



An Empirical Study of Religion, Culture, and Women's Empowerment: Implications for SDG 5 and the 2030 Agenda

Anya Reddy

Student, Candor International School, Bangalore, India

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex interplay between religion, culture, and women's empowerment within Hindu and Muslim communities, examining individual perceptions of religious influence and barriers to gender equality. Drawing on survey data from 58 participants, the findings reveal that while many perceive their religion as supportive of women, significant limitations persist, particularly concerning marriage, family planning, and societal expectations. Desired changes centered on greater gender equality and equal educational opportunities, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals. The study highlights the need for multi-faceted approaches that address both structural and attitudinal obstacles to women's empowerment within diverse religious and cultural contexts. Despite limitations related to sample size and design, this research provides valuable insights for informing future investigations and interventions.

Keywords: *Women's Empowerment, Religion, Culture, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

Introduction

The intricate relationship between religion, culture, and women's empowerment is a central topic of contemporary social and academic discourse, directly relevant to the global agenda for sustainable development. Across diverse societies, religion and culture profoundly shape individual identities, societal norms, and power dynamics. However, the influence of these forces on the status and opportunities available to women is often complex and contested, impacting progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which calls for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. While certain interpretations of religious texts and traditional practices may inadvertently or intentionally perpetuate gender inequalities, hindering the achievement of SDG 5 targets, other interpretations and traditions may serve as catalysts for female agency, leadership, and social transformation, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable future (e.g., Ahmed, 1992; Mahmood, 2005).

Globally, women's empowerment is increasingly recognized as essential for achieving sustainable development goals, promoting social justice, and fostering inclusive societies (United Nations, 2015; World Bank, 2012). Indeed, achieving SDG 5 is considered a critical

enabler for progress across the entire 2030 Agenda. Yet, the path to achieving gender equality is often fraught with challenges, particularly in contexts where religious or cultural norms are invoked to justify discriminatory practices or limit women's access to education, employment, political participation, and personal autonomy (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Amnesty International, 2019). These barriers directly impede the realization of SDG targets related to education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

In many communities, religious institutions and leaders wield significant influence over social attitudes, moral values, and even legal frameworks. Consequently, the ways in which religious teachings and traditions are interpreted and applied can have a profound impact on women's lives (Smith, 2005; Jones, 2010). As an illustration, interpretations that favor the view of women as household members or, even more destructively, females who ought to be ruled by the other sex may have an even worse impact by conning women from seeking their potential (Davis, 2006; Miller, 2009) thus making them less productive in terms of the economy, as well as entirely not engaging in society's activities, which is contrary to the functions of SDGs 5 and 8. However, other readings of the text, which consider female patrons as depictions of firmness, intelligence, and gender-as well as regard them as role models, can arouse women to oppose the stereotypical rules and fight for their rights and dignity (Brown, 2011; Wilson, 2015), promoting gender parity and making societies more just and inclusive for everybody, in accordance with the separate goals of SDG 16.

Acknowledging that gender diversity is one of the causes of human rights violations, one must appreciate that opposing gender imbalance calls for tailored remedies. Defining any religious or cultural group by one or very few characteristics can be erroneous because views and practices change from time to time, place to place, and across religions (Esposito & DeLong-Bas, 2001; Khan, 2016). Besides, the policy agenda should also address equally the state level, which is based on the fact that the historical gender 'verticality' and 'horizontal' in many states are still being constituted in the 'hierarchical' and 'territorial' ways. At the level of the state, gender policies reflect the conditions and ideology of gender relations prevailing within the specific society (Beneria & Sen, 1981).

The primary goal of this research paper was to examine, in detail the interface of religion, culture, and the struggle for the empowerment of women by focusing on the reactions and personal and social life of people in specific communities that would help in SDGs implementation. We aim to focus on the critical factors by use of survey data that has been gathered using selected populations, most of who are likely to belong to both the Hindu and Muslim religion. Such factors include the view towards the existence of women in the society as seen from the respect them in the society and the women place in the religious and ritual spheres; the extent to which the religious and cultural norms limit the men and women in the society and the changes that the people want in order to give all men and women equal rights in the society. Understanding the behaviors encapsulated within these perspectives shall be instrumental in the elucidation of these issues as well as in the formulating of relevant methods of fast tracking the various denominations in religious and cultural contexts when it comes to women's empowerment. This study is expected to enhance evidence-based discrimination informational opinions and strategies for levelling the ground as well as encouraging the full potential of women in every aspect

of their life and the need to advance the sustainable development goals. This study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do individuals perceive the influence of their religion and culture on women's empowerment? (2) What are the perceived barriers to gender equality within these contexts? (3) What changes are desired to promote women's empowerment?

Literature Review

The complex relationship between religion, culture, and women's empowerment is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Research indicates that while religion and culture can be sources of identity and community, they can also contribute to gender inequality (James, 2024; Wiqas, 2018). Several studies highlight the potential for conflict between globally recognized women's rights and religiously or culturally grounded beliefs and practices (Harvard, 2020; Human Rights, 2023). For instance, discriminatory assumptions within family law and social practices, often justified by religious interpretations, can lead to violence against women and restrictions on their equal rights (Human Rights, 2023). Surveying some of the challenges reported regarding the political representation of women in African states, for example, adherence to CEDAW has been very slow and even a highly industrialized state like South Africa still battles with challenges such as Abahlali following the legalization of CEDAW in most African states. Nevertheless, some of the interaction may also be positive. Religion has played a role in causing women's empowerment especially in unifying them and enabling further action both to combat poverty and to enhance social justice. The example of Ela Bhatt, in her approach to the activities of the organization, like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), is a proof stating this. To make matters worse, a recognition has to be made that religious and cultural beliefs are not monolithic since they contain different ideological strands and positions instead. In this vein, religious and cultural variations may be taken advantage to installation of religious reform and to contestation of patriarchal exegesis of religious scriptures (Barlas 2019; Wadud 1999).

Even though some beliefs direct on how religion and culture can give back power to women, a good number of investigations examine the way in which these dialectics work against the women's freedom. In the paper documented by Wiqas (2018), the quotation by Bukhari (2012) emphasized that on account of religious beliefs, women have been grossly marginalized by the institutions of civilized societies from time in memoriam. Similarly, James (2024) argues that tradition and religion are harmful to women's rights as they try to justify these unconcealed forced separations which are such a big part of rape campaigns including restrictions like virginity examinations which are used to restrict females in social sphere into ethnocultural frames. This factor has different causes such as the lack of women's property rights, unequal education and employment opportunities and women's inability to choose whom to marry (Wiqas, 2018).

Moreover, Gruber and Hertel (2010) also emphasized that religious beliefs on inequality towards women are important vis-à-vis measurable outcomes. Based on their research, these attitudes have hindered the effectiveness of gender equality measures in health and social affairs (Gruber & Hertel, 2010). Yet, this does not apply uniformly to different regions. A comparative study of women's autonomy in South Asian countries indicates that, although all women have limited independence, women from Tamil Nadu (South India) have the best prospects among women in Punjab (Pakistan) or Uttar Pradesh (North

India) across regions and irrespective of faith (Jejeebhoy, 2001). This suggests that cultural distinctions may be more influential than religion or nationality in shaping women's autonomy (Jejeebhoy, 2001).

Research Methodology

Research Objectives of the study

- To examine individual perceptions of how religion and culture influence women's empowerment within their respective
- To identify the specific barriers to gender equality that are perceived to be rooted in religious or cultural beliefs and practices.
- To explore the types of changes that individuals believe are necessary to promote women's empowerment within their religious and cultural contexts.
- To investigate the roles of women in religious practices.
- To investigate the attitudes toward women in leadership positions.

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was appropriate for this study because it allowed for the efficient collection of data on individual perceptions and experiences related to religion, culture, and women's empowerment at a single point in time. This approach was suitable for exploring the prevalence of certain beliefs and attitudes, as well as the relationships between key variables.

Variables: The study examined the following variables:

- **Independent Variables:** Age, Religion, Highest Educational Qualification, Employment Status, Marital Status
- **Dependent Variables:** Agreement with religion supporting women's empowerment, perception of women's leadership roles, perceived limitations imposed by religion, identified barriers to gender equality, reported experiences of resistance or discouragement, attitudes towards religious dress codes, roles in religious festivals, perceptions of portrayals of women in religious stories, support for reinterpretation of religious texts, and desired changes to promote women's empowerment.

Sampling Design

The target population for this study consisted of adults who self-identify as either Hindu or Muslim and have experience with religious and cultural practices within their communities. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and the potential for participants to be hesitant to openly discuss their views on religion and gender, a sampling technique that relied on trust and existing social networks was deemed most appropriate.

Sampling Frame: Given the absence of a comprehensive and readily accessible list of individuals meeting the specific criteria of the target population, a non-probability sampling approach was employed. The study utilized snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, to reach potential participants.

Sample Size: The number of participants who managed to fill in the questioners was fifty-eight. This research contains a small number of the questioned people due to the limitations in time and resources constraints that allow data collection to be affected.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through an online self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was crafted to capture the socio-economic variables of the respondents, religious affiliation, the understanding of the impact of religion and gender equality, and prospect for building the capacity of women.

Questionnaire Composition: The questionnaire included the subsequent sections:

- **Section 1: Demographic Information** - It involved questions regarding age of the participants, religion, level of education, employment, and finally the current (...) relationship status of the participants.
- **Section 2: Perceptions of Religious Influence:** This section assessed participants' agreement with statements about the role of religion in supporting or limiting women's empowerment, using five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree".
- **Section 3: Experiences of Gender Inequality:** This section explored participants' experiences of resistance or discouragement due to religious or cultural beliefs, attitudes towards religious dress codes, and roles in religious festivals.
- **Section 4: Desired Changes:** This section asked participants about the changes they believe are necessary to promote women's empowerment within their religious and cultural contexts. This included open-ended questions.

Results and Discussion

a. Demographic Characteristics:

The sample consisted of 58 participants, with 83% (48) identifying as Hindu and 17% (10) identifying as Muslim. The age distribution was as follows: 31% (18) were 18-30 years old, 22% (13) were 31-40 years old, 26% (15) were 41-50 years old, and 21% (12) were 50-60 years old. In terms of education, 36% (21) held a graduate degree, and 53% (31) held a postgraduate degree, while 10% (6) held a 12th pass. Regarding employment status, 40% (23) were employed, 29% (17) were self-employed, and 31% (18) were unemployed. 62% (36) were married, and 38% (22) were unmarried. This distribution provides context for interpreting findings.

b. Perceptions of Religious Influence:

A slight majority of respondents, 59% (34), agreed or strongly agreed that their religion supports the empowerment of women. However, 17% (10) were neutral, and 24% (14) disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating diverse views. *This aligns with existing literature emphasizing diverse interpretations of religious texts* (Ahmed, 1992; Mahmood, 2005). Analyzing by religion showed that while 63% of Hindu respondents agreed/strongly agreed, 40% of Muslim respondents did. This difference, while potentially meaningful, can't be confirmed statistically due to the small sample size of Muslims.

Regarding women's leadership, 81% (47) indicated their community allows women to take leadership roles, while 10% (6) said no and 9% (5) were unsure. However, 76% (44) felt their *community* allows women to take leadership roles, indicating potential discrepancies between religious allowance and actual community acceptance.

c. Perceived Limitations and Barriers to Gender Equality:

The survey explored specific areas where respondents perceived religious control as potentially limiting women's rights and opportunities. Multiple selections were permitted, and the results revealed the following patterns: Marriage was identified by 50% (29) of respondents as an area of concern, followed by family planning and education, both

selected by 31% (18). Dress code was also frequently cited, with 33% (19) of respondents indicating that religious norms around dress can limit women's choices. Employment was identified by 24% (14), mobility by 12% (7), and food preferences by 7% (4). *These results point to areas where religious influences are seen as potentially restrictive.* Beyond these specific domains, the qualitative data from open-ended responses regarding major barriers to gender equality revealed that "traditional beliefs" and "societal expectations" were frequently mentioned, suggesting a complex interplay of religious and cultural factors. As one respondent articulated, "*Societal norms/frameworks that limit women from exploring career options*" represent a significant barrier, highlighting how broader societal structures, often intertwined with religious values, can constrain women's agency.

d. Experiences of Resistance and Discouragement:

Only 8% (5) had personally faced resistance from family due to religious/cultural beliefs while pursuing education, and 5% (3) had been discouraged from working/choosing a career. However, a larger number, 36% (21), knew someone discouraged from studying further, and 34% (20) knew a woman who gave up a job due to these beliefs. *This suggests resistance may be more commonly experienced vicariously.*

e. Religious Dress Code:

Regarding expectations surrounding dress, 41% (24) of respondents indicated feeling pressured to conform to specific religious or cultural norms. When asked about the reasons behind these expectations, "respect for tradition" emerged as the most common explanation, cited by 62% (36) of participants. "Family or community expectations" were also frequently mentioned, accounting for 52% (30) of the responses. Other reasons included "protection from judgment" (40% or 23 participants), "modesty" (33% or 19 participants), and "spiritual purity" (26% or 15 participants). A smaller proportion, 10% (6), attributed the dress code to obedience to religious texts. Experiences with these expectations varied, as only a minority of respondents, 22% (13), reported facing criticism for not adhering to the expected dress code. *This suggests that while pressure to conform to religious or culturally influenced dress codes is relatively common, direct negative consequences for non-compliance are less frequently experienced.*

f. Roles in Religious Festivals:

In 48% (28) of the households Elders made key decisions about religious festivals, followed by women 24% (14), and Both 28% (16). 100% said yes for responsibilities given to women. Common responsibilities include cooking, cleaning, and puja preparation. While 81% (47) said women have a say in rituals, only 17% (10) said certain festivals exclude women. *This highlights women's central role in religious practice, but potential exclusion in specific instances.*

g. Portrayals of Women in Religious Stories:

The survey explored the common depictions of women in religious stories and folktales. Participants indicated that women are most frequently portrayed as "goddesses or divine figures," with 71% (41) of respondents selecting this option. Other prevalent portrayals included "obedient wives or mothers" and "symbols of purity or sacrifice," both chosen by 45% (26) of respondents. Less frequent, though still present, were depictions of women as "wise and powerful leaders" (21% or 12 participants), "victims of injustice" (14% or 8 participants), and "temptresses or sources of downfall" (8% or 5 participants). A majority of respondents, 53% (31), expressed the belief that these portrayals influence societal expectations of women's behavior. *This finding reinforces the notion that religious narratives play a role in shaping and reinforcing societal norms related to gender roles and expectations.*

h. Desired Changes and Support:

When asked about the changes they would like to see within their religious or cultural communities to promote women's empowerment, a prevalent theme was the desire for greater gender equality, explicitly mentioned by 12 respondents. This desire for equality encompassed various aspects of life, from equal rights and opportunities to equal treatment and respect. Several respondents also emphasized the importance of equal opportunity in education, with 3 individuals specifically highlighting this as a crucial area for improvement. Further, shifting mindsets among men and older generations and equality in bringing up children were also mentioned, but only by one participant each. When asked about the specific types of support needed to achieve gender equality, family support and social support were mentioned, and encouragement and emotional support. *These responses point to the perceived need for both systemic changes that promote equal access and opportunity, and for shifts in individual attitudes and behaviors that foster a more supportive and equitable environment for women.*

i. Role of Religious Leaders:

The responses for this were open-ended and quite varied. Some responses indicating positive perception include, Religious leaders can influence beliefs, values and behaviours. So they should preach in a progressive manner where all humans irrespective of gender, caste and creed are considered equal, Very strong and Equality in chances, preferences. Whereas responses with negative perception include, it is nothing like religious leaders when it comes to women empowerment and the people tend to follow the orders from them instead of that they should just give a thought about why?

Implications for Sustainable Development Goals:

The findings of this study have clear implications for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." The identified barriers to women's empowerment, including limitations related to marriage, family planning, education, and employment, directly impede progress towards this goal. The fact that a significant portion of respondents perceive religious and cultural norms as limiting women's opportunities signifies the need for targeted interventions that address these specific challenges. Furthermore, the expressed desire for greater gender equality and equal opportunity in education aligns directly with the targets of SDG 4 (Quality Education), which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. To empower women and girls and help them play an active role in economic, social, and political spheres, the society should promote the principle of equal access to education. Having a feeling of love, care, emotional support, and encouragement by family members, friends, and the society in general also emphasizes the necessity of women empowerment. This is true about SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) that aspires to uplift peaceful and just societies in accordance with the development goals, guarantee judicial services to the all and construct effective, responsive, and participatory institutions at all levels. The accomplishment of these objectives calls for the getting rid of the peer and power operational culture that in many settings stands out as an obstacle to the attainment of the gender equality objective. To that end, religious leaders together with

other community members may be involved in discussions and debates that contest the harmful aspects of religion and engender progressive gender standards. It includes being unwilling to extreme provide education and awareness campaigns on gender equity and women's rights to promote women and girls' empowerment. The conclusions drawn indicate that a blend of methods may be useful to improve operational gender issues, appreciating that both legal and administrative changes and social transformation are involved sectors.

In conclusion, this research looked at the role of religion, and women empowerment issues as well as the cultural aspects among the Hindu and Muslim sects where the use of the survey technique disclosed the fact that in one hand religion can be protective and yet on the other hand pushes barriers when it comes to the issues of marriage, education and society as a whole. In relation to the same issue locally, the respondents revealed that there was a thirst for gender balance and mentioned the need for financial, psychological and community assistance, all of which fits well with the global Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs). Although the survey was limited in its application to a specific sample not taken randomly, the study reveals a number of useful points and therefore it is recommended that follow up research explores the religious arguments regarding advantage given to women and they are to be accommodated within such cultural situations.

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