

VOL. 1

A PEER-REVIEWED · MULTIDISCIPLINARY · MULTILINGUAL JOURNAL



Knowledge Beyond Boundaries...

SHIBLI NATIONAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL

S N A J

Open Access · Online · Biannual · Double-Blind Peer Reviewed
Crossref Indexed DOI · Multidisciplinary · Multilingual

VOLUME 1 · ISSUE 1

JANUARY – JUNE 2026

CHIEF EDITOR

Dr. Mohammad Zahid

www.snaj.org.in

ISSUE 1



SHIBLI NATIONAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL
Volume 1 · Issue 1 · January – June 2026

FOREWORD

It is with immense pride and a deep sense of purpose that I present the inaugural issue of the Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ) to the global community of scholars, researchers, and students. Named in reverence to the towering legacy of Allama Shibli Nomani — a scholar whose intellectual contributions transcended boundaries of language, discipline, and geography — this journal aspires to carry forward that same spirit of rigorous, cross-cultural inquiry.



SNAJ was conceived from a simple but pressing conviction: that meaningful scholarship should not be confined by the language in which it is written, nor by the discipline from which it emerges. India's intellectual tradition has long thrived at the confluence of languages — English, Hindi, and Urdu among them — and it is this confluence that our journal seeks to honour. By welcoming original research across the humanities, social sciences, education, and emerging interdisciplinary, multilingual fields, we hope to build a genuinely inclusive platform for academic dialogue.

As Chief Editor, I have had the privilege of witnessing the dedication of our editorial board, reviewers, and contributors, whose collective commitment has shaped this first issue. Every article herein has passed through a rigorous double-blind peer review/ indexed process, and each is assigned a Crossref indexing, registered DOI, reflecting our unwavering commitment to academic integrity, originality, and permanence in the global research ecosystem.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our esteemed reviewers, editorial board members, and the scholars who entrusted us with their research. It is through their collective effort that this journal has moved from vision to reality. I also invite researchers, academicians, and students from across disciplines and linguistic traditions to consider SNAJ as a home for their scholarship in the issues to come.

It is my sincere hope that this journal will serve not merely as a repository of research, but as a living, evolving conversation — one that bridges languages, disciplines, and generations of scholars in pursuit of knowledge.

With warm regards,

Dr. Mohammad Zahid

Chief Editor
Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ)

Negotiating Faith and Work: Socio-Religious Challenges of Muslim Working Women in Contemporary India

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Abstract

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The increasing participation of Muslim women in professional spaces has generated significant socio-religious discussions within Muslim societies. In contemporary India, Muslim working women often find themselves negotiating multiple expectations related to faith, family responsibilities, and social norms. This paper explores the socio-religious challenges faced by Muslim working women and examines how they reconcile religious identity with professional aspirations. By examining historical precedents in Islamic tradition and contemporary social realities, the study argues that women's participation in economic life is not inherently contradictory to Islamic teachings. Instead, many challenges faced by Muslim working women arise from cultural interpretations and societal expectations rather than from religious doctrine itself. The paper also highlights the agency of Muslim women who actively reinterpret religious principles in order to participate in education, employment, and public life while maintaining their religious commitments. Through this analysis, the study contributes to broader discussions on gender, religion, and modernity within Muslim societies. This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary sources. The findings indicate that the challenges faced by Muslim working women are more closely linked to cultural expectations than religious teachings. The study also highlights that women actively balance faith and professional life.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Work-Life Balance, Religious Identity, Muslim Women, Employment, India

Introduction

Over the past few decades, women's participation in the workforce has grown steadily across many societies around the world. Economic changes, expansion of educational opportunities, and evolving social attitudes have gradually opened new professional spaces for women. This transformation has also influenced Muslim communities, where increasing numbers of women are pursuing higher education and entering professional careers. In countries such as India, Muslim women are becoming more visible in sectors like education, healthcare, administration, social work, and small-scale entrepreneurship. Although this progress has been gradual and uneven, it reflects broader shifts in social structures and the aspirations of younger generations of Muslim women who seek both intellectual development and economic independence. In the Indian context, the question of Muslim women's employment is particularly

complex. Muslim communities in India represent diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, and therefore the experiences of Muslim women vary widely across regions and social classes. Nevertheless, one noticeable trend is the increasing emphasis placed on education among Muslim families during the last two decades. As more Muslim girls gain access to schools and universities, many of them aspire to build professional careers. These aspirations are often motivated not only by personal ambition but also by practical considerations such as financial stability, social mobility, and the desire to contribute to family well-being. However, despite these encouraging developments, Muslim working women frequently encounter a set of socio-religious expectations that shape their professional journeys in significant ways. While their economic contributions are often welcomed, they are simultaneously expected to continue fulfilling traditional domestic responsibilities. In many families, women remain primarily

responsible for household management, childcare, and caregiving, even when they are employed outside the home. As a result, Muslim working women often find themselves navigating what sociologists describe as a “dual responsibility,” where professional obligations and family expectations must be managed simultaneously

These expectations are not always presented as restrictions; rather, they are often embedded within broader cultural understandings of gender roles and family life. Within many communities, the ideal image of a woman continues to emphasize qualities such as modesty, dedication to family, and moral responsibility. Consequently, women who pursue professional careers sometimes feel compelled to demonstrate that their employment does not compromise these values. For some women, this balancing act becomes a daily negotiation between personal aspirations, family expectations, and social perceptions. Islamic teachings themselves emphasize principles of justice, dignity, and mutual responsibility between men and women. The Qur’anic framework acknowledges the moral and spiritual equality of both genders and encourages social participation within ethical boundaries. Historical examples from early Islamic society also demonstrate that women were actively involved in economic activities, trade, education, and community life. The well-known example of Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, a successful merchant and the wife of Prophet Muhammad, is frequently cited as evidence that women’s economic engagement has long existed within Islamic tradition. Despite these historical precedents, the lived experiences of Muslim women are often shaped by interpretations of religious teachings that have developed within specific cultural contexts. In some communities, religious discourse is used to emphasize modesty, domestic responsibility, and limited public interaction for women. While these interpretations are intended to preserve moral values, they sometimes create tensions when women seek to participate more actively in public

and professional spaces. As a result, Muslim working women may face questions about the compatibility of their careers with religious ideals or cultural expectations.

Another dimension of this issue relates to the social perception of women’s visibility in public life. In professional environments that involve interaction with male colleagues or participation in public institutions, Muslim women may encounter varying attitudes from both within and outside their communities. At times, they must respond to stereotypes or misconceptions about Muslim women’s roles in society. In other cases, they may encounter internal community debates regarding appropriate professions for women or the conditions under which women should work. Yet it would be misleading to portray Muslim working women simply as individuals struggling against restrictive structures. In reality, many women actively interpret and negotiate these frameworks in creative ways. Through education, professional experience, and engagement with religious scholarship, Muslim women increasingly articulate perspectives that reconcile faith with professional participation. Some women view employment as a means of fulfilling ethical responsibilities toward family and society, while others see it as part of a broader pursuit of intellectual and personal growth. During my own engagement with discussions surrounding Muslim women’s employment, I have often noticed that the conversation is rarely limited to economic factors alone. Instead, it involves deeper questions about identity, morality, and social change. Muslim working women frequently find themselves reflecting on how to remain faithful to their religious values while also participating meaningfully in contemporary professional life. This process of negotiation does not always follow a single pattern; rather, it varies according to individual circumstances, family support systems, educational backgrounds, and workplace environments.

This paper seeks to explore the socio-religious challenges experienced by Muslim

working women in contemporary India. It examines how historical Islamic perspectives on women's economic participation compare with modern debates surrounding women's employment. The study also considers the everyday experiences of Muslim working women as they navigate expectations related to family responsibilities, religious identity, and professional commitment. By analyzing these dynamics, the paper aims to highlight the complex ways in which Muslim women engage with both tradition and modernity in shaping their lives. Ultimately, the discussion presented here argues that the relationship between Islam and women's employment should not be understood as inherently conflictual. Instead, it represents an evolving dialogue within Muslim societies about how religious values can coexist with changing social realities. The experiences of Muslim working women illustrate that faith, family life, and professional aspirations can intersect in diverse and meaningful ways. Recognizing these experiences is essential for developing a more nuanced understanding of gender roles within contemporary Muslim communities.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to explore the socio-religious realities of Muslim working women in contemporary India. In recent years, increasing participation of women in education and employment has raised important questions about identity, tradition, and modernity within Muslim communities. This study focuses on understanding how Muslim women manage these changes in their everyday lives.

The main objectives of the study are:

- To examine the socio-religious challenges faced by Muslim working women in India
- To analyze how religious beliefs and cultural expectations influence women's participation in the workforce
- To explore how Muslim women balance professional responsibilities with family obligations
- To understand the role of education in shaping women's opportunities
- To identify the strategies used by Muslim women to maintain work-life balance and religious identity

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design. It is based on secondary sources of data, including books, academic journals, research articles, and reports related to Muslim women and gender studies. The research follows a descriptive and interpretative approach to understand the socio-religious challenges faced by Muslim working women in India. A thematic analysis method is used to identify key issues such as work-life balance, gender roles, religious identity, and social expectations. This study does not rely on primary field data but instead focuses on analyzing existing scholarly work. This approach helps in connecting historical perspectives with present-day realities and provides a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Review of Literature

Several scholars have examined the role and status of women in Islam from different perspectives. Leila Ahmed (1992) discusses the historical development of gender roles in Muslim societies and explains how cultural practices have influenced women's position over time. Amina Wadud (1999) provides a gender-sensitive interpretation of the Qur'an and emphasizes equality and justice in Islamic teachings. Similarly, Asma Barlas (2002) argues that patriarchal interpretations, rather than religion itself, have limited women's rights. Fatima Mernissi (1991) explores the relationship between gender and power in Muslim societies, while Margot Badran (2009) introduces the idea of Islamic feminism and explains how women use religious frameworks to advocate for their rights. Saba Mahmood (2005) focuses on women's agency and highlights how women actively shape their identities within religious contexts. Although these studies provide strong

theoretical insights, there is limited research on the everyday lived experiences of Muslim working women in India. Most existing work focuses on theoretical debates, while less attention is given to practical challenges faced by women in balancing faith and professional life. This study attempts to address this gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on perspectives from Gender Studies and Islamic feminist discourse. Gender Studies helps in understanding how socially constructed roles and expectations influence women's participation in both domestic and professional life. It highlights issues such as gender inequality and work-life balance.

At the same time, Islamic feminist thought provides a framework to interpret religious teachings in a way that supports justice, equality, and dignity for women. It emphasizes that Islam encourages education, economic participation, and social engagement for women. By combining these perspectives, this study analyzes how Muslim working women balance religious values with modern professional demands.

Historical Perspectives on Women's Work in Islam

To understand the socio-religious debates about Muslim women's employment today, it is important to look at the historical background of women's roles in Islamic societies. Many people assume that Islam discourages women from working outside the home, but historical evidence from early Islamic history suggests otherwise. In fact, women in the early Islamic period were involved in different social, economic, and intellectual activities. One of the most well-known examples is Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the first wife of Prophet Muhammad. She was a respected and successful businesswoman in Mecca who managed trade and commercial activities. Historical sources mention that she owned trading caravans and conducted business independently. Her example

clearly shows that women's participation in economic life was not unusual in early Islamic society. Rather, it was accepted and respected. Women also played an important role in religious learning and scholarship. A good example is Aisha bint Abu Bakr, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad. She was known for her deep knowledge of Islamic teachings and became one of the most important narrators of hadith. Many companions and later scholars learned from her. Her role demonstrates that women were not only active in social life but also contributed significantly to the development of Islamic knowledge. These examples from early Islamic history show that women's involvement in both economic and intellectual life was not considered against Islamic teachings. Islam introduced ethical guidelines that emphasized modesty, respect, and responsibility for both men and women. Within these principles, women were able to participate in different areas of social life.

However, as Muslim societies developed over time, cultural traditions and social structures began to influence gender roles more strongly. In some regions, patriarchal customs gradually limited women's access to education and employment opportunities. As a result, the idea developed in certain societies that women should mainly remain within the domestic sphere. Understanding this historical background is important when discussing Muslim women's employment today. Early Islamic history suggests that women's economic participation can exist within the moral and ethical framework of Islam.

Socio-Religious Expectations and Gender Norms

In many Muslim societies today, expectations about women's roles are influenced by a combination of religious ideas, cultural traditions, and social values. These expectations are not always the same everywhere because Muslim communities live in different cultural and geographical settings. However, one common expectation is that women should give priority to

family life. Responsibilities such as marriage, raising children, caring for elders, and managing household affairs are usually seen as central parts of a woman's role in society. These responsibilities are respected and appreciated within Muslim families, and many women themselves value these roles as meaningful and important. At the same time, these expectations sometimes lead to the belief that women's professional goals should come after their family duties. In other words, work outside the home is often considered acceptable only if it does not interfere with domestic responsibilities. Because of this belief, Muslim women who wish to build professional careers sometimes face pressure to prove that they are still fulfilling their expected roles within the family. For many Muslim working women, daily life involves managing both professional work and household responsibilities. Even when women contribute financially to the family income, the responsibility for cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other domestic work often remains largely theirs. This situation can create physical and emotional pressure, as women must constantly balance the demands of work and home life. In some cases, women may feel that they must perform exceptionally well in both areas in order to gain acceptance from family members and society.

Another important aspect of socio-religious expectations relates to modesty and behavior in public spaces. Islamic teachings encourage modest conduct and respectful interaction between men and women. These teachings are meant to promote dignity, morality, and mutual respect in society. However, the way these principles are interpreted can vary across different communities and cultural contexts. In some families, concerns about mixed-gender workplaces or public visibility may influence attitudes toward women's employment. Parents or relatives may worry that certain work environments are not suitable for women or that working outside the home may expose them to situations that conflict with cultural or religious values. Because of these concerns, families may

prefer that women choose professions that are considered socially appropriate or safe. For example, fields such as teaching, healthcare, or social work are often seen as more acceptable professions for women in many communities. These professions are viewed as compatible with women's nurturing roles and are therefore more easily accepted by families. On the other hand, careers that involve long working hours, travel, or frequent interaction with male colleagues may sometimes be viewed with hesitation. These expectations can create additional challenges for Muslim women who wish to pursue professional careers. Many women feel that they must constantly demonstrate that their professional lives do not conflict with their religious identity or cultural values. They may feel responsible for maintaining a positive image of working Muslim women in society. To manage these expectations, Muslim women often develop different strategies. Some choose workplaces that are supportive and respectful of their religious practices. Others maintain modest dress, such as wearing the hijab, as a way of expressing their religious identity while participating in professional environments. Some women also rely on support from family members who encourage their educational and professional ambitions. In many cases, women also try to create a balance between family responsibilities and professional goals. This may involve organizing their daily routines carefully, sharing household responsibilities with family members, or choosing flexible work schedules. These strategies help women continue their careers while also maintaining strong family relationships.

Overall, socio-religious expectations do not always prevent Muslim women from working, but they do shape the conditions under which women pursue employment. Understanding these expectations is important for recognizing the complex realities that Muslim working women experience in their daily lives.

Challenges Faced by Muslim Working Women

Muslim women who work outside the home often face a variety of social, cultural, and practical challenges. These challenges can appear in different forms depending on factors such as education, family background, economic status, and workplace environment. While many Muslim women have successfully built professional careers, the journey is often not without difficulties. One of the most common challenges faced by working women is maintaining a balance between professional responsibilities and family life. Many women experience what researchers describe as the “double burden,” meaning that they must manage both their jobs and their domestic responsibilities at the same time. Even after completing a full day of work outside the home, women may still be expected to cook meals, care for children, and handle other household tasks. This situation can lead to physical exhaustion as well as emotional stress. Women may feel that they are constantly trying to meet the expectations of different roles: as professionals, as mothers, as daughters, and as wives. In some cases, the pressure to perform well in all these areas can create feelings of guilt or anxiety, especially when women feel that they are unable to give enough time to one responsibility because of another. Another challenge faced by Muslim working women relates to social attitudes toward women’s employment. In some communities, there may still be conservative views about women working outside the home. People may question whether employment is necessary or appropriate for women, especially if the family is financially stable. In such situations, women who choose to work may face criticism, judgment, or doubts about their priorities. Sometimes these attitudes come not only from the wider community but also from relatives or acquaintances. Women may be asked why they need to work, or they may be told that their main responsibility should remain within the household. Such comments can discourage women from pursuing their professional ambitions or continuing their education. Workplace challenges can also affect Muslim women’s professional experiences. Some women may face discrimination or bias

because of their religious identity. For example, women who wear the hijab may sometimes experience stereotypes or misunderstandings in professional environments. Employers or colleagues who are unfamiliar with Islamic practices may form assumptions about Muslim women’s abilities or professional commitment.

In certain cases, these biases may influence hiring decisions, promotions, or workplace relationships. Muslim women may feel the need to work harder than others to prove their competence and professionalism. They may also feel pressure to represent their community positively in environments where they are a minority. Access to education and professional networks is another factor that can affect career opportunities. In some communities, girls may still face barriers in accessing higher education due to financial constraints, early marriage, or social expectations. Limited access to education can reduce employment opportunities and make it more difficult for women to enter professional fields. Even when women obtain higher education, they may still face difficulties in finding suitable employment. Lack of mentorship, limited professional connections, and restricted mobility can sometimes slow career growth. Economic inequalities within society can further affect employment opportunities for Muslim women in certain regions.

Despite these challenges, it is important to recognize the determination and resilience of Muslim women who pursue education and professional careers. Many women continue to work not only for financial independence but also because they believe that education and employment allow them to contribute positively to their families and communities. For many Muslim women, employment represents an opportunity for personal growth, social participation, and intellectual development. Through their work, they are able to support their families, inspire younger generations, and challenge outdated stereotypes about women’s roles in society. In recent years, the increasing

visibility of Muslim women in different professions has also helped to gradually change social attitudes. As more women become teachers, doctors, researchers, lawyers, and administrators, society begins to recognize their abilities and contributions. Although challenges remain, the growing participation of Muslim women in education and employment suggests that social attitudes are slowly evolving. Women continue to find ways to balance their religious values, family responsibilities, and professional aspirations.

Empirical Insights into the Socio-Economic Conditions of Muslim Working Women

While theoretical discussions provide important insights into the position of Muslim women in society, it is equally necessary to examine empirical evidence to understand their actual socio-economic conditions. Available data from national surveys and reports indicates that the participation of Muslim women in the workforce in India remains comparatively low. Studies based on Census and NSSO data suggest that Muslim women have lower work participation rates compared to women from several other communities. This situation is influenced by a range of factors, including limited access to higher education, early marriage, restricted mobility, and socio-cultural expectations regarding gender roles. In addition to low participation rates, many Muslim women are concentrated in informal and low-paying sectors such as home-based work, small-scale businesses, and unorganized labor. These forms of employment often lack job security, financial stability, and opportunities for career advancement. As a result, even when women are economically active, their contributions may remain undervalued and invisible in formal economic structures.

At the same time, emerging trends in urban areas show that educated Muslim women are gradually entering professional fields such as education, healthcare, and administration. However, their participation in these sectors is often shaped by ongoing socio-religious

expectations. For instance, an educated Muslim woman working as a teacher in a city like Delhi may successfully manage her professional responsibilities, yet she may still be expected to perform the majority of household duties. Even after a full day of work, responsibilities such as cooking, childcare, and family care continue to be seen as her primary role.

Such situations illustrate the concept of the “double burden,” where women are required to manage both professional and domestic responsibilities simultaneously. This dual role can lead to physical exhaustion as well as emotional stress. Despite these challenges, many Muslim women actively develop strategies to balance their responsibilities. They organize their daily routines, seek support from family members, and choose work environments that are compatible with their values and needs. Overall, the empirical evidence suggests that the challenges faced by Muslim working women are not solely rooted in religious teachings but are significantly shaped by socio-economic conditions and cultural expectations. Understanding these realities is essential for developing a more balanced and realistic perspective on the role of Muslim women in contemporary society.

Agency and Adaptation among Muslim Working Women

Although Muslim working women face many obstacles, it is important to recognize their strength and resilience. Many women actively find ways to balance their professional goals with their religious beliefs and family responsibilities. Education plays an important role in this process. When women gain access to higher education, they are able to engage more deeply with religious teachings as well as contemporary social ideas. This allows them to form their own understanding of how faith and professional life can coexist. Professional achievements by Muslim women are also gradually changing social perceptions. When women succeed in fields such as medicine, education, law, and academia, they challenge stereotypes about

women's abilities and roles in society. Many women also develop practical strategies to manage both work and family life. These may include seeking supportive family arrangements, flexible working conditions, or building professional support networks.

These developments show that Muslim women are not simply reacting to social pressures. Instead, they are actively shaping new discussions about gender roles and social participation within Muslim societies.

Conclusion

The experiences of Muslim working women in contemporary India reflect the complex relationship between religion, culture, and the changing realities of modern society. Over the past few decades, social and economic transformations have created new opportunities for women to pursue education and employment. At the same time, traditional expectations regarding family roles and cultural values continue to influence how women's participation in the workforce is viewed. As a result, Muslim working women often find themselves navigating between long-standing social expectations and emerging professional possibilities. Historical evidence from early Islamic society shows that women were actively involved in economic, intellectual, and social life. Women participated in trade, scholarship, and community activities while maintaining the moral and ethical principles emphasized in Islamic teachings. These historical examples indicate that women's participation in public life is not necessarily inconsistent with Islamic values. Instead, the challenges that women face today often arise from cultural interpretations and social norms that have developed over time in different societies. In contemporary India, Muslim women who pursue professional careers frequently encounter a range of expectations from family members, communities, and workplaces. On one hand, their education and employment are increasingly recognized as valuable contributions to family well-being and social development. On

the other hand, they are still expected to fulfill traditional responsibilities within the household. Balancing these expectations requires significant effort and adaptability. Many Muslim working women manage multiple roles simultaneously. They contribute financially to their families, participate in professional life, and continue to carry important responsibilities within the home. This balancing act can sometimes create stress and pressure, yet it also demonstrates the resilience and determination of women who are striving to achieve both personal and social goals. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Muslim women are not simply responding to external pressures. Many women actively shape their own paths through education, professional dedication, and thoughtful engagement with religious teachings. By interpreting religious values in ways that support dignity, responsibility, and social participation, Muslim women are contributing to evolving discussions about gender roles within their communities.

Education plays a particularly important role in this process. As more Muslim women gain access to higher education and professional training, they develop the knowledge and confidence to participate actively in social and intellectual life. Their achievements in fields such as education, medicine, law, research, and administration demonstrate that women can contribute meaningfully to the development of society while maintaining their religious and cultural identities. Another important outcome of women's growing participation in the workforce is the gradual transformation of social attitudes. When communities witness the positive contributions of educated and professional Muslim women, perceptions about women's capabilities and roles begin to change. Younger generations, in particular, are increasingly supportive of women's education and professional aspirations.

Rather than viewing women's employment as something that contradicts Islamic principles, it may be more helpful to understand it as part of an ongoing dialogue

within Muslim societies about how religious values can be practiced in changing social circumstances. Islamic teachings emphasize justice, responsibility, and mutual respect between men and women, and these principles can provide a foundation for supporting women's active participation in society. Encouraging and supporting Muslim women's aspirations is therefore not only important for individual empowerment but also for broader social progress. When women have opportunities to pursue education and meaningful employment, they are better able to contribute to their families, communities, and the overall development of society.

In conclusion, the experiences of Muslim working women illustrate that faith, family life, and professional aspirations do not necessarily exist in conflict with one another. Instead, they represent interconnected aspects of women's lives that require thoughtful balance and understanding. Recognizing the efforts and achievements of Muslim working women can help promote more inclusive perspectives on gender roles and contribute to greater social harmony and equality in contemporary societies.

Policy Implications

There is a need to promote awareness within Muslim communities about the importance of women's education and employment. Educational institutions and policymakers should create more inclusive opportunities that encourage women's participation in higher education and professional fields. Workplaces should adopt gender-sensitive policies that ensure safety, flexibility, and equal opportunities for women. Families also play an important role in supporting women's aspirations. Encouraging shared household responsibilities can help reduce the

burden on working women. In addition, awareness programs can help challenge stereotypes and promote a positive understanding of women's roles in society. These steps can contribute to the empowerment of Muslim women and overall social development.

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ISSN 3139-3284 (Online) · Crossref DOI Indexed

chiefeditor@snaj.org.in**www.snaj.org.in**