Muslim Women's Participation in Sustainable Development: Issues and Opportunities

Dr. Shavanam
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology
M.G Balika (P G) College, Firozabad
Shavanm.336@gmail.com

Abstract - This study examines Muslim women's participation in sustainable development, highlighting their unique socio-cultural, religious, and economic challenges and opportunities. Using secondary data, it analyses global and Indian contexts through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative indicators and qualitative case studies. The research underscores the crucial role of integrating Islamic principles with sustainable development frameworks to enhance Muslim women's empowerment. Key issues include limited education, health disparities, socio-economic exclusion, and low representation in leadership. The paper advocates for faith-sensitive policies, educational initiatives, digital inclusion, and community engagement as pathways to increase Muslim women's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Findings suggest that leveraging Islamic values alongside progressive development strategies can foster inclusive growth and gender equality.

Keywords: Muslim women, sustainable development, Islamic principles, empowerment, gender equality, socio-cultural barriers, SDGs.

I.   INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations (1987), sustainable development refers to progress that fulfils the needs of the present without endangering the ability of future generations to fulfil their own. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced in 2015, highlight gender equality (Goal 5) and the empowerment of all women as key priorities. This includes Muslim women, who constitute a substantial segment of the global female population and often encounter overlapping challenges influenced by religious, cultural, and socio-economic factors.

According to UN Women (2024), women in Muslim-majority countries hold only 15% of high-level decision-making positions, compared to the global average of 25%. The World Economic Forum (2018) notes stark differences across Muslim countries: Kazakhstan reports a 74% female labour participation rate, whereas Saudi Arabia reports only 21%. This disparity highlights varied socio-cultural norms and policy environments within the Muslim world.

In the Indian context, data from the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21)** indicate that the literacy rate among Muslim women stands at 55%, which is significantly below the national average of 74%. Health statistics further underscore existing inequalities, with Muslim women showing elevated maternal mortality rates and reduced immunization coverage compared to their Hindu and Christian counterparts (NFHS-5, 2021). Additionally, their labour force participation remains under 20% (NSSO, 2020), a situation further influenced by prevailing socio-cultural constraints.

Given these disparities, understanding Muslim women's specific barriers and opportunities within sustainable development frameworks is essential. This research addresses this gap by analysing secondary data on education, health, economic participation, and religious interpretations to inform policy and practice. The study's objectives include exploring barriers, assessing opportunities through education and economic empowerment, and recommending culturally sensitive interventions.

II.   SOCIOLOGICAL & THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Gender and Development Theory (GAD) (Kabeer, 1999) views women as active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries. It focuses on transforming power relations and addressing structural inequalities that limit women's participation in development. For Muslim women, GAD highlights the need to challenge patriarchal norms restricting education, employment, and decision-making. For example, microfinance initiatives like Bangladesh's BRAC program empower Muslim women economically but require broader social reforms to enhance agency.

Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) explains how overlapping identities—such as gender, religion, ethnicity, and class—create unique experiences of oppression. Muslim women often face discrimination rooted not only in gender but also in religious minority status and socio-economic factors. For instance, Muslim women in rural India experience compounded barriers to education and healthcare access compared to other groups, demanding policies that address these intersecting inequalities.

Empowerment Framework (Kabeer, 1999) conceptualizes empowerment as the ability to make strategic life choices

through access to resources, agency, and achievements. Muslim women's empowerment involves improving access to education, economic resources, and decision-making power. Self-help groups in Kerala, India, have helped Muslim women gain financial literacy and community influence, although cultural constraints on mobility remain a challenge.

Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) focuses on how individuals internalize societal gender norms, shaping their behaviour and perceptions of appropriate roles. In many Muslim communities, socialization teaches women to prioritize family care and modesty, limiting public engagement. For example, young Muslim girls in Pakistan may be discouraged from pursuing higher education or careers, restricting their developmental opportunities.

Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the *Matrix of Domination* (1990) explains how various systems of oppression—like patriarchy, economic disadvantage, and religious bias—intersect and reinforce each other. This framework is particularly relevant to the experiences of Muslim women in India, who navigate restrictions imposed by religious and cultural norms, economic marginalization, and their position as a minority in a predominantly Hindu society. These overlapping factors significantly contribute to their limited participation in the labour market.

Social Construction of Gender (Lorber, 1994) posits that gender roles are socially constructed and vary across cultures. Muslim women's roles, such as caretakers and modest individuals, are shaped by cultural and religious norms that differ by country. For example, Saudi Arabia enforces strict gender segregation limiting women's public participation, while Turkey exhibits greater female participation in education and workforce, reflecting differing gender constructions.

Standpoint Theory (Smith, 1987) emphasizes that marginalized groups hold unique knowledge and perspectives that challenge dominant power structures. Listening to Muslim women's own experiences is vital to formulating effective development policies. Research from India shows that Muslim women's narratives reveal cultural and systemic barriers to healthcare access, underscoring the need for community-informed solutions.

Conflict Theory (Engels, 1884) views society as a struggle for resources where dominant groups maintain power by oppressing others. In Muslim communities, male-dominated elites often restrict women's access to land, inheritance, and economic opportunities, hindering empowerment despite legal rights. This dynamic is evident in parts of India where family structures control women's property rights.

Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) examines how daily interactions and symbols construct social realities. In conservative Muslim households, interactions that emphasize female modesty discourage women's public roles such as education or employment. These symbolic meanings reinforce restrictive gender norms, limiting Muslim women's participation in broader societal development.

III. OBJECTIVES

- To explore socio-cultural, economic, and religious barriers limiting Muslim women's participation in sustainable development.

- To analyse educational, economic, and policy opportunities for empowering Muslim women.

- To assess how Islamic teachings and their interpretations can support or hinder Muslim women's empowerment.

- To review national and international secondary data relevant to Muslim women's development.

- To recommend faith-sensitive and community-focused policy interventions.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on secondary data and integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of Muslim women's involvement in sustainable development. Quantitative data were gathered from national surveys such as NFHS-5 (2019-21), NSSO (2020), and international reports from UN Women (2022), the World Bank (2021), and WHO. Qualitative data include case studies and thematic analyses drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles and books addressing Muslim women's socio-economic status and religious interpretations (Jahan et al., 2022; Begum et al., 2023; Nasreen et al., 2024; Tajkia, 2023). Religious texts such as the Quran and Hadith were also reviewed to understand Islamic perspectives on gender roles. The mixed-methods approach facilitates comprehensive insights into barriers, opportunities, and cultural dynamics shaping Muslim women's empowerment.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Perspective: UNDP and World Bank Reports

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020) and World Bank (2021) reports utilize large-scale quantitative data analysis covering multiple countries to assess women's participation in sustainable development globally. The UNDP's Gender Equality Index analyses indicators like labour force participation, education, and political representation, using cross-national statistical methods. The World Bank employs econometric techniques to correlate women's empowerment with improvements in social and environmental indicators. The conclusion highlights that global progress on gender equality is uneven,

and culturally sensitive policies are essential to enable sustainable development that includes women, especially in minority communities.

Islamic Viewpoint: Quranic and Hadith-Based Interpretations

Scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (1982) and Amina Wadud (1999) adopt qualitative hermeneutic methodologies to reinterpret Islamic texts, advocating gender justice and women's empowerment. Their work critically analyses Quranic verses and Hadiths through feminist theological lenses. Rahman emphasizes justice and equality as Islamic values, while Wadud promotes active participation of women in social and religious spheres. Field studies (Khan, 2022) employing interviews and textual analysis in Muslim communities support these views, showing that progressive Islamic interpretations can foster women's inclusion in development processes. The conclusion is that integrating Islamic principles with sustainable development strategies offers a culturally relevant path for empowering Muslim women.

Indian and South Asian Context: Jahan et al. (2022)

Jahan et al. (2022) use a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic fieldwork and structured surveys in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Qualitative interviews with Muslim women reveal socio-cultural barriers including restrictions on mobility and education. Quantitative data from local government reports corroborate low female literacy and economic participation. The study concludes that socio-cultural norms and infrastructural deficits jointly restrict Muslim women's development opportunities, and targeted interventions are needed to address these intertwined barriers.

Bangladesh Context: Begum et al. (2023)

Begum et al. (2023) employ a district-level mixed-methods study combining quantitative governance data with qualitative focus groups in Bangladesh. The research identifies cultural restrictions and weak governance structures as key obstacles limiting Muslim women's participation in development programs. The study concludes that enhancing women's governance roles and culturally appropriate interventions can significantly improve their engagement and empowerment.

Health Access Study in India: Nasreen et al. (2024)

Nasreen et al. (2024) use quantitative statistical analysis of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data alongside qualitative interviews to examine health disparities among Muslim women in India. The quantitative data show that Muslim women have lower health indicators compared to Hindu and Christian women, such as maternal health and child nutrition metrics. Interviews reveal barriers such as limited healthcare access and socio-cultural taboos. The conclusion calls for health policy reforms that are culturally sensitive and inclusive of Muslim women's specific needs.

Book Review

"Islamic Feminism and Social Change" (Karim-Cooper, 2021)

Karim-Cooper (2021) adopts a qualitative feminist approach, examining historical documents, case studies, and conducting interviews with Muslim women activists from various countries. The book critiques patriarchal norms and presents Islamic feminism as a tool for reconciling faith with women's rights and social justice. It concludes that grassroots movements grounded in Islamic feminism are crucial drivers for social change and sustainable development among Muslim women.

"Women and Development in the Muslim World" (Abbas, 2023)

Abbas (2023) uses a comparative qualitative analysis synthesizing case studies and secondary data from UN reports. The research examines how legal frameworks, educational opportunities, and religious contexts shape the developmental roles of women in both Muslim-majority and minority settings. The conclusion highlights that faith-sensitive development models show promise in overcoming barriers and promoting women's empowerment.

Digital Inclusion and Economic Participation: Nasreen & Fatima (2024)

Nasreen and Fatima (2024) conduct a mixed-methods study combining surveys and in-depth interviews with Muslim women entrepreneurs in India to assess the impact of digital literacy on economic empowerment. Quantitative results show a 35% income increase among digitally literate women. Qualitative data reveal that digital platforms help circumvent mobility and cultural restrictions. The conclusion stresses digital inclusion as a transformative tool for sustainable economic participation among Muslim women.

VI.   OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION

Islamic Microfinance and Entrepreneurship

Islamic microfinance provides Sharia-compliant financial services that help Muslim women start businesses without violating religious principles (Obaidullah, 2018). Studies (Karim & Chowdhury, 2022) show these services enhance women's economic independence and promote sustainable livelihoods, especially in sectors like handicrafts and agriculture.

Female Education and Literacy Campaigns

Education is key to empowering Muslim women. Programs like UNESCO's literacy initiatives and local campaigns such as "Educate a Girl" in Pakistan have improved female literacy rates by involving community and religious leaders (Ahmed & Begum, 2023). Education enhances job prospects and empowers individuals to engage in health-related and political spheres, aligning with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

NGO Interventions and Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

NGOs form SHGs that empower Muslim women through credit access, skill development, and social networking (Rao & Hassan, 2022). These groups foster leadership and confidence, combining economic support with awareness on health and rights, often integrating Islamic values to ensure cultural acceptance.

Government and UN-Supported Programs (SDG 5)

Government schemes like India's "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" and UN Women's faith-inclusive programs promote gender equality and women's empowerment (UN Women, 2022). These initiatives support education, vocational training, microcredit, and political participation in Muslim communities.

Online Learning and Social Media (Digital Inclusion)

Digital technologies provide adaptable avenues for education and entrepreneurship, helping to bypass mobility limitations (Nasreen & Fatima, 2024). Social media helps build support networks and raise awareness within Islamic contexts, making digital inclusion a vital tool for Muslim women's sustainable development.

Qualitative Analysis (Case Studies & Themes)

Sri Lanka: Governance Barriers (Begum et al., 2023)

Begum et al. (2023) conducted a mixed-methods study in Sri Lanka focusing on Muslim women's participation in district-level governance. Through focus groups and interviews, the study revealed significant barriers, including patriarchal social norms and limited decision-making roles for women in local councils. These restrictions reduce women's ability to influence development policies and programs. The study emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive governance reforms and increased leadership training to empower Muslim women in political spaces.

India: Health Access Challenges (Nasreen et al., 2024)

Nasreen et al. (2024) combined qualitative interviews with quantitative NFHS-5 data to explore health access issues for Muslim women in India. Interviews with women in rural and urban areas highlighted barriers such as socio-cultural taboos, lack of female healthcare providers, and poor infrastructure. Quantitative data showed lower maternal and child health indicators compared to other religious groups. The research calls for health policies that address these specific cultural and logistical challenges to improve health outcomes among Muslim women.

Bangladesh: Economic Empowerment and Cultural Restrictions (Tajkia, 2023)

Tajkia's (2023) qualitative case study in Bangladesh used participant observation and in-depth interviews with Muslim women entrepreneurs. While economic empowerment opportunities exist through microfinance and vocational training, deep-rooted cultural restrictions on women's mobility and public engagement limit their full participation. The study suggests community-based awareness programs and involvement of male family members to support women's economic activities within accepted cultural frameworks.

Role of Islamic Education in Empowerment (Jahan et al., 2022)

Jahan et al. (2022) explored how gender-equitable Islamic education promotes empowerment using a qualitative approach based on interviews with educators and students in India. Their findings show that curricula emphasizing equality and rights within an Islamic framework help challenge patriarchal norms and encourage women's active roles in community development. The study highlights the transformative potential of reformed religious education in advancing Muslim women's sustainable development participation.

Quantitative Data (National & International Reports)

UN Women (2022) Report

According to the UN Women (2022) report, only about 15% of women in Muslim-majority countries hold positions in high-level decision-making roles, highlighting a significant gender gap in political and economic leadership. This underrepresentation limits Muslim women's influence on policies related to sustainable development and gender equality, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to increase their leadership opportunities.

National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), India

Data from India's NSSO reveals that Muslim women's literacy rate is substantially lower than the national average. As per the 2017-18 survey, literacy among Muslim women stands at approximately 59%, compared to the national female literacy rate of 65% (NSSO, 2018). This educational gap restricts Muslim women's access to employment and socio-economic advancement, impacting their role in achieving sustainable development goals.

World Bank (2021) Labor Force Participation Data

The World Bank's 2021 statistics indicate that women's labour force participation in South Asia is below 30%, with Muslim women participating at even lower rates. In countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, cultural, religious, and structural barriers reduce Muslim women's employment opportunities, limiting their economic empowerment and contribution to sustainable development.

National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), India (2021)

The NFHS-5 report (2021) highlights that Muslim women in India experience poorer health indicators than Hindu and Christian women, including higher rates of maternal mortality, malnutrition, and limited access to healthcare facilities. For instance, Muslim women have a maternal mortality ratio of 178 deaths per 100,000 live births, which exceeds the national average of 145, according to NFHS-5 (2021). These health disparities pose significant challenges to the sustainable development of Muslim communities.

Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2021)

UNESCO's 2021 report underscores that female literacy rates in Muslim-majority countries have improved but still lag behind global averages. For instance, literacy among women aged 15-24 in these countries is around 75%, compared to 90% in developed nations. This gap affects Muslim women's ability to engage fully in sustainable development processes, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive education policies.

World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (2023)

The WEF's 2023 Global Gender Gap Report ranks many Muslim-majority countries low in gender equality, particularly in economic participation and political empowerment. Countries like Yemen and Pakistan rank near the bottom globally, with scores indicating less than 20% parity in economic opportunities for women. This data highlights persistent structural challenges Muslim women face in accessing equal development opportunities.

VII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop **faith-sensitive development models** that integrate Islamic teachings supporting women's rights.

- Promote **inclusive Islamic scholarship** encouraging female religious leaders.

- Strengthen **women-centric development schemes** specifically targeting Muslim women's socio-economic needs.

- Implement **digital literacy and access programs** for rural and urban Muslim women.

- Support **female religious scholars and activists** as community advocates.

- Enforce **gender-responsive budgeting** prioritizing Muslim women's development.

- Foster **public-private partnerships** enhancing entrepreneurship and employment.

- Improve **healthcare services** tailored to Muslim women's cultural contexts.

- Reform **education curricula** to challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equity.

- Facilitate **community dialogues** involving religious leaders to dismantle socio-cultural barriers.

- Advocate for **legal reforms** ensuring Muslim women's rights in education, employment, and health.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Muslim women's participation is crucial for sustainable development but remains limited by deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers, including gender discrimination, restricted mobility, and limited decision-making power within families and communities (Begum et al., 2023; Nasreen et al., 2024). Qualitative studies reveal how patriarchal norms and cultural expectations often marginalize women's voices, despite Islamic teachings promoting gender justice and equality (Jahan et al., 2022). Quantitative data from UN Women (2022) and NFHS-5 (2021) confirm disparities in education, health, and political representation, further hindering empowerment. Addressing these challenges requires culturally sensitive, faith-aligned policies that enhance education, economic opportunities through Sharia-compliant microfinance, gender-sensitive healthcare, and increased political participation. Inclusive Islamic scholarship that promotes gender equity can challenge patriarchal attitudes and empower communities from within. Multi-sector collaboration is essential to create enabling environments where Muslim women can actively engage in sustainable development, fostering social justice, economic independence, and improved well-being.

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