

REASSESSING THE MUSLIM MIGRANT WORKER EXPERIENCE IN JAPAN: AN INDONESIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Submitted: April 15th, 2025; Revised: May 15th, 2025; Accepted: June 12th, 2025

Abstract

This research provides an insight on the reasons behind the difficulty to introduce and promote religious accommodations for Muslim workers in Japan through Indonesian Muslims' perspectives. As the country progresses into a multicultural society, the Japanese society faces challenges in incorporating and integrating religious communities, particularly Muslims, in Japanese workplaces. Through the scope of multiculturalism and literature research, the difficulty to the provision is caused by a combination of external and internal factors. Additionally, creating a multicultural society leads to the necessity for societal reforms involving not only individuals and non-governmental organizations, but also the potential for local-scale diplomatic relations.

Keywords: Indonesia, Japan, Multiculturalism, Muslims, Mutual understanding

INTRODUCTION

The term “religious conviction in the workplace” face continuous criticism and debates as the two terms seem contradictory at the first glance (Burbank Leader, 2014). In a more secular stance, workplace managers consider religion to be a private matter that should remain private instead of being displayed in public spaces (al-Sheha, 2007). To an extent, several workplaces outright forbid any kinds of religious practices within the workplace. For instance, the barring of *hijab* for Muslim female workers and the six-times possibility of Muslim female individuals to be unemployed compared to the non-Muslim female counterparts with similar skill sets has become major issues in the United Kingdom (Dincer, 2016) and the European Union (Fiedler, 2022; Ngendakumana, 2023; Pelham, 2023). Furthermore, there is a stigma that religion tends to interfere with professionalism and is a primary cause of unnecessary human conflict (Nocos, 2023; Duderija, n.d.). Such treatment is not limited to countries with a significant atheist or agnostic population as countries with considerably religious population are equally prone to this phenomenon, such as Indonesia (Fitasari & Mas’ud, 2023; Zain et.al., 2023).

With various issues the Muslim community faces in searching for employment, the cultural aspect of this issue shall not be ignored as even among the members of the Muslim community, Muslim female workers are at risk of facing discrimination not only from non-Muslim colleagues, but

also Muslim men barring women from working under the guise of Islamic culture (Scott & Franzmann, 2007; Tariq & Syed, 2017). This form of infighting subsequently creates the oppressive image of Islam based on the Western orientalism, overlooking the basic household role negotiations (Hasan, 2020; Maftuhah, 2022). Based on the descriptions, the author proposes a research question: **“Why is it difficult for Japanese workplaces to accommodate the needs of Muslim workers?”**

These research questions represent the rising multicultural issues in a country renowned for its seemingly homogenous race and culture. Deeply religious in nature while presenting themselves as “non-religious,” the Japanese community often finds its members struggling in accepting the new waves of international migrations from mainly developing countries along with their unique values (i.e., religion). Furthermore, with the roughly 90% of Muslim population in Japan being foreign residents, the presence of Japanese Muslims living and working in the country must be nonetheless addressed (Tanada, 2018; Obuse, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW, METHODOLOGY, SIGNIFICANCE

In answering these questions, the concept of multiculturalism presents a suitable framework in picturing the shifting condition in Japan. Being on a crossroad in facing the rising presence of foreign residents and the issues caused by such phenomenon, the Japanese community is debating whether to promote a more open migration or to impose stricter regulations for

migrants entering Japan. Again, Japan is often portrayed as a homogenous society for an extended period to the point that the reality of Japan as a nonetheless heterogenous society is overlooked.

For this research, the author considers seven articles as the best representations in answering the question:

1. Amin, A. (2022). Living Among Others: Divergent Religious Practices among Indonesian Muslim Migrants in Japan. Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies (GSAPS), Waseda University Repository.
2. Budianto, F. (2024). Promoting Diversity, Introducing Islam: Muslim Indonesian Professionals In Contemporary Corporate Japan. *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 22(4), 1-13.
3. Ishikawa, Y., & Setyowati. (2018). Social and Cultural Issues of Indonesian Migrant Nurses in Japan. *The Malaysian Journal of Nursing*, 10(1), 49-56.
4. Nishikawa, S. (2012). 在日インドネシア人ムスリムの「つながり」と「へだたり」. *東北人類学論壇: Tohoku Anthropological Exchange*, 11, 26-43.
5. Pratama, D. P. (2023). The Development of Halal Food in Japan: Role of Indonesian Muslim Community in Japan viewed through Multiculturalism Perspective. *University of Tsukuba LAJS Master's Thesis Repository*.
6. Rizcha, F. R., Mulyadi, & Rustam, M. R. (2024). I Lost My Muslim Identity: A Study of Indonesian Muslim Women Workers in Japan. *International Journal of Religion*, 5(4), 276-286.
7. Rustam, M. R. (2021). Oyster Cultivation Betting on Foreign Workers: A Study of Indonesian Workers in Hiroshima. *IZUMI*, 10(1), 131-142.

This research poses a significance in providing in-depth knowledge on Muslim minority communities in Muslim-minority countries through the

perspective of Indonesian Muslims as one major representative of Muslim population in Japan. Due to the majority status of Indonesians among the Muslim community in both Japan and the world (Tanada, 2021), the author perceives the uniqueness of the community in influencing accommodation policies in the workplaces. Nonetheless, the Muslim community in Japan consists of people from various ethnic and racial backgrounds, each observing different degree of piety towards the religious teachings. In this case, the author would like to present the multidimensional perspectives towards the issues faced by Muslim workers in Japan, particularly Indonesians, and their expectations for the betterment of their lives as members of the society through first-person perspective.

2.1. Framework: Multiculturalism and Its Practices in Japan

Multiculturalism, or *tabunka-kyosei* (multicultural coexistence) in Japanese, refers to the political philosophy which promotes cultural and ethnic diversity within a single sphere of community. In a multicultural society, the presence of people with various ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds helps creating a better society through the sharing of “new ideas and culture” in forms of mutual understanding, acculturation, and assimilation (Takaya, 2008; Markus, 2011; Lee & Olsen, 2015). The idea of multiculturalism is implemented in a large scale through public policies considering the inclusion of migrant workers within the workplace, with the most recent example being Canada and Australia (Markus, 2011; Ng & Metz, 2015).

Japan is considered a latecomer in introducing the integration of foreign residents and their descendants in Japanese society. Sparked by the 1974 Park VS Hitachi dispute in which a Japanese of Korean descent was accused of lying in his job application records for the difference of his Korean and Japanese name, the awareness for the admission of multiethnic, multicultural Japan proceeds as both political and academic discourse dubbed “multicultural coexistence”. Furthermore, this incident also sparked the rising awareness for indigenous ethnics unrecognized by history, particularly the Ainu and Ryukyu ethnic groups, followed by pre-World War II Chinese and Korean, Japanese descendants from Latin America, and foreign residents from various regions in the world, demanding reforms in Japanese system (Lee & Olsen, 2015).

Again, the approach to multiculturalism is divided by the doctrine on how the numerous ethnic groups should be managed. On one hand, the “integration” approach encourages the maintaining of everyone’s identities unique to one another while promoting social and economic equality. On the other hand, the “assimilation” approach encourages the promotion of a single identity everyone must adopt, regardless of their origins, including way of life, language, habits, and others. This dilemma is apparent in Japan as both sides argue over the other’s ineffectiveness in tackling Japan’s social issues, often mentioning “public safety” as a reason to reject the notion of multiculturalism altogether (Takaya, 2008; Eto, 2016).

Research discussing Japan's characteristics on working alongside foreigners conducted by Orsini and Magnier-Watanabe (2023) indicated that Japanese workers are generally reluctant in working with people they consider as strangers, therefore building trust is paramount. However, they paradoxically perceive less benefit collaborating with foreigners with almost culturally similar ethnics compared to those considered "culturally different." Based on this research, it can be concluded that integrating foreign workers in Japanese workplaces is feasible as, based on the "integration" perspective of the multiculturalism theory, the presence of diverse backgrounds can result in ideas' diversity necessary for innovation. However, it is still notable that in times of dire needs and scarcity, Japanese managements prioritize "those of the country."

Based on the data provided by Japanese Statistic Bureau (e-Stat, 2024), late December 2023 displayed 3,410,992 foreign residents recorded in Japan with around 85 percent of the residents originating from Asia, later followed by South America (8%), Europe (3%), North America (2%), Africa (1%) and Oceania (less than 1%). In further details, 821,838 of the foreign residents are Chinese, followed by 565,026 Vietnamese, 410,156 South Koreans, 322,046 Filipino, 211,840 Brazilians, 176,336 Nepali, 149,101 Indonesians, 86,546 Burmese (Myanmar), 64,663 Taiwanese, 63,408 and Americans (United States of America/USA) above others. These numbers alone contributed to roughly 80% of the total registered foreign residents in Japan. Furthermore, the following cities after Tokyo with the highest numbers of foreign residents are, rather than neighboring

prefectures, Aichi and Osaka prefectures, later followed by Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba prefectures as Tokyo's neighboring prefectures. However, being the capital city of Japan, the author would assume that a certain percentage of foreigners living in these prefectures commute to Tokyo for work and leisure on nearly daily basis (Sekai Property, 2020).

2.2 Muslims in Japan: Who Are They?

The history of modern Muslim population in Japan can be attributed to the diplomatic affairs between the Empire of Japan and the Ottoman Empire and the presence of merchants from the Ottoman Empire conducting trade affairs in Kobe in the late 19th century, the legacy of this relation traceable to Kobe Mosque and Tokyo Cami (functioning as both mosque and Turkish cultural center). Seven decades into the future, Japan's increasing economy provided an opportunity for foreign residents searching for economic prosperity, including those originating from Muslim-majority countries. Among the Muslim-majority countries, Indonesian are among the top 10 largest foreign residents in Japan in 2023, followed by Bangladeshi and Pakistani ranked 15th and 16th respectively (e-Stat, 2024). The increasing presence of Muslims in the country is further supplemented by the increasing number of mosques (in Arabic, *masjid*), numbering at 113 in 2021 (Otaki & Takai, 2023).

As of recently, there are roughly 230,000 people identifying themselves as Muslims in Japan, with 90 percent of them being "foreign residents" or

“of foreign origin” and the rest being Japanese Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2021; Tanada, 2021). This inaccuracy is mainly due to the lack of routine official statistics over religious affiliation in Japan, leaving researchers or independent statistics agencies to be self-reliant. However, one shall not assume that Japanese mannerism towards religion is considerably different: centuries of political events create the “pick and mix” attitude of different religious teachings (particularly Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity) observed in Japanese societyⁱ, therefore Japanese people have a tendency to identify themselves as practitioners of more than one religion as it belongs to “cultural practices” while admitting that they do not believe in any religion (Sumimoto, 2000; Khamis, 2021; Harn, 2023).

With the disassociation of religion and its practices and most Muslims in Japan being of foreign residents and those of foreign origins, any distinct routines, behaviors, and habits practiced by Muslims will be considered “strange.” However, Muslims in Japan are facing two other problems: biased mass media and negative experience in regards towards religion in Japan. Following the 9/11 incident in the US back in 2001 and the continuous conflicts in the Middle East (in addition to Afghanistan in Central Asia), both Japanese and Western media closely portray Islam and its followers as individuals and groups who dedicate their lives (*jihad*) through violence and destruction of the free world, particularly through terrorism. In turn, these continuous exposure of negative perceptions towards Islam create the “violent” images of Islam common until today.

Additionally, the portrayal of Islam as an “oppressive, misogynistic, and exclusive” religion provides little assistance to enlighten the misconceptions and provide foundations for positive discussions (Yamashita, 2022).

While terror acts committed by extremist Muslims are nonexistent domestically, it is safe to state that Japan is quite traumatized with the enforcement of state religion (namely, state Shintoism), and the rise of cultist movements in the late 20th century (namely, the Sarin gas attack committed by *Aum Shinrikyo*). Responding to these experiences, Japanese government and society consider two approaches to religions and their practices: a form of religious neutrality which neither favors nor suppress religious beliefs and activities, and religious syncretism with Shinto, Buddhist, and Christian religious practices being preserved as cultural practices. Therefore, Muslim practices that requires extensive effort, faith, and conviction, such as five times daily prayers, sunrise-sundown fasting, dietary restrictions, and religious clothing among many aspects, tend to be considered “burdensome, strange, and radical” by the syncretic Japanese. Furthermore, several international incidents with Japanese as victims further deteriorates Japan’s trust towards the Muslim community (Yamagata, 2019; Tanaka, 2023; Ushiyama, 2023).

As the mosques serve as community centers for the needs of Muslim residents in their vicinity and relief stations to the community in times of distress and disasters (Kotani et.al., 2022; Kotani et.al., 2023), the presence of Halal-certified necessities (food, drinks, etc.) provided domestically and

through imports is irreplaceable as a part of the adherence to the faith. The term *halal* (meaning, allowed or permitted) refers to any activities and provisions that are allowed for Muslims to indulge into, which includes food and drink. As of recently, there are thirty independent Halal certification bodies in Japan, some collaborating with Halal certification bodies in Muslim majority countries (Hasnan & Kohda, 2023). Furthermore, entrepreneurship allows the steady growing of Halal food shops across Japan and potential export beyond Japanese borders. However, it is not without issues as lack of interest, widespread misconception, complicated and expensive processes, lack of selling value, and the absence of governing body among many problems often hinder the proliferation of stable flow of Halal products (Fujiwara & Mohamed Ismail, 2017; Fujiwara, 2022; Hasnan & Kohda, 2023).

2.3 Muslim Workers in Japan: Previous Research

When describing Muslim workers in Japan, the description of foreign residents from Muslim countries arriving in Japan as “blue-collar”ⁱⁱⁱ workers may pop up in mind, and that is partly correct as Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia contribute to around 50 percent of Muslim population and five percent of foreign population in Japan (Kojima H. , 2006; Tanada, 2021). Furthermore, as Japan is experiencing an increasing demand for foreign workers amidst the global recession, increasing the importance of the establishment of relations with these countries is crucial (Tanno, 2010; Tam, 2018). In the process, however, the presence of “white-

collar’ⁱⁱⁱ workers and Japanese Muslims regardless of their occupations shall remain important.

Research conducted by Onishi & Murphy-Shigematsu (2003) explored the identity narratives of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Iranian Muslims with various length of residence in Japan and their experience in adapting to the Japanese society: conforming to Japanese lifestyle by “letting go” of some attributes of the original identity (in the article, noted as “I am almost like Japanese”), unable to connect to Japanese society and left being isolated (noted as “They do not see who I am”), and seeking refuge and union with fellow Muslims (noted as “I have become a better Muslim”). Based on this research, one can conclude that the success and failure of integration with the Japanese society on the first and second narrative depends on external factors, particularly the acceptance of the host community. The third narrative, however, display resilience in encountering rejection from the host community by maintaining close contact with fellow Muslims. On another research, Yulita and Ong (2019) explored the experiences of Japanese female Muslims in Kobe, Kyoto, and Tokyo and their daily experiences, namely “Halal food”, “worship”, “work”, and “social relations”. While Japan is progressively more open to Muslims, finding Halal food is still difficult outside Muslim-dense areas and fasting in summer. In terms of professional lives, several Japanese clients are reluctant to interact with Muslims due to the influence of mass media and lack of interaction with Muslims. Responding to this issue, the management tend to resort to extreme measures, such as banning of *hijab* and reject Muslim

employees altogether. However, good relations with non-Muslim relatives, neighbors, and law enforcement are encouraged to ease the challenges.

On the perspective of Indonesian Muslims, they also experience the increasing acceptance of Japanese management and coworkers of Muslim workers in the workplace. However, it is entirely respective of the types of workplaces and the openness or conservativeness of the management. In an article by Budianto (2024), Indonesian Muslim “white-collar” workers in Metropolitan Tokyo area experience positive relations with management and coworkers as they receive full support towards their religious needs. Furthermore, the opportunity is seized by the informants for soft and peaceful proselytization of Islamic messages (*da’wah*) and promotion of multiculturalism within the environment. However, “blue-collar” workers still face the general issue of the permission to pray, fast, and wear religious clothing while working. For instance, Indonesian nurses tasked as caretakers under the EPA system (Ishikawa & Setyowati, 2018) admitted the presence of challenges in practicing religion in the workplace as one of main issues, followed by deskilling (brain-waste) issue, difficulties coping with Japanese work culture, differences in nursing practices, and family concern (several of these nurses are already married prior to working in Japan). Additional research by Rizcha et.al. (2024) and Rustam (2021) present a glimpse of the challenging life as Muslim nurses, factory workers, and oyster farmers in Japan as the ability to practice religion is at the mercy of their employers. With problems of *hijab* becoming the cause of patients’ discomfort, prohibition of fasting due to safety and health risks, and the

absence of time and place to pray due to lack of understanding of the management, these three issues regularly appear in research on Muslim workers and multiculturalism in Japan.

2.4. Basic Needs: The Muslim Workers' Perspectives

There are four basic needs of Muslim workers that researchers, management, and coworkers need to consider when discussing Muslims' religious needs, namely mandatory prayers, fasting, religious lifestyles, and holidays. Firstly, the mandatory prayers, correlating with the responsibility "five-times prayers" are the prayers Muslims must establish according to the decided time, being before sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening, with two or three times often occurring within general working hours (Tayyiah, 2018; MUNA, 2020; Rustam, 2021; Oktaviani & Rhamadhan, 2024). It is noteworthy that the right for five-times prayers includes not only time, but also space, meaning that pure and clean spaces must be prepared to ensure the fulfillment of this right (Retnosary, Md Salleh, & Masruroh, 2021). While the number of mosques in Japan is increasing (Tanada, 2021; Pratama, 2022; Srifauzi & Surwandono, 2023), there is no guarantee that workplaces may provide the deemed safe and convenient prayer spaces since Japanese labor law does not oblige employers to accommodate their workers' religious needs (Atsumi & Sakai, 2022). However, it is safe to state that the opportunity for negotiations for religious needs is open (Budianto, 2024).

Secondly, fasting involves the abstinence of food, drink, and other activities from sunrise to sunset. Conducted primarily during the month of *Ramadhan* (the ninth month of the Muslim *Hijr* calendar), Muslims with certain criteria^{iv} are required to fast from sunrise to sunset and commit to religious duties (i.e., charity, self-restraint, prostration) for the whole month. As fasting is committed during the day, it easily conflicts with the work schedule and performance; to some degree, the management fear the decrease of performance leading to workplace hazards (Rustam, 2021; Trabelsi, et al., 2022; Khan, 2023).

Thirdly, religious lifestyle involves the choice to wear *hijab*, a head covering worn by Muslim women, and the choice to consume Halal food and drinks. Contrary to widespread belief, the order of *hijab* or “covering oneself” does not govern only women, but also men to maintain the dignity of both genders. As Muslim women are decreed to cover their whole body except for those commonly visible, being face and palm, Muslim men are decreed to cover the areas between the belly button and knees. Furthermore, *hijab* or “covering” involves three main aspects: physical *hijab* (modest clothing, head covering), social *hijab* (maintaining certain borders during interactions), and eye *hijab* (prevent the viewing of physical or digital presentation of sexualized images of each gender). In terms of Halal food consumption, the ruling of *Halal* is to be applied not as a constraint, but rather a border. In other words, Muslims are allowed to indulge in any kinds of activities unless explicitly forbidden by God and the teachings of the prophet. While the consumption of food and drink is rather manageable,

the barring of *hijab* or the discouragement from promotion in the workplace is problematic (Pertiwi & Asnawi, 2022; Pratama, 2022).

Lastly, the two Islamic holidays, the *Eid al Fitr* (Day of Purity) and *Eid al Adha* (Day of Sacrifice) and after-sunrise congregational prayers established only on those two days, which on some occasions occur during weekdays. As the celebrations provides incentives for the community to gather, social and mental health aspect of *Eid* lies on the social ties and mutual support committed by fellow Muslims. Furthermore, Muslim families living separated from the families also practice homecoming during the *Eid*, incorporating religious and cultural elements. For the two *Eid*, while it is not mandatory to attend the prayers, social and mental emphasis on the two *Eid* must be considered (Wisnubroto, 2023; Nizar, 2023; Mimsy, 2024) as the tradition of homecoming has not dissipated despite the presence of digital forms of communication (Lubis, Fachrizal, & Lubis, 2017; Idris, Rowley, & Yaqub, 2022; Wisnubroto, 2023; Nizar, 2023)

3. Multiculturalism in Japanese Workplaces: The Situations

During one part-time session as an interpreter for a workers' agency managing Indonesian technical trainees, the author recalled having to inform two of the Indonesian Muslim trainees arriving in Japan that based on the company's safety regulations, they are neither allowed to pray or fast during working hours. In another opportunity, the author's acquaintance complained about the impossibility of Friday prayers due to the strict

working hours and its conflict with the distance to the nearest mosque, often resorting to the regular noon prayers. Under the stance of professionalism, managers and company owners pose complete separation between religious practices and professional ethics (Rustam, 2021; Widarahesty, 2024).

The restriction from religious practices during work is merely one dimension of Muslim workers' issues in Japan. As of today, Muslim workers in Japan face a multitude of issues associated with external and internal factors. In this section, external factors causing the difficulty of religious accommodation include constraints of professional rules, differences of working cultures, and physical and social distances. On the other hand, varying religiosity, deskilling and family issues, and identity crisis are included as internal factors as the instances related to this issue point towards internal struggles of Muslim individuals living in Muslim-minority countries, such as Japan.

3.1. External Factors

Japan's constitution on Article 14 Paragraph 1 provides protection against discrimination in political, economic, and social relations based on race, creed/religion, sex/gender, social status, or family origin. In its practices, however, the principle of Japan's religious freedom lies heavily on the concept of neutrality, in which Japanese constitution provides neither support nor suppression towards any religious practices if such

practices do not violate the rights of other citizens. Furthermore, Japanese employers are discouraged to inquire details related to religious practices of their applicants and employees. As any kind of religious accommodation is considered optional, it means that employers are not obliged to provide any religious needs of their employees (Atsumi & Sakai, 2022). Under this ruling, Japanese companies orienting into either global expansion or employing foreign workers with religious needs are the only ones incentivized enough to provide religious accommodations for their workers.

Consequently, this ambiguity reveals one major issue: there has been no officially issued detailed guideline on treatment towards the religious community in professional space. Within the increasingly diverse Japanese workplace in which foreign workers with different religious creeds begin collaborating with Japanese workers, employers often resort to NGOs for consultation on how to properly employ religious individuals. However, the recent period indicates improvements in the facilitation of religious needs, particularly in terms of accommodations for Muslims' religious practices. Firstly, the attempt for provision of prayer spaces has begun gaining attention among large companies, with Muslim workers able to utilize the facilities during prayer times. Secondly, Muslims' fasting culture has become more recognizable with non-Muslim coworkers often supporting their Muslim coworkers during their fast (Rizcha et.al., 2024; Budianto, 2024), although support from the management may vary between sectors (Rustam, 2021; Rizcha et.al., 2024). Thirdly, religious attire (i.e., *hijab*) receive a wide

degree of responses from the Japanese society, even among managements. Following the 9/11 Incident and Global War on Terror, *hijab* and other attributes associated with Muslims receive backlash from the Western world and its allies with “terrorist” or “oppression” becoming the main theme. As empowerment movements start gaining attention among Muslim women (al-Wazni, 2015; Kuriata, 2016; Garcia-Yeste et.al., 2021) among many members of the Muslim community, there has been a shift of perspective on *hijab* with the attire slowly gaining positive responses, although the level of acceptance may vary (Rizcha, Mulyadi, & Rustam, 2024).

Beyond the positive changes of Japanese workplaces in adopting more multicultural workplaces, Muslims in Japan still face various issues beyond their current control. In this section, issues such as the constraints of professional rules, stark differences in working cultures, and physical distances from religious congregations (primarily mosques), will be considered as external factors as these factors are often beyond their control as employees of certain companies with their unique rules and situations.

3.1.1. Constraints of Professional Rules: Between Professionalism and Faith

As stated in the introduction, modern workplaces often secularize professionalism and personal faith. Introduced as the concept of religious neutrality or religious neutrality requirements (RNR), any faith is neither

repressed nor supported by the ruling institutions under this stance, being state and company managements in this instance. However, this stance's interpretation is loose with many countries applying their own set of standards, considering the countries' unique cultures. In the case of Japan, the approach towards religious neutrality provides every citizen with rights to practice their faiths in closely personal spaces. This practice is associated with Japan's deeply personal nature of religious practices (Harn, 2023), often refraining from openly displaying religious identities.

In the case of modern Japan's relations with Islam and the Muslim community in the country, there are differing reports describing the situations of Muslim workers in Japan. However, there is an indication that white-collar workers tend to experience more opportunities to negotiate their needs as Muslims compared to blue-collar workers. Examining the paper by Widarahesty (2024), Indonesian Muslim technical intern trainees (TITP) and specified skilled workers (SSW) which belong to the "blue-collar" category experience harsher treatment from their superiors, belittling them for practicing Islam. It is often to an extent that workers practice basic religious needs (i.e., praying and fasting) privately during working hours, ensuring that the management has no knowledge of their actions. Similar is also mentioned in other previous articles by Rizcha et.al. (2024) and Rustam (2021), proving the strict regulations in the work field. In contrast, an article by Budianto (2024) stated that Indonesian Muslim white-collar workers are generally feeling well-facilitated in terms of their religious needs, with the provision of prayer spaces and time (in particular

midday Friday prayer compulsory for Muslim men) and the permission to fast during working hours.

However, there are significances of mindset differences between the two sectors: white-collar workers experience less fear when facing potential negotiations with the management and coworkers compared to the blue-collar workers. Based on the demographic provided, Indonesian Muslims with higher educational background and extensive knowledge and exposure to Japanese language and culture possess more confidence in negotiating their identity and needs to the management and knowledge to navigate through the potentially disfavoring corporate regulations (Rustam, 2021; Rizcha et.al., 2024; Budianto, 2024; Widarahesty, 2024). Furthermore, despite the increasing demand for foreign workers, particularly those from Muslim-majority countries (i.e., Indonesia) under the SSW category (established in 2019) and the technical intern trainee category (1993-2027), there is barely any incentives for the companies and their managements to further provide religious needs for their workers. One main issue among Japanese companies is that foreign workers are not expected to stay in Japan for an extended period. Furthermore, due to their “temporary” status, companies barely perceive any incentives in positioning foreign workers in managerial status, hampering “two-way learning process” by both workers and managements (Widarahesty, 2024; Tang, 2024).

3.1.2. Working Cultures: Navigating Changes

Japan's workplace is famous for being stressful and demanding. Often associated with Japan's attempt for post-war economic rise from the 1960s to 1980s, Japan's soaring into one of Asia's economic powerhouses is followed by the increasing health-related issues among the workers. Furthermore, Japan's image of homogenous society also provides a breeding ground for minority-based harassment issues. Despite the presence of the constitution and labor law declaring prohibition for employers to discriminate against workers based on race, creed, social status, or family origins, the law does not prevent employers from denying an applicant based on these statuses. Additionally, gender-related wage disparity and treatment are equally in need for attention in the country (Sakuraba, 2008; Nemeth & Lai, 2023; Chang, 2024).

However, as the generation changes, experts have placed their attention to increase the welfare of Japanese future workforce. Various issues such as work-related stress and mental issues, gender equality, hierarchy and harassment, and societal pressures have driven companies to issue policies that alleviate these issues to a certain degree and to increase the steadily declining work productivity. However, the implementations are not necessarily perfect since some companies struggle with deadlines and the ever-lingering harassment among many, leading to further issues related to anxiety and suicide rates among workers. Furthermore, strict hierarchical order and seniority in the companies mean that junior employees are often

indirectly coerced by the seniors and superiors in many aspects, including the de-facto mandatory drinking parties (*nomikai*) as the most common example (Japan Dev, 2023; Nemeth & Lai, 2023; Chang, 2024).

In the case of Indonesian Muslim workers in the Japanese workplace, a wide range of sacrifices are common for them, ranging from the lack of provision of dedicated prayer spaces to the outright rejection from the company due to religious attire as an extreme extent. Furthermore, prohibition from compulsory fasting and prayers are common in the name of work safety. Although common among blue-collar workers, being white-collar workers does not eradicate the potential for this kind of maltreatment to occur. In addition to these issues, as company socialization through *nomikai* is still common, Muslims struggle in this situation as alcoholic drinks are forbidden for Muslims. Even if they decide to join without drinking any alcoholic drinks, some people consider it unfair since the price they must pay is equal^v (Budianto, 2024; Widarahesty, 2024).

Although there is a current wave of attempts to increase awareness on this issue through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academia, their influence is arguably sub-effective (Widarahesty, 2024). Structurally, as many Indonesian workers in Japan are under the TTTP and SSW programs (e-Stat, 2024) which are under the supervision of job-seeking agencies as liaisons, there is an expectation that these agencies will defend their needs, including religious ones. However, as companies still practice traditional

working cultures, the agencies are more considered ignorant by the Muslim workers when facing these issues.

3.1.3. Physical and Social Distances: Sparse Connectivity to Fellow Muslims

In 2024, it is estimated that Japan is the home of at least 133 mosques. This number is a massive increase from only 3 in the late 1980s, 50 in 2008, and 100 in 2017 (Otaki & Takai, 2023; Kubo, 2024). However, there is an easily overlooked drawback: the increasing number of mosques is often not accompanied with ease of access related to both distance and time. In other words, while the number of mosques continue to increase, the distance from the workplaces is often too far or the provided noon break time is not enough for the workers. Nishikawa (2012) captured the dilemma faced by Indonesian Muslim trainees in Miyagi Prefecture's fisheries industry and their relations with fellow Indonesian Muslims and Sendai Mosque. Due to their distance with the mosque and their activities mostly focusing on open ocean, combined with strict working hours imposed by the employers, they barely receive any time for religious practices. Furthermore, this physical barrier is worsened by the prolonging mutual prejudice with Indonesian Muslims in Sendai; as the trainees perceive the Indonesian Muslims students, which is a majority in Sendai, as "more devout, highly educated, and arrogant elites", the students view the counterpart as "scary, unruly Muslims".

An additional perspective, one of the author's acquaintance informed that the company does not provide him with enough time to attend the Friday prayer, although both the nearest mosques and his office are in the Shinjuku area. Through another observation, the distance between the workplace of the two Indonesian Muslim trainees the author mentioned is far from the nearest Ueda Mosque, Nagano; even though they are being provided with bicycles, commuting between the two places within one hour is nigh-impossible. In both cases, despite the significance of bicycles in Japan (JP-MIRAI, n.d.) for both Japanese and foreigners, the modes of transportation, provided time, and physical distance are nonetheless inadequate.

3.2. Internal Factors

Accompanying external challenges experienced by Muslim workers in Japan, internal challenges are posing equal threat to their welfare. In this section, the author will discuss the spectrum of religiosity among Muslim workers in Japan, the dilemma between family and professionalism among the workers, and the potential of identity crisis as the base of internal issues. The concern among the internal Muslim community is that, being a multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural society, while the core belief remains similar, each country's community receive a variety of detailed teachings involving daily practices, creating the illusion of disparity. Even among the Indonesian Muslim community, family, ethnic groups,

education, and individual experiences influences the importance of religion for everyone.

3.2.1. Religiosity: The Spectrum among Muslims and Professions

The concept of religiosity can be interpreted as direct and indirect reflections of the fundamentals of faith over certain beliefs portrayed in individual and social lives. Paradoxically, there has been no consensus on the definition of “religion” (Kimter, 2013), although the most common interpretation to religiosity is “to accept God as the source of existence and as a beneficent power” (Vergote, 1999) closely associated with monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs. However, as the process of believing is associated with individual-spiritual element, any actions motivated by religion are social which are closely influenced by religious socialization and personal community, including family, peers, and religious institutions (Cornwall, 1987), although other factors such as cultural context, life events, psychological factors, and even genetics are claimed to play equally important roles (Button et.al, 2011; Baranski et.al, 2024).

In Nishikawa (2012), educational and family background, proximity to adequate spiritual support, and personal experiences form the rifts of misunderstanding between the two communities. However, there is an indication that the members of the community are relatively compromising with each other’s differences (Pratama, 2023) while also attempting to improve the situation for all Muslims living in Japan (Widarahesty, 2024).

Again, there are also movements advocating for stricter and more orthodox Islamic practices among Indonesian Muslims in Japan following the rise of fundamentalist movements in the early 21st century (Amin, 2022), jeopardizing the movement for compromises.

3.2.2. Professionalism VS Brain-Drain and Family Issues: A Split Between Responsibilities

The reality of Muslim workers in Japan is that not all of them are single when arriving in Japan; some are already married when they decided to leave for better opportunities in the new country. In an article by Ishikawa and Setyowati (2018) on the condition of Indonesian nurses and care workers in Japan, in addition to the difficulty in coping with Japanese work culture and nursing practices and the conflict in regards to religious practices, deskilling (brain-drain) and family issues are also crucial. On the issue of deskilling, nurses, and care workers with significant experiences in Indonesia can barely utilize their skills in Japan, due to differences in nursing practices. Furthermore, since care worker position is nonexistent in Indonesia, the prospect of the utilization of skills earned as care workers in Japan is nigh-useless at home. On the issue of family relations, many unmarried participants in their research expressed difficulties in relationship prospects due to language skills and cultural differences. Furthermore, for those who are married prior to arriving in Japan, it is often a matter of attention for the management that Indonesian nurses and care workers prioritize family over work.

To an extreme extent, the disregard by the management of this issue leads to violation of human rights to establish a family. One example of this issue is the case reported by *RUMI Jepang*, a non-governmental organization focused on Indonesian migrant workers' protection of rights, mentioning the case of one Indonesian caregiver coerced for deportation or abortion due to being pregnant (RUMI Jepang, 2022) which not only violates one of 12 rights of sexual and reproductive rights according to International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (1997) on the right to liberty and security of the person, but also Islamic law which forbids abortion without justifiable reasons (major birth defect, its birth endangering the mother, infant as a result of rape) (Jayanti, 2023).

Amin (2022) provided supplementary insights that while some Indonesian Muslim professionals generally enjoy living and working in Japan, some express their worries for their families at home and their disappointment with Japanese educational system in terms of religious education for their children. After all, Japanese formal education does not include religious education, thus families often find difficulties providing religious education to their children amidst their hectic schedules. Additionally, the level of language skills among Indonesian Muslims varies and it determines the capacity of adaptation to Japanese life and work cultures to a major degree. However, regardless of their language skills, being accepted as an integral part of Japanese community is a completely different aspect (Onishi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003).

3.2.3. Identity Crisis: Identity Negotiation and Muslim Workers in Japan

Being a part of Japanese workforce means that Muslim workers must provide “sacrifices” to blend into the surroundings. In some cases, these sacrifices are deemed too great to bear, causing loss of self-identity. Muslims in Japan generally observe three identity narratives to maintain their lives in Japan: (1) accepting the dominant narrative of Japanese society, (2) rejecting the dominant narrative, and (3) incorporating and redefining religious identity (Onishi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2003; Budianto, 2024). The first narrative includes those who, at their best, avoid confrontations and conflicts with the Japanese by strongly associating with the majority, often at the cost of their religious identity. The second narrative includes those remaining isolated from the majority, maintaining the gap between migrants and locals. The third narrative are essentially “refugees,” not in the context of migrating from home countries to seek refuge in Japan but rather differentiating themselves from the Japanese by asserting their Muslim identity while seeking relations with fellow Muslims.

It is worth noting that followers of any religions are not necessarily the perfect image of the religious teachings, and the Muslims are not entirely different. As stated in sub-chapter 4.2.1., as religiosity works in a spectrum, the degree of religiosity varies in personal level. For instance, the articles by Amin (2022) and Pratama (2021) provided an insight on the issue of inclusivism VS exclusivism among Indonesian Muslims amidst the rising

conservatism among the community. Furthermore, the rising ideology of “Global Halal” increases the awareness towards the issue, particularly among policymakers, academia, and the Muslim community. For the policymakers and academia, studies on “Global Halal” ideology provides an insight on tourism and other pragmatic purposes. For the internal Muslim community, it delivers an insight on how Muslims across the world are, while different in religiosity and certain religious practices, attempt to revolutionize the surroundings to better suit their needs as Muslims (Pratama, 2022; 2023).

Arguably, while economically pragmatic stance of Japan’s policymakers and enterprises provide Muslim populations with further means to adhere to their religious teachings (i.e., Halal food and drinks), the attempts to increase awareness of the Japanese society towards Muslims’ other needs lay on the hands of Muslim individuals and non-governmental organizations which result in inconsistent understandings among the target population. For instance, while several Muslim individuals are loose on their daily consumption, the rest are strict. Another instance of this issue is the fact that not all Muslim women wear *hijab*, causing confusion among those interacting with the Muslim community^{vi}. Lastly, there is a rising concern among Muslims that some Muslims are losing grasp of the importance of prayers and fasts due to various reasons (Al-Salami, 2019; Amin, 2022), potentially shattering the image of Islamic unity in the eyes of the non-Muslim community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Indeed, the process of acculturation and assimilation with local cultures and habits and regional availability influences the lives of Muslims, both as individuals and a community. However, the fact that Islam and its teachings traverses beyond racial, ethnic, and national borders triumphs over the differences of individual practices, being that all Muslims inherently believes in the presence and authority of *Allah* and the messages of Prophet Muhammad. Despite this message of unity, the presence of these differences is often negatively portrayed by the non-Muslim community on the external side and fellow Muslims internally. Finally, as managements often lack knowledge on how to properly treat Muslim employees due to what they perceive as an inconsistency, the short-term employment among Muslim employees, which are dominated by foreign residents, diminishes managements' incentives for reformatory changes.

In times of constant economic decline, closely attributed to the changes in global economy, declining birthrate and aging and shrinking population (Wolf, 2024; Himino, 2025), Japan has consequently started to include foreigners within the workforce, particularly in the blue-collar industries. However, as the 21st century observes the rising involvement of foreign residents in more administrative duties and other white-collar positions (Budianto, 2024; NHK, 2025), it is safe to state the spreading of

awareness on religious accommodation has yet to reach optimal level. Furthermore, the intake by Harn (2023) on Japanese religiosity, regardless the religion, provides the information that there is a gap among Japanese and foreigners in displaying religious conviction. Arguably, the Muslims are the most impacted by this situation since Muslims' religious practices are generally visible to the public.

Responding to the various issues in relation to the accommodation of religious needs in the workplaces, indeed increasing awareness must receive utmost priority. However, efforts are solely burdened to the individuals; while succeeding in few cases, it is generally ineffective. Furthermore, there has been a call for non-governmental organizations to support the promotion of inclusion within the workplaces, in particular religious organizations (Widarahesty, 2024), including mosques. One recent attempt among Indonesian Muslims' organizations is the provision of notification and request letter for Japanese companies to allow Muslim employees to celebrate the *Eid al-Adha* in 2024 (KMII Jepang, 2024), but the effectiveness of this letter is a matter of later research.

Secondly, the term "tolerance" is often challenged in describing the intra-Muslim relations. Currently, the Muslim community is perceiving a sense of division among its members, questioning whether the other groups are religious enough to be considered as Muslims. As mentioned, this battle of inclusivity VS exclusivity has progressed for a long time and the 21st century displayed a concerning matter among Muslims (Amin, 2022). While

the internal debate inside the Muslim community is common, they rarely escalate into full-blown conflicts (Gleditsch & Rudolfson, 2016). However, the outside parties (non-Muslims) often view the debates as a symbol of inconsistency and instability among Muslims, potentially decreasing the level of the inter-community trust. Responding to this issue, a common ground shall be established among Muslims in facing any criticism from the non-Muslim community, placing the importance of the “different, but one” value. In other words, setting aside the differences, all Muslims should be able to advocate for the main values of Islam and the similarities of the core belief. The author believes that Indonesians are familiar with “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*” or “Unity in Diversity,” and the extension to this national slogan reaches religious tolerance and understanding not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also among fellow Muslims as a union (*ummah*).

Lastly, creating an inclusive environment requires awareness from all parts of society. In the case of Japan, it is also a stark reminder that accommodation for tourism is not necessarily similar with that for residence, obviously due to the length and reason of stay. Indeed, while the government has so far established extensive efforts to facilitate Muslim tourists (Pratama, 2022), creating a better environment for Muslim residents is completely different. It is worth noting that Japan’s reluctance to accept Muslims as a part of the modern Japanese society is mainly due to fear and the lack of knowledge (Sulaiman, 2021; Wada, 2021; Kusumawati, 2021) rather than hatred (Yamashita, 2022; Omuro, 2022; The

Yomiuri Shimbun, 2024). The author believes that the effort in creating this mutual understanding cannot be fully delegated to individuals, Muslim organizations, and other non-governmental organizations alone, but diplomatic efforts shall be introduced with countries with departments focused on religious affairs assisting in the effort. So far, Tokyo Cami not only serves as a mosque, but also Islamic and Turkish cultural center (Widarahesty, 2024); the author observes this instance as the success of Japan-Türkiye diplomatic relations. Further exploring the possibilities, the author believes that various diplomatic bridges (i.e., paradiplomacy through sister city initiations) can be a proficient method in facilitating local-scale efforts which Japan needs.

CONCLUSION

The situation of Muslim workers in Japan varies dependent on the working sectors. However, there is a red line to describe this situation: challenges in accommodation of religious needs are not entirely external from the perspective of the Muslim community, but also internally. As individuals and non-governmental organizations in Japan attempt to facilitate mutual understandings between the majority non-Muslim Japanese and the predominantly foreign Muslim community, the fact that the Muslim community is not perfect often shatters the trust and incentives of stakeholders and enterprises in facilitating the needs of Muslim workers. However, rather than focus on the differences, this paper inclines on the increasing of awareness of fellow Muslims to focus on similarities, rather

than differences, and guide their surroundings on how to further support and accommodate an inclusive society. Beyond this scope, the proposal for the potential of local-scale diplomatic cooperation or paradiplomacy is another gateway to encourage changes in the local level.

Again, this paper is not without its limitations, being that this paper is essentially a literature review with minimum field observations. Since discourses on multiculturalism is constantly progressing in Japan, fieldwork at various local municipalities is encouraged. Secondly, the importance of non-governmental organizations as a bridge between Muslims and the non-Muslims need to be further explored. The author has mentioned the contribution of one organization, *KMII Jepang*, in the discussion, but the presence of other religious organizations is equally crucial, but the extent of their contribution needs further research. Thirdly, while solely focusing on the Muslims, other religious minorities are less mentioned in this paper although the main framework is multiculturalism theory. Therefore, further research on other religious communities with similar situations with the Muslims is encouraged.

DECLARATION

The author declares that the creation of this paper serves no monetary or political benefits, and there are no observable conflicts of interest.

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ⁱ “Japanese people, born as a Shinto, marry as a Christian, and die as a Buddhist”. While often taken as a light-hearted joke, this statement portrays Japanese religious syncretism.

ⁱⁱ “Blue-collar” workers include those working in the field involving rigorous physical works. Often mentioned as 3K (kitanai, kitsui, kiken, translated into dirty, demanding, dangerous), work sectors within the “blue-collar” sphere in experiencing a decrease of domestic workers.

ⁱⁱⁱ In contrary, “white-collar” works generally involve managerial desk duties with more emphasis on soft skills achieved through higher education and training.

^{iv} These criteria include physically and mentally mature, not sick nor intoxicated, conscious, not too old, and not within the “impure” state (i.e., during menstrual period for women).

^v Most *nomikai* in Japan only provides all-you-can-drink services.

^{vi} On author’s observation, there are also instances in which some Muslim women decided not to wear *hijab* not due to disobedience, but rather coercion by the social and professional circles. Furthermore, the absence of *hijab* among some Muslim women is not necessarily a complete abandonment of the pillars of Islam.