



ACCESS AND FAITH

Advancing disability rights in Malaysian mosques

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the critical importance of inclusivity and accessibility within Malaysian mosques for individuals with disabilities, emphasising the need to integrate the voices and experiences of disabled community members within Malaysia's unique socio-religious context. Despite Malaysia's advancements in disability rights legislation, many religious spaces, including mosques, remain inaccessible, thus marginalising a vital segment of the Malaysian Muslim community. Through in-depth interviews with disabled individuals, mosque leaders, and community members across Malaysia, this research identifies the specific needs of Malaysian Muslims with disabilities and offers contextually appropriate recommendations for creating inclusive mosques within Malaysia's legal and cultural framework. Key findings highlight physical accessibility barriers, communication challenges, and social stigma particular to the Malaysian context as primary obstacles faced by disabled participants. The study proposes a Malaysian-centred approach to inclusivity, combining national legal reforms with practical measures such as physical modifications, sensory and communication aids, active community engagement, and policy development specifically tailored to Malaysian mosque administration structures. Empowering disabled Malaysian Muslims through active participation in mosque activities not only enriches their spiritual experience but also fosters a more compassionate, inclusive and cohesive Malaysian Muslim community aligned with both constitutional principles and Islamic values.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka kepentingan inklusiviti dan aksesibiliti dalam masjid-masjid di Malaysia bagi orang kurang upaya (OKU), dengan menekankan keperluan untuk mengintegrasikan suara dan pengalaman komuniti tersebut dalam konteks sosioagama Malaysia yang unik. Walaupun Malaysia telah menunjukkan perkembangan positif dalam perundangan berkaitan hak OKU, banyak ruang keagamaan, termasuk masjid, masih tidak mesra akses, sekali gus meminggirkan segmen penting komuniti Muslim di negara ini. Melalui temu bual mendalam yang melibatkan individu OKU, pemimpin masjid, dan ahli komuniti di seluruh Malaysia, kajian ini mengenal pasti keperluan khusus Muslim OKU serta

KEYWORDS

Disability policy; disability rights; Islamic principles; legal framework; Malaysian mosque accessibility

KATA KUNCI

Aksesibiliti masjid Malaysia; dasar OKU; hak OKU; kerangka undang-undang; prinsip Islam

mengemukakan cadangan yang bersesuaian dengan konteks tempatan bagi mewujudkan masjid yang lebih inklusif dalam kerangka undang-undang dan budaya Malaysia. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa halangan akses fizikal, cabaran komunikasi, serta stigma sosial yang wujud dalam masyarakat Malaysia merupakan rintangan utama yang dihadapi oleh komuniti OKU. Sehubungan itu, kajian ini mencadangkan pendekatan inklusiviti yang berteraskan konteks Malaysia melalui gabungan reformasi undang-undang negara dan langkah praktikal seperti pengubahsuaian kemudahan fizikal, penyediaan bantuan deria dan komunikasi, penglibatan aktif komuniti, serta pembangunan dasar yang disesuaikan dengan struktur pentadbiran masjid di Malaysia. Memperkasakan Muslim OKU melalui penyertaan aktif dalam aktiviti masjid bukan sahaja dapat memperkayakan pengalaman spiritual mereka, malah turut menyumbang kepada pembentukan komuniti Muslim Malaysia yang lebih penyayang, inklusif, dan bersatu padu, selaras dengan prinsip Perlembagaan Persekutuan dan nilai-nilai Islam.

Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) defines persons with disabilities as ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (United Nations 2006). This definition embodies the social model of disability, which recognises that disability is not an inherent deficit within individuals, but rather emerges from the interaction between people with impairments and disabling barriers in their environment. By situating disability as a human rights issue rather than a medical problem, the CRPD establishes that persons with disabilities are entitled to full and equal participation in all aspects of society, and that the removal of attitudinal, physical, and systemic barriers is a matter of legal obligation, not charitable accommodation.

Islam and the international community through the United Nations recognise the equal rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. The Prophet Muhammad in the 6th century had showed that persons with disabilities are part of our society and have their rights to participate fully and equally in all kinds of activities. Islamic teachings, rooted in equality, compassion, and justice, provide strong support for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, particularly in religious spaces such as mosques. Islam emphasises that all individuals, including persons with disabilities, are inherently dignified (Quran 17:70), affirming that everyone deserves respect and inclusion, with no superiority except by piety. Furthermore, Islam encourages its adherents to show mercy and to support vulnerable members of society, including those with disabilities. The Prophet Muhammad emphasised mercy, stating, ‘Show mercy to those on earth, and He who is in the heavens will show mercy to you’ (Sunan Abī Dāwūd, no. 4941; Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī, no. 1924). This calls for a compassionate and inclusive society where persons with disabilities are fully integrated.

Islamic law (fiqh) provides accommodations to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate in religious obligations. For example, individuals unable to stand

during prayer (*Salah*) can pray while seated, and those unable to fast are exempt from it. Such flexibility shows that Islam prioritises ease and inclusivity in worship. Mosques should be accessible to all, reflecting the principle (Quran 2:286), ‘Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear’. Although Islam promotes social justice, urging the community to ensure all members, including persons with disabilities to have access to resources and opportunities (Nurul Izzatie Elnyz Mahadi et al. 2024a, 2024b), stigma and inaccessibility still exist within many Muslim communities. Scholars and leaders can play a critical role in promoting awareness and aligning Islamic values with modern disability rights frameworks like the CRPD to foster inclusivity. Studies on disability legislation reveal that only 45 countries globally have anti-disability laws, highlighting the gap between principle and implementation (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. n.d.).

In Malaysia, ensuring a disability-friendly environment remains particularly challenging despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and the recognition of Islam as the official religion. Malaysia is among many nations that operate plural legal systems (where civil law co-exists alongside religious or customary law such as sharia) presenting distinct considerations in addressing mosque accessibility, given the interplay between Islamic law and civil law. The Malaysian Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008 defines disability as those with long-term physical, mental, or sensory impairments that may hinder their full and effective participation in society. According to the WHO (2023), approximately 16% of the world’s population (which is projected to exceed 1.3 billion people) has impairments. Malaysia’s Department of Social Welfare (2023), lists 637,537 registered persons with disabilities with a higher proportion of men (416,704) than women (220,833). Of the total registered individuals, 485,472 were adults and 152,065 were children..

Islamic teachings offer a robust foundation for the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, particularly in religious practices. The challenge lies in overcoming stigma and ensuring these values are fully implemented in practice. This article addresses the specific requirements and amenities necessary in Malaysian mosques. It analyses the obstacles and constraints encountered by persons with disabilities within Malaysia’s religious administrative structure, and explores culturally appropriate strategies to overcome these hurdles to make mosques accessible and accommodating for Muslims with disabilities. It is important to ensure that Malaysian mosques are equipped to function as centres for education, preaching and as one-stop centres that provide other facilities for those those suffering sensory and physical impairments.

Literature review

A rights-based approach to disability emphasises human rights, dignity, equality, non-discrimination, participation, inclusion, accessibility, empowerment, and accountability (Abduraof 2022). This approach marks a paradigmatic shift from viewing persons with disabilities as objects of charity or medical care to recognising them as active subjects with rights and the ability to make decisions about their own lives (Degener 2016). This includes access to education, employment, healthcare, and public services (Degener 2016). Accessibility emphasises the need to remove barriers that hinder full participation in physical, informational, and communicational environments

(Bickenbach et al. 1999), while empowerment focuses on enabling persons with disabilities to claim their rights and make decisions about their lives through necessary resources, opportunities, and support (Shakespeare 2018). Accountability requires governments and other duty-bearers to respect, protect, and fulfil these rights through laws, policies, practices, and monitoring mechanisms (Harpur 2012).

This alignment between international human rights frameworks and Islamic principles creates a compelling foundation for disability inclusion in religious spaces. However, the literature reveals that regardless of a country's economic situation, individuals with disabilities tend to be marginalised in human rights contexts. Globally, individuals with disabilities continuously experience inequalities that violate their dignity, deny their autonomy, and limit their share of society's resources (WHO 2011). Malaysia is no exception, and this persists despite economic development and constitutional protection. The inclusivity of persons with disabilities in mosque practices represents an essential fulfilment of both universal human rights and Islamic obligations within Malaysia's constitutional framework.

Existing literature remains predominantly Western-centric (Unsworth et al. 2019), with scant scholarly attention devoted to disability rights and inclusion in Malaysian and Southeast Asian contexts, particularly concerning mosque accessibility and Islamic religious practices within Malaysia's plural legal system. While studies have examined physical accessibility in mosques (Nor Azlina Abd. Wahab et al. 2016; Zetty Nurzuliana Rashed and Siti Muhibah Nor 2020) and Islamic perspectives on disability (Ghaly 2010), a significant gap remains in integrating these dimensions into a comprehensive model that addresses both physical infrastructure and the full range of religious, educational, and social programmes that mosques provide.

Mosques in the Malaysian context

Mosques stand as fundamental institutions in Islamic life, serving as sacred spaces dedicated to the worship of Allah. Regardless of their physical appearance from elaborate to simple, functional spaces, whether government-established or community-built, all mosques share the same primary purpose as a dedicated space for worship. They also function as centres for religious education, offering classes in Quranic studies and Islamic jurisprudence and may include various workshops and programmes that benefit the broader community. Mosques universally serve as more than spaces for prayer, functioning as vital hubs for community support, social welfare, and collective gatherings, a role that is equally prominent within the Malaysian context. Many mosques maintain food banks, provide health services, and offer various forms of assistance to those in need such as family counselling. They serve as venues for significant life events, including weddings, funerals, and Eid celebrations, helping to strengthen community bonds and promote social cohesion (Mohammad Sabran Harun 2013; Roslan Mohamed 2003; Norakyairee Mohd Raus and Ab. Halim Tamuri 2011).

However, Malaysian mosques faces an ongoing challenge in ensuring these sacred spaces remain accessible to all their members. This includes creating inclusive environments for women, children, and individuals with disabilities, reflecting the universal nature of Islamic worship and community service. As mosques continue to evolve in the modern era, addressing these accessibility concerns remains a priority in fulfilling their role as comprehensive centres for spiritual and community life.

Islam places profound emphasis on the rights and dignified treatment of individuals with disabilities, particularly in religious contexts. The Islamic tradition addresses disability through various theological and practical frameworks, beginning with the Quranic concept of *al-dhaif* (الضعيف), meaning 'the weak' or 'vulnerable'. This term, referenced in Quran 2:282, encompasses individuals with various forms of disabilities and emphasises the community's responsibility to provide special care and support. The Islamic perspective on disability is fundamentally rooted in the principle of human dignity. This is exemplified in Prophet Muhammad's leadership, notably through his appointment of Abdullah ibn Umm Maktum, a blind man, as both muezzin and his representative in Medina, demonstrating that disabilities should not prevent individuals from holding significant community roles.

Modern Islamic scholarship, particularly through Mohammed Ghaly's comprehensive work *Islam and disability* (2010), has further explored the intersection of disability rights and Islamic teachings. Ghaly's analysis combines traditional Islamic scholarship with contemporary disability rights perspectives, examining both theological (*aqeedah*) and legal (*sharia*) dimensions. It complements the human rights perspective articulated by Rioux and Carbert (2003), who emphasise that individuals with disabilities must be viewed as 'subjects' rather than 'objects', possessing equal rights and opportunities within society. This framework advocates for enhanced inclusivity across various domains, including healthcare, tourism, employment, economy, culture, and religion.

However, the practical implementation of these principles in Malaysian mosque settings reveals significant gaps in both physical accessibility and the broader religious and social programmes that mosques provide. A study by the Islamic Da'wah Foundation of Malaysia (Yayasan Dakwah Islam Malaysia 2015) indicates that efforts to develop a comprehensive model of a disability-friendly mosque remain at a relatively unsatisfactory stage. Muslims with disabilities face multiple barriers that prevent their full participation in religious and community life, including inadequate ramps, narrow doorways, inaccessible restrooms, lack of clean and accessible wheelchairs in prayer spaces, inadequate directional signage, and limited Braille materials (Nor Azlina Abd. Wahab et al 2016). As Zetty Nurzuliana Rashed and Siti Muhibah Nor (2020) emphasise, the needs of persons with disabilities vary according to their specific categories where individuals with visual impairments require designated pathways to facilitate mobility, while those with hearing impairments need sign language interpretation services.

Beyond physical infrastructure, mosques also lack adequate programmes and services to fulfill their broader community functions for persons with disabilities. Critical gaps include the absence of sign language interpretation during Friday sermons, insufficient spiritually enriching programmes such as Quran and *Fardhu Ain* classes tailored for Muslims with disabilities, *tarbiyatul aulad* courses for Islamic guidance on educational guidance of children, as well as limited employment opportunities within mosque settings (Nor Azlina Abd. Wahab et al. 2016; Nurhidayah binti Abdullah et al. 2017). These deficiencies prevent mosques from serving as true 'one-stop centres' for Muslims with disabilities, limiting their access to the economic, social, educational, and recreational activities that mosques provide to the wider community.

Therefore, it is imperative for relevant authorities to prioritise the needs of Muslims with disabilities in the planning and development of new mosques (Abdul Munir bin Ismail 2014). This requires collaborative efforts among stakeholders and the broader

community to address both physical barriers and programme gaps, including the provision of accessible infrastructure, appointment of dedicated mosque staff to manage those with disabilities, sign language interpreters for religious services and classes, and the creation of employment opportunities such as appointing Muslims with disabilities as mosque muezzins or coordinators for those with disabilities (Nurhidayah binti Abdullah et al. 2017; Mohammad Sabran Harun 2013; Roslan Mohamed 2003; Zetty Nurzuliana Rashed and Siti Muhibah Nor 2020). In this context, the role of disability-friendly preachers within a mosque is equally vital. As noted by Zuklefi bin Aini and S. Salahudin bin Suyurno (2014), and Norul Huda Bakar and Mariam Abd. Majid (2016) a preacher is also a counsellor who guides individuals towards personal improvement by understanding their challenges. Furthermore, Norakyairee Mohd Raus et al. (2013) highlight that special education programmes in schools have included the teaching of the Quran using Braille for students with special needs. It is proposed that such Quranic education be extended to mosque settings to provide greater access for students with disabilities to learn and engage with the sacred text. This underscores the urgent need for a disability-inclusive mosque model that facilitates deeper religious learning for this group. These studies indicate that mosques serve as focal points for a wide range of community activities, including those related to education and spirituality (Abdul Munir bin Ismail 2014). However, a significant gap remains in the provision of religious education tailored to the needs of persons with hearing and visual impairments.

In a study conducted by Nur Dayana Mohd Khalil et al. (2022), a critical gap was identified in the teaching of Islamic jurisprudence for Muslims with disabilities across all categories. This gap should be addressed by the respective mosque management and religious authorities to ensure that this special group receives proper guidance rooted in the Quran and Sunnah. The establishment of appropriate educational support and dedicated classes on religious rulings for Muslims with disabilities would help reduce their social isolation and empower them with greater confidence and motivation to deepen their understanding of Islamic teachings. Thus, tailored religious instruction represents an essential element in the realisation of a disability-inclusive mosque model.

Legal frameworks for disability rights: from international conventions to Malaysian implementation

International legal frameworks

At the international level, the CRPD, established in 2006, marks a paradigm shift from a medical to a social model of disability. This landmark convention emphasises non-discrimination, full societal participation, and accessibility to physical environments, transportation, information, and services. Article 9 specifically requires member states to ensure accessibility across all public facilities and services, while Article 30 guarantees the right to participate in cultural and religious life. The CRPD contains 50 Articles covering all areas of life, from health, education and employment to equal recognition before the law, freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse, and accessibility. This study specifically focuses on the following articles: Article 19 (living independently and being included in the community); Article 21 (right to freedom of expression, opinion

and access to information); Article 24 (education); Article 27 (employment and work); and Article 29 (participation in political and public life) (UN Human Rights 2006).

These principles are reinforced by complementary international frameworks including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which guarantees freedom of religion (Article 18) and prohibits discrimination (Article 2); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which protects religious practice (Article 18) and equal protection before the law (Article 26); and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 10 (reduced inequality) and Goal 11 (inclusive, accessible cities and communities, including places of worship). The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993) further reaffirms universal human rights, urging states to ensure inclusive access to places of worship for all, including those with disabilities. ILO (2016) Convention No. 159, while primarily focused on employment, also advocates for societal inclusion of persons with disabilities, including access to religious spaces.

Within the Islamic world, several key initiatives have been undertaken to complement and reinforce the universal human rights approach embodied in the CRPD. These include the Draft OIC Plan of Action on People with Disabilities 2019, the OIC Strategic Health Programme of Action (OIC-SHPA) 2014–2023, and advocacy work by the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) (SESRI 2023).

Malaysian implementation and national legislation

Malaysia's implementation of these international frameworks demonstrates a comprehensive approach combining rights protection with practical infrastructure requirements. After ratifying the CRPD in 2008, Malaysia enacted the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685), which aligns with UN definitions in describing persons with disabilities as those with long-term physical, mental, and or sensory impairments that hinder their full societal participation due to various barriers. The Malaysian legal framework is further strengthened by specific infrastructure requirements through the Roads, Drains and Buildings Act 1974 (Act 133), the Uniform Building By Laws 1984 (UBBL 1984), particularly Section 34A, and the Uniform Building (Amendment) By Laws 1991. These regulations mandate accessibility features across various building categories, including administrative and commercial buildings, transportation facilities, healthcare institutions, entertainment and recreational facilities, religious buildings, educational institutions, and residential buildings (except private single-family dwellings). The Public Authorities Protection Act 1948 provides additional safeguards while ensuring good faith implementation of accessibility requirements.

In practice, the rights-based approach necessitates comprehensive legislation and policy frameworks that protect the rights of persons with disabilities, aligned with international standards such as the CRPD (Bruce et al. 2002). Public awareness and education are essential to change societal attitudes and reduce stigma and discrimination against persons with disabilities. Inclusive planning and development processes should involve persons with disabilities to ensure their needs and perspectives are considered. Support services, such as personal assistance, accessible transportation, and assistive technologies, are vital for enabling persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in society (Mitra 2006). Regular monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities are upheld, involving data collection, analysis, and necessary adjustments (Lang et al. 2011). In different

contexts, the rights-based approach promotes inclusive education systems, equal employment opportunities, accessible healthcare services, and the political participation of persons with disabilities (Lansdown 2011). This approach aligns with broader human rights principles and contributes to building inclusive, equitable, and just societies (Goodley 2025).

This multi-tiered framework represents the evolution of disability rights from broad international principles to specific local implementation measures. The explicit inclusion of religious buildings in Malaysia's building codes highlights the intersection between disability rights and religious accessibility, creating legal obligations for mosque administrators and reinforcing the importance of inclusive mosque design and facilities. By integrating these principles into legislation, policy, and everyday practices, societies can better respect and promote the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, ensuring their full participation and inclusion in all aspects of life.

Research gap and contribution of this study

The gap between Islamic principles, international human rights frameworks, legal requirements, and current mosque practices highlights the urgent need for comprehensive accessibility reforms in mosques. This requires addressing both physical infrastructure and community awareness. Islamic teachings emphasise that accessibility is not merely a matter of convenience but a fundamental right aligned with the religion's core principles of equality and dignity. Creating truly inclusive mosque spaces requires a coordinated effort from mosque administrators, community leaders, and policymakers to implement both physical accommodations and attitudinal changes. Findings from previous research confirm the urgent need for such a model, as they indicate that both the provision of facilities and the spiritual development of Muslims with disabilities remain at an unsatisfactory level and require significant improvement (Nor Azlina Abd. Wahab et al. 2016; Yayasan Dakwah Islam Malaysia 2015). A key gap revealed in existing literature is the lack of integration between physical accessibility and comprehensive religious programmes within mosque institutions.

From a global perspective, Muslim-majority countries demonstrate varying progress in implementing disability rights and mosque accessibility, with a common pattern of urban-rural divide. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Turkey, and Bangladesh have made notable advances in major urban mosques, with facilities such as the Grand Mosque of Mecca, National Mosque Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, and 564 'Model Mosques and Islamic Cultural Centres'. The latter is a nationwide initiative by the Government of Bangladesh, featuring comprehensive accessibility accommodations (Khitam Al Amir 2024; Hazreena Hussein and Naziaty Mohd Yaacob 2012; Journalists and Writers Foundation 2020; AZB 2023). Most have ratified the CRPD and enacted national disability legislation, including Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008, Saudi Arabia's Disability Code of 2000, Turkey's Law on Disabled People of 2005, and Bangladesh's Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2013 (United Nations Human Rights 2019; BLAST 2015).

However, implementation challenges persist, particularly in rural areas where smaller mosques often lack basic accessibility features. Countries like Pakistan, with more than 33 million persons with disabilities, show localised success in facilities as in its national

mosque, the Faisal Masjid in Islamabad but face broader systemic gaps despite the country's Disabilities Bill of 2020 (Khan 2023, 2024). Similarly, Indonesia, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina struggle with consistent accessibility standards across their territories, despite having comprehensive legal frameworks in place (Balcazar 2024; Center for Human Rights in Iran 2020; Human Rights Watch 2018; Ibragimov 2023; Maftuhin 2021; United Nations Development Programme 2021). This international context underscores the universal nature of accessibility challenges in mosque environments and reinforces the need for the comprehensive one-stop centre model proposed in this study.

This transformation aligns with both Islamic ethical principles and modern human rights frameworks, which emphasise equal participation and dignity for all individuals. The goal is to ensure that mosques fulfill their role as inclusive community centres where all members, regardless of ability, can fully participate in religious and social activities. This includes involvement in mosque governance, decision-making processes, and community events, reflecting Islam's comprehensive vision of human dignity and social justice.

The needs of Muslims with disabilities must be given due attention so that mosques can be developed to serve not only as a place of worship but also as a centre for Islamic knowledge, religious affairs, the gathering of scholars to disseminate Islamic teachings, and meeting the socio-economic needs of the community. This study seeks to address these shortcomings by proposing the mosque as a comprehensive one-stop centre that encompasses not only a place of worship but also a hub for inclusive social activities and education, particularly religious learning and career development opportunities for Muslims with disabilities.

This study distinguishes itself from prior research by not only addressing the shortcomings in physical accessibility for Muslims with disabilities within mosques but also by linking these issues to broader social needs, religious obligations (sharia), the lived experiences of Muslims with disabilities, and Malaysia's legal framework. It envisions the mosque as a one-stop centre for the Muslim community with disabilities, positioning it as both an inclusive place of worship and a centre for holistic human development encompassing religious education, social participation, and employment opportunities. Ultimately, both governmental and non-governmental actors must collaborate to ensure that mosques serve all segments of society, especially those with disabilities, fulfilling Islam's comprehensive vision of human dignity and social justice.

Methodology

This study employed in-depth interviews. Six interviews were conducted with key informants comprising administrators/managers (3) of selected mosques and NGO representatives (2) working on disability issues in Malaysia in five zones (states) and one represented both the mosque management and the disabilities community (Table 1). The five states are Kelantan, representing the east coast zone; Selangor for the central zone; Johor for the southern zone; Perak for the northern zone, and Sarawak for the Borneo zone. These states were selected as each recorded the highest number of registered persons with disabilities (OKU) within their respective zones: Kelantan (45,277), Selangor (104,909), Johor (73,918), Perak (55,333), and Sarawak (42,774), based on

Table 1. Respondent background and interview details.

Respondent	Role	Type of disability	Mosque/NGO	State	Date of interview
R1	Person with disabilities & mosque management	Physical disability	Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz, Shah Alam, Selangor	Selangor	18 July 2023
R2	Person with disabilities	Physical disability	NGO – Yayasan OKU Kelantan	Kelantan	20 July 2023
R3	Mosque management	None	Masjid An Nur Perumahan OKU, Bachok, Kelantan	Kelantan	20 July 2023
R4	Person with disabilities	Deaf	Persatuan Orang Pekak Islam, Johor	Johor	20 July 2023
R5	Mosque management	None	Masjid Taman Cicely, Teluk Intan, Perak	Perak	18 July 2023
R6	Mosque Management	None	Masjid Jamek, Sarawak	Sarawak	6 July 2023

data from Malaysia's Department of Social Welfare (2023). It is important to note that these figures reflect registered OKU only; the actual prevalence of disability may be higher due to underregistration, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The selected mosques were identified and recommended by those from the respective disabilities community, ensuring that the sites reflect the perspectives and lived experiences of those requiring mosque facilities. Although some mosques have demonstrated initiatives in providing disability-friendly facilities, the responses also indicate existing limitations, such as poorly maintained facilities, insufficient assistive resources, and the lack of inclusive communication support for worshippers with sensory impairment. These insights further justify the selection of the mosques, as these were recognised for their efforts and initiatives in accommodating persons with disabilities, while still presenting areas for improvement, making them particularly relevant and suitable for this study. We grouped data into themes, examining cases in the study to ensure all manifestations of each theme have been accounted for and compared, and then examined how themes are interconnected.

Interview procedures

This study (UM.TNC2/UMREC_2414) received approval from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) on 1 March 2023. The interviews were held between 6 July and 20 July 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for comprehensive exploration of all thematic areas. All interviews were conducted in Malay and audio-recorded with participants' explicit informed consent. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the study objectives, interview procedures, and their rights as research participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to decline answering any questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. Following each interview, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Malay by the researchers. Transcripts were subsequently reviewed for accuracy and further analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes, patterns, and insights that informed the development of the data management framework and policy recommendations. Where participant responses are quoted directly in this article, transcripts have been translated from Malay into English by the researchers, with care taken to preserve the original meaning and intent of each response.

Findings and discussion

The interview findings reveal various deficiencies in mosque accessibility and infrastructure across Malaysia, with variations across states. In Selangor, R1 highlighted that inconsistent ramps and signage hinder participation:

Many mosques lack ramps and proper signage. It makes difficult participation. (R1)

Similarly, in Kelantan, steep ramps and inaccessible ablution areas prevent wheelchair users from fully engaging in prayers:

Sometimes, I need to crawl to join the congregation because the wheelchair cannot fit inside. (R2)

In Johor, the deaf community suggests the use of signal lights to aid participation in prayer routines:

We need signal lights to indicate when the adhan or iqamah is being called. (R4)

Both Perak and Sarawak mosques face accessibility issues where ramps are treated as optional features, when they should be mandatory infrastructure installed proactively, independent of the current presence of persons with disabilities in the congregation. Although some special facilities, such as wheelchairs and interpreters, are available in certain mosques, coverage is uneven. In Perak, the need for sign language interpreters during sermons is critical:

We need at least one [sign] interpreter during Friday prayers. (R5)

In Kelantan, volunteers provide assistance, but persons with disabilities prefer greater independence:

Persons with disabilities prefer doing things independently. Banners explaining prayer etiquette would help. (R2)

Kelantan's mosques offer accessible restrooms and parking but lack programmes specifically tailored for the deaf, as noted by R3. Social support and inclusion also vary, with persons with disabilities often relying heavily on family or volunteers for mosque access. Sarawak demonstrates positive collaboration between NGOs and mosque committees:

NGOs play a big role in helping the blind and deaf communities access religious education. (R6)

However, in Johor, limited sensitivity from mosque management leaves persons with disabilities feeling isolated:

The mosque is a good place to learn, but without interpreters, we feel left out. (R4)

The study also identified unmet spiritual needs for persons with disabilities. In Selangor, participants noted the need for improved access to religious education, especially through online platforms that accommodate mobility challenges:

I prefer studying Islam online because I can learn at my own pace. (R1)

In Perak, attendees emphasised the importance of visual aids and pre-recorded sermons with sign language interpretation:

Slides or videos with sign language interpretation would be immensely beneficial. (R5)

Meanwhile, in Kelantan, there are aspirations to make mosques not only centres for prayer but also hubs for rehabilitation and vocational training, according to R3. In Sarawak, mobility support remains inadequate, with insufficient special trails (tactile pathway) and few Braille Qurans:

Braille Qurans are not widely available in mosques across Sarawak. (R6)

Braille Qurans are more readily available in other states than in Sarawak, yet supply remains insufficient to meet demand across all five states, where accessibility needs differ significantly from one another. In Johor, communication challenges exist for the deaf community due to the absence of sign language interpreters during religious classes and the lack of visual systems to assist in congregational prayers. In Kelantan, physically disabled individuals face difficulties such as steep pathways and ablution areas that are not wheelchair-friendly, while the prayer area being distant from the entrance makes those with disabilities feel isolated. In Perak, while most facilities are available, their maintenance is not given adequate attention. In Sarawak, while designated accessible pathways connecting car parks to prayer areas exist, provision remains inadequate to meet current demand. Nonetheless, notable steps toward visual impairment inclusion have been made, supported by NGOs that actively facilitate knowledge-sharing and capacity-building to better serve persons with disabilities. In Selangor, despite the presence of disability-friendly initiatives, ramps and lifts fail to comply with the Malaysian Standard MS 1184:2014, resulting in infrastructure that does not adequately accommodate wheelchair users and others with mobility needs. One common issue across all five states is the inadequate availability or complete absence of Braille Qurans due to their high cost. The disparities in mosque accessibility and facilities across the states, are summarised in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Mosque in five zones in Malaysia.

NO.	ACCESSIBILITY	MOSQUE				
		M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
1	Parking	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Ramp	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Ablution area	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Toilet	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Wheelchair	X	X	X	X	X
6	Handrail	✓	X	X	✓	X
7	Direction sign	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Screen/monitor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Escalator / stairs	✓	X	✓	✓	X
10	Elevator	✓	X	X	✓	X
11	Religious class	✓	✓	X	X	X
12	Braille Quran	✓	X	X	✓	X
13	Sign language	✓	X	X	X	X
14	Invitation for community activities	X	X	X	X	X

M1 : Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz, Shah Alam, Selangor

M2 : Masjid An Nur Perumahan OKU, Bachok, Kelantan

M3 : Masjid Taman Cicely Teluk Intan, Perak

M4 : Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar, Johor Bahru, Johor

M5 : Masjid Jamek Negeri Sarawak, Kuching, Sarawak

Based on the issues identified in this research, an integrated framework for mosque accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities was developed to support the inclusion and accessibility of persons with disabilities in community spaces, particularly in mosques (Figure 1). It highlights multiple dimensions of accessibility, starting with physical access. This includes ensuring that entrances, pathways, elevators, and escalators are easily accessible, along with designated spaces for wheelchairs and special furniture that can accommodate different needs through flexible arrangements, in accordance with the Malaysian Standard MS 1184:2014 (Universal Design and Accessibility in the Built Environment).

In the prayer areas, flexibility is emphasised by providing moveable furniture and adaptable seating arrangements to accommodate users with varying abilities. Similarly, the ablution area is designed to be accessible, with features like lowered sinks, grab bars, and seating to ensure comfort and convenience for those with physical impairments. Toilets are another important component, with larger stalls to fit wheelchairs, grab bars, and sinks at accessible heights to enable independent use.

The framework also addresses sensory and cognitive accommodations by providing tools such as visual aids (signage, lighting, and reading glasses) and auditory aids (hearing loops and speakers). Additionally, it includes written materials like Braille Qurans, large-print books, and audio versions for individuals with visual impairments. Educational and support services form another key area, focusing on inclusive religious education through specialised classes, along with volunteers and staff trained to assist persons with disabilities. Counselling services are also provided, offering spiritual support and sign language assistance where necessary.

Community and social inclusion are promoted by organising accessible events and ensuring transportation support, while also educating the community and training staff to better interact with persons with disabilities. Emergency preparedness is another vital component, with clear emergency plans and equipment in place to assist persons with disabilities during crises. The framework further emphasises the

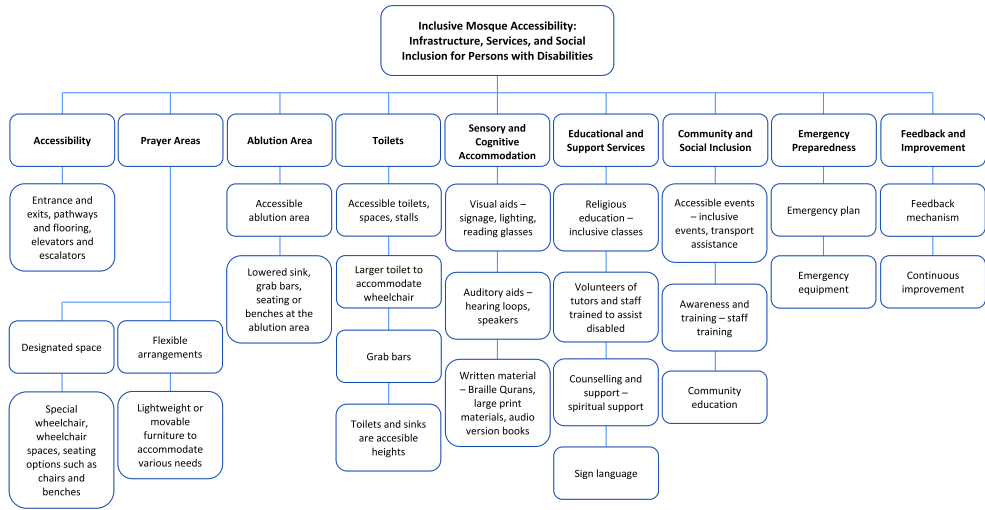


Figure 1. An integrated framework for mosque accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

importance of continuous feedback through structured mechanisms, along with ongoing improvements to ensure that facilities evolve in response to user needs.

The mosque serves not only spiritual and educational purposes but also facilitates communal cohesion and social engagement. However, the current facilities in many operating mosques in Malaysia, particularly in rural areas, still discourage persons with disabilities from participating in religious activities, largely due to the absence of amenities suited to their needs. Most of these older structures do not adhere to Malaysian Public Works Department rules, despite existing special provisions requiring public buildings to meet the specifications for disabled facilities.

Wheelchair ramps and accessible entrances are essential for enabling persons with disabilities to move throughout mosque premises independently, decreasing physical obstacles and ensuring their participation in community activities. This is in accordance with the guidelines set forth by the United Nations on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which promote unrestricted access to public facilities. Designated prayer spaces are specifically designed to accommodate persons with disabilities during communal prayers, acknowledging their unique requirements and facilitating active participation in worship. This practice is endorsed by Islamic doctrine, which promotes inclusivity and equal involvement in religious activities. The purpose of such spaces is not to discriminate, but rather to provide a dedicated area that enables persons with disabilities to fulfil their religious obligations with ease and respect.

Accessible restrooms and ablution facilities are crucial for guaranteeing the comfort and dignity of persons with disabilities during their visit to the mosque, enabling them to address their personal needs autonomously. Similarly, the provision of accessible ablution facilities allows persons with disabilities to comfortably engage in religious purification rituals, ensuring they can easily and respectfully uphold their religious traditions.

Beyond physical infrastructure, educational programmes and accessible religious materials ensure that individuals with disabilities have equitable opportunities to acquire knowledge about their faith and participate in spiritual activities. Audio and visual assistance enhances the individual's capacity to engage in prayers and Friday and Eid sermons, ensuring that sensory impairments do not prevent their inclusion in religious activities. Accessible religious resources facilitate independent engagement with the Quran and other religious materials, encouraging inclusivity and supporting spiritual development.

Community support services and spiritual guidance play a crucial role in diminishing social isolation and promoting a sense of inclusion among persons with disabilities. Providing counselling and psychological assistance within the mosque ensures that the mental and emotional wellbeing of persons with disabilities is addressed in a culturally and spiritually sensitive setting. Mosques function as central gathering places for communities, providing a distinct environment where individuals can access assistance that aligns with their religious beliefs and values. By integrating counselling services into mosques, communities can cultivate a nurturing atmosphere that acknowledges the comprehensive requirements of individuals with disabilities, thereby guaranteeing their complete engagement and integration in religious and communal activities.

Designing an inclusive mosque requires a significant financial investment and the involvement of various parties. Renovating older mosques to comply with modern accessibility regulations can pose significant difficulties and high costs, often necessitating specialised knowledge and meticulous planning to maintain architectural authenticity. Nevertheless, these modifications are essential in guaranteeing that every member of

the community, irrespective of their physical capacity, can fully engage in religious activities. Mosque renovations typically involve various parties, such as the State Religious Affairs Departments (SRAD), the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, and Baitul Mal under the State Islamic Religious Council, which provide financial support for such projects. A key obstacle faced by many mosques when opting to rebuild facilities for persons with disabilities is the lengthy permission process from essential stakeholders.

To meet the needs of persons with disabilities in fulfilling their religious obligations, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, it is essential to standardise policies or guidelines across all states to ensure that the accessibility of facilities is maximised. Secondly, appointing dedicated staff, such as sign language interpreters or trained caretakers, is necessary to enhance support. Thirdly, collaboration with NGOs is crucial to expedite facility improvements. Lastly, an annual audit by mosque management is needed to ensure that facilities for persons with disabilities are functioning properly and maintained consistently. With this approach, every state in Malaysia can address existing gaps and build truly inclusive mosques, aligned with the vision of Islamic community development in the country.

Recommendations for Malaysian mosques

Ensuring the accessibility of mosque facilities for persons with disabilities in Malaysia is not just a matter of convenience, but a significant manifestation of Islamic principles and Malaysia's constitutional commitment to religious freedom within its dual legal framework. Islam holds a profound reverence for the rights of disabled individuals, providing them with special measures to ensure their ability to accomplish their religious obligations in a comfortable and dignified manner. This Malaysian case study highlights the urgent requirement for inclusive accessibility solutions that address the specific needs of Malaysian Muslims with disabilities within the country's administrative structure for religious affairs.

Within Malaysia's federalised religious system, where mosque administration falls under state religious councils (Majlis Agama Islam Negeri), it is essential to develop contextually appropriate solutions that consider both federal disability legislation and state-level religious governance. Educational programmes and accessible religious resources in Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, Tamil, and English (reflecting Malaysia's multicultural society) are crucial in promoting the spiritual development and involvement of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, the use of audio and visual assistance tailored to Malaysia's diverse linguistic landscape ensures that individuals with sensory impairments can fully participate in prayers and sermons, thus fostering an inclusive religious experience within Malaysian mosques.

Community support services and spiritual counselling provided by trained Malaysian imams play a crucial role in reducing social isolation and improving the emotional well-being of Malaysian Muslims with disabilities, making them feel respected and included in their local mosque communities from urban centres like Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya to rural villages in states like Kelantan and Sabah.

Accessibility needs for Malaysian mosques

The ideal Malaysian mosque for persons with disabilities should incorporate the following features, adapted to Malaysia's specific architectural traditions, climate considerations, and religious administrative structure (Table 3):

Table 3. Needs for facility accessibility for persons with disabilities in Malaysian mosques.

ACCESSIBILITY NEED	MALAYSIAN CONTEXT DESCRIPTION	IMPACT ON MALAYSIAN MUSLIMS WITH DISABILITIES
Ramps and elevators	Installation of ramps and lifts compliant with Malaysian Standard MS 1184:2014, considering Malaysia's tropical climate with covered walkways to protect from heavy rainfall.	Enables enhanced mobility for Malaysians using wheelchairs, walkers, or individuals with limited mobility while accommodating Malaysia's weather patterns.
Accessible ablution areas	Design of inclusive facilities for performing ritual ablution (<i>wudu</i>) following Malaysia's specific ablution practices, including appropriate seating and supportive handrails that accommodate cultural preferences for seated or standing ablution.	Facilitates the ability of Malaysian Muslims with disabilities to perform ablution in a comfortable and self-sufficient manner while respecting local customs.
Tactile pathways	Installation of tactile pathways using materials suitable for Malaysia's climate (resistant to humidity and frequent cleaning) to provide guidance for persons with visual impairments.	Improves navigation and enhances safety for visually impaired Malaysian Muslims, particularly important given the typically large scale of state and district mosques.
Braille and audio resources	Provision of Quran and Hadith collections in Braille and audio forms in Bahasa Malaysia, Arabic with Malay translation, and other languages common in Malaysia's multicultural society.	Facilitates independent access to religious materials for Malaysian Muslims with visual impairments in their preferred languages.
Sign language interpretation	Provision of <i>Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia</i> (Malaysia Sign Language) interpreters for <i>khutbah</i> (sermons) and religious classes, particularly for Friday prayers in state and district mosques.	Facilitates complete engagement of Malaysian Muslims with hearing impairments in religious services using their national sign language.
Accessible restrooms	Installation of bathrooms equipped with spacious stalls, sturdy grab bars, and additional accessibility amenities that comply with Malaysian Standard MS 1184:2014 for public toilets.	Offers Malaysian Muslims with disabilities essential amenities that accommodate both disability needs and cultural requirements for hygiene and privacy.
Designated prayer spaces	Designating specific area within Malaysian mosque prayer hall for wheelchair users and anyone requiring assistance, considering Malaysia's typical gender-segregated prayer arrangements.	Promotes inclusivity while respecting Malaysia's religious customs regarding prayer spaces and gender separation.
Hearing assistance systems	Installation of hearing loops or other listening devices compatible with Malaysia's electrical standards and suitable for the acoustic challenges of Malaysia's varied mosque architectural styles.	Enhances auditory comprehension for Malaysian Muslims with hearing challenges during prayer, sermons and religious education sessions.
Parking and entrance accessibility	Installation of conveniently located parking spaces near mosque entrances with OKU (<i>Orang Kurang Upaya</i> - disabled persons) designation as per Malaysian road regulations, along with covered walkways suitable for Malaysia's climate and with user-friendly paths.	Facilitating easier access to the mosque for Malaysian Muslims with disabilities while considering Malaysia's weather patterns that include heavy rainfall and intense heat.
Community sensitisation programs	Efforts to raise awareness within Malaysian communities about the requirements and rights of persons with disabilities, integrated with Malaysia's existing religious outreach programmes through JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) and state religious departments.	Promotes a climate of inclusivity and support within Malaysian mosque communities, building on traditional Malaysian values of community cooperation.

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

ACCESSIBILITY NEED	MALAYSIAN CONTEXT DESCRIPTION	IMPACT ON MALAYSIAN MUSLIMS WITH DISABILITIES
Educational programmes	Offering tailored religious education programmes for Malaysians with disabilities through integration with existing Islamic educational structures such as <i>sekolah agama</i> (religious schools) and madrasahs.	Enhance religious knowledge while fostering inclusion within Malaysia's established Islamic educational framework.
Spiritual guidance and counselling	Providing therapeutic counselling through trained Malaysian imams and counselors certified by JAKIM's counselling unit, incorporating both Islamic approaches and modern psychological support.	Enhances mental wellbeing of Malaysian Muslims with disabilities through culturally appropriate spiritual and psychological support.
Accessible religious materials	Ensuring the availability of religious materials in accessible formats that reflect Malaysia's multilingual society, including Bahasa Malaysia, Arabic with Malay translation, Chinese, and Tamil.	Enables independent religious education for Malaysian Muslims with disabilities in their preferred languages.
Inclusive worship practices	Enabling flexible prayer position and offering guidance from Malaysian religious authorities on accommodations for various disabilities, validated by Malaysia's National Fatwa Council.	Ensures Malaysian Muslims with disabilities can fully engage in religious rituals with appropriate theological guidance from recognised Malaysian religious authorities.
Community support and social inclusion	Encouraging community engagement through Malaysia's existing social support networks, including mosque committees and community volunteer groups.	Facilitates the establishment of support networks within Malaysia's traditional community structures, reducing isolation among Malaysian Muslims with disabilities.

A comprehensive accessibility of disabled-friendly mosques is an obligation of the local community as well as the government, ensuring that persons with disabilities can exercise their rights to perform their religious duties and have complete access to other educational and community programmes available in the mosques. This issue aligns with the fundamental principles of development delineated by the government in the 12th Malaysia Plan (RMK 12), which includes the development of inclusive societies and measures for disabled people's empowerment. It is an expansion of RMK 11 concerning the disabled's access rights to public buildings and supports the Malaysian government's initiatives to uphold and defend those rights. This is also consistent with the six primary domains of the national key result area (NKRA), which encompass the enhancement of high quality and competent education and the enhancement of the living situations of economically disadvantaged individuals. It is well acknowledged that most individuals with disabilities have little financial means and need a platform to enhance their cognitive and metaphysical understanding.

The government acknowledged the difficulties encountered by persons with disabilities in accessing buildings, especially mosques (Bernama 2026). Prior to approving the construction plans for a new mosque in both urban and rural areas, it is prudent to implement necessary actions. Building permits will only be issued if the plans have facilities for accommodating persons with disabilities and other special needs groups. Moreover, efforts are being made to launch campaigns in neighbouring communities with the aim of increasing awareness and fostering inclusiveness. These steps demonstrate an increasing recognition of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities and a dedication to establishing surroundings that cater to their requirements

The results of this study have raised various recommendations to enhance the accessibility of the mosque's amenities for people with disability. First, mosques should prioritise installing wheelchair ramps, accessible doorways, and specialised prayer rooms, which would eliminate physical obstacles and guarantee autonomous access for individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, the incorporation of inclusive design elements in ablution spaces is of utmost importance, enabling individuals to carry out their religious rituals in a comfortable and dignified manner. Second, educational programmes specifically designed to meet the requirements of persons with disabilities should be developed, promoting inclusivity in religious education and participation by ensuring the availability of Quran and other religious resources in accessible formats, such as Braille or audio. For example, the Friday sermon, currently disseminated through booklets and displayed on notice boards, should also be made available in formats accessible to individuals with disabilities. Third, community support services should be implemented to assist persons with disabilities in accessing transportation to the mosque, completing ablution, and engaging in community events, thereby boosting their level of participation and sense of inclusion. Finally, the provision of spiritual and psychological counselling services is crucial for supporting the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

Achieving inclusivity and accessibility for disabled individuals in mosques is not just a matter of physical infrastructure, but also one of social justice, legal compliance, and religious duty. This study underscores the importance of integrating disabled voices into the design and operation of mosques, ensuring that they can fully participate in religious practices and communal life. Despite the existence of international laws, such as the CRPD, and Islamic teachings that emphasise equality and compassion, significant barriers remain, including physical inaccessibility, social stigma, and a lack of political will. Efforts to make mosques more inclusive need to be multifaceted, involving not only structural modifications but also community engagement, education, and policy reform. The role of religious leaders is critical in advocating for inclusivity within their congregations, aligning modern accessibility standards with core Islamic values of justice and equality. Similarly, governments and international bodies must prioritise disability rights, ensure legal enforcement, and foster collaboration with religious institutions. Ultimately, creating accessible mosques benefits not only disabled individuals but the broader Muslim community, promoting values of compassion, unity, and equal participation. By addressing these challenges, we can take meaningful steps towards a more inclusive and just society, where everyone, regardless of ability, can practise their faith freely and fully.

The journey towards ensuring accessibility in mosques is ongoing and requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including religious leaders, community members, policymakers, and the government. By prioritising accessibility and inclusivity, mosques can serve as beacons of compassion and justice, reflecting the true spirit of Islam and enhancing the quality of life for persons with disabilities. Moreover, fostering solidarity within the community not only fulfils its moral and religious obligations but also creates a more peaceful, harmonious, and supportive environment for all its members, laying the foundation for sustainable progress.

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