

A Qualitative Perception of Muslim Women from the Understanding of non-Muslims Regarding Muslim Women's Engagement in Employment: A Study Based in the Ampara District, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Muslim women's perceptions of non-Muslim understanding regarding their employment. The study, qualitative in nature, involved fourteen professional women from diverse academic and non-academic backgrounds, working in the public sector. These participants represented various locations in the Ampara district, including Sainthamaruthu, Maruthamunai, Ninthavur, Akkaraipattu, Sammanthurai, and Oluvil. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized for data collection. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, and the data was analyzed using Nvivo 10 software. Interviews were carried out in the participants' native language, Tamil, and were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. The study found that non-Muslims hold diverse opinions about Islamic women's work. Muslim women strive to adhere to Islamic norms in various contexts, considering their femininity. The study suggests that Islam does not restrict their rights; rather, their perception is influenced by various sociocultural factors. By highlighting Muslim practices, non-Muslims gain a better understanding of Muslims, and Muslim women can clarify the teachings of Islam regarding their employment.

Keywords: Muslim women, non-Muslim, Perception, women's employment, Ampara district

INTRODUCTION

The discussion on Islamic women's rights, particularly regarding their employment, has become a prominent subject among both Muslims and non-Muslims in recent times, as noted by Cholil (2017). Islamic teachings, historically pioneering in introducing concepts of fairness and gender equality, often face misunderstandings due to sociocultural practices within Muslim societies and

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a lack of religious education among non-Muslims, as Galloway (2014) suggests. Islamic law, according to Badawi (1980), ensures equal rights for women, paralleling those of men.

Sheha (H: 1418) and Mohamed (2015) highlight that Islam permits women to work within certain bounds that safeguard their dignity. Throughout history, Muslim women have significantly contributed to various sectors, balancing their professional roles with their duties as spouses and mothers, a point echoed by Shehu and Zejno (2015). Raheema and Omar (2017) observe that modern Muslim women enjoy greater autonomy, including the freedom to work and participate in social activities. They occupy diverse professional roles, ranging from teaching to engineering and law enforcement. Azeem et al. (2013) argue that both men and women should fulfill their God-given responsibilities. Islam allows women to work in commerce and professional sectors under specific circumstances, adhering to set guidelines. Islam's stance on gender rights involves acknowledging the distinct nature of women and their selection of employment (Potoari, 2019). However, Islam imposes certain restrictions to maintain gender equity and consider women's character. Authors such as Parveen and Rubab (2013), Azizah et al. (2019), Jabir (2015), and Qureshi (2003) affirm that while women in Islam have complete economic independence, their primary role remains within the family's moral upkeep. Women's employment choices should align with their feminine nature, as stated by Nawab (997), Qureshi (2003), Kounsar (2017), and Lone et al. (2015). Doi (1990) and Siddiqa and Ruby (2018) advise that women should maintain modesty and adhere to Islamic principles professionally. Despite these teachings, societal misconceptions persist, often viewing Islam as restrictive towards women's rights. Potoari (2019) suggests that rectifying these misconceptions requires proper Islamic education and awareness within the Muslim community. Additionally, non-Muslims need to understand Islamic teachings without bias, especially concerning women's employment, as misinterpretations can occur, as noted by Bhat (2012).

This work explores the claim prevalent in Sri Lankan non-Muslim culture that Islam limits the professional opportunities for women. As stated by Manel & Perera (2017), there is a perception that religious constraints, particularly among Muslim women, restrict employment possibilities for a significant portion of non-Buddhist females in Sri Lanka. This study aims to investigate Muslim women's views on how non-Muslims perceive their participation in the workforce. This inquiry is essential as the combined efforts of men and women are crucial for uplifting the Muslim community. In Islam, men and women are considered equal in the eyes of God, making women's contributions to societal progress as significant as men's.

Islam encourages skilled and competent women to engage in various sectors without altering Sharia laws. A continued misunderstanding in this area could increase non-Muslim misconceptions about Islam. While there have been numerous studies on Sri Lankan women in professional roles, a focused scientific study on Muslim women in this context is lacking. Misconceptions about Islamic theology have arisen partly due to the lower work engagement of Muslim women. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to uncover non-Muslims' misconceptions about working women in Islam and understand the reasons behind these misconceptions.

Given the aforementioned disparities, this research primarily concentrates on the perception of Muslim women. It specifically addresses the views of non-Muslims on the

employment of Muslim women in the Ampara District, a region in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province where Muslims form the majority of the population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores factors influencing the lower participation rates of women in the workforce and their evolving roles. Raheema and Omar (2017) highlight that women, particularly those with education, are increasingly taking up roles in diverse fields like teaching, engineering, law, military, and law enforcement. However, there is an observable scarcity of women in many sectors. Marcati (2020) points out that the ratio of women to men in professional and technical roles in several Middle Eastern countries is notably low. Farook (2019) observes a similar trend in Pakistan, where professional fields are predominantly male. Alotaibi (2021) discusses how various fatwas, interpretations of the Quran and Hadith, and the impact of other cultures on Islamic civilization pose challenges to Muslim women's participation in social services.

Ibrahim and Hamdard (2018) found that domestic responsibilities significantly hinder Muslim women's career advancement. Almaki et al. (2016) reinforce this, noting the traditional expectation for women to prioritize household duties and family care. Saidun et al. (2018) add that the hijab is a notable obstacle for Muslim women, particularly in nursing roles where they are a minority. Kashkooli and Gangadhar (2019) emphasize that family decisions play a crucial role in whether Muslim women work outside the home. In Jordan, Mehtap et al. (2016) observed that husbands significantly influence their wives' professional choices. Silva et al. (2023) point out the low representation of women in obstetrics and gynecology, attributing it to the high commitment demanded in the medical field and women physicians' preference for balancing personal life and family over long work hours. Fawzer and Feroziya (2018), along with Rifas et al. (2023), assert that these trends are not unique to non-Muslim communities. In the Muslim community of Ampara district, the tradition of dower significantly impacts women's career choices, demonstrating the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and familial factors in shaping women's work participation.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study focuses on the Ampara district in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, predominantly inhabited by Muslims. The research involved fourteen professional women from various academic and non-academic backgrounds, including lecturers, university librarians, registrars, women's development officers, counselors, physicians, and engineers. These participants, all university graduates employed in the public sector, were selected using the Purposive Sampling method. They represent various locations within the district, including Sainthamaruthu, Maruthamunai, Ninthavur, Akkaraipattu, Sammanthurai, and Oluvil, and have experience working alongside non-Muslims.

To gather in-depth insights, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted. These interviews allowed for a thorough collection of responses, providing a wealth of information on the subject. Each interview was conducted in the participant's native Tamil language, then

recorded verbatim, transcribed, and translated into English for further analysis. Data analysis was carried out using the QSR Nvivo10 software. The transcripts were meticulously reviewed, with significant details from each question being coded and subsequently organized into relevant categories. From this process, the researcher identified and deduced key “themes” relevant to the study’s objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discussed the main findings of the research.

Perception of Muslim women on non-Muslim’s understanding

The collected data highlighted various perspectives from respondents based on their experiences. In response to the question, “Is there any misconception among non-Muslims regarding the employment participation of Muslim women in your workplace?” it was found that, although a social structure of exclusion is no longer prevalent, certain misconceptions persist in society. A majority of the respondents, seven out of fourteen, indicated that such misconceptions are still held by non-Muslims. For instance, two respondents shared the following statement:

“Here are some misunderstandings of Islam in the non-Muslim community on women’s working rights” (Respondent 14)

“I think there is some misconception among non-Muslims that Muslim women are not involved in a large number of labor forces due to religious restrictions. Scientific answers should be given for this” (Respondent 11)

Four mentioned that they did not hear this claim:

A respondent quoted the following:

“I never heard that there is a misconception regarding labor force participation” (Respondent 3)

Three indicated that this was not in the current period, and it prevailed before that.

One respondent claimed:

“It may have been early times. But as far as the current period is concerned not such perceptions” (Respondent 4)

When further inquired about the specific misconceptions held by non-Muslims, respondents shared that a common belief among non-Muslims is that Islam restricts women from going out to work. Several respondents cited examples from their experiences to illustrate these claims. They provided quotes that reflect the prevalent perceptions among non-Muslims about the limitations Islam supposedly imposes on women’s work. These responses highlight the nature of misconceptions about Muslim women’s participation in the workforce, as seen through the eyes of non-Muslims.

“As I am working in a non-Muslim area, sometimes people ask, “Why are Muslim women not engaged in this field? Is there any restriction in your religion?” (Respondent 2)

“There is a perception among non-Muslims that religion does not allow women to go out women are controlled by educated people who have learned religious knowledge (11)

“There are some people asking me why your women are wearing black and covering their faces without come out side and work” (Respondent 12).

The respondents believed that these misconceptions among non-Muslims arose from observations of Muslim society’s practices, such as male dominance, dress code restrictions, and a general lack of understanding about Islamic teachings among both Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as other sociocultural factors. This aspect was analyzed under two sub-categories: ‘Understanding of Non-Muslims on Women Employment Participation’ and ‘Factors Influencing this Understanding.’ This led to the identification of a major theme: ‘Understanding of Non-Muslims on Women’s Employment and the Influencing Factors.’

Understanding of non-Muslims on women employment and the factors influence it.

In this study, the researchers explored non-Muslim perceptions of Muslim women’s participation in employment, particularly how Muslim societal practices influence these views. The findings revealed that while Muslim women are active in various fields, their presence in certain professions, notably in medicine and engineering, is perceived as rare due to dress code restrictions. One respondent noted, “Muslim women don’t focus on certain fields, especially in Nursing. Ah, but it’s visible where Muslims are a minority society... However, in Ampara district, Muslim women follow their religious restrictions” (Respondent 13).

The issue of dress code, especially in nursing, is significant as it often does not align with the Islamic Hijab’s requirements and boundaries. While this may not be a major concern in Muslim-majority areas like Ampara district, it becomes more pronounced in parts of the country where Muslims are in the minority. As highlighted by Saidun et al. (2018), the hijab can be a significant factor in determining Muslim women’s involvement in the nursing profession in areas where they are a minority. The current study corroborates this, indicating that while dress code is not a significant issue in Ampara district, it is a concern in other regions of the country with a minority Muslim population.

Another aspect revealed in the study is the perception of oppression related to face coverings among Muslim women. Six participants noted that there is a belief among non-Muslims that Muslim women are not permitted to work and are oppressed, confined to their homes under the restriction of face coverings. When inquired about their perspective on this notion, the Muslim women respondents clearly articulated their views. They concurred that certain practices within the Muslim community, particularly those related to dress codes, are a primary cause of these misconceptions among non-Muslims. They pointed out that some within the Muslim society adhere to strict dress code norms, including face coverings, which may be misinterpreted as religious constraints against women’s participation in the workforce.

This has led to misunderstandings among non-Muslims and the perpetuation of stereotypes. One respondent emphasized:

“Some Muslim women cover their faces while working. For Muslims, it would be a casual event. But for non-Muslims, it would be odd. This is especially true in the teaching process.

Non-Muslims say that we need to have eye-to-eye contact to understand. In some such situations, we cannot justify our actions, and misunderstandings arise (12)

One of the participants highlighted that such misconceptions often arise when Muslim women do not participate in certain fields, mainly due to dress code restrictions imposed in those practices by non-Muslims. She shared her experience:

As far as engineering is concerned. Our lecturers never like to wear hijabs when we go to practice. There is an opinion among them that we will not go to work or practice due to the dress code “(Respondent 5)

In the current study, three participants indicated that some non-Muslims believe Muslim men, especially those with religious knowledge, exercise control over women’s work outside the home due to male dominance. Some participants mentioned that Muslim women are restricted from working because men with limited religious knowledge tend to dominate women, thereby preventing them from utilizing their talents in the workforce. Previous research, including studies by Galloway (2014), Cikalkinanty et al. (2022), and Nadeem (2020), has noted that male dominance, patriarchal traditions, and cultural conventions often deprive Muslim women of their fundamental rights. This study likewise shows that non-Muslims perceive male dominance as a factor influencing women’s participation in the workforce.

Another respondent’s opinion was:

“Ah, there are some Muslim people who induce women to stop going to work ... And they think that their whole role is to be a wife and a mother. This is the misunderstanding. Islam does not say it in such a way. Due to the presence of some such people in the community, there is some disapproval of some of the jobs to be done by women or restricted from work. This made some claims among non-Muslim society” (Respondent 14).

“Ah, many degree holders are stuck at home instead of participating in jobs. Such practices can lead to accusations among non-Muslims. If it is so, I also see it as wrong (Respondent 8)

According to experiences shared by one of the respondents, some non-Muslims believe that Muslim women limit their working hours and days and often do not participate in events outside their working schedule. This perception was highlighted by a respondent who stated:

“.....Muslim women do not participate after their work hours. If they have to work from 8:30 to 4:30, if there are any important events after 4:30, they would not participate in work.....If they are working during the week and invited to some events on the weekends, they would not be present there. Ah, some such situations have created some misunderstandings about Muslim women” (Respondent 12).

Furthermore, respondents noted that due to the limited participation of Muslim women in employment, non-Muslims tend to assume that Muslim women have little interest in working. This lack of participation in certain fields has led to misconceptions among non-Muslims. The study identified a similar trend of limited female participation in certain fields, as highlighted by Assi and Marcati (2020) and Farook (2019).

A respondent pointed out that Muslim women often show less interest in fieldwork, especially in engineering, nursing, and medical fields. Consequently, there's a general perception that they do not engage in these fields. When asked for their opinion on this matter, participants acknowledged a noticeable scarcity of women in some fields. A respondent's comment was as follows:

“In fact, the labour force participation of Muslim women is low in some fields. For instance, in nursing In Amara district, women's participation in this field is almost non-existent. It may be the reason for their understanding.” (Respondent 2)

They assumed that women should enter this field in the context of not being able to wear the Islamic dress code. It depends on their preferences. However, women's participation in this field is mandatory and there is a need to give logical explanation to non-Muslims in this regard.

Reflecting on non-Muslim perceptions of Muslim women's employment, the respondents shared various opinions when asked about their views on these claims. While the majority acknowledged the existence of misconceptions or claims among the non-Muslim society, they also pointed out that these could not be entirely avoided due to certain prevailing societal practices, albeit at a minimal level. However, they firmly stated that Islam does not restrict women's employment rights, highlighting the modern advancement of Muslim women in the workforce.

The respondents suggested that the perceived low participation of Muslim women in the labor force is largely due to misunderstandings about Islam. They argued that, like women in other societies, Muslim women's participation in various fields has increased, with only a few exceptions, possibly due to personal issues. Therefore, it would be incorrect to assume that their participation is generally diminished. The respondents highlighted the disparity between non-Muslim perceptions and the actual practices within the Muslim community. One respondent elaborated on this point, stating:

“M... Yeah. There are many differences between the perspective of non-Muslims and the practice of our society.While our parents encourage their children to get a better education and go for a better career, there is a perception among non-Muslims that women are oppressed in our society. M.... If we take the fact that 50 of the graduates are women and 40 of them are employed, If 10 graduates do not take jobs, it does not mean that they are oppressed.” (Respondent 13).

Another respondent's opinion was as follows:

“This is actually a misunderstanding of Islam. Because Muslim women's labor force participation has increased similar to that of non-Muslim women in many sectors such as education, skilled labour, and academia, A few women may not pursue careers due to personal problems. That is not to say that their participation is lessened because of that” (Respondent 1).

Some of them said that there are some accusations on Muslim women's performance. A respondent's quote was as follows:

“If there is a Muslim lady who is highly performing, they will work against her and think that more women like her should not come into our society. At the same time, they will accuse Muslim society of oppressing Muslim women” (Respondent 13).

The respondents clarified that wearing a face cover is not mandated by Islam as an obligatory practice. Islam requires covering the body except for the face and hands, but wearing a face cover is a choice made by Muslim women, either willingly or due to external factors such as personal preference or fulfilling their husband’s wishes. This practice does not imply that Muslim women are restricted from professional engagement. In fact, in many Muslim-majority countries, women work while wearing face covers. However, certain practices within the Muslim community can lead to misconceptions among non-Muslims, an issue that cannot be entirely avoided. There is a need to educate and empower both women and men regarding these aspects.

Men and women with ordinary religious knowledge practice the principle of equality in Islam in their lives. But those deeply educated religious scholars) impose some restrictions on working women with face covers, and they do not employ talented women. Girls who receive religious knowledge are less likely to participate in any job. Due to this practice of the Muslim community, there is a perception among non-Muslims that religion does not allow women to go out and that women are controlled by educated people who have learned religious knowledge. It has been clarified by another respondent as follows:

“In my view, most of the wives of such husbands who have studied Islam more are at home without working” (Respondent 11)

Additionally, the majority of the respondents (twelve) noted a lack of religious knowledge among Muslims, including those who are educated. They observed that there is little enthusiasm for acquiring Islamic knowledge within the community. For instance, two respondent’s statements as follow:

“I don’t think there is enough knowledge about this among the Muslim community. Even among educated people. Here is a lack of understanding of Islamic teaching. There is a need for deep learning about Islamic doctrine, but most people are not interested in learning” (Respondent 8).

“Yes, certainly. There are many accusations and criticisms among the non-Muslim community and even the Muslim community regarding the teaching of Islam on equity due to a lack of knowledge of Islamic doctrine and the malpractice of the Muslim society (Respondent 3).

Muslims encounter numerous challenges in explaining Islamic doctrines to non-Muslims in their workplace. It is essential for Muslims themselves to provide these clarifications. One respondent elaborated on this point, stating:

“Islam does not force women to work... it does not mean that she cannot engage any work or do not allowed to do any social contribution, M....generally men have enough income, they assumed that his wife do not need to work..... This depend on the family structure. Because Islam pays great attention welfare of the family. Ah, if a women’s work is to extent of neglecting family work. Such work is not necessary, so women may not be involved at that work due to such reasons. It is wrong to say that Islam restricts women from working” (Respondent 11).

One respondent highlighted the issue of male dominance in Sri Lankan societies, noting that it's not exclusive to the Muslim community (Respondent 5).

She pointed out that in some families, men who believe they can financially support their family might restrict women from working outside. However, she further emphasized that this mindset of dominance within certain family structures needs to change.

To sum up, the data clearly shows that misconceptions exist among non-Muslims about Muslim women's employment. Previous research has pointed to various factors influencing Muslim women's participation in the workforce, such as family responsibilities, family structure, prioritizing family life, Islamic dress code, cultural practices, and societal views. However, this research reveals a different perspective from non-Muslims. They mainly cite issues such as dress code, especially the face cover, limited participation in certain fields, male dominance, and restricted working hours. These perceptions, however, are not necessarily linked to religious restrictions. While some aspects might be accurate, it is important to recognize that Muslims often strive to adhere to their religious norms. Therefore, it cannot be said that Islam outright prevents women from working. The lack of in-depth religious knowledge among both Muslim and non-Muslim communities contributes to these misunderstandings.

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