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Statues of Women in Nepalese Muslim Society

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Abstract

This study explores the social, cultural, and religious positions of women in Nepalese Muslim society through an interdisciplinary and qualitative lens. Focusing on lived experiences, community norms, and institutional influences, the research investigates how Muslim women in Nepal navigate their identities amidst religious expectations, traditional customs, and modern societal changes. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with Muslim women across diverse regions of Nepal, the paper highlights the intersections of gender, faith, and social structures. Durkheim's sociological theory of social facts is employed to examine how religious norms and patriarchal values shape women's roles and statuses within family, education, and public representation. The findings reveal both structural constraints and personal agency, showing how women negotiate, resist, or adapt to socioreligious norms in nuanced ways. This research contributes to broader academic conversations on gender in South Asian Muslim societies and aims to fill the empirical and methodological gap in Nepali Muslim women's studies. Implications are drawn for gender equity, policy reform, and culturally contextualized feminist discourse in Nepal. The paper aims to offer actionable insights for scholars, civil society actors, and policymakers working in the intersections of religion, gender, and minority rights.

Keywords

Nepalese Muslim women, gender roles, religious norms, social structure, Islamic identity.

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1. Introduction

The position of women within Islamic societies has long attracted scholarly attention, with researchers exploring the intersection of religion, culture, and gender across diverse Muslim communities (Mernissi, 1991; Badran, 2009). However, such studies have largely centered on countries with significant Muslim populations such as Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, or Indonesia, while smaller Muslim communities, particularly in South Asia's peripheral regions, remain understudied. Nepal, a predominantly Hindu country, is home to approximately 4.4% Muslims (CBS, 2021), yet the experiences of Muslim women in this context remain underrepresented in both national scholarship and global academic conversations.

The absence of robust, empirical research on Nepalese Muslim women creates a significant knowledge gap at multiple levels. Firstly, it limits understanding of how minority Muslim communities in Nepal interpret and negotiate gender roles in comparison to other South Asian contexts. Secondly, it excludes these women from national discussions on women's rights, inclusion, and intersectional identity, thereby rendering their voices invisible in policy and academic frameworks. Thirdly, the empirical gap persists due to the lack of field-based, qualitative research capturing women's own narratives and perceptions of religion, identity, and agency.

Existing studies on gender and Islam in South Asia have highlighted the dual influence of religious patriarchy and cultural conservatism in shaping women's roles (Jeffery & Basu, 1998; Shaheed, 2010). Muslim women often occupy a marginal space where their identities are defined and confined through religious interpretations controlled by male-dominated leadership structures (Mahmood, 2005). In the case of Nepal, however, such research is sparse. A handful of sociological studies have examined Muslim identity (Hussain, 2009; Khan, 2015), but few focus specifically on women's everyday struggles, aspirations, or strategies of negotiation within family, community, or public spaces.

Moreover, most studies in Nepal on gender are dominated by discussions of caste-based discrimination, gendered violence within Hindu frameworks, or Indigenous women's rights. The layered experiences of Nepalese Muslim women as religious minorities and women are thus doubly marginalized. The epistemological gap lies not only in lack of research but also in the frameworks employed: most available work fails to apply intersectional, feminist, or sociological theories to Nepalese Muslim women's lives, which reinforces their exclusion from theoretical advancement.

This study addresses these absences by exploring the status of women in Nepalese Muslim society through a qualitative, interdisciplinary lens. It investigates how religion, cultural tradition, social structure, and community practices shape the roles, rights, and restrictions experienced by Muslim women. Central to the study is the concept of statuses or positionality - how women are perceived and positioned within familial, educational and religious spheres. In doing so, it contributes both empirical data and theoretical engagement to the neglected field of Muslim women's studies in Nepal.

Drawing on Émile Durkheim's sociological concept of social facts, the paper conceptualizes religious norms and gender roles as collective, coercive forces that transcend individual control. According to Durkheim (1982), social facts are "ways of acting, thinking and feeling" that exist outside the individual and exert a constraining influence. In Nepalese Muslim society, such social facts manifest in the form of gendered expectations, restrictions on women's mobility and education, and community-enforced norms regarding marriage, dress, and behavior. Religion, in this framework, operates not only as faith but as a structuring social institution deeply intertwined with cultural and political hierarchies.

Through semi-structured interviews with Muslim women from different regions of Nepal including Terai plains, urban centers like Kathmandu, and remote hill areas. The research explores how these women internalize, resist, or reinterpret dominant norms. Their testimonies offer insight into how agency and submission are constantly negotiated within everyday life. Some women actively challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam, while others find empowerment within religious boundaries. This multiplicity of responses highlights the limitations of monolithic views on Muslim women and opens space for nuanced understanding rooted in local context.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative approach with an interpretivist paradigm. This allows for deep, contextual exploration of meanings and experiences rather than numerical generalization. Unlike large-scale surveys, in-depth interviews allow for emergence of personal histories, contradictions, and aspirations that are otherwise obscured in surface-level research. Additionally, by foregrounding women's voices and perceptions, the study aligns with feminist principles of centering marginalized narratives.

The interdisciplinary nature of this study, intersecting religious studies, sociology, gender theory, and South Asian studies allows it to speak across academic fields. It contributes to the sociology of religion by illustrating how Islamic norms are practiced in a minority setting; to gender studies by detailing how patriarchy is locally configured and resisted; and to Nepal studies by documenting an understudied demographic.

This paper fills significant knowledge, methodological, and theoretical gaps in the study of Nepalese Muslim women. By combining Durkheimian analysis with feminist sensibilities, and grounding the research in real-life experiences, it aims to offer a comprehensive portrayal of women's status in this community. The broader aim is not only to document inequalities but to amplify voices and create space for alternative narratives that challenge dominant assumptions about Muslim women's passivity or subordination. This research aims to explore how Nepalese Muslim women perceive, experience, and negotiate their status within their communities' social, religious, and cultural frameworks. It also investigates how religious norms influence women's roles and mobility, the forms of agency or resistance women display in patriarchal Muslim settings, and how generational, regional, or educational differences impact perceptions of gender and Islam.

The findings are relevant for scholars, activists, policymakers, and educators concerned with inclusion, gender justice, and religious pluralism in Nepal and beyond. This article seeks to answer the following questions –

How do religious norms, cultural traditions, and socio-economic factors influence the roles, agency, and status of Muslim women in different regions of Nepal?

What ways do Nepalese Muslim women negotiate, resist, or conform to patriarchal and religiously framed expectations within family, community, and public spheres?

Why do Muslim communities in Nepal interpret and negotiate gender roles?

2. Literature Review

Education, marital customs, and socio-religious norms all interact to influence women's standing in Nepalese Muslim culture, especially in the Terai/Madhesh. Research shows that early marriage and women's restricted educational possibilities limit their agency and reinforce their subservient positions in the home and community. (Marphatia et al., 2022; Karki et al., 2024). Ojha and Bhandari (2023) explore how Muslims in Miya Patan, Pokhara, maintain caste-hierarchical practices similar to those in Hindu society especially via Saiyedism and notions of purity even as Islamic doctrine theoretically rejects such stratification. The study reveals how social prestige, endogamy, and occupation reinforce Muslim caste divisions. Marriage customs, particularly dowry, persist widely and are socially endorsed, fostering economic reliance and sustaining gender inequality. (Upadhyay, 2023). Although NGOs and INGOs have implemented initiatives to postpone marriage and enhance women's access to health and education, deeply rooted cultural beliefs and rigid gender norms frequently obstruct enduring transformation. (Panday et al., 2019; UNICEF & NHRC, 2024). Tiwari (2022) investigated factors influencing women's participation in income-generating activities (IGAs) in Pokhara, Nepal. Based on a survey of 130 women and binary logistic regression analysis, the study revealed that literacy, occupational status, and family monthly income significantly determine IGA involvement. In contrast, socio-demographic factors such as age, caste, marital status, family type, and age at first marriage were found insignificant. The study emphasizes the need for education and awareness to empower women economically. Ojha (2022) investigates Muslim matrimonial practices in Miya Patan, Pokhara, highlighting the unique aspects of Muslim marriage rituals in Nepal. The study explores the adherence to Sariyat (Islamic law) and the social contract between husband and wife. Ojha emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural values amidst modernization, noting that the Muslim community in Pokhara has maintained traditional practices that are increasingly overlooked by the broader society. The research contributes to understanding the dynamics of religious minority practices in a predominantly Hindu context. Shanker Thapa's (2000) study on Nepal's Muslim community uses an ethnographic approach to understand its ethnic diversity. It categorizes Muslims into distinct ethnic types based on religious behaviors, language, beliefs, and social relations. The study provides a rich descriptive account of Nepalese Muslim minorities. It also overlooks intergroup dynamics among different Muslim ethnic groups, the influence of external factors on ethnic identity, and a comparative perspective with Muslim communities in other South Asian countries. From a theoretical perspective, Durkheim's religious theory underscores how collective conscience and social facts regulate individual behavior, illustrating why marriage customs and women's roles remain deeply embedded within religiously influenced community life. However, existing scholarship often highlights practices descriptively without systematically linking women's status to the normative force of religion in Muslim society. This reveals a knowledge gap: while socio-economic barriers are documented, the interaction between religiously framed norms and women's

lived experiences in hill and terai remains underexplored. Addressing this gap requires situating women's status within broader processes of religiously mediated social integration and regulation.

Studies on Nepalese Muslim communities reveal women's socio-cultural and economic constraints, such as early marriage, limited education, gender discrimination and dowry practices. They also highlight caste-like hierarchies, social prestige, and endogamy. However, there is a gap in linking these practices to religious norms and exploring how women negotiate, conform, or resist them. Theoretical applications are limited, and studies rely on descriptive ethnography without comparative approaches that integrate socio-economic, cultural, and religious dimensions, leaving women's experiences within normative religious frameworks underexplored.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology rooted in an interpretivist paradigm to explore the nuanced realities of women in Nepalese Muslim society. The goal is not to generalize statistically, but to understand the complex, context-dependent meanings that women attach to their lived experiences, identities, and social positions within religious and cultural frameworks. Through this approach, the study privileges subjective interpretation, social meaning-making, and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant.

3.1 Research Design

Given the exploratory and context-sensitive nature of the topic, a semi-structured interview method was employed to gather primary data from Nepalese Muslim women across different geographic and social settings. This approach allowed for both consistency across core questions and flexibility to follow participants' narratives in depth. The method was chosen to ensure a deeper understanding of participants' views on family, religion, education, social expectations, gender roles, and personal aspirations.

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Participants

Twelve Muslim women who were specifically chosen for greatest variance on important variables (age, education, employment, geographic location, and Islamic school of thought) were recruited using a purposive sample technique. In-depth investigation of women's lived experiences in hill/terai and rural/urban contexts pertinent to the study's goal. Purposive sampling was used in the study to choose people who could offer rich, pertinent, and varied data. Interviews were conducted with 12 Muslim women between March and May of 2025. In order to represent geographic, class, and educational variety, participants were chosen from both rural and urban areas of Nepal, including Banke, Parsa, Siraha, Kathmandu, and Pokhara. Participants included housewives, students, teachers, business owners, and religious academics, and their ages ranged from 18 to 65 ([Interviewee, 2025](#)).

Criteria for selection included:

- Self-identified Muslim women
- Willingness to engage in open conversation
- Variation in age, occupation, and education

3.3 Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Self-identified Muslim women aged 18–65.
- Resident in one of the selected geographic sites (Gorkha, Nuwakot (Hill), Kathmandu, Pokhara (Urban settlement), Birjung, Rautahat- Terai).
- Willing and able to participate in a 40–60 minute semi-structured interview.
- Able to give informed consent or to describe local religious norms/practices.
- Represent diverse education/occupation backgrounds.
- Affiliated with Deobandi or Barelvi schools of thought.

(The Deobandi movement, originating in India from Darul Ulam Deobandh in the late 19th century, is a Sunni Islamic reformist movement that emphasizes Hanafi jurisprudence, Sharia observance, and rejects syncretic religious practices. Deobandis prioritize personal piety, scriptural literacy, and the preservation of Islamic law, often

discouraging excessive ritualistic innovations or saint veneration (Sanyal, 2007) and the Barelvi movement, originating in India in the late 19th century, emphasizes the veneration of Prophet Muhammad, saints, and Sufi practices. It combines Hanafi legal school with devotional rituals, intercessory practices, and celebrations of the Prophet's birthday, positioning itself as more flexible than Deobandis (Nizami, 1975). Deobandi emphasizes textual orthodoxy and puritanical reform; Barelvi emphasizes devotional and Sufi practices, combining orthodoxy with local religious culture. Both school of thought are popular among the Nepali Muslims. Majorities are Deobandi followers in Nepal)

Exclusion criteria:

- Men or women outside the 18–65 age range.
- Those unable to provide informed consent.
- Short-term visitors not resident in the local community.
- Respondents whose primary identity is not Muslim.

3.4 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in Nepali and Hindi language, depending on participant preference, and lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded with consent and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Open-ended guiding questions explored women's experiences in areas such as:

- Religious education and practice
- Marriage and family expectations
- Access to schooling or employment
- Community involvement and public visibility
- Views on Islamic law and gender justice

Field notes and observations were also taken to complement interview data and contextualize responses.

3.5 Participant Characteristics

ID	Age	Education level	Occupation	Marital status	Region (site)	School of thought
P1	22	Primary	Housewife	Married	Birjung (Terai)	Barelvi
P2	45	Illiterate	Religious worker	Married	Rautahat (Terai)	Deobandi
P3	34	Secondary	Teacher	Married	Kathmandu (city)	Barelvi
P4	29	Higher sec.	Entrepreneur	Married	Pokhara (city)	Deobandi
P5	52	No formal edu.	Housewife	Widowed	Gorkha (hill)	Barelvi
P6	60	Primary	Religious worker	Married	Nuwakot (hill)	Deobandi
P7	19	Secondary	Student/part-time	Unmarried	Birjung (Terai)	Barelvi
P8	38	Bachelor	Teacher	Married	Rautahat (Terai)	Deobandi
P9	25	Secondary	Entrepreneur	Married	Kathmandu (city)	Barelvi
P10	41	Illiterate	Housewife	Married	Pokhara (city)	Deobandi
P11	65	No formal edu.	Community elder	Widowed	Gorkha (hill)	Barelvi
P12	30	Diploma	NGO worker/liaison	Married	Nuwakot (hill)	Deobandi

3.6 Recruitment & Ethical Procedures

- Participants were recruited via local contacts, community leaders, and snowballing after initial purposive identification.
- Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. For low-literacy participants, consent information was read aloud and verbal consent documented. Consent included permission to audio-record, anonymize data, and use quotes.
- Ethical approval was obtained from (Central department of History, Tribhuvan University). Confidentiality and the right to withdraw were emphasized.

3.7 Interview Protocol (Semi-Structured; 40–60 minutes)

A. Introduction (5 min)

Greet, explain purpose, confirm consent, explain recording, confidentiality, and estimated duration. Warm-up question: *Tell me a little about your daily life.*

B. Core topic areas & sample prompts (30–45 min)

1. Education & opportunities

- Can you tell me about your schooling? How did education (or lack of it) shape your life?
- Probes: family support, barriers, community attitudes.

2. Marriage practices & family roles

- How are marriage decisions made in your community? What do you think about dowry/early marriage?
- Probes: examples, changes over time, personal experience.

3. Religious norms & gender

- What practices or teachings in your community shape women's roles?
- Probes: mosque/community leaders, rituals, gendered rules, differences between Deobandi/Barelvi practices.

4. Work, mobility, and agency

- Do women work outside home? How is that viewed?
- Probes: economic activities, restrictions, support systems.

5. NGO/State interventions & change

- Have NGOs or government programs reached your community? What changed, what didn't?
- Probes: program acceptability, women's participation, cultural fit.

6. Closing reflective questions

- If you could change one thing for women in your community, what would it be?

C. Closing (5 min)

Thanking participant, remind about confidentiality, invite any final comments, explain next steps and contact for follow-up.

3.8 Interview Recording, Transcription & Translation

3.8.1. Recording

All interviews audio-recorded with participant permission. Field notes and observational memos recorded immediately after each interview.

3.8.2 Transcription

1. **Verbatim transcription** in the common language (Nepali and Hindi used), including pauses, emotional markers, and non-verbal notes (e.g., laughter, crying).
2. **Timestamping** every 30–60 seconds to enable traceability.

3.8.3 Translation

1. **Forward translation:** Translated into English by the researcher itself.
2. **Team review:** Researcher compares translated transcripts with audio to ensure conceptual equivalence.
3. **Quality control:** Random 20% cross-checked

3.8.4 Storage

Used manual transcription. Stored audio files, used participant codes (P1–P12). Retained raw data per ethical guidelines.

3.9 Data Management & Audit Trail

Maintained a transparent audit trail to ensure dependability and confirmability.

3.9.1 Raw data: Audio Files, Original Field Notes.

- **Transcripts:** Original-language to English translations.
- **Code:** Manual coding.
- **Data analysis plan:** Versioned documents describing analytic decisions (thematic framework used).

3.9.2 Transcription to Analysis Steps

1. **Transcription → Translation → Quality-check**
2. **Familiarization:** Read transcripts multiple times; create initial codes.
3. **Open coding:** Line-by-line codes assigned
4. **Theme development:** Grouped codes into categories; wrote themes, linked to Durkheim's constructs (social facts, collective conscience, and integration/regulation).
5. **Triangulation:** Compared across regions, age groups, and school-of-thought to identify patterns and divergences.

3.10 Theoretical Framework:

Durkheim's Concept of Social Facts

Émile Durkheim's sociological theory of social facts is the primary interpretive framework for this research, which focuses on how religious doctrines, gender norms, and community expectations shape women's lives in Nepalese Muslim society. Social facts are defined as collective norms, values, and institutions that exist external to the individual yet exert coercive power over behavior and thought (Durkheim, 1982). These social facts are not just products of individual choice or religious belief but also result from external social structures that guide and restrict action. Durkheim recognizes the dynamic nature of social facts and their capacity to evolve as societies change, allowing for an examination of how women internalize, reinterpret, or resist these norms.

Durkheim's theory posits that women's roles and status in Nepalese Muslim society are shaped by external, collective, and coercive forces such as laws, customs, religious practices, and moral beliefs. These forces regulate behavior, reinforce social order, and sometimes allow for transformation through resistance. Religious norms, such as modesty, segregation, and family roles, serve as collective social facts, shaping acceptable female behavior and maintaining social cohesion while reinforcing gender hierarchies. Education is a site of empowerment and resistance, as it both reflects and challenges social facts. Marriage customs, such as dowry, early marriage, and gendered division of labor, are powerful social facts, exerting pressure on women to conform to roles of wives and mothers.

Religious schools and divergent interpretations of gender roles also play a role in shaping women's roles, with different schools of thought illustrating the variation of social facts across groups and how multiple social facts coexist within the same society. Invisible agency and strategic resistance are evident in women's actions within constraints, showing how gender roles are embedded in broader systems of morality, religion, and collective consciousness.

Integrating Durkheim's theory with gender-sensitive analysis provides a powerful dual lens -one that appreciates the binding force of social facts while remaining attentive to how women exercise agency even within restrictive settings. Durkheim's theory demonstrates that women's status in Nepalese Muslim society is shaped by social facts that regulate through norms, sanctions, and surveillance. Religious norms act as moral imperatives, cultural customs extend their reach into daily practices, and institutions like marriage, education, and madrasas embed these facts into collective life.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to standard ethical guidelines in qualitative research. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their rights to withdraw at any time, and the use of their data. Verbal informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms are used throughout to protect identities. The study was conducted with sensitivity to the cultural and religious context of participants, ensuring that all questions and interactions respected their values and privacy.

3.12 Reflexivity and Limitations

As a researcher, I recognize that my positionality (including gender, religion, and educational background) influences the research process. Every effort was made to engage reflexively with the data and avoid imposing outsider assumptions onto participants' narratives. Translation also posed interpretive challenges, particularly when dealing with religious or culturally embedded terms that carry layered meanings. Limitations include:

- The sample is not statistically representative.
- Participants may have been selective in disclosure due to cultural sensitivities.
- The study does not focus on legal or institutional policies affecting Muslim women, which could be explored in future research

4. Finding

4.1 Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic coding. A grounded approach was used in the early stages, allowing key themes to emerge organically from the data. Later, themes were refined and categorized using concepts from Durkheim's theory, feminist sociology, and intersectional analysis.

Preliminary codes included:

- Religious obligation vs. autonomy
- Honor, shame, and community pressure
- Women's education and its limits
- Resistance through reinterpretation
- Generational shifts in gender perception

Themes were then clustered around broader analytical categories like:

- Religious Norms as Social Control and Protection
- Education as a Site of Empowerment and Resistance
- Marriage and Gendered Expectations
- Religious Schools and Diverging Interpretations of Gender Roles
- Invisible Agency and Strategic Resistance

4.2 Data Interpretation

Key findings from interviews with 12 Muslim women in Nepal, drawing out thematic patterns that illuminate how they experience and negotiate their status in society. The women, aged 18 to 65, represent diverse occupational, educational, and regional backgrounds and follow either the Barelvi or Deobandi School of Islamic thought. Through their voices, we gain insight into the interplay of religious norms, cultural expectations, personal agency, and structural constraint.

Thematic coding revealed five primary themes:

Theme 1: Religious Norms as Social Control and Protection

Many women framed their status through the lens of religious duty and divine order, reflecting Durkheim's notion of social facts, norms external to the individual, accepted as sacred and binding.

"We are taught that a woman's izzat (honor) is in her modesty. Islam gives us rules so we don't go astray. I don't see it as restriction. It is protection." (Respondent 3, 41 years old, housewife, Deobandi follower, Banke)

Yet, even as these norms were internalized, some women expressed awareness of the tension between protection and control.

"They say it's Shariah, but sometimes I feel it's more about men's comfort than God's will. For example, why can't I work late if my brother can?" (Respondent 6, 28 years old, secondary school teacher, Barelvi, Pokhara)

While most women expressed deep faith in Islam, they distinguished between spiritual principles and cultural practices that are often conflated with religion.

Theme 2: Education as a Site of Empowerment and Resistance

All respondents recognized the transformative power of education. However, access was uneven often mediated by family support, financial status, and interpretations of Islamic permissibility.

"In our village, people say girls don't need higher education. But my father always said Islam teaches us to seek knowledge. That's why I'm in nursing school today."

(Respondent 1, 22 years old, student, Barelvi, Siraha)

In contrast, others faced early marriage or pressure to leave school after puberty.

"I was pulled out after 8th class. They said girls after marriage age should stay home. I still want to study higher education also computers."

(Respondent 7, 30 years old, mother of three, Deobandi, rural Parsa)

Education was described not only as career preparation but as a means to reinterpret religion in more inclusive and empowering ways.

Theme 3: Marriage and Gendered Expectations

Marriage emerged as a defining structure in shaping women's identities, responsibilities, and autonomy. Several women spoke of being married off at a young age, often with limited consent.

"I was 16 when I got married. My mother said it was Allah's will. But nobody asked me what I wanted." (Respondent 4, 33 years old, shopkeeper, Barelvi, Kathmandu)

Married women bore domestic burdens, and decisions about mobility or employment often required husband or in-law approval.

"If I go to my parent's house without asking, it becomes a fight. I must explain everything. Islam gave women rights, but our men don't follow that part." (Respondent 9, 25 years old, tailor, Deobandi, Rupandehi)

Despite restrictions, some women actively challenged expectations negotiating terms of marriage, delaying childbirth, or advocating for children's education.

Theme 4: Religious Schools and Diverging Interpretations of Gender Roles

The respondents' affiliation with Barelvi or Deobandi schools influenced their perception of gender roles and religious obligations.

Barelvi followers generally expressed greater openness toward women's participation in cultural life and Sufi practices. Women in Barelvi households were more likely to engage in public festivals, attend dargahs, or study.

"We go to Urs every year. There are women-only circles where we read and discuss. Islam is about love and respect, not just rules." (Respondent 5, 35 years old, community volunteer, Barelvi, Kathmandu)

In contrast, Deobandi-aligned respondents emphasized strict separation of genders, modesty, and discipline. Their approach was more scripturalist, often limiting public roles for women.

"Too much mixing is fitna. Our scholars say women should stay within the home unless necessary. I don't feel bad I feel secure." (Respondent 11, 38 years old, homemaker, Deobandi, Birgunj)

Despite these differences, both groups revealed flexibility and contradiction in actual practice indicating a complex negotiation between doctrine and everyday life.

Theme 5: Invisible Agency and Strategic Resistance

A crucial finding is the presence of quiet, often invisible forms of resistance what scholars' term "soft agency." Rather than overt defiance, many women described strategic navigation of constraints.

"I can't say no to my husband openly. But I delay, I suggest alternatives, I use religious examples to convince him." (Respondent 8, 29 years old, school teacher, Barelvi, Kathmandu)

Others expressed dual identities - compliant in public but assertive in private spheres.

"In front of elders, I cover fully. But with my sisters, we talk about everything — dreams, rights, even politics." (Respondent 2, 19 years old, college student, Deobandi, Nepalgunj)

These accounts challenge dominant portrayals of Muslim women as passive victims and instead reveal subtle negotiations that preserve dignity while testing boundaries.

Interpretation through Durkheimian Lens

Durkheim's framework of social facts allows us to understand how religious norms and community expectations operate as external moral forces that shape behavior. The women's narratives reflect how these norms are:

- Taught and enforced through religious schooling, family discourse, and social surveillance
- Legitimized by invoking divine authority and tradition
- Negotiated through reinterpretation, selective compliance, or coded resistance

While Durkheim emphasized the binding nature of such facts, the findings here reveal individual creativity and variation within normative structures particularly when women access education or spiritual literacy.

The data also demonstrate regional and theological variations within the Muslim community in Nepal, contradicting any monolithic or essentialist portrayal of Islamic gender roles.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute critical insights to the existing literature on Muslim women's roles, especially within religious minority contexts like Nepal. Through thematic analysis and sociological interpretation, the study demonstrates how Nepalese Muslim women live at the intersections of religion, gender, tradition, and marginality, navigating multiple layers of identity and expectation. Their narratives confirm, complicate, and challenge dominant academic assumptions about Muslim women's passivity or exclusion.

1. Complexity beyond Stereotypes

Existing global discourses often frame Muslim women as either victims of religious patriarchy or agents of Islamic feminism (Mahmood, 2005; Badran, 2009). This study shows that in Nepal, neither framing fully captures the localized complexity of women's experiences. Instead, women express faith and feminism simultaneously respecting religious norms while actively contesting patriarchal interpretations.

For example, many respondents invoked Quranic teachings to advocate for education and equal rights, challenging the cultural misconception that Islam prohibits women's empowerment. This aligns with studies by Shaheed (2010) and

Wadud (1999), who argue that Muslim women across the world often draw from Islamic resources to assert agency within religious boundaries.

2. Durkheim's Social Facts and Gendered Constraints

The use of Durkheim's theory of social facts provides a valuable lens for interpreting how religious norms in Nepalese Muslim society function as collective moral imperatives. The external pressure to conform whether through dress codes, marriage practices, or mobility restrictions echoes Durkheim's idea of "coercive structures." Yet, the women's interviews also reveal variability and resistance. As Durkheim suggested, social facts are not immutable; they evolve, especially when challenged by education, generational shifts, or new interpretations.

This evolution is particularly visible in urban or semi-urban contexts, where women reported greater exposure to Islamic reformist debates, NGOs, and modern education systems. Their narratives show a tension between tradition and transformation, where social facts are being slowly renegotiated.

3. Internal Diversity within Islam

The contrast between Barelvi and Deobandi respondents is a notable finding that adds religious depth to the study. While both schools draw on Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, their cultural and interpretive differences significantly shape women's lives. Barelvi women were generally more integrated into public religious life and spiritual events, while Deobandi women emphasized separation and modesty. However, both groups showed overlapping aspirations particularly around education, respect, and personal dignity revealing that religious affiliation alone cannot predict women's agency.

This supports prior research suggesting that Islam is not a monolith, and internal plurality shapes gender roles in diverse ways (Ahmed, 1992; Saba Mahmood, 2005).

4. The Silent Agency of Women

The most striking insight from this research is the silent, strategic, and often invisible agency that Muslim women exercise. Their resistance is not always vocal or confrontational, but it is embedded in everyday decisions postponing marriage, persuading husbands using religious arguments, or supporting daughters' schooling. This aligns with feminist ethnographic literature that recognizes "soft resistance" or "everyday negotiation" as a powerful form of agency (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Kandiyoti, 1988).

The respondents' stories disrupt the binary of oppression vs. liberation and invite a more nuanced understanding of how women act within constraint.

Durkheim's Social Fact Theory in the Study of Women's Status in Nepalese Muslim Society

Durkheim's theory (1982) of social facts explains how individuals' lives are shaped by collective, external, and coercive patterns of thought and conduct. In Nepalese Muslim society, women's lives are regulated by these social facts that emerge at the intersection of religious doctrines, cultural traditions, and social institutions. These social facts operate as both constraints and enabling structures, creating possibilities for both compliance and resistance.

Religious norms, such as modesty, veiling, and prescribed gender roles, function as social facts because they are external to the individual, morally binding, and sanctioned by the collective. They offer protection to women by prescribing honor and morality while restricting autonomy. Education is seen as a site of empowerment and resistance, where cultural versus religious norms compete, enabling empowerment even within surveillance structures.

Marriage in Nepalese Muslim communities is institutionalized through dowry, early marriage, and gendered household labor, shaping women's identities as wives and mothers. Durkheim's emphasis on institutions reveals marriage as a moral and collective order, with deviation inviting stigma and conformity ensuring belonging.

Madrasa education reflects Durkheim's idea that institutions transmit the collective conscience, with competing interpretations of Islamic texts across Deobandi, Barelvi, or modernist schools illustrating how multiple social facts coexist, each exerting coercion within its community. Women's invisible agency, which involves strategically negotiating within accepted boundaries, illustrates how individuals resist while still reproducing collective norms.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the understanding and experiences of Nepalese Muslim women within a sociocultural and religious framework influenced by Islamic teachings, patriarchal customs, and minority status. It uses Durkheim's sociological theory to reveal how religious norms operate as social facts, and how women subtly resist, reinterpret, or negotiate these norms. The research reveals that while Islamic identity is central to many women's lives, it is not always synonymous with restriction. Women distinguish between faith as empowerment and culture as limitation, and this distinction forms the core of their negotiation.

The study also reveals that women's status is structured by social facts, such as religious injunctions, marriage practices, and educational opportunities, which constrain behavior, sanction deviation, and sustain community order. For many women, Islamic faith is seen as a source of moral dignity, protection, and empowerment, while patriarchal traditions are often seen as cultural impositions rather than religious imperatives.

The study highlights that while social facts are coercive, they are not immutable. Women exercise invisible agency by complying with certain norms while subtly reinterpreting or bending them in practice, such as pursuing education or contributing to household decision-making. This highlights Durkheim's insight that social facts evolve over time through collective adaptation and resistance.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that gender roles in Nepalese Muslim society are embedded in a broader collective moral order, which is both constraining, enabling, and open to transformation through the everyday practices of women themselves.

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