



Empowering or Oppressive? The Impact of Religious Gender Roles on World View

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Abstract

This project is a literature review focusing on women's roles in religious groups and how traditional gender roles impact how the world views women and how women view themselves. We found that gender roles in religious groups, modesty culture, religious leadership, and stereotypes often negatively impact women's body image, mental health, and the gender power balance. Additionally, religious teachings of female submission have been linked to domestic violence ideology.

Findings

Religious Teachings and Domestic Violence Ideology

According to data from the CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, about 41% of women and 26% of men have experienced sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Center for Disease Control, 2022). While faith leaders by no means condone family and domestic violence (FDV), "beliefs and interpretations of sacred texts that prescribe and proscribe specific gender roles and norms were identified as core underpinnings of understandings and responses to FDV in many faith communities," (Truong et. al., 2022, p.890). Many faith leaders are concerned about the misinterpretation of gendered religious teachings. According to a study of various religious leaders in Memphis, TN, "91% of the leaders were concerned that teachings of submission could be interpreted to support abusive behavior," (Levitt et. al., 2006, p.1186). Additionally, religious teachings on marriage can prevent women from leaving abusive relationships. Religious leaders who endorse submission often suggest marital interventions that protect the marriage rather than providing a woman with support to leave the marriage (Levitt et. al., 2006, p.1186-1187).

Effects on Body Image

Based on a study of online forums on modesty, swimwear, and religiosity, some women view dressing modestly as dignifying and empowering. Others dress modestly out of shame, and associate immodesty with "failing to uphold social class norms, corrupting the thoughts of boys and men, failing to honor God with one's body, losing 'purity', and having no moral compass," (Kabel, 2022, p. 43). In another study, 475 Israeli Muslim women between the ages of 18 through 30 completed a questionnaire about their faith in correlation to positive and negative body image from 2016 to 2018. It was found that the relationship between the views on the body and practicing their faith plays a big role. (Sidi, 2020, 60:1095-1108).

Effects on Mental Health

A study was conducted by observing high school Muslim girls in Bali as well as interviewing teachers and parents. It was found that the wearing of the hijab caused many issues for these girls and some schools do not even allow them to wear it. It concludes females undergo their unequal Muslim-minority status in ways that Muslim-minority men do not have to experience. This takes a toll on girls' mental health (Parker, 2017, 3: 441-458).

Gender Power Balance

Eriksen and Mayblin explained that much of early Christian literature included language regarding "sociological issues such as the nature of gender identities and the way they determine persons' abilities to assume leadership and public roles within various churches" (Robbins, 2014, S165). Eriksen even went so far as to say "Christianity itself....is gendered" (Robbins, 2014, S165). Eriksen and Mayblin went on to explain that Christianity has made some progress in the realm of gender roles as the idea of women being allowed to become deacons has at least been proposed. Additionally, the idea of the most sacred figures in the religion being deemed genderless has also been a cornerstone of Christianity as "[ungendered sacred figures] both helps protect the distinctiveness of the sacred and shapes very concrete earthly struggles over the appropriate ways for human men and women to live" (Robbins, 2014, S165). While gender roles are at the very heart of Christianity when it comes to positions of power, the Church has worked to move past this emphasis on gender roles, but it still has effects on Christianity and its members everyday.