



Empowerment and social inclusion of Muslim women: Towards a new conceptual model



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ABSTRACT

We developed a conceptual model of empowerment induced social inclusion. This model postulates that women's empowerment in social, economic, psychological and political spheres improve social inclusion and access to justice institutions. Using multi-stage cluster sampling procedure, we recruited 300 rural Muslim women. Standardized scales were used to measure the key concepts of the model. We used descriptive analyses alongside with structural equation modelling to test the data-model-fit. The women's personal autonomy ($\beta = .221$; $p < 0.001$), political empowerment ($\beta = .169$; $p < 0.01$) and household decision-making ($\beta = .211$; $p < 0.001$) have showed significant partial effect on social inclusion. The domestic consultation ($\beta = .152$; $p < 0.05$) and political empowerment ($\beta = .303$; $p < 0.001$) have showed significant partial effect on access to justice institutions. Model fit indexes showed excellent overall model fits on GFI = 0.999; AGFI = 0.996 and RMSEA = 0.000. The study concludes that women's empowerment in personal, familial, social and political spheres significantly improved their social inclusion and access to justice institutions.

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1. Introduction

Women empowerment is a critical development concern around the world, especially in developing countries. National and international initiatives have made effort to reduce the disparities among women, the empowerment goals are yet to be completely realized globally. In India, women have acquired significant influence on social, economic and political institutions through emancipatory actions and empowerment movements (Handy and Kassam, 2006). This was additionally reinforced when women empowerment became central to the ninth five-year plan (1997–2002). Indian government showed its commitment by observing the year 2001 as the year for women empowerment at national level. Nevertheless, familial, cultural and socio-economic status of women significantly varies across regions, states, social groups and ethnic minorities (Cherayi, 2015; Jose et al., 2010).

Kerala is a socially progressive state ranked highest on Human Development Index (HDI) among all other Indian states. The

Muslims in Kerala are estimated at around a fourth of the state's population, who are the well-educated Muslims in the country (Census, 2011). Nevertheless, Muslim women have been largely silenced and side-lined from the national mainstream (Sachar, 2006). Social institutions viz., religious and cultural factors, patriarchal nature of family maintains and reinforces social exclusion of women especially among minorities such as Muslims, dalits and tribes (Udin, 2012). The structural disabilities on Muslim women are evident in the spheres of education, economic, social and political life, which results in their social exclusion (Brenner, 1996). However, the national and state development efforts through empowerment actions, including educational, legal and socio-cultural have significantly contributed to empowerment of women. Evidence suggests that the empowerment needs and the level of empowerment enjoyed by Muslim women are different in diverse socio-cultural contexts across the states in India (Ahmed, 1986; Anwar et al., 2013; Haron, 2008).

India's social composition includes several marginalized sections such as dalits, tribes, women of religious minority groups, sexual minorities, elderly and children in difficult situations (Jose and Sultana, 2012). Most of them who belong to these categories are subjected to rights violations on their everyday life. The Muslim women are such a group who are vulnerable to patriarchy and

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structural disability due to gender divide and bias (Jose et al., 2010). Hence, there is a need to have systematic effort to facilitate Muslim women's better access to formal and non-formal justice institutions. This study assumes that empowerment has a significant influence on improving access to formal justice institutions such as court of law, policy, local bodies and alternative traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Hence, the present study examined how Muslim women's empowerment influence access to formal and non-formal justice institutions in Kerala.

Access to justice refers to the capability of people to acquire a solution through formal and informal justice institutions in conformity with human rights standards. The formal justice system includes civil and criminal justice comprises of formal state based justice systems and procedures viz., police, courts, prosecution and custodial measures. The informal justice system refers to elders, spiritual and chief leaders, who initiate to resolve problems and disputes based on widely accepted cultural paradigms (Flomoku and Reeves, 2012; Kenya, 2011).

Access to justice is the fundamental right of any citizens and communities irrespective of caste, creed and colour. Kenya (2011) indicates that women who live below poverty line have reported to experienced difficulty to access justice through formal justice system. As a result, they were likely to seek justice through the informal justice system. Evidently, informal justice system are often more accessible to the poor and disadvantaged people and may have the capacity to provide cheap, quick and culturally relevant remedies. Informal justice systems are prevalent to the entire world especially in developing countries (Chopra and Isser, 2011; Harrington, & Tanya, 2010). Situating within this conceptual premises, we studied Muslim women's access and affordability to formal and informal justice institutions.

1.1. Socio-economic status of Muslim women in Kerala

Muslims of Kerala are different from Muslims of other states of India on various respects. Being a dominant minority community, they are heirs to a rich culture and history that contributed enormously for shaping Kerala's diverse culture and history. All aspects of Kerala life, including its culture, language, arts, literature, life-style, rituals, housing and cuisine bear distinct imprint of Muslim culture. Nevertheless, Muslims continued to be alienated or absent from Kerala's public sphere even today. It is partly due to the prejudices deliberately manufactured against Muslims while most cultural and historical legacies of Muslims have not been codified yet (Mazumdar and Guruswamy, 2006).

The socio-economic indicator of Kerala is much better than the other states in India. It is balanced in all districts in the state. Indeed, Muslim women belong to the Malabar region are distinct in education, employment and participation in public sectors since years due to the cultural and religious restrictions (Eapen and Kodoth, 2003). Studies proved that more than the socio-economic deprivation of family, cultural and religious factors clearly makes it more difficult for girls to get education than for boys. It is observed that girls dropouts from schools at the earliest. About 50% of Muslim women in India are illiterate, the literacy being officially defined as rather generously to include just anyone can read and write a sentence. About 85% of north Indian Muslim women from rural areas are unable to read and write. On the other hand, the situation in the urban areas of the south was considerably better while 88% of the south Indian women were literate. In Kerala, the literacy rate of Muslim was 89.4%, much higher than the national average (64.8%). Muslim male literacy rate is 93.7% and female literacy rate is 85.5%. The accessibility of higher education among Muslim women is limited when compared to the women of other communities in the state (Census, 2011; Chacko, 2003).

The status of women needs to be viewed in the context of their access to knowledge, economic resources and political power as well as their personal autonomy in the process of decision-making (UNDP, 2004; Acharya et al., 2010). Muslim women often face gender disparities associated with the patriarchal gender system. In Muslim communities, veiling and sex-segregation form the part of the gender system. Muslim women are underrepresented in formal politics; their activism within Muslim states for the advancement of women's rights and interests is widespread and growing. Advocacy and activist groups have proliferated, exhibiting great variety in their political complexion, in their avowal of religious commitment, and in the radicalism of their demands for change (Hasan, 1989).

Given these systemic barriers to women empowerment and social inclusion, the present study examined the factors contributing to Muslim women's empowerment and its influence on social inclusion and access to justice institutions.

2. Problem formulation

Women of marginalized social aggregates experience psychosocial disability that substantially limit and restrict their social participation, access to basic rights and formal justice systems (Jose et al., 2011; Cherayi, 2015). Muslim women were one of such marginalised group, who were excluded in their familial and social life. They reported low personal autonomy, less influence on household decision-making and political empowerment (Hasan, 1989; Jayaweera, 1997; Jejeebhoy and Sathar, 2001). Kerala reported substantial level of empowerment and access to basic rights among women. Nevertheless, little is known about the empowerment, social participation and access to basic rights and justice for Muslim women. Hence, it is imperative to examine Muslim women's empowerment in different spheres of life induce women's access justice through formal and informal justice institutions and their inclusion in familial and social life. This study therefore examined women's perceived competence and confidence to access and avail different forms of justice delivering systems. It also examined how gender biased social disability constrains women's sense of empowerment. Besides, little is known about how the construct empowerment induces inclusion in formal and informal justice institutions.

The present study examined how empowerment helps in accessing formal and informal justice institutions. Empowerment is closely associated with the socio-economic status and their participation in household matters. Evidence suggests that women's empowerment has substantially improved inclusion in various spheres of social life (Batliwala, 1994; Bennett, 1997; Kabeer, 2002). Considering these factors, the present study hypothesised that Muslim women's empowerment viz., personal autonomy, influence in family decision making, status in domestic consultation and political empowerment is likely to increase their social inclusion. Further, it was hypothesised that Muslim women's empowerment is likely to improve their access to formal and informal justice institutions.

This model (Fig. 1) was conceptualized to explain how women's empowerment accelerates social inclusion and inclusion in formal and informal institutions of justice. Based on the review of literature, previous work experience and causal observations with Muslim women in Kerala, we developed a conceptual model on empowerment induced social inclusion. This model postulates that different aspects of women's empowerment such as social, economic, psychological and political, significantly induce the process of social inclusion of women in formal and informal justice institutions. Therefore, the present study empirically validates the key conceptualizations raised; thereby test the suitability of this model to explain the role of empowerment in promoting women's

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