

## **Gendered structuring of public places**

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### **Abstract**

*The contemporary times have seen a marked increase in the participation of women in remunerative work in the city of Aizawl, Mizoram, which is majorly inhabited by the Mizo ethnic and tribal people. The city of Aizawl is the only Census Notified Town and houses major government establishments, educational institutions, companies and corporate offices besides hospitals. The home space is traditionally regarded as the sphere and responsibility of women in the society of the Mizos. However, in the context of increased entry of the women of the city into waged employment in the organised sector, workplaces and offices as physical spaces transform into spaces of interaction between the genders thusly. In the context of a marked entry of women into extra-mural works there is bound to be social interactions within work spaces that may or may not be gendered. The micro level workplace architectural arrangements within these physical spaces may indicate gendered physical arrangements in some way or not at all. In this light the research asks the question- does increased presence of women in extramural works translate into spaces of exclusion within the work setting such as in an office. Thereby, for the purpose of the study, intense field survey was conducted in which data was collected from a total of 41 offices of government directorates and departments, 20 corporate offices, 8 hospitals, 16 schools and 2 universities and 10 colleges. These samples were drawn by the stratified technique of sampling. In situ investigation and survey was done through workplace observations and interviews through schedules were carried out. The study revealed that the overall structure and social relationships that exists does not allow a universal operation of spaces of exclusion especially on gender lines. Therefore the physical spaces within the workplace do not witness any conspicuous existence of segregation of the genders and the study revealed that there is intense social interaction and relationships that do not welcome segregation of men and women within the micro level architectural structure of the workplace.*

**Keywords:** 1. Gendered architectural arrangements, 2. Spaces of exclusion, 3. Women's increased employment, 4. Workplace relationship.

**Introductory statement**

The access to public spaces is often gendered and any entry into it by a particular section of people is met with hostility and experiences almost violent repercussions. The integrated workplace did not exist until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century even in the developed countries of the world (Massey, 1994). Public spaces were therefore gendered in no small measure. Wherever human beings come together in any physical space there is bound to be social interaction which may either be subdued or thoroughly vibrant. In this light McDougal (2005) describes space as “the medium in which we behave” and one which is socially conditioned. The Mizo society is patriarchal and this system of the social structure had in earlier times manifested itself in many unfavourable ways. A perfect example from history is the institution of the ‘*zawlbuk*’ which was a dormitory for boys and men and a place of traditional education and learning had been a space of complete exclusion. This social and educational space which was exclusively meant for males and females were neither admitted into the institution nor were they allowed to even step foot into it. Women in the contemporary Mizo society and especially Aizawl city are now stepping out of the house and engaging themselves in myriad occupations and professions. They are no longer restricted within the four walls of the home even if it means putting aside their traditional responsibilities in the household. Women’s foray into the economic sphere may therefore be either carrying forward the forms of segregated spaces that existed in earlier society of the Mizos, or not at all. The architectural arrangement within the workplace space is a significant subject for study thus in order to ascertain whether there are gender specific spaces within the office or workplace. This paper thus seeks to explore the many aspects of social interaction and spatiality within the physical space of the workplace and find out whether women’s presence in the workplace translates into spaces of exclusion.

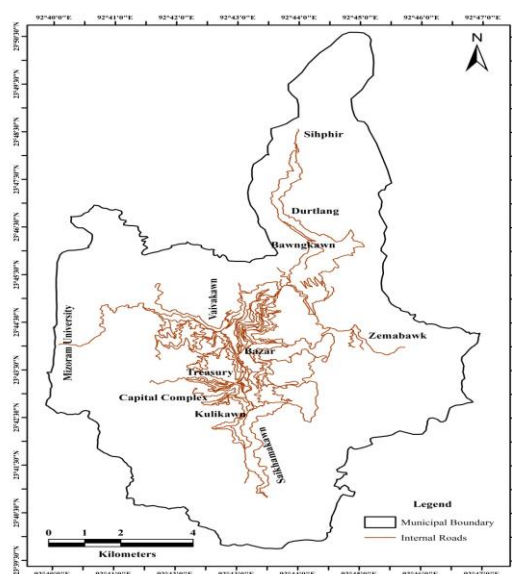


Fig 1. An outline map of Aizawl city showing areas of employment

**A background of the employment structure of Aizawl**

The number of women being in paid employment is very high in the city. There are even some sectors where women employees outnumber their male counterparts. Professions like nursing especially which may be regarded as extensions of women’s responsibility of care giving in the domestic and private space is dominated by women. The government sector also has a high proportion of females working in them and are in majority in 10 offices of directorates and departments. The teaching profession also has a high number of women especially in schools where their numbers are more than women in a majority of cases. Table 1 shows the share of women employees in each sector of the economy and can be seen that some professions have higher proportions of women.

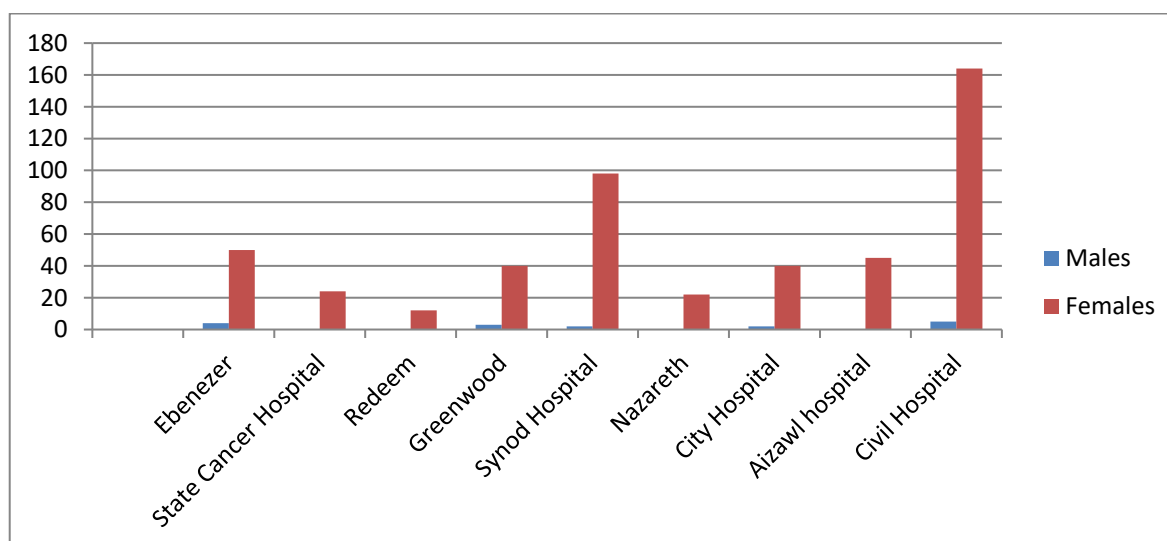
**Table 1. Total number of males and females in different professions in Aizawl**

Sector	Males	Females
Government	1890	1147
Teaching	155	259
Doctors	96	99
Advocates	100	76
Company executives	100	24

Source: Field Survey, 2019

As can be seen from Fig.1 the proportion of female nurses is much higher than that of males in the nursing profession which shows the disinclination of males towards the profession. It is worth mentioning that 10 out of 41 government directorates and departments have higher female count among the employees. Teaching in schools is also majorly dominated by women with 13 of the 16 schools that were considered for the study have higher number of female teachers.

**Fig 1. Proportion of male and female nurses in hospitals of Aizawl**



Source: Field Study, 2019

## **The physical environment of the workplace**

The workplace or the office as a physical space is an important part of any work environment whether it is a government or a private sector building. The physical structure of the workplace often translates into spaces where socialisation and in its various forms takes root and is manifested in myriad ways. The architectural arrangements within the workplace are one point of study in the context of social relationships that presents itself when the genders come together in a public space.

A total of 420 office goers were asked whether they were happy with the physical environment of their respective workplaces. Of the 151 state government employees 144 of them declared that they had no issues with the surroundings. Respondents working in Central government offices had 37 employees who said they were satisfied with the structure with only 5 saying it was not satisfactory. 68 employees working for public and private corporations did not mind the built environment of the office while 8 responded negatively. College lecturers and school teachers had a very high proportion of respondents saying the physical environment was good with 98 approving of the physical setting of the workplace and only 7 persons thought otherwise. 35 respondents working in the medical profession said the physical environment was good while four people declared their dissatisfaction. Among respondents working in the legal profession 29 did not have any problem with the physical environment of the office with only 5 stating that it was not up to the mark.



Plate 1. The Office of the Engineer –in-Chief, Khatla, 2019

## **Micro level Architectural Arrangements in the Workplace**

The physical aspects are important factors for any employee or office-goer as it goes a long way in bringing about some degree of comfort while working the job. Physical arrangements within the office buildings also have its impact on the mental and psychological well being of employees to a certain degree. One would not like to be situated in a physical setting where the workplace is overcrowded and there is little room for efficient working. Private space is often regarded by psychologists as being a valuable asset towards more effective application of the mind and also a safeguard against any unwanted physical intrusion or sexual abuse

in the workplace especially in the context of men and women sharing a particular space. There aren't any examples of physical segregation of men and women as such in the offices of Aizawl. Questions were therefore directed at respondents regarding this aspect of the physical setting of the workplace in order to ascertain whether such an arrangement would work in the context of the existing social makeup of the city.

The spatial arrangement within the workplace as observed during field study did not seem to indicate any signs of the prevalence of spaces that excluded a particular gender. Among state government employees a paltry 12 respondents said that there should be separate workspaces for men and women in the office. The remaining 134 did not see any need for gender based segregation. The social aspect therefore comes into play in this regard. The perspective of gender equality is most often cited as the reason for the pointlessness of segregation within the workplace. One respondent believed that in order to bring about balance segregation should not be implemented. Rather, some respondents appreciated men being around since they are more useful in times of emergency and crisis. Another respondent was of the view that both sexes are equipped with strengths which when combined could prove to be effective in carrying out different tasks. The perception of gender equality is stressed by several respondents. However the modern Mizo society may be deemed as an almost universally egalitarian one wherein both sexes are respected and celebrated in equal measure even if the balance may not always be perfect. "The society is a gregarious one and it is important to discuss things together to make working efficient. With segregation communication is hampered," asserted one respondent. The disadvantages of having segregation is also brought out by respondents saying that it would lead to the formation of different groups and damaging workplace politics and consequently also prompt employees to give in to gossip. Women employees also lauded men as being more mature and possessing greater foresight which made them better coordinators and planners. It was also thought unnecessary to have separate spaces unless colleagues and co-workers were given to bad behaviour in the office. Still another believed that since professionalism brings about decent and respectable behaviour, so there is no need for separation of the sexes.

However cubicles do exist within some offices that are seemingly being modernised. The majority of offices do not have structures to separate one employee from the other. The workspace is therefore shared and desks are arranged very closely to each other. However the most common form of separated workspaces is between different sections of the office which deals with particular subjects and tasks.



Plate 2. An office with cubicles: Directorate of Horticulture

There are also offices that have a mix of both cubicles and open workspaces. A perfect example is the office of the Directorate of Horticulture in Khatla as seen in Plates 2 and 3. However in the event of more employees of the same sex being present in a section of the office there tends to be a continuous line of employees belonging to a particular gender, again seen in Fig. 4.3. However this cannot be seen to mean that there is segregation on the micro level within the architectural structure of the workplace.

The overall environment in these state government offices is one composed of cordial and friendly relationships and the men are projected as being respectable and helpful co-workers and friends by the women employees. The social setting of the workplace is thus manifested in these settings through the opinions of the respondents.

**Table 2. Workplaces with cubicles**

Sector	With separate cubicles	Open and shared workspaces
Government offices	10	31
Companies	2	18
Law chambers	1	33
Hospitals	0	8
Schools	4	12
Colleges	6	4
Universities	2	0

Source: Field survey, 2019

Central government employees also have similar views on segregation at the workplace and hence not a single respondent among them felt the need to have such an arrangement in the workplace. The very nature of society is brought out by some in which respondents opined that men and women ought to mingle freely together and co-workers be friendly with one another. One respondent declared that there was no discrimination against another gender so there is no need for segregation of the sexes. Men were also deemed chivalrous and therefore very handy in general. The complementary nature of men and women, which helps in getting the task at hand to be done more professionally and efficiently, was also highlighted again here by one employee. Probably the most significant and substantial reason for considering segregation to be unnecessary is that there have not been any cases of sexual harassment.

An overwhelming majority of women working in public and private corporate believe that segregation is not needed. In terms of numbers, 71 did not see it to be necessary while only five respondents felt the need to have such a structure. A similar stance towards physical segregation is thus echoed in this category of employed women. However there is also the expectation of the other to behave in a proper manner so that such physical arrangements will continue to be unnecessary. One woman employee asserted, "No, men and women should not have separate workspaces. We should be able to access the same resources, opportunities and enjoy the same rights while being under the same protection." Segregation of genders is therefore regarded as being detrimental for the organisation as a whole.

Women employees in the education sector have the highest proportion of respondents who support separation within the workplace, among all sectors. 22 people felt there should be physical barriers to separate the two genders. However 83 persons did not see the need for it. It was felt that setting up barriers would impede communication between the faculty members since there is a need to discuss about students with colleagues. In a similar vein one respondent said that men and women should be able to intermingle freely. This depicts the prevailing social facet of the city which is characterised by gregariousness and absence of gender discrimination. Another view was that since workplaces in the state do not and have not experienced any cases of sexual abuse in their respective workplaces there is thus no need for physical and gendered segregation.

Those in the medical profession who have to rub shoulders with all sorts of people in their everyday work had only two respondents who felt segregation was needed while the remaining 37 saw no need for it. One respondent said that there is a need for such an arrangement specifically for persons who have night duty. This could imply that she is concerned about her personal safety and have most likely felt vulnerable while performing the night shift. Others have declared that there is no need for such a thing in a place like Mizoram. Focusing on one's own tasks is believed to be a deterrent to any form of undesirable behaviour by employees. There is also the expectation of each other to respect. On the other hand, women huddling together tend to gossip as observed by one respondent. So there should not be separate spaces for women to perform their duties. Another opined people do need some personal space when it comes to work.



Plate 3. A section of the Office of the Directorate of Horticulture without cubicles.

Upon observation of the law firms and chamber in and around the District Court of Aizawl, it was noticed that males and females sat next to each other and socialised freely, sharing meal packets and exchanging knick-knacks. Therefore it is no surprise that not a single respondent from among this profession was in favour of gender based separation within the workplace. Having male colleagues around was appreciated since women tend to gossip when they sit together. Working together with men was not an issue for women advocates since they all mingle freely. One opined that if there was segregation the goal of gender equality would be lost completely. The reason of equality is also propagated in their opinion which then completely counteracts the need to have separate workspaces.

There is thus a consensus on the pointlessness of setting up physical barriers to separate the sexes. There is almost a universal opposition to the idea. While one might presume that women would be strongly in

favour of having separate workspaces the opinion about having one in the workplace is completely the reverse of that. The need for such a spatial arrangement has cited as a general personal need instead of one that is based on being detached from persons belonging to the opposite sex. There is a collective belief among the women office goers of Aizawl that bringing in such a practice in the workplace would diminish rather than augment the existing spirit of cooperation and teamwork that employees generally desire to preserve. Also in order to attain and preserve gender equality it is important to mingle freely with the opposite sex. However there is also a strong expectation by women employees of their male co-workers and counterparts to conduct themselves in a right and acceptable manner at the workplace. Mizoram is also regarded relatively safe for women especially in the workplace which is corroborated by the fact that several respondents have cited it as a reason not to have segregation. The office space is thus not gendered in any way and it is also the desire of employees of Aizawl city to remain that way. Architectural arrangement based on gender is therefore out of the question and has not been practised in any form in the workplaces in Aizawl city. The disadvantages of putting gendered segregation in place is universally considered as being detrimental to the overall office atmosphere.



Plate 4. Accounts Section of the Grand Post Office, Treasury Square

### **Relationship between employees**

Besides being a place of work the workplace is a space within which social interactions also take place. In the context of an increased presence of women in the economic landscape of the city the question of social relationships in these public spaces becomes an important point of study. Both men and women come together at the workplace and the situation might have several social outcomes. The difference in personalities either lead to clashes and conflicts, or people could make this difference work in order to benefit the organisation. As declared by a numerous number of respondents, the social setting at the workplace is significantly egalitarian. The instances of employees mingling freely with each other, irrespective of gender, are numerous, and is the rule rather than an exception.

All 151 respondents from among the state government employees felt that there is good relationship between men and women in the workplace. Men and women ought to co-exist peacefully and this should also extend to the workplace stated one respondent. No section of the employees is marginalised and the society is seen as being fair. There is a lot of security and protection of women. Male employees also do not think any less of women and mete out equal treatment to everyone. The state government offices therefore universally possess

a feeling of oneness. Therefore there is no question of spaces of exclusion ever being existent in the workplace and is a place of cordial social interface.

Central government employees also do not face any hardships from their male counterparts and colleagues. 41 out of the 42 respondents were confident about the good relationship they have with the men in the office. They are full of praises for them and believe that they are more organised and operate efficiently.

Public and private corporation employees are also majorly of the opinion that the workplace is not gendered. 73 respondents had no issues with their male colleagues by way of discrimination. However the older men do misbehave claimed one respondent. Another revealed that there have been instances of discriminatory attitude by men in the workplace. Overall the relationship is good in these offices but is not without any undesirable atmosphere however insignificant it may be in relation to the whole.

In line with other sectors and profession the teaching fraternity also experienced very little discrimination or rather none of it in their work. The relationship between men and women in the workplace is therefore cordial and there is no space for discriminatory practices. 100 respondents claimed that there is good relationship between men and women in the workplace while an insignificant total of four people thought otherwise. Out of the 105 respondents from the profession only three people claimed to have been a victim of discrimination.

A very high proportion of doctors and staff nurses feel that there is good relationship between men and women in their workplace. 37 people out of the 39 respondents from this sphere of employment do not have any issues with the men. The exact same number of people also stated that they haven't faced any discrimination in their line of work. One person though declared that her not getting regularised in her work was discriminatory.

None of the respondents from among the legal profession claimed that there was any bad blood between them and their male colleagues. As regards discrimination, one respondent said that she faces discrimination when working with men. And since there is no significant cases of discrimination or bad relationships it may be concluded that the presence of women in public spaces has not led to the creation of any spaces of exclusion within the realm of the legal profession.

All sectors and professions have workplaces that are not gendered in any way. The instances of discrimination are greatly insignificant and the spaces created by this kind of environment only make working a less stressful affair in no small measure. There is mutual respect and appreciation for one another and spaces of exclusion are therefore nonexistent due to this very fact. The public spaces in Aizawl are therefore characterised by mutual coexistence wherein women are neither marginalised for their gender nor are they hindered in any way towards progressing in their careers.

All 42 respondents from the Central government offices declared that they were comfortable working with persons of the opposite sex. The men are helpful and always ready to lend a hand. There seems to be no discriminatory attitudes towards women. "Gender is not an issue because the job is based on skills and qualifications," stressed one respondent. Female employees are treated with respect and the men are friendly in their manner. It is also perceived that men are respectable to their women colleagues and co-workers. Some respondents reiterate their lack of concern for gender differences. The absence of gender discrimination in

Aizawl is stressed upon. The men are also thought to be broadminded and their physical strength comes in handy on many occasions. One respondent said that she felt safer with men around in the office.

The public and private corporations had 72 respondents who were comfortable with the opposite sex at work with only two of them responding in the negative. Here the men are seen as being respectable to women, helpful in times of need and also very capable and mobile. There does not seem to be any signs of discrimination. The men are also said to be caring and open-minded which makes working alongside them a less stressful affair. One respondent claimed that there was no gender segregation at work. This statement points to the free mingling between the genders and thusly they are comfortable working with each other consequently. Late night duties are also less of a tension when men are around said another respondent. Therefore men being around are greatly appreciated by the women. An all women office is loathed upon by women themselves as that would only lead to intensification of gossip. The comfort level of working with men in the office is enhanced because the women feel that they are in good company and get to learn a lot from them.

An overwhelming majority of teachers and lecturers said that they were comfortable working with the opposite sex. Only three out of the 105 respondents of this sector did not share the feelings of the majority.

Medical sector respondents also had a majority of them having no issues working with men. 37 out of the 39 employees said they were comfortable to be rubbing shoulders with them at the workplace. The resistance to improper behaviour is expected of the opposite sex here. It is also felt that men are more useful than women in many cases because of their physical strength. The staff members usually get along well together. One respondent stated that she had good co-workers. Working together as a team is also stated to be of vital importance and thereby there is a need to work together as a unit in order to get better outcomes.



Plate 5. Employees of the Mizoram Public Service Commission having lunch together

The non-existence of gender discrimination at the workplace is corroborated by the fact that 31 out of the 33 respondents from the legal profession said they had no concerns about working with males. The friendly nature and restraint from doing things that would otherwise cause uneasiness for others make male co-workers pleasant to work with. Professionalism is also seen as a major determinant in creating cordial relationships. Observation of the law chambers and firms did not indicate the existence of any signs of ill-feelings towards co-workers of the opposite sex or inclinations to challenge authority.

The economic landscape of Aizawl city, it may be safely concluded, thus free from any form of discrimination based on gender or otherwise. The office becomes a social space in which workers of both gender mingle with each other freely and the feeling of fraternity is appears to be strong. These make for good work environments across all sectors of employment. Spaces of exclusion are therefore non-existent. Employees do not bear any ill-feelings towards the members of the opposite sex at the workplace and there is prevalence of equality in all aspects. The employment landscape is therefore not gendered in any respect.

## **Concluding Statement**

The workplaces in Aizawl have their own unique identity in that they are as much social spaces as they are places of work. Gendered architectural arrangements are few and far between. The interaction that goes on in these places of work is typically representative of actual social institutions where the feeling of being a family is present more or less universally across the employment space. If separate workspaces did have to be implemented it would be for personal privacy and not to exclude any other group, namely members of the opposite sex. There seems to be absent the prejudiced actions and mood against people of the opposite sex, thereby presenting itself as a 'space of inclusion' rather than one of exclusion. The public space is therefore an interface of the spatial and the aspatial aspects which does not appear to have any form of prejudice and gender bias. This, therefore, does not allow any form of arrangements within the architectural structure of the workplace that shows signs of segregation or spaces that depict exclusivity.

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