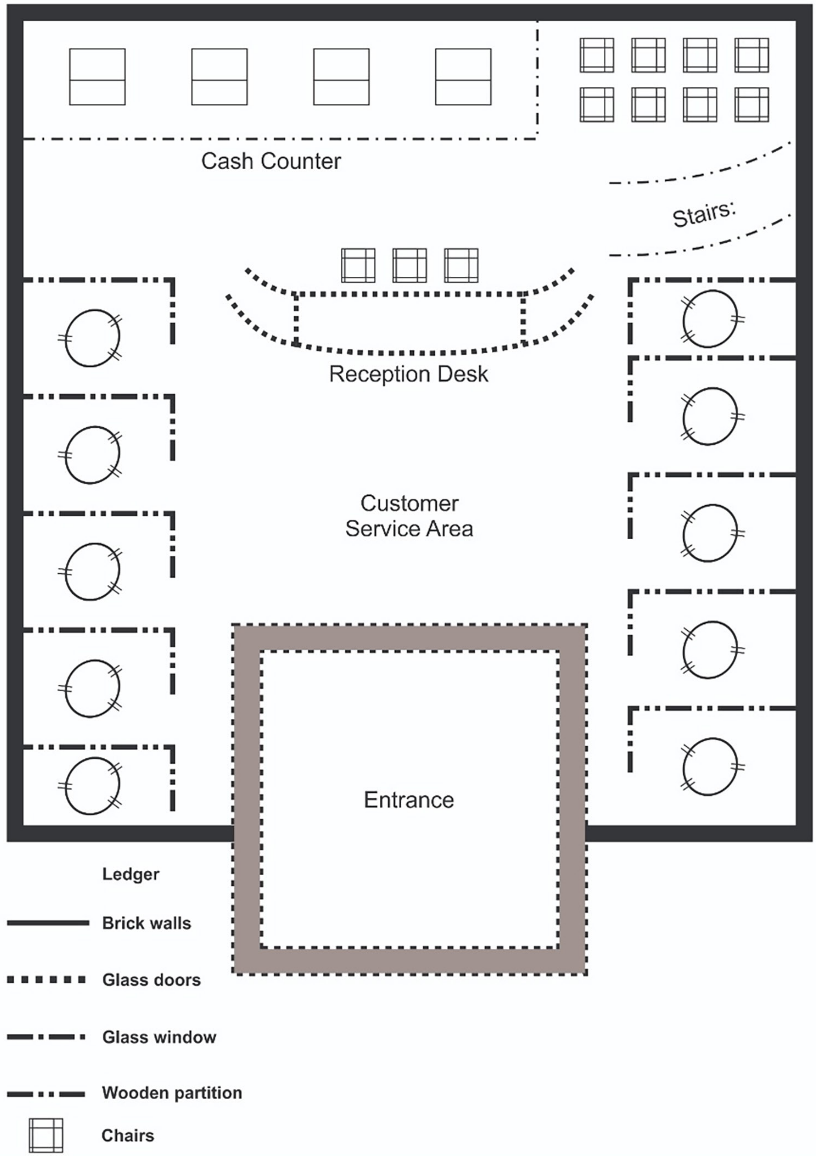
Cash Counter
Stairs:
Reception Desk
Customer Service Area
Entrance
Ledger
Brick walls
Glass doors
Glass window
Wooden partition
Chairs

Figure 3. The conceived space of WB (ground floor)

> The presence of women has a positive impact on the business of a company. It is basic human psychology that people prefer to visit the branch that has more female staff. (Rizwan, m, WB)

While one might argue that WB is a more inclusive workplace, the spatial design reveals the phallic formant of the abstract space, one in which women's bodies are exploited for the achievement of business purposes while they continue to be monitored in their interactions with clients to fulfil purdah's rules. The organization of space reminds us of the tensions between structural power relations that place sales and profit at the

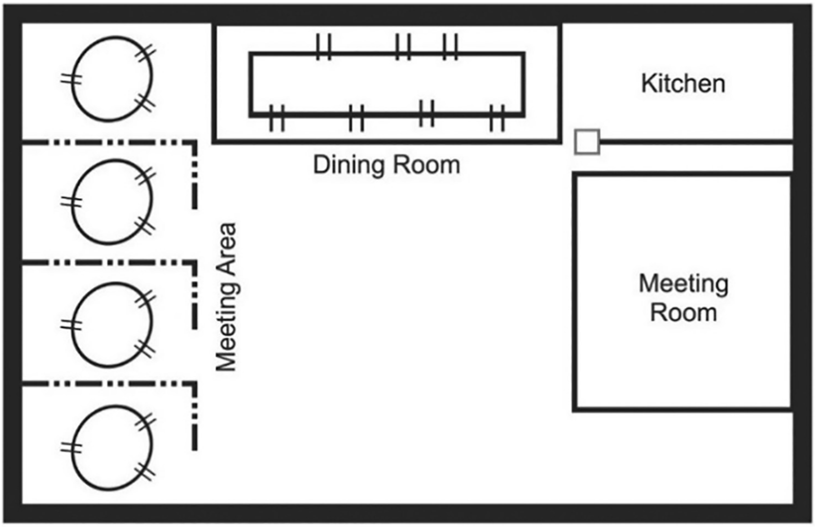

Figure 4. The conceived space of WB (first floor)

centre of this bank's practices, as (male) clients are attracted to women bankers who use their femininity to sell financial products. According to Lefebvre (1991), socio-political contradictions are realized and made operative by local space. Here the capitalist forces in action in the banking system paradoxically represent the counter-planes and subsequent counter-space that opposes purdah and sharia finance (as the abstract space) and its hegemonic spatial representation of gender separation.

Spatial Experiences of 'Otherness'

This section analyses the experiences of space as an organizational and social process. The spatial design of SB (segregated) and WB (assimilative) are experienced in diverse ways, although, paradoxically, both contribute to othering women workers. In SB, women and men experience spatial isolation and segregation as 'respect', although participants recognize that it limits women's ability to gain and share knowledge leading to work opportunities and career advancement. Women are clearly othered by the conceived space, physically (see Figure 2) and professionally marginalized; however, they also report that spatial segregation allows them to feel safe from sexual harassment. During an informal conversation with Haleema, she mentioned that when she worked in a private company her …

> male colleagues behaved in a weird way, they came to your desk without any reason. They tried to be friendly with you and asked the wrong questions […], about your personal life.

Similarly, Sameena (f) said:

> I feel we are in a shell. Interaction with men is very limited here, in private firms is not as good. Managers and male peers are also not good there and they use female colleagues for their own interests.

> Researcher: What do you mean by 'use female colleagues'?
> S: They try to be physical with them. Companies also use females to attract male customers.

The segregated space is a space of safety and oppression. It is a space where they can resist male sexual attention and also corporate's exploitation of their femininity, as international banks tend to appoint women in customer-service roles to attract male clients and, thus, serve the business objectives. While it is experienced as a secure place for Islamic women who want to adhere to the practice of purdah, as an abstract space it also epitomizes the power and control elements of a society heavily influenced by orthodox religious precepts. Although the women at SB feel safe, they also explained that working in isolation from colleagues prevents them from experiencing the core activities of banking, attending training opportunities and learning from colleagues and superiors.

> We are administrative workers, not bankers […]. We don't know much about the procedural side of trade and credit […], it requires training and we are not recommended for this […]. The head office is in X (a different city) and we can't travel alone […]. Also training for us is considered useless because we can't generate business for the bank. For this you need to interact with male clients and our bank does not allow it […]. (Fatima, f, SB)

As women in SB are prevented from interacting with male customers and colleagues, they remain absent from key positions and, thus, are unable to advance in their careers. Despite their skills and qualifications, they are allocated to administrative tasks (see also Pilgeram, 2007) and find it impossible to advance further, even in roles that do not involve customer interaction because they are unable to participate in training and developmental activities that require travelling. Their participation in training activities outside of their branch's premises requires specific arrangements such as the allocation of separate rooms for women and a chaperone family member. These demands not only increase the responsibility of managers, as gatekeepers of women's modesty but are also a financial burden for the branch, as Rajab, below, confirms:

> She [Ayesha] was willing to go to Karachi for training. I refused not because she did not deserve it, but for the arrangements I needed to do […]. You can't send a woman to another city without being accompanied by a trustable man […]. To be honest! It's a big hassle for us. (Rajab, m, SB)

The gendered separation of space further contributes to othering women, who are second-class workers, prevented from engaging in the same activities and achieving the same objectives as their male colleagues. While providing a sense of safety, the 'zoning' out provokes strong feelings of exclusion and inequality, with one woman comparing herself to a member of the lowest social cast.

> I am the only woman in this department […]. My desk is at the corner of the room […]. In Islam, social interaction should be minimal, and our bank follows this […].

> Sometimes it feels like you are Shudras [a lower Indian caste whose members are not allowed to sit with the upper caste people] and are placed at the end. (Afeefa, f, SB)

Compared to SB, WB provides opportunities and resources for women's professional development and progression that are rarely available in other Pakistani organizations. Due to the incorporation of globalized working standards, the allocation of women to a wide range of positions allows them to demonstrate and develop their skills and provides opportunities for self-development and social exchange.

> I did my internship in a public bank. There is a huge difference between the working environment of a local bank and a Western bank. Here the environment for women is extremely good […]. It is good in terms of respect, learning and the career opportunities we have. You know you will be somewhere after 5 years. (Maryam, f, WB)

Orthodox Islamic values that prohibit men and women from freely interacting are generally enforced in most workplaces in Pakistan (Syed, 2010). Local organizations, including offices and factories, have separate rooms for women and men or they place women's workstations in positions where they do not face men's desks (Grünenfelder, 2013; Mirza, 1999). On the other hand, foreign-owned secular organizations are aspirational workplaces for highly educated, liberal women, who wish to improve their economic and social capitals.

> To be part of a multi-national organisation, as WB, you need to be liberal […] From a religious point of view, we shouldn't work together with men and need to keep our distance. […] Undoubtedly the bank gives us opportunities to learn, socialise and have financial independence, but we need to be careful. […]. As a woman, your modesty can be questioned in less than a second. (Hina, f, WB)

Despite the fact that the ambience and spatial practices at WB do not overtly present the structural determinants of purdah, its power, as a social superstructure, continues to regulate women's behaviours, as they need to monitor any action that can compromise their modesty. As Hina asserts, being liberal also means that one has to be more careful in protecting one's modesty. At WB, the social norms of spatial modesty intersect with work demands associated with capitalist commercial targets and constrain women's full participation. For instance, Amara (f), a relationship officer, explained how her sales targets are impacted by norms associated with spatial modesty in relation to mixed-gender interactions and travelling restrictions.

> We cannot do sales as men do, by visiting clients and by having friendly chat with them as these are not acceptable for us […] No doubt this is an obstacle in our career. We have some limitations from family as our families do not allow us to go alone to meet anyone […].

WB is recognized as an open organization, where more liberal women can fulfil their career ambitions and grow their social capital. However, despite its gender assimilative nature, space in WB is still conceived as a manifestation of the segregation discourse (i.e., no closed office but half-walled partitions), with the conceived space ensuring political and social utility. The constraints imposed by the abstract space (i.e., Islamic purdah) limit what women can do in the workplace, where they are viewed as others. They are others in relation to their male colleagues, who are able to freely seek business opportunities, and they are others in relation to most women in Pakistan and female colleagues working in other establishments (including SB) that enforce the institution of purdah.

Modest Spatial Practices: 'Selective' Appropriation of Purdah

In this section the analysis continues to expose the actual production of space by showing how space is appropriated and lived by users. In the previous two sections we have juxtaposed the spatial gendered experiences and expectations we observed in the two different banks, however, the patterns of exclusion and othering we discussed are complex and multifaceted. Women, in fact, find opportunities and compromises to fulfil their personal ambitions while moulding the boundaries of purdah. For example in SB, some women renegotiate spatial distance by asking the 'controllers' of space (i.e., the managers) permission to interact with men in order to progress with their careers. Ayesha (f, SB), explained that to broaden her knowledge and be able to take on another position she needed to shadow a male colleague who did that job. However, as a modest woman it was important that everybody knew that, while being physically close to a male colleague, she and the colleague were following the manager's order and fulfilling organizational requirements.

> I told you that my manager didn't recommend me for training. But one day I took the courage and went to him and said: "Sir, I have been working in this seat for more than two years, now it is time to learn, please could you tell someone to show me how they execute their work". The next day he came and loudly said: "Ahmed whenever you are free after lunchtime, teach Miss on advances, at least we have some backup when you and Ali are absent". After hearing this, everyone knew that I had to sit next to Ahmed.

In line with other studies (Sewell, 1998, 2012), the manager's power and authority ensures the legitimization of the workplace's spatial requirements and expectations. He 'liberates' the woman from the spatial tyranny of purdah, while upholding the Islamic concept of Qiwama, intended as the man's commitment to ensure the dignity and nobility of women. Ayesha's lived experience of space is the expression of what is conceived and what is perceived, as well as the expression of the abstract political power of the religious institution which moulds women's behaviours and segregate them to the periphery. This is evident in how Ayesha engages in spatial practices that ensure that a symbolic physical distance from her male colleague is maintained. As she explained: '*Everyone knows why I am interacting with him, to learn the work […]. I always leave one empty chair between us. I know how to sit with him*'.

Another participant, Fatima (SB), recognizes that the physical and social limitations regarding interactions with men allowed her to maintain a modest demeanour in her work relations while permitting her to be financially independent. She asserted that while she communicated with her male colleagues for professional matters, she did not engage in friendly behaviours, nor had any physical contact with them. She said: '*it does not mean that I shake hands with male co-workers and joke with them. It is not like that. I talk to male colleagues with decorum and only about work-related matters*'.

Both Ayesha and Fatima emphasize the physical distance from their colleagues as the condition for their work participation and maintenance of their modesty. Similarly, in WB the distance between women's and men's bodies is maintained to ensure honour and respectability (see also Arifeen and Gatrell, 2013), however, colleagues of both genders had greater familiarity with each other and acted in a more friendly manner. Nonetheless, women still had to monitor their behaviour. As Hina (f) reported:

> We are like a family and have a strong bond with each other, but we keep our distance with the male staff […]. Distance like you have with your brother. You have fun with him but with certain limitations: Not holding and shaking hands […].
>
> All workplaces are mixed-gendered but our environment is a bit more modern, or you can say it's a westernised working environment, but we still keep our distance from men colleagues. Distance means that if two men are chatting I would ensure that I will go once they finish their conversation. (Maryam, f, WB)

Given that a woman is perceived as immodest if she is seen with a group of men, they tend to interact with men on a one-to-one basis or as part of mixed-gendered groups. The working environment at WB was perceived as more friendly, fun and informal, in contrast with the formality and imposed segregation observed at SB. People on the same hierarchical level called each other by their first name, but monikers or terms such as 'dear', which are sometimes used in Western workplaces (Rodriguez, 2010), were considered inappropriate. During the fieldwork, it emerged that most employees at WB were more liberal, often educated in the Global North or at mixed-gender institutions and interpreted purdah according to a more moderate view.

> Salma: I studied in a mixed-sex University. Now I am working here. […] It also depends on how you have been brought up, my parents never objected if I went out with my friends and now with colleagues. But I know what my boundaries are, this is, I believe, what Islamic norms are.
>
> Researcher: What do you mean by boundaries?
> Salma: Being Muslim you should not engage in sexual relations. In Islam, we do not have any concept of sex before marriage.

Salma clearly renegotiates the meaning of purdah as restricted to the avoidance of sexual relationships outside of marriage, rather than the avoidance of friendship between men and women. Salma's understanding of the lived space, as a space of representation, allows her to (re)appropriate purdah as an institutional knowledge and action that, within her family and small social circle, is moderately practised, indicating the shifting boundaries of the abstract space. Another example that shows how employees at WB renegotiate the norms of purdah as a lived practice, is concerned with travelling in the company of non-mahram men. During field visits to clients' workplaces, male colleagues accompanied women to protect their modesty and ensure they were not harassed by other men. Male colleagues are expected to fulfil the responsibility of guardians of women and to maintain the abstract space, that is, a respectable society.

> When customers call me for a meeting somewhere that is not the bank, the manager doesn't allow me to go alone. He prefers to send a man first, but if the work can't be executed without my presence, for example, when I need to complete legal checks and documents at the factory's address, then he sends a male with me, for my comfort and security […]. (Maryam, f, WB)

> When our female colleagues need to go on factory visits we go with them. We don't consider it appropriate that they go alone […]. This is ethically and religiously wrong and against our values. (Waqas, m, WB)

These men apply the norm of 'Qiwama' (where men family members are considered the protectors of women's modesty) and although they are not close family members, they support the career of their female colleagues while ensuring the safeguarding of their modesty. While this interpretation of purdah fits the standpoint of Islamic feminists (e.g., Moghadam, 2012), arguing for gender equity and justice and for complementary gender roles that safeguard women's rights and opportunities, it also recalls a reappropriation of the sharia space by Western capitalist mode of production (Lefebvre, 1991), as women bankers (and their male colleagues) fulfils the interests of their employer.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study advances Lefebvre's theory of space by extending its focus on class diversity with theorizing that emerged from new knowledge on gendered organizational space in differently segregated contexts. Specifically, it contributes with theoretical and practical considerations of how purdah, intended as a philosophy of gendered space, shapes the organizational space of Pakistani banks.

The analysis revealed that space is conceived in ways that support organizational objectives and cultures and that the aesthetic of both organizations is symbolic in reflecting the orthodox ideology in one bank (SB) and a more liberal view in the other (WB). Beyond the aesthetical elements and the material artefacts, manifested as the conceived space, a range of spatial practices ensured the adherence to purdah, in a moderate form in WB and more conservatively in SB. The analysis of these lived practices reveals similarities between the two banks that would otherwise remain hidden. These similarities concern processes of othering that are differently experienced and acted upon by women in each bank, as they attempt to fulfil personal work ambitions. As argued by Panayiotou (2015), women can act upon spatial practices and change their otherness at work; we show how in both segregated (SB) and assimilated (WB) conceived spaces, women act on the perceived space, confronting and resisting the othering processes in ways that reflected their own lived interpretation of religious norms. In both banks they renegotiate the meaning of modesty, often in cooperation with their male colleagues, to ensure that others (colleagues, customers and society in general) still perceive their behaviours as modest. This also allows them to achieve professional development and career goals, as they consciously invest new meaning into their spatial modest practices, and use these meanings as a way of securing their own legitimacy as (women) bankers, recognized by society as modest women. Furthermore, in WB this renegotiation of spatial modesty supports the achievement of business objectives, such as the expansion of the client portfolio. Here, in fact, we observed a conscious transactional exchange, where women navigate the tensions between two institutional logics—faith/purdah and commerce—(Boone et al., 2022; Gümüşay et al., 2024) by accepting the exploitation of their femininities to achieve their personal aspirations.

The findings corroborate other studies (e.g., Panayiotou, 2015; Pratt et al., 2006; Tyler and Cohen, 2010) that have shown how the conceived workspace perpetuates gendered power relations. However, in exploring two financial institutions characterized by orthodox, one, and liberal cultural practices, the other, the findings go beyond what reported in the current literature. Specifically, the dynamic interconnections of the three realms of *conceived*, *lived* and *practised* space bring to the fore the power of patriarchy and religion and how it is exercised to control women's work and careers. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the subtleties of these interconnections and shows how the production of space is nuanced and complicated by organizational and cultural precepts.

In exposing paradoxes and the implicit or 'unsaid', we show the tensions existing between attempts to develop a career and achieve professional goals for women, with the demands placed on them by the norms of purdah. Underlying this paradox is an ontology of dualism where opposing elements—such as Islamic norms and organizational cultures and objectives—come together to form dynamic and evolving situated practices (Boone et al., 2022; Clegg et al., 2002) within which women and men not only locate themselves but also appropriate to fulfil personal objectives. As highlighted by organizational paradox scholars (e.g., Lewis, 2000), emerging tensions often cannot be resolved, therefore organizational actors tend to accept, engage and navigate these tensions without resolving them. In fact, while the elements of the paradoxes we brought to light may appear contradictory, at least in WB, they are interrelated and are not viewed as either/or scenarios but, instead, stimulate bank workers to find creative solutions that allow them to achieve organizational objectives and personal ambitions.

In WB, the work spatiality created by the interrelationships between the capitalist organizational culture and socio-religious norms is negotiated by women bankers in a 'selective appropriation of modest spatiality' that sustains their otherness, but it is never fully passively accepted. Women in WB use the space to act upon their otherness in society and achieve a level of empowerment that is denied to the women in SB. However, they do this within the powerful hold of the phallic formant, as men remain the guardians of their 'empowerment', and no radical change occurs. Thus, in offering a reading of Lefebvre's theory through the lenses of Islamic Feminism, we reinterpret women's 'modest resistance' to spatial oppression through a religiously grounded normative approach, which mostly releases men from being viewed as the source of oppressive practices to shift this onto the divine and sacred texts (Badran, 2011).

Women, like men, internalize the gendered norms embedded within and reflecting religious-cultural believes, and navigate the tensions through lived spatial practices that allow them 'to do' modesty and career simultaneously and within the socially accepted boundaries. Our contribution talks to Arifeen and Gatrell's (2013) study in which Muslim women felt prevented from fully achieving their career ambitions by 'glass chains' that bound them to religious and familiar norms. In the observed banks, in fact, the power of purdah maintains a hold on women's bodies, as they monitor their distance from men's bodies, police their verbal and non-verbal behaviour to only speak about work topics, and avoid being too friendly with men. While purdah as a social superstructure fulfils the objective of controlling women's bodies, the study shows that there are heterogeneities in the ways in which purdah is lived by women and men in different workspaces (see also Aldossari and Calvard, 2022; Syed, 2010).

In SB, the abstract space of orthodox Islamic principles was not only reflected in the functionality of the bank's operations, but also mirrored in the organizational spatial design. This layout ensured the spatial isolation and segregation of women, whose workstations were located away from the public gaze, and well distanced from the male colleagues' workstations. The conceived space of SB, with its dark, gloomy and rectangular work spaces reproduced a clear gender hierarchy where women were confined to the dark corners of the offices, unable to undertake different roles and progress in their careers. The contour and colour patterns of the customer areas and the offices clearly reproduced the phallic formant (Wasserman, 2019), as the space was used to control women's bodies and achieve spatial modesty. The building was also symbolic in its aesthetic, with holy verses written on the walls, which reminded customers and employees about their commitments to Islam. In SB all three components of physical workspaces such as instrumentality (effectiveness of space), aesthetic (beauty of space) and symbolism (conveying power to observers) (Vilnai-Yavetz et al., 2005) were clearly gendered in very explicit ways that reflected orthodox Islamic gender relations.

In WB, the design of the workspace was defined as secular, or modern, and reflected the 'open' culture of the Western multinational bank. Similarly to contemporary workplaces found in many countries across the world, much of the workspace in WB was open plan (Benammar et al., 2018; Elsbach and Pratt, 2007; Paliadelis, 2013). However, as reported by Hirst and Schwabenland (2018) and Wasserman and Frenkel (2020), visibility and the consequent surveillance associated with open-plan offices inflict a lack of privacy, discomfort and noise on workers, many of whom are women. Conversely, in WB, the visibility of the workspaces is welcomed, as it allows women to interact with male customers and co-workers while meeting the socio-cultural norms of modesty. Here, a readjusted 'Western office layout' was used to the benefit of liberal Muslim women and men, whose visibility assures co-workers and bank visitors that the norms of purdah remain upheld. Such an arrangement also allows women to pursue a banking career in a society that imposes so many constraints on women's bodies and lives. Visibility is paradoxical not only when comparing open-plan offices in liberal countries (as in Hirst and Schwabenland (2018) and Wasserman and Frenkel's (2020) studies) with the open-plan layout of WB, but it is also paradoxical in our comparison of WB with

SB. In WB, a liberal foreign organization, women are visible to be controlled by all; in SB, women are hidden as the control resides in the organizational sharia ideology and mission. Therefore, when the work organization does not enforce the 'divine rule', the community will do so.

Comparably to Tyler and Cohen (2010), Wasserman and Frenkel (2015) and Hirst and Schwabenland (2018), we contend that 'conceived spaces such as offices incorporate complex constructions of gender as part of the enduring patterns of relations they are designed to realize' (Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018, p. 172). The workspaces at WB and SB were designed to encourage gender relation models that in their attempts to achieve the organizational objectives also fostered social-religious norms and control women (and men) through varied and multiple articulations of the abstract space.

While gender scholarship that has applied Lefebvre's theory has either focused on the conceived space (e.g., Wasserman, 2019) or on the lived experiences of spaces (e.g., Simpson, 2014) in the Global North, this study has explored the three dimensions of the spatial triad and analysed the interconnections between them in relation to the abstract space shaped by a religion-infused culture. In doing so, it unveiled the multeities and complexities of how the abstract space is revealed in the architecture of the buildings, the work and communal spaces (the conceived space) and the gendered experiences of space, as religious and socio-cultural norms of purdah interact with organizational cultural differences. As discussed by Lefebvre (1991), abstract space is dominated by mental centrality over the geographical and social space and this is functional to the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. Through the lenses of Islamic feminism, Lefebvre's knowledge of space is constructed as more nuances as we brought to the fore the numerous socio-political contradictions that become operative when patriarchy and religion clash with capitalism. In WB, the abstract space appears to service the capitalist mode of production in its interaction with purdah, as attractive women attempt to sell financial products to men while doing so under the eyes of colleagues and clients to protect their modesty. In SB, on the other hand, the abstract space services the patriarchal religious orthodoxy segregating women to the (physical and social) periphery. The analysis of the fragmentation and multiplicity of gendered banking work/space has revealed how such contradictions come into play and become contradictions of space (Lefebvre, 1991). As Lefebvre (1991) suggested, counter-spaces that run against established strategies of power spring from these contradictions of space; however, our study revealed that such counter-spaces are occupied by capitalist forces instead of the grass-route pressures (against capitalism) observed in Western countries. In the banking sector, the opposition to the abstract space of purdah, and its hegemonic representation of segregated workplaces, is the abstract space of capitalism designed to 'selectively' thwart the sharia programme imposed by the orthodoxy.

By making the connection between Islamic feminism and work spatiality, through the analysis of practices of purdah, we embedded the intersection of religious ideology and gender into Lefebvre's space theory. The empirical analysis of how women at both banks enacted a range of spatial practices, such as physical and interactional 'guarded' distance and a take on Qiwama that extended to work colleagues (not just family members) shows how the renegotiation of purdah into a 'selective appropriation of spatial modesty', is shaped by the contradictions of space, as contended individual, organizational and, ultimately capitalist forces, exercise performance pressures. In extending Lefebvre's spatial framework with insights from a perspective that acknowledges the importance of faith, such as Islamic feminism, this article contributes a more in-depth understanding of the role of space in shaping and perpetuating gender inequalities in organizations operating in Muslim-majority countries.

Limitations, Further Research and Implications of the Study

We recognize that the study findings represent a specific geographical, social and work sector, and that this specificity can be a limitation in extending this new understanding to other workplaces based in Muslim-majority countries. While a Muslim-majority country, Pakistan does not enforce spatial gender segregation, such as the governments of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan (Agrizzi et al., 2021). Furthermore, the country itself presents extensive differences across urban and rural areas in terms of women's labour participation, literacy rate, conservativism and adherence to different branches of Islam, among others. As grounded in an ethnographic methodology, this study's generalizability is, thus, restricted, and its contributions beyond the specific organizational settings studied need to be contextualized with care. Nonetheless, it offers points of reflection that can support the analysis of similar settings and investigations of the complexities of, and interrelationship between, faith and organizational cultures, particularly in multi-national organizations. Further cross-cultural research could explore different workplaces beyond the banking sector and in different geographical areas within Pakistan, as well as in other Muslim-majority countries.

A further limitation of the study concerns the category of participants, as most interviewees worked as middle managers in the banking sector. None of the women participants worked at senior managerial level, such as branch manager or area manager. Future analyses of different sectors and different hierarchical levels might reveal diverse spatial practices within a similar geographical context.

The study offers important implications for managers and workers in diverse cultural contexts, based in Muslim-majority countries and in secular countries. An important consideration for managers is the range of support they can offer to advance the careers of more conservative Muslim women, who practice purdah but are interested in pursuing engaging and fulfilling careers. The study, in fact, clearly highlights how managerial support is crucial for resolving tensions related to contradictory pressures and for advancing gender equity. Similarly, important insight into the arrangement of offices and workstations is offered to those organizations committed to creating inclusive workplaces that also support women's work and their faith. Offering possibilities of different spaces and innovative institutional processes would accommodate the needs of both traditional and more liberal workers while sustaining their career ambitions. These implications are relevant for all organizations, whether based in Muslim-majority countries or not. The study can also offer important insights to women and men workers about ways to navigate different institutional demands, such as the pressures that come from faith, organizational expectations and personal ambitions.

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NOTES

[1] Islamic feminists such as Barlas (2002) emphasizes gender justice instead of gender equality, acknowledging that women and men can be treated differently but in a fair and just way, and that this treatment should be equivalent in relation to their rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities (Priola and Chaudhry, 2021). While the terms gender justice and gender equality are often used interchangeably, particularly by scholars in the Global North, equality refers to equal access to opportunities and resources so that no one is discriminated against because of one's own characteristics, while fairness and justice account for cultural differences between men and women while aiming at equivalent treatment.

[2] "O ye wives of Prophet! Ye are not like any other women. If ye truly fear God, do not be too soft in speech in case the sick at the heart should lust after you, but speak in an appropriate manner; stay at home, and do not flaunt your attractions as they used to in the pagan past; keep up your prayers; give the prescribed psalms and obey God and his messenger" (The Quran, 33:31).

[3] A narrative record of the sayings or customs of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions that were collected and compiled several years after his death.

[4] The indoors or the home.

[5] A person out of a kinship relation (someone who is not the father, brother, son and uncle).

[6] We recognize that in describing this bank we are simplifying ethical Islamic banking, which, as shown by Jatmiko et al. (2024), is complex and include practices that can span from investment in permissible sectors to a range of CSR measures, leading to an heterogeneous Islamic banking sector. For the purpose of this study we are not assessing the sharia complacency or technicalities of the financial instruments implemented by SB, but are focusing on how purdah, as an Islamic norm, is practiced within the premises of the bank.

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