

The Concept of Gender Equity and its Relation to Women's Employment in Sri Lanka: An Islamic Perspective

MOHAMED SULTHAN ISMIYA BEGUM*

Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, #32360 Oluvil, Sri Lanka
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7221-2659>

MOHAMED MAHROOF ALI ABDULLAH

Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyah of Laws, International Islamic University Malaysia, Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Malaysia
ORCID iD : <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5022-2806>

ZUL' AZMI YAAKOB

Research Centre for Theology & Philosophy, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
ORCID iD : <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6834-5622>

WAN FARIZA ALYATI WAN ZAKARIA

Research Centre for Theology & Philosophy, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
ORCID iD : <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4509-7638>

MOHAMMED ZAWAHIR MOHAMMED NAHEEL

Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion, University of South Australia Magill Campus, Adelaide SA 5001, Australia
ORCID iD : <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0821-4401>

*Corresponding Author; email: ismiyams@seu.ac.lk

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ABSTRACT

Islam was the first religion to introduce the concept of gender equity, emphasising justice and balanced rights between men and women. However, its practical application remains uneven across many Muslim societies. This issue is particularly evident in minority-Muslim contexts such as Sri Lanka's Ampara District, where Muslim women often face challenges in applying Islamic gender equity in the workplace due to cultural norms, misinterpretations of religious teachings, and limited awareness of their Islamic rights. The central research problem highlights a significant discrepancy between the theoretical "Islamic equity doctrine" and the lived professional experiences of these women. Despite the economic rights guaranteed under Shari'ah, female public sector employees encounter systemic challenges rooted in limited religious literacy and conservative socio-cultural expectations. The primary objectives of this research are to analyse the perceptions of professional Muslim women regarding Islamic employment guidelines and to evaluate the extent to which the concept of Islamic equity is implemented in their daily professional lives. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employed purposive sampling and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fourteen professional Muslim women, including university lecturers, medical doctors, and engineers. Data were managed using QSR NVivo 10 and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and structural barriers. The findings reveal that participants primarily enter the workforce due to economic necessity and localised dowry pressures, often selecting Shari'ah-compliant roles that accommodate Islamic modesty. While these women prioritise domestic responsibilities and adhere to religious dress codes, they experience a pronounced "double burden" alongside institutional barriers such as male-centric promotion biases and excessive workloads. The study concludes that the professional landscape in the Ampara District reflects a form of "negotiated equity" rather than a full realisation of Islamic doctrine. Consequently, bridging this gap requires institutional policy reforms that align workplace environments with Islamic principles of justice and mutual respect, ensuring that professional advancement is not constrained by cultural misconstructions or structural inequities.

Keywords: Ampara District; gender equity; Islamic perspective; women's employment; women's perception

INTRODUCTION

Gender equity in employment is a critical issue with global significance, particularly in Muslim-majority societies across the Middle East, South Africa, South Asia, and South East Asia (Sidani 2005; Strachan et al. 2023). Although Islam advocates for justice and gender equity, the practical implementation of these principles varies due to diverse cultural norms, socio-economic conditions, and legal frameworks (Ali et al. 2022). In the Middle East, for example, women's participation in the workforce has increased in recent years; however, barriers such as limited access to leadership roles persist (Assi 2020). Sidani (2005) highlights that women's participation was generally low, with significant variation across Arab countries some relaxing restrictions, while others, like Saudi Arabia, maintained strict controls.

In Southeast Asian countries, particularly Malaysia, Muslim women's participation in higher education and the professional workforce has significantly increased in recent years. However, conservative interpretations of Islam continue to restrict the aspirations of female managers and employees, particularly within "Shari'ah-compliant" corporations, resulting in a sense of ambivalence and limited career advancement. Moreover, although Islam promotes gender equity, women in Indonesia known for their gentle, caring, and nurturing nature often face injustices and harsh treatment in various areas of life. Inequitable access to and control over resources continues to be a significant issue affecting women in society (Sahliah & Marpaung 2022). In South Africa, Muslim women face a range of challenges that hinder their career advancement. These include external barriers such as discrimination related to wearing the headscarf, exclusion from male-dominated professional networks, workplace practices that overlook religious needs, and societal and cultural expectations about women's roles. Additionally, internal factors like a lack of assertiveness and limited educational opportunities further restrict their participation. These combined challenges contribute to the underrepresentation of Muslim women in the professional workforce (Agherdien 2025).

Similarly, in South Asia, women encounter obstacles to professional advancement and gender equity in employment (Strachan et al. 2023). This study examines how Muslim women employed in the public sector in Sri Lanka's Ampara district navigate

professional challenges while adhering to Islamic principles. By offering localized insights grounded in lived experiences, the research contributes meaningfully to the broader international discourse on gender equity in Islamic contexts. Its findings are expected to attract scholarly interest across multiple regions, particularly those engaged in discussions surrounding women's rights, religion, and social justice.

Feminism has introduced a range of concepts, among which gender equality and equity have emerged as pivotal frameworks for analyzing gender dynamics (Ibrahim et al. 2022). Gender equity acknowledges that men and women, influenced by biological differences, gendered experiences, and social distinctions such as race, religion, and language, possess varying interests, needs, and priorities (Arizah 2018). In this regard, Islam emphasizes equality across spiritual, economic, and social dimensions. However, it is important to acknowledge that although different genders may seek parity in various areas of life, they do not possess identical rights (Begum et al. 2024; Hamisan et al. 2021). The Qur'an 3:36 explicitly articulates this distinction: "*The male is not like the female*". As noted by Assim al-Hakeem (2021), this scriptural reference suggests that the Islamic interpretation of gender equality is fundamentally flawed. Ayatollah Seyyed Mohamed Hossain Tehrani further asserts that equality should not be equated with similarity, as intrinsic differences between the sexes imply that men and women excel in different domains (Mutiullah 2022).

These differences rooted in their natures, physical structures, and attitudes necessitate distinct responsibilities, rights, and duties (Ahamed 2013). Consequently, Islam advocates for gender equity rather than strict equality, emphasizing the need to allocate rights based on individual capacities and requirements (Badawi 1995; Ahamed 2013). This framework seeks to establish gender harmony within Islamic teachings, with implications for various aspects of life, including polygamy, inheritance, testimony, family responsibilities, and divorce rights. Central to all Islamic doctrines is the principle of justice, which necessitates that these aspects be actualized in practice to achieve social equity.

This research focuses on the Islamic equity concept as it pertains to women's employment and its practical application among Muslim women. In recent years have witnessed a notable surge in

the labor force participation of Muslim women across various global sectors (Nazeera et al. 2018). However, it has been observed that the principles of the Islamic equity doctrine are often inadequately practiced in Muslim societies, a situation attributed to a lack of religious knowledge (Mihlar 2015). The employment doctrine, in particular, is subject to misinterpretation. Although Islam guarantees full economic rights and freedoms for both men and women within an equitable framework, it also necessitates treatment aligned with women's natural differences. Misunderstandings of these principles can lead to misconceptions and practices that do not reflect Islamic teachings, resulting in challenges for women in both workplace and domestic settings.

The concept of gender equity is a multifaceted theme that encompasses various criteria and perspectives. Among working Muslim women, differing perceptions regarding gender equity exist, influenced by cultural, social, and religious factors. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the practice of the Islamic equity doctrine as it pertains to women's employment, examining it through an Islamic perspective. By analyzing these practices and perceptions, the study seeks to illuminate the complexities and challenges that Muslim women encounter in their professional lives, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of gender equity within Islamic contexts. Thus, Central to this inquiry is an examination of how the concept of Islamic equity is implemented among Muslim women? This inquiry forms the basis for the current research, which operates under the hypothesis that while Islamic guidelines on employment are recognized, Muslim women in the Ampara District of Sri Lanka face significant challenges in their professional lives.

While Islam upholds the principle of gender equity, Muslim women particularly in minority-Muslim contexts such as Sri Lanka's Ampara District frequently encounter challenges in the practical implementation of these principles within the workplace. These challenges often stem from prevailing cultural norms, misinterpretations of religious teachings, and limited awareness of women's rights as outlined in Islamic doctrine. Despite the growing participation of Muslim women in the workforce, there is a notable gap in research examining how they navigate employment while adhering to Islamic values. By delving into the lived experiences of Muslim women within the public sector, this research aims to uncover how Islamic

gender equity principles are practically applied in professional settings, thereby addressing a critical void in the current literature.

Thus, this research holds significance in illuminating the application of the Islamic equity concept concerning women's employment within the Sri Lankan context, contributing to a broader understanding of gender dynamics in Muslim societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse on gender equity in Islam reveals a nuanced understanding of the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women, particularly concerning economic obligations. Central to this discussion is the principle that while Islamic principles uphold the fundamental equality of men and women in terms of their inherent rights, a clear distinction emerges regarding their functional roles especially concerning family sustenance, which are distinctly defined

ECONOMIC RESPONSIBILITY AND GENDER ROLES

A fundamental tenet of Islamic teachings is that men bear the full financial responsibility for maintaining their families. Azeem et al. (2013) and Muhammed (2015) are among the scholars who have noted this expectation, while others like Parveen and Rubab (2013) and Shehu and Zejno (2015) further highlight how this aligns with traditional interpretations of Islamic law. The expectation that men are financially responsible for their families is a key aspect of traditional Islamic teachings, as noted by scholars such as Azeem et al. (2013) and Muhammed (2015). This framework often limits women's economic participation, making income generation non-compulsory for them (Patoari 2019; Mihlar 2015; Chaudry 2006; Badawi 1995; Doi 1990). As a result, societal pressures may lead women to focus on domestic roles, hindering their economic independence. Traditional gender roles reinforce these limitations, creating barriers to career opportunities.

However, an emerging discourse on gender equity within Islam advocates for interpretations that support women's economic involvement, suggesting that financial independence can benefit families and communities. Overall, while traditional expectations shape the economic landscape, they

also pose challenges to women's empowerment, necessitating a more nuanced investigation into these dynamics to promote gender equity in Islamic contexts.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC FREEDOM AND EMPLOYMENT

The literature on women's economic freedom and employment within Islamic contexts reveals a complex interplay between rights and restrictions. Despite the financial obligations placed on men, women in Islam are granted significant economic freedoms. Scholars assert that women have the right to work and engage in economic activities, provided these pursuits adhere to Islamic principles (Abdulhameed 2019; Azeem et al. 2013; Azizah et al. 2019; Kounsar 2017; Nadeem 2020; Qaradawi 2010). However, these freedoms are often accompanied by specific limitations, emphasizing that women's career choices must be compatible with *Shari'ah* law (Saleh 2022; Muhammed 2015; Mihlar 2015; Jabir 2015). Overall, while women are recognized as having the right to engage in economic activities, the constraints imposed by interpretations of *Shari'ah* law can limit their opportunities and empowerment, indicating a need for further critical examination of these dynamics.

PRIORITIZATION OF FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

A recurring theme in the literature is the expectation for women to prioritize familial duties. This emphasis is reinforced by various scholars, who argue that the Islamic framework encourages women to focus on family responsibilities, which are considered integral to societal stability (Ihram 2012; Muhammed 2015; Husain 2017; Shehadeh 2000). Such perspectives reflect a broader cultural ethos that values the family unit and its preservation. However, this emphasis on familial duties may simultaneously constrain women's autonomy and limit their opportunities for personal and professional development.

MODESTY AND SOCIAL CONDUCT

The doctrine of modesty exerts a significant influence over women's economic participation and social conduct. Numerous authors highlight

the importance of modesty in various aspects of a woman's life, including her professional demeanour and attire (Doi 1990; Al-Sheha 2000; Siddiq & Ruby 2018; Okon 2013; Yufenu 2017; Sulaiman & Raifu 2020; Osmani 2012). This principle serves to guide women's interactions in the public sphere, ensuring alignment with Islamic values.

GUIDELINES FOR TRAVEL AND SOCIAL ITERATIONS

Further reinforcing the framework of gender roles, the literature addresses guidelines related to travel and social interactions. Women are often advised to observe Mahram (male guardians) and Ajnabi (non-related men) restrictions when traveling, underscoring the importance of protection and social boundaries (Hanim 2019; Asar & Ghalia 2016; Al-Sheha 2000; Qaradawi 2010). These guidelines reflect the broader Islamic concern for family integrity and social order.

The literature on gender equity in Islam illustrates a complex interplay between rights and responsibilities. While men are tasked with financial provision, women are afforded economic freedoms, albeit within certain constraints. The emphasis on family responsibilities, modesty, and guidelines for social interactions highlights the intricate framework that governs gender roles in Islamic society. This body of work not only elucidates the foundational principles of gender equity within Islam but also invites ongoing discussion regarding the evolving interpretations and practices within contemporary contexts.

The criteria of the gender equity concept in Islam regarding women's employment include the recognition of Women's occupational entitlements and achieve financial independence, the importance of modesty and ethical conduct in professional environments, and the need to balance work with traditional family roles. Additionally, it emphasizes non-discrimination in hiring and promotion practices, ensuring equal opportunities for women in the workforce. Together, these elements form a comprehensive framework for understanding gender equity in Islamic perspectives on employment.

Based on the information discussed above, the study's conceptual framework was drawn as follows:

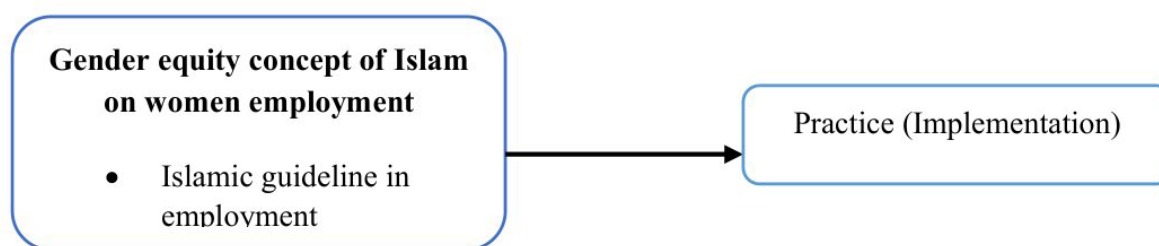


FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework of the Study

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research investigates the specific socio-cultural landscape of the Ampara District in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, where a predominantly Muslim population resides. A total of fourteen professional Muslim women participated in the study. The participants represented a range of professions, including university lecturers, a university librarian, a registrar, development officers, a counselor, medical doctors, and engineers. The study purposively selected university-educated Muslim women employed in the public sector to obtain insights from individuals who are likely to

be familiar with gender equity issues and Islamic perspectives. Many of the participants had academic backgrounds in sociology, Islamic studies, and other relevant disciplines, which added depth and diversity to the analysis. This sampling strategy also ensured representation from various localities within the Ampara District, including Sainthamaruthu, Maruthamunai, Ninthavur, Akkaraipattu, Sammanthurai, and Oluvil. To protect the privacy of participants, all identifying information was anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in all case studies and related analyses.

The specific demographic summary of the respondents is detailed in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1. Demographic details

Respondent	Region	Profession	Nature of profession	Type of profession	Status of profession
R1	Sainthamaruthu	Lecturer	Academic	Government	Permanent
R2	Sainthamaruthu	Doctor (MBBS)	Non- Academic	Government	Permanent
R3	Sainthamaruthu	Lecturer	Academic	Government	Permanent
R4	Sainthamaruthu	Development Officer	Non- Academic	Government	Permanent
R5	Sainthamaruthu	Engineer	Non- Academic	Gvernment	Permanent
R6	Sainthamaruthu	Counsellor	Non- Academic	Government	Permanent
R7	Akkaraipathu	Lawyer	Non- Academic	Government	Permanent
R8	Maruthamunai	Librarian	Non- Academic	Government	Permanent
R9	Sainthamaruthu	Engineer	Non- Academic	Government	Permanent
R10	Sainthamaruthu	Doctor (MBBS)	Non- Academic	Government	Permanent
R11	Ninthavur	Assistant Registrar	Non-Academic	Government	Permanent
R12	Sammanthurai	Lecturer	Academic	Government	Permanent
R13	Sainthamaruthu	Lecturer	Academic	Government	Permanent
R14	Oluvil	Lecturer	Academic	Government	Permanent

Primary data was gathered via face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This approach facilitated an immersive and nuanced investigation of each participant's experiences, insights, and interpretations concerning Islamic gender equity and employment. All interviews were conducted in

Tamil, the respondents' native language, to ensure comfort, authenticity, and clarity of responses. Following participant consent, the sessions were audio-captured, documented through word-for-word transcription, and later translated into English for analytical purposes. Data analysis was carried

out using QSR NVivo 10 software to organize and manage the qualitative data effectively. After thorough reading and familiarization with the transcripts, the researcher categorized responses into themes based on recurring patterns and key

concepts. study's objectives. This process provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges and practices related to gender equity as experienced by Muslim women professionals in the context of Islamic teachings.

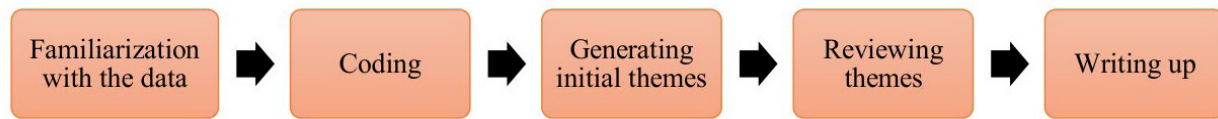


FIGURE 2. Resource: Kampira & Meyer (2019)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 professional Muslim women,

the following main and sub themes were identified. Table 2 illustrates it as follows:

TABLE 2. Main and sub-themes

Main themes	Sub-theme / categorise	Codes / unitization
The perception on the practice of Islamic guidelines in employment	Practice of Islamic guidelines in employment	Engagement in work considering circumstances Shari'ah-compliant job selection Prioritization of family responsibilities Maintenance of modesty
Islamic equity concept on women's employment in practice	1. Women's working rights in practice	Husband denies permission to work Women's Preference to Work
	2. Women faced issues while working	Harassment Working load Dual burden Discrimination in achieving higher position

THE PERCEPTION ON THE PRACTICE OF ISLAMIC GUIDELINES IN EMPLOYMENT

This theme describes the perceptions regarding the circumstances under which women can work.

PRACTICE OF ISLAMIC GUIDELINES IN EMPLOYMENT

Engagement in Work Considering Circumstances

Although Islam does not mandate that women must work, it grants them the right to do so and defines the circumstances under which they may work. According to the respondents, all indicated that they work to mitigate economic barriers and family-related issues. They view most problems arising from a lack of money; thus, they choose to work to avoid depending on others and prevent economic

problems and family violence. As one respondent stated:

"I have to work to maintain harmony in my family. Several issues arise in families when there is insufficient money" (Respondent 13).

The incident referenced in the Qur'an (28:23) "We do not water until the shepherds dispatch [their flocks]; and our father is an old man" leads some scholars to infer that women may engage in earning for the family under economic compulsion. Muhammed (2015) and Qaradawi (2010) further explain that a father must assume full responsibility for his daughter before marriage and her husband must assume it after marriage. Her brothers must provide for her and their mother if the father is absent. The Muslim community is obligated to care for her in the absence of her immediate family.

Islam does not mandate that a woman work in a profession. Similarly, Mihlar (2015) indicates that Islam does not condone expecting social assistance without personal effort when one is capable of achieving it. However, two respondents mentioned that women are needed in certain fields for economic purposes. They work with the intent of providing social service. Muhammed (2015) notes that Islam offers women complete opportunities to contribute to societal welfare, allowing them to use their qualities and abilities for the betterment of society. Consequently, some respondents said that women work to contribute to societal well-being. Additionally, certain social structures have encouraged some women to pursue careers. Almost all of respondents (12) claimed that dowry customs in the district motivated them to work.

Shari'ah-Compliant Job Selection

The theme suggests that job selection should align with Islamic *Shari'ah*. According to the equity concept of Islam, certain jobs are deemed inappropriate for women due to considerations of femininity, such as modelling, heavy industrial work, and roles as flight attendants. However, women retain the right to utilize their abilities and skills in any field permitted by Islam. The data from respondents indicate that their career choices fall within Islamic boundaries. Therefore, the majority of Muslim women select jobs that conform to Islamic principles. Examples of such professions include teaching, medicine, engineering, nursing, lecturing, librarianship, business, administrative roles, and management. Respondents view these occupations as acceptable within Islam. Scholars from Sri Lanka, including Muhammad (2015) and Mihlar (2015), assert that women work in diverse professional landscapes such as healthcare, pedagogy, nursing, hairstyling, and both the commercial and agricultural sectors. They may also engage in combat roles. Hence, women can work in any field permitted by Islam. Nawab (1997) states that, even with spousal consent, women cannot profit from their femininity by working as dancers, models, bartenders, movie actresses, musicians, or prostitutes.

Moreover, women have historically contributed significantly to public healthcare since the time of the Prophet (PBUH) (Akhmetova 2016; Alotaibi 2021; Begum et al. 2025; Mihlar 2015). Mihlar (2015) notes that Islam highly values teaching, as demonstrated by Prophet's wife Ayesha (RA), who educated the entire Muslim Ummah, and Hazrat

Rabia Basri, a revered instructor in Islamic history. Consequently, most respondents are engaged in professions permitted by Islam, such as teaching, social work, and nursing. Therefore, respondents consider their professional choices to be within Islamic parameters.

For instance, a participant working as a development officer stated:

“My work is entirely related to social services. I mentor and economically empower women, particularly those living in poverty. Thus, I believe Islam recognizes the value of my line of work” (Respondent 4)

However, a few respondents (3) noted that their career choices did not align with their qualifications. For example, two engineers mentioned they were working in positions not commensurate with their qualifications, such as development officers. One respondent remarked:

“Without a doubt, this is not a career that fits my qualifications” (Respondent 5)

All other respondents affirmed that their career choices were suitable according to their merits.

Prioritization of Family Responsibilities

The theme explores the extent to which Muslim women adhere to Islamic doctrine regarding the prioritization of family responsibilities. All respondents indicated that they prioritize their family over work. They mentioned that they manage office-related tasks at the office and household responsibilities at home to maintain a work-life balance. One respondent, a development officer with an engineering degree, noted that although she brings work home, she avoids neglecting household duties. She chose not to pursue employment commensurate with her qualifications due to family obligations. She expressed:

“I want to choose my qualifying fields, but I don't want to ignore my family's needs and go out” (Respondent 5).

Her primary concern is the welfare of her family. Ihram (2012) suggested that women should work to protect family interests. Respondent 5 further explained that she selected her career to avoid interfering with her commitment to her family.

Despite claiming to prioritize their families, some respondents admitted that balancing work and family responsibilities is challenging. They reported that longer working hours prevented them from

fulfilling familial obligations and spending adequate time with their families. Some found it difficult to place family first and questioned the necessity of their work. They clarified that their motivation was financial, aiming to support their families amid rising living costs. University lecturers among the respondents mentioned that maintaining a work-life balance is challenging but they strive to manage both aspects. One respondent stated:

“Maintaining balance between work and family life is a big challenge. But anyhow, I try to balance both, and it is also an additional burden” (Respondent 12).

Another respondent shared her experience, noting that working women sometimes feel unable to focus on family responsibilities due to work commitments. To illustrate this, Seyyid Qutb argued that women's employment could negatively impact their children, who are considered vital to society (Husain 2017). Although women have a responsibility to build peace, love, and compassion in their families (Rahman et al. 2014), Islam encourages them not to neglect their family responsibilities entirely (Azizah et al. 2019).

Some respondents noted that despite prioritizing family tasks, certain situations necessitate prioritizing work. According to Islamic teachings, a woman serves as a shepherdess over her husband's home and is held spiritually accountable for this guardianship in the afterlife (Sahih Bukhari, 2554). The Qur'an 7:189 states that men find tranquility with their spouses, as described in the verse “*He created you from one soul, and He created their spouses from themselves so that they might find peace*”. Islam views a woman as a source of serenity and tranquillity for her husband, making her primary responsibility to provide peace within the family. A wife who is exhausted from working cannot foster tranquillity at home, which affects her unique skills (Dengni et al. 2014).

Sri Lankan Scholar Muhammed (2015) states that the primary and greatest career of a woman is to teach and educate the new generation. Therefore, the wellbeing of the entire society depends on it. What is the worth of a society that does not have a healthy and capable young generation? Therefore, women should not be misguided into abandoning this role, whether by others who are too ignorant to respect this role, nor by those who want to ‘liberate’ them.

Women must therefore balance their responsibilities and make appropriate choices in every decision. Islam emphasizes that women

should prioritize fulfilling their allocated obligations over other tasks, as they will be held accountable in the hereafter. The results suggest that while many respondents prioritize their family obligations, they sometimes feel that carrying out their duties is accepted.

Maintenance of Modesty

The theme addresses the ways in which Muslim women uphold traditional standards of modesty, particularly when their occupations require them to leave the house. Islam regards modesty as a fundamental virtue, as outlined in the Qur'anic verse 24:31 (Shafie & Othman 2015). This principle is applicable to both men and women, although women are required to observe greater veiling due to differences in nature, temperament, and social roles, especially concerning attire (Doi 1990; Boulanouar 2006; Ahmad et al. 2022). All respondents confirmed that they adhere to Islamic guidelines regarding dress codes.

Muslim women are expected to cover their entire bodies except for their hands and faces unless they are in the company of their spouses (Zainol et al. 2015). The majority of scholars, referencing primary Islamic sources, assert that veiling should cover all parts of the body, including the face, palms, and feet (Abu Syuqqah; Sayyid Sabiq al-Barazi; Muhammad Tariq; Al-Qaradawi, cited in Hamza et al. 2014). Consequently, respondents reported that their attire conforms to Islamic requirements, which includes wearing the traditional dress (*abaya*) that aligns with Islamic teachings on dress covering, looseness, thickness, and avoiding attire that attracts undue attention from men, as indicated in Surah An-Nisa: 30-31. They emphasized that their dress is neither similar to men's nor non-Muslim attire and is not intended for fame, vanity, or pride. Furthermore, the veil, which covers the head, neck, and chest, should not reveal accessories or draw attention, such as by tying the hair in a bun (Hamza et al. 2014).

One respondent recounted avoiding certain medical practices in mock rooms because the dress code did not comply with Islamic principles:

“I never preferred to enter MOOT (Medical Officer in Operational Theatre) due to its dress code system, as it does not reflect Islamic boundaries on dress code” (Respondent 10).

Seyyed Qutb argues that the authentic advancement of a woman is not determined by her professional milestones but by her advancement

in humanity, character, and moral development (Shehadeh 2000). Syed (2010) suggests that such a viewpoint may impede the engagement of Muslim women within the communal sphere, particularly regarding their entry into the formal workforce. However, many believe that the Islamic dress code protects both men and women from harassment and preserves dignity. Previous studies support this view: Rahim et al. (2022) found that wearing a hijab increases feelings of safety, respect, and confidence. Sulaiman and Raifu (2020) noted that modesty helps shield women from sexual harassment, while Abdulssalam (2006) argued that modesty also protects men from potential sexual stimulation. Okon (2013) highlighted that the purpose of covering is to uphold chastity and loyalty as core moral values in both public and private spheres.

The use of perfume is another aspect of modesty; three respondents admitted occasionally using perfume but stated they do not tie their hair in high buns. Modern mixing of men and women is increasingly common, including in the workplace. Islamic principles dictate that anything leading to a prohibited act, such as fornication, should also be avoided. Allah instructs in al-Qur'an 17:32 to avoid approaching adultery, which is deemed shameful and evil. All respondents reported efforts to minimize unnecessary interactions with men. They described various strategies to achieve this, including limiting conversations, delegating duties, and avoiding situations where they are alone with men. For instance, one respondent mentioned:

“However, there are many situations where I have to mix with men at my place of work. In such cases, I avoid socializing as much as possible” (Respondent 3).

Another respondent shared:

“In certain situations, it may be necessary for men and women to collaborate within the same group. I make an effort to distance myself from men whenever possible. For instance, there are times when I have to be alone with a man after many employees leave for lunch. During such times, I go to the prayer room” (Respondent 5).

Some respondents expressed discomfort when working in mixed-gender environments, finding it challenging to remain close to colleagues of the opposite sex. They reported striving to avoid being alone with men and refraining from unnecessary conversations.

ISLAMIC EQUITY CONCEPT ON WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN PRACTICE

This theme clarifies the extent to which the Islamic doctrine of gender equity has been implemented within Muslim society, based on the data collected. This includes the women's working rights and the issues faced women while working.

WOMEN'S WORKING RIGHTS IN PRACTICE

Husband Denies Permission to Work

In Islam, men are generally assigned the primary livelihood duty. However, Islam does not prohibit women from engaging in employment or contributing to the family income if necessary. The verses from the Qur'an such as 4:32 and 28:23 are frequently cited to support women's participation in economic activities. Additionally, many traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) exemplify women's involvement in employment and economic endeavours; for instance, the Prophet's wife Khadija (RA) was a prominent businesswoman. Thus, women have the right to work or earn but cannot engage in employment without their husband's consent.

All respondents noted that while they are permitted to work by their husbands, societal issues arise after marriage when some husbands do not allow their wives to work, despite the women's desire to be employed or contribute financially. This issue often persists if the husband is financially stable, or the wife faces job difficulties. Muhammed (2015) confirms that in Islam, a woman is not obligated to work as financial provision remains the husband's duty to ensure the household's economic stability.

Earlier literature also supports this view. Women in Islam possess the right and responsibility to engage in professional vocations, provided that such pursuits do not compromise their primary obligations within the familial household. A husband's decision to prevent his wife from working is not based on gender bias but on aligning with her nature and responsibilities (Husain 2017). According to Islamic perspective, obtaining the husband's formal authorization is considered a necessary prerequisite before a woman engages in employment (Begum et al. 2024; Asar & Ghalia 2016). The Qur'an 4:34 stipulates that livelihood is the husband's obligation, and a wife should obtain her husband's consent if she wishes to work outside

home (Saleh 2022). Marriage in Islam is structured similarly to a contractual agreement, wherein the husband is tasked with the financial maintenance and spiritual stewardship of the household, while the wife is expected to respect his guidance as he fulfills these providential duties (Yelwa 2013). Just as an employee requires permission from an employer to perform specific actions, a wife needs her husband's approval to work outside home. Islam grants women the freedom to pursue any profession, but they must first seek their husband's approval. The decision for a woman to work should be made in consultation with family members, considering practical factors and household needs (Begum & Suheera 2025). The current study indicates that Muslim women adhere to Islamic doctrine regarding this aspect.

Women's Preference to Work

The majority of respondents indicated that they work according to their own preferences and are not compelled to do so by others. Nonetheless, they occasionally consider leaving their jobs when they face challenges. However, financial constraints often motivate them to continue working, regardless of their personal preferences. Chaudry (2006) notes that Islam permits women to work, and it may even be considered a *Sunnah* or obligation if circumstances necessitate it. For instance, a widow with no other means of support, or a woman whose financial contribution is needed to support her family, may work to provide for herself and her dependents. An example cited in the Qur'an 28:23 is the story of two daughters who took over the role of their elderly father as shepherds: "*We do not water until the shepherds dispatch [their flocks]; and our father is an old man*"

Islam allows women to engage in work if they choose and to leave it if they do not. As reflected in previous literature, the primary financial responsibility for maintaining a family is imposed on men. Scholarly contributions from Azeem et al. (2013) and Muhammed (2015), alongside findings by Parveen and Rubab (2013) as well as Shehu and Zejno (2015), Patoari (2019), Mihlar (2015), Chaudry (2006), Badawi (1995), Doi (1990), Siddiqi & Ruby (2018), Asar & Ghaliya (2016), and Al-Sheha (2000) collectively indicate that earning is not compulsory for women and that men bear the full financial responsibility for their families. This is supported by Qur'anic verses such as 2:233, 240-241, and 4:34, which outline men's economic

duties, while women are assigned roles related to childbearing and rearing (2:233; 7:189).

A dual-sex society, characterized by gender-specific roles, fosters societal cohesion and ensures that the collective interests of the community are met. (Mesbah et al. 1991). Therefore, compelling women to work contradicts Islamic teachings. The current research shows that respondents work based on their own preferences. If they choose to leave their jobs, they are motivated by their circumstances. Forcing women to work against their will is not permitted, as it would violate their rights and contradict societal norms.

WOMEN FACED ISSUES WHILE WORKING

Harassment

Workplace harassment remains a significant issue, often disproportionately affecting women (Cannon 2023). This can manifest as verbal abuse, unwanted advances, or discriminatory comments that create a hostile work environment. Dharmawardhane & Navaratne (2019) reported that sexual harassment is widespread in both the public and private sectors in Sri Lanka. The majority of respondents (10) indicated that they had not personally experienced any harassment. However, two respondents noted that although they had not encountered such issues themselves, they believed these practices persist. They suggested that women sometimes face verbal and physical harassment. In Islam, sex-based discrimination is explicitly forbidden. Gender-based violence and harassment, encompassing any misconduct or intimidation that results in or is liable to cause physical injury, psychological distress, emotional trauma, sexual abuse, or financial detriment, fall under this prohibition.

Almighty emphasizes in the Qur'an:

"Treat the parents with moral excellence and (do good to) relatives, orphans, the needy, the close as well as unacquainted neighbours, and your fellows and the wayfarers and those whom you possess" (4:36).

Sexual harassment laws are grounded in Islamic principles concerning neighbourly relationships. This framework implies that any form of harassment or discrimination against employees should be absent from the workplace. Accordingly, such laws mandate the prohibition of sexual harassment in all its forms, irrespective of the perpetrator.

“...And force not your maids to prostitution, if they desire chastity, in order that you may make a gain in the (perishable) goods of this worldly life...” (Qur’an, 24:33).

The dignity of men and women as human beings is the same (Qur’an, 49:13). Hence, they should be treated according to their dignity that has provided by Islam.

Working Load

The workload can be unevenly distributed in many workplaces, with women often assigned additional tasks or responsibilities without corresponding recognition or compensation. This contributes to gender disparities in career advancement.

Four of the fourteen respondents indicated that they feel burdened by their workload. Qur’an indicates that “*Allah does not place upon a soul a burden beyond that it can bear*” (2:286). Additionally, the Prophet (PBUH) advised against overburdening workers, stating: “*It is essential to feed the slave, clothe him properly, and not burden him with work beyond his capacity*” (Sahih Muslim, 1662). Islam emphasizes that working hours should not be excessive, as the human body requires rest and other individuals (such as family and friends) have rights over a person’s time. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

“Your eyes have a right over you, your body has a right over you, your wife has a right over you, your guest has a right over you, and your friend has a right over you” (Sunan an-Nasa’i, 2391).

Thus, if a woman feels overburdened, she risks compromising her health and failing to meet her body’s needs and relationships. Islam condemns such conditions when they lead to the violation of fundamental rights.

Dual Burden

A significant portion of the female workforce navigates a compounded role strain, balancing career-related obligations with unpaid labor at home; such persistent pressure often culminates in emotional exhaustion and diminished well-being as they reconcile workplace targets with childcare needs.

Nine respondents raised the issue of the double burden. Women are honoured guests in Islam at every stage of life, and they should not be expected to bear additional burdens beyond their familial

responsibilities. Islam avoids imposing obligations on individuals that exceed their capacity. The Qur’an states, “Allah burdens not a soul beyond its scope” (2:286). This reflects a fair measure of equality and dignity as prescribed by Islam. In Muslim families, which are often more extended compared to other societies, there is a tendency for women to be expected to handle all responsibilities. However, this expectation contradicts Islamic teachings, asserting that both husband and wife share in managing family affairs.

Discrimination in Achieving Higher Position

Women frequently encounter barriers when striving for leadership roles. This can include biases in hiring practices, lack of mentorship opportunities, or being judged more harshly than male counterparts. Aside from this, respondents shared their observations regarding workplace discrimination, including dehumanization, male dominance, bias, preference for men, and denial of promotions. A small percentage of respondents reported no prejudice in obtaining positions, noting that women in some organisations, such as department heads, hold senior roles. One participant mentioned that women lead certain departments. In Islam, it is acceptable for a woman to occupy a leadership role if she has the necessary skills and credentials. Historically, many Muslim women have held higher positions based on their capabilities. For example, the Prophet’s wife, Aisha (RA), and other prominent female leaders exemplify this. Samra binti Nuhaik al-Asadiyyah, appointed by the Prophet (PBUH) as the administrator of commercial law, served during the reigns of the first two Caliphs, Abu Bakr (RA) and Umar (RA). Similarly, Caliph Umar assigned Al-Shifa bint Abdullah (Laila) to oversee commercial law (Ramzy & Ghavifekr 2019).

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

This study provides important implications for academic researchers, policymakers, religious institutions, and community stakeholders concerned with promoting gender equity in employment among Muslim women in minority contexts such as Sri Lanka. As Muslims form a religious minority in the country, it is essential for community members to possess a sound and comprehensive understanding of Islamic principles to ensure that their practices align with authentic teachings. When Islamic

concepts are correctly understood and implemented, they can serve as a foundation for a model society that upholds justice and equity. However, selective or biased interpretations can hinder progress toward this goal.

The findings underscore the importance of integrating accurate Islamic knowledge into educational and institutional frameworks, particularly within universities that offer Islamic studies. Beyond basic awareness, deeper engagement with Islamic ethics, legal principles, and gender perspectives is necessary to facilitate the correct application of Islamic values in both personal and professional domains.

This study establishes a foundation for future research by emphasizing the importance of exploring diverse perspectives, including those of male professionals.

Geographically, the research is limited to the Ampara District, where Muslims represent the majority population. Future studies could broaden the scope to include other districts, allowing for comparative analyses across different regions. Additionally, as the present study focuses solely on professional women employed in the public sector, future research may incorporate participants from the private sector to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the primary purpose of this study is to evaluate the extent to which Islamic doctrine on equity is practiced among Muslim women in employment. The study clarifies this issue from an Islamic perspective. The results demonstrate that, according to Islamic equity doctrine, the guidelines for women's employment are largely followed among Muslim women. Women have the right to choose their careers according to their preferences, provided their work remains within Islamic boundaries. Islam permits women to engage in any work as long as it aligns with Islamic *Shari'ah*. Therefore, their employment activities adhere to Islamic principles. Most respondents choose to work based on their family's financial situation, with a few considering both social and economic factors. Their motivations for employment are acceptable according to Islamic teachings, and they prioritize familial responsibilities over work. However, they face challenges in certain situations.

They maintain a work-life balance by consulting with their husbands to address these challenges. Islamic teachings emphasize that women should prioritize familial responsibilities, a role that is considered significant in the hereafter. Regarding modesty, the majority adhere to Islamic guidelines concerning dress code and maintain restrictions on interactions with non-mahrams (*ajnabi*). However, a few respondents use perfume when going to work, which is inconsistent with Islamic modesty teachings. The second objective reveals that some Muslim women feel their rights are denied by their husbands. From an Islamic perspective, working is a woman's right, and no one can deny this right. Nevertheless, if a husband denies his wife the right to work due to familial concerns or because he believes her dignity or femininity may be compromised in the workplace, this is more acceptable within Islam. A husband's decision to protect his wife's rights and dignity does not negate her right to work. Some women feel they are compelled to work, despite not having a responsibility to earn or maintain the family, as no one should force her to work according to Islamic teachings. While respondents did not report harassment, some reported issues related to workload and the double burden. However, these issues are minimal. Regarding discrimination, respondents indicated facing barriers in achieving higher positions, which contradicts Islamic teachings. The equity doctrine in Islam asserts that everyone should be treated according to their abilities, nature, and needs. Women can achieve higher positions if they are qualified, but they must also consider whether such positions hinder their primary familial responsibilities. Ultimately, Islam's gender equity doctrine aims to promote justice within society.

This study provides important implications for academic researchers, policymakers, religious institutions, and community stakeholders concerned with promoting gender equity in employment among Muslim women in minority contexts such as Sri Lanka. As Muslims form a religious minority in the country, it is essential for community members to possess a sound and comprehensive understanding of Islamic principles to ensure that their practices align with authentic teachings. When Islamic concepts are correctly understood and implemented, they can serve as a foundation for a model society that upholds justice and equity. However, selective or biased interpretations can hinder progress toward this goal.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Mohamed Sulthan Ismiya Begum; Methodology: Mohamed Sulthan Ismiya Begum and Zul' Azmi Yaakob; Resources: Mohamed Sultan Ismiya Begum and Mohamed Mahroof Ali Abdullah; Writing – Original Draft Preparation: Mohamed Sultan Ismiya Begum and Mohamed Mahroof Ali Abdullah; Writing – Review and Editing: Mohamed Sulthan Ismiya Begum, Mohamed Mahroof Ali Abdullah, Wan Fariza Alyati Wan Zakaria and Mohammed Zawahir Mohammed Nafeel. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) GENERATED TEXT DECLARATION

In the process of drafting this manuscript, Gemini by Google was employed to assist with syntactic restructuring and the refinement of technical phrasing to enhance overall readability. Every suggestion provided by the tool was critically evaluated and revised by the authors to ensure academic precision. The authors maintain complete accountability for the final text and the integrity of the research presented.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests, professional affiliations, or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study involved primary data collection through individual interviews. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their

involvement. The authors ensure that the interview process was conducted ethically, respecting the privacy of the participants and ensuring that no sensitive personal matters were adversely affected. To maintain confidentiality, all data have been anonymized, and no personally identifiable information is included in this report.

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