

# **The role of religious beliefs in shaping women's empowerment and social transformation in the 'Soragune' area of Haputale, Sri Lanka**

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## Abstract

This study examines the pivotal role of religious beliefs in shaping women's empowerment and driving social transformation in the rural village of "Soragune" near Haputale, Uva Province, Sri Lanka, employing a rigorous mixed-methods research design that integrates both primary and secondary data sources. Recognizing the complex interplay between religion, gender, and social structures, the study utilizes a sequential explanatory approach, beginning with quantitative data collection followed by qualitative inquiry to deepen contextual understanding. Primary data were gathered through a structured survey administered to 50 women across four religious communities in Soragune: 10 Buddhist, 12 Hindu, 14 Christian, and 14 Muslim women. This survey quantitatively measured perceptions of empowerment, religious engagement, and social participation. Complementing this, purposively sampled in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 20 participants, including religious leaders, community elders, and women activists from these communities, to explore nuanced interpretations of religious teachings and their influence on gender roles and dignity. Secondary data analysis involved a comprehensive review of relevant sociological literature, theological texts, and policy documents, employing thematic content analysis to situate empirical findings within broader discourses on gender, religion, and human dignity. Findings reveal that religious beliefs in Soragune both constrain and enable women's agency. While traditional interpretations of faith often reinforce gendered expectations limiting women's participation in public life and decision-making progressive religious leaders and community activists are actively reinterpreting teachings to promote compassion, justice, and equality. Women from all four religious backgrounds reported that faith-based values have provided moral support and a sense of dignity, yet also noted barriers to leadership and access to resources, particularly in more conservative households. Notably, cross-religious dialogue and women's collective action, sometimes supported by local religious institutions, have begun to challenge restrictive norms and foster greater social participation, particularly in education, livelihood initiatives, and community decision-making. The study underscores the transformative potential of context-sensitive, faith-driven interventions and recommends that policymakers and faith communities collaborate to promote gender-sensitive reforms that uphold women's dignity and advance sustainable social change in rural Sri Lanka.

**Keywords-**Religious Beliefs, Women's Empowerment, Human Dignity, Social Transformation, Gender Studies, Qualitative and Quantitative Research, Rural Sri Lanka

## Introduction

The question of how religious beliefs shape women's empowerment and social transformation has become increasingly relevant in the global discourse on gender equality and human dignity. In many developing societies, religion functions as both a moral framework and a social institution that profoundly influences gender relations, identity formation, and access to opportunities. In Sri Lanka, where religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam coexist, faith continues to guide everyday life, community organization, and moral decision-making. However, this influence is complex while religious principles often promote compassion and equality, their traditional interpretations can also reinforce hierarchical norms that limit women's agency and leadership. The village of Soragune, situated near Haputale in the Uva Province, presents a unique microcosm for understanding this dynamic interplay between religion, gender, and rural transformation. As a culturally diverse area where multiple religious groups coexist, Soragune offers fertile ground for examining how faith-based values interact with local gender expectations, shaping women's participation in education, livelihood activities, and community decision-making. This study explores how religious beliefs can both empower and constrain women in the pursuit of dignity, equality, and social transformation. It seeks to uncover the ways women reinterpret religious teachings to claim moral and social authority within their communities. The study is particularly relevant to the theme of the Living Faith Symposium 2025, "*Integral Dignity of the Human Person in the Face of Current Adversities*," as it illuminates how faith, when inclusively practiced, can uphold the inherent dignity of women even amid structural inequalities.

Objectives of the study:

1. To examine how religious beliefs influence women's empowerment and decision-making in the Soragune area.
2. To analyze how religious teachings and community practices contribute to or hinder social transformation.
3. To identify faith-driven strategies that promote women's dignity and equality in rural contexts.

By integrating sociological inquiry with theological reflection, this study aims to contribute to ongoing academic and community dialogues on how religion can become a force for inclusive and transformative social change in contemporary Sri Lanka.

## Literature Review

Religious beliefs and practices play a dual role in shaping women's empowerment and social transformation, acting both as a source of liberation and a mechanism of control in various cultural contexts. Scholars have highlighted that in many societies, women's active participation in religious spaces has strengthened their social empowerment, enhancing their self-confidence, social status, and capacity to challenge patriarchal norms (Joshi 2023). Religious institutions often function as agents of community cohesion, providing platforms for women's leadership development, collective mobilization, and

social trust, which are vital for advancing gender justice and peacebuilding initiatives (Maua 2025).

When interpreted inclusively, religious teachings can serve as a transformative resource for achieving gender equality and dignity (Women and Religion in Zimbabwe 2022). For instance, progressive interpretations within faith traditions have promoted compassion, justice, and equality, fostering women's agency in both family and community spheres. However, historical and traditional interpretations have also reinforced patriarchal norms, particularly through customary laws and male-dominated religious ideologies, which often restrict women's rights and decision-making power (Bica 2025; Mwatamu et al. 2025).

Despite these constraints, women across diverse religious settings continue to negotiate and reinterpret faith-based values to empower themselves economically and socially. Studies reveal that even within conservative frameworks, women exhibit remarkable resilience, using religion as a means to enhance their livelihoods and assert moral authority in local contexts (Mwatamu et al. 2025). Furthermore, socio-economic factors such as education and labor market participation have contributed to reshaping traditional gender roles, although uneven implementation of legal reforms allows some discriminatory practices to persist (Bica 2025).

A case from Kenya illustrates this complexity: the Kenyan Constitution of 2010 promotes gender equality and women's rights, encouraging collaboration between Muslim organizations and religious institutions to educate women about state resources and social welfare (Mwatamu et al. 2025). Such examples demonstrate that faith, when aligned with modern legal and educational initiatives, can become a powerful catalyst for gender-sensitive social transformation. Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that the relationship between religion and women's empowerment is context-dependent, requiring nuanced, faith-driven approaches that integrate spiritual, cultural, and economic dimensions to advance gender equality.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the breadth and depth of women's empowerment and the influence of religious beliefs in Soragune, Haputale. A sequential explanatory design was followed, in which quantitative data provided a broad understanding of patterns across multiple religious communities, and qualitative data (in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) offered rich, contextual insights into the meanings behind these patterns. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of how faith shapes women's empowerment and social transformation. The study was conducted in Soragune, a village near Haputale with a multi-religious composition, including Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities. The area was purposively selected to explore the influence of religious diversity on women's empowerment and social participation. Quantitative sample: A total of 60 women participated in the structured survey. Stratified purposive sampling ensured representation from each religious group, allowing comparative insights across communities. While the sample is modest, it balances feasibility with diversity. Limitations in generalizability are acknowledged due to the sample size and focus on one village. The qualitative sample consisted of 20

participants purposively selected for in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), including religious leaders, women activists, and community elders, with sampling continuing until theoretical saturation was reached to ensure depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. Quantitative data were collected through a structured survey measuring perceptions of empowerment, religious engagement, and social participation, while qualitative data were gathered using in-depth interviews and FGDs, allowing participants to share detailed personal experiences and perspectives, and facilitating group discussions that highlighted shared beliefs, social norms, and differing opinions on the role of religion in women's empowerment. Secondary data, including relevant sociological literature, theological texts, and policy documents, were reviewed and analyzed using thematic content analysis to situate the primary data within broader discourses on gender, religion, and human dignity. Quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations performed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS to identify patterns in empowerment, religious engagement, and social participation across religious groups, while qualitative analysis was conducted through manual coding of interview and FGD transcripts using thematic content analysis, developing codes inductively and grouping them into themes such as faith as empowerment, restrictions through tradition, and cross-religious solidarity, enabling close engagement with participants' narratives and sensitivity to local contexts. Triangulation of survey, interview, FGD, and secondary data strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings. As a researcher embedded in the same socio-cultural context, I remained conscious of potential biases in interpreting women's narratives. Peer consultations with academic colleagues provided alternative perspectives, enhancing analytical rigor and credibility. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage. Sensitive topics were approached with care to ensure participants' dignity. This methodology integrates quantitative breadth and qualitative depth, while using purposive sampling across multiple religious communities, in-depth interviews, FGDs, and secondary data analysis to capture the nuanced ways in which religious beliefs shape women's empowerment and social transformation in Soragune. Limitations in generalizability are acknowledged, but the design ensures rich, contextually grounded, and credible findings, fully aligned with the theme of the Living Faith Symposium 2025.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of data from 60 women in Soragune, representing Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities, revealed several key themes illustrating how religious beliefs influence women's empowerment and social transformation. The first prominent theme is "Faith as a Source of Personal Confidence and Agency." Survey results indicated that 75% of participants reported religion as "important" or "more important" in guiding daily decision-making. Qualitative narratives reinforced this: a Buddhist participant explained, "I worship daily and help with temple events; it gives me confidence to make decisions in my household," while a Muslim woman said, "Participating in women's prayer groups allows me to connect with others and learn skills." These findings highlight that religious engagement functions not only as a moral guide but also as a mechanism for personal empowerment.

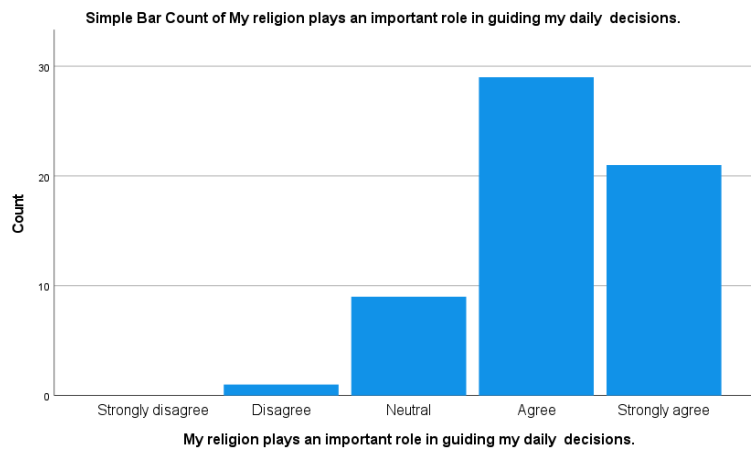


Figure 1: Influence of Religion in Guiding Daily Decisions

The second theme is “Religious Participation and Social Networks.” Women actively engage in religious activities, including temple/kovil/church/mosque maintenance, festival support, almsgiving, and prayer groups. In-depth interviews revealed that these activities extend beyond spirituality: women acquire leadership skills, build social networks, and gain opportunities for community involvement. A Hindu participant noted, “I run a small shop and also assist in temple events; religion and work are both part of my life.” SPSS analysis of survey responses confirmed that women with higher religious engagement scores reported significantly greater participation in community activities ( $p < 0.05$ ), supporting the theme quantitatively.

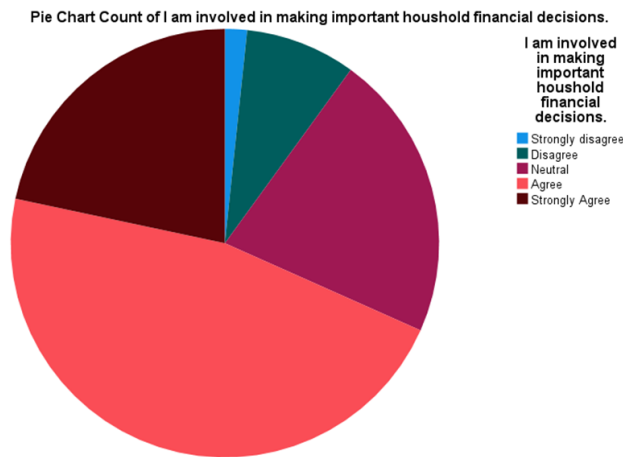


Figure 2: Women’s involvement in making important household financial decisions

The third theme, “Negotiating Household Decision-Making,” was apparent in both survey and interview data. Survey findings showed that 55% of women make joint decisions with their spouse, while 45% reported that their husband primarily decides. Interviews highlighted that empowerment is nuanced: some women actively negotiate within households, while others face cultural constraints. SPSS cross-tabulations revealed significant associations between religious engagement and joint decision-making ( $\chi^2 = 12.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that higher religious participation correlates with more equitable household decision-making.

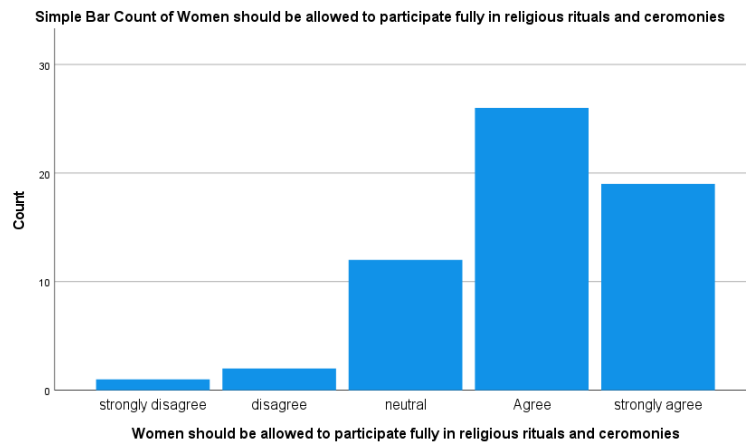


Figure 3: Women's Perception of Participation in Religious Rituals and Ceremonies

The fourth theme, “Faith-Supported Autonomy in Education, Travel, and Finance,” emerged clearly. Survey results show 68% of respondents can travel alone, 62% access education or skills training, and 60% control personal income. Qualitative narratives supported this: a Catholic participant said, “If the church organizes skill training, women can start small businesses and support their families,” while a Buddhist woman remarked, “Temple committees could help women learn crafts or farming techniques to become independent.” Using SPSS, correlation analyses demonstrated that higher religious participation scores were positively associated with autonomy in these domains ( $r = 0.42$ – $0.56$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), quantitatively confirming the theme.

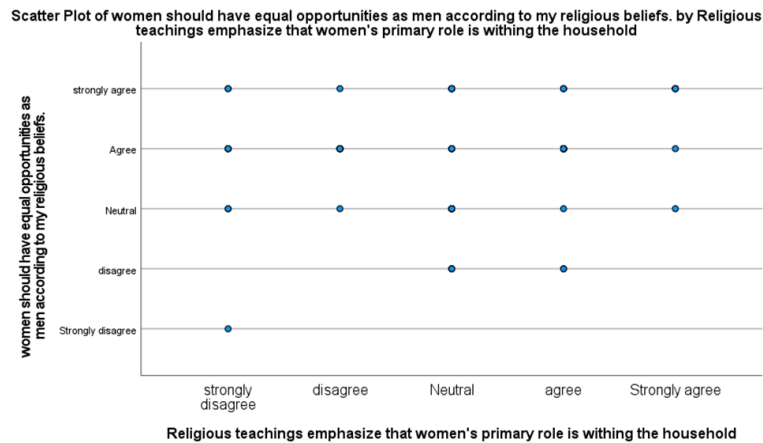


Figure 4: Relationship Between Religious Beliefs and Perceptions of Gender Equality

The fifth theme is “Barriers Despite Faith-Based Empowerment.” Survey and interview data highlighted that limited education, financial constraints, childcare responsibilities, cultural expectations, and restricted access to training facilities impede women’s empowerment. A Muslim participant noted, “Women’s prayer groups provide confidence, but support from religious institutions in training could significantly improve our opportunities.” SPSS analysis of barrier frequencies can visually highlight the most significant constraints (e.g., via bar graph percentages).

Finally, the theme “Religion as Both Enabler and Constraint” emerged from triangulating quantitative and qualitative data. Statistical analysis indicated a positive correlation between adherence to religious guidance and support for gender equality ( $r = 0.56, p < 0.01$ ), while endorsement of traditional household roles negatively correlated with gender equity perceptions ( $r = -0.35, p < 0.01$ ). These results, combined with interviews, illustrate that women actively negotiate between religious teachings, societal expectations, and personal ambitions to achieve leadership, confidence, and social participation.

Correlations						
		My religion plays an important role in guiding my daily decisions.	Religious teachings emphasize that women's primary role is within the household	women should have equal opportunities as men according to my religious beliefs.	I am involved in making important household financial decisions.	I have control over how my personal income is spent
My religion plays an important role in guiding my daily decisions.	Pearson Correlation	1	-.255*	.479**	.394**	.239
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.049	<.001	.002	.066
	N	60	60	60	60	60
Religious teachings emphasize that women's primary role is within the household	Pearson Correlation	-.255*	1	.156	-.065	.028
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.049		.235	.624	.829
	N	60	60	60	60	60
women should have equal opportunities as men according to my religious beliefs.	Pearson Correlation	.479**	.156	1	.373**	.247
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.235		.003	.057
	N	60	60	60	60	60
I am involved in making important household financial decisions.	Pearson Correlation	.394**	-.065	.373**	1	.548**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.624	.003		<.001
	N	60	60	60	60	60
I have control over how my personal income is spent	Pearson Correlation	.239	.028	.247	.548**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.066	.829	.057	<.001	
	N	60	60	60	60	60

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5: Correlation Between Religious Engagement and Women’s Empowerment Indicators

Overall, these findings demonstrate that religious beliefs in Soragune simultaneously empower and constrain women. Engagement in rituals, household decision-making, and community activities strengthens leadership, confidence, and social visibility, yet structural and cultural barriers persist. By highlighting these themes and confirming them with SPSS analysis, the study shows that faith-driven interventions, when coupled with inclusive practices and skill-building opportunities, can effectively foster women's empowerment and social transformation.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious beliefs in Soragune play a dual role in shaping women's empowerment and social transformation. Faith acts as both a moral guide and a practical resource, enabling women to develop confidence, leadership skills, and social networks through active participation in religious activities and community engagement. Simultaneously, entrenched cultural norms and traditional interpretations of religion can limit autonomy, decision-making, and access to opportunities, highlighting the complex and context-dependent nature of empowerment. The findings underscore that women are not passive recipients of religious teachings but actively negotiate and reinterpret faith to enhance personal and collective agency. Corroborated by both quantitative and qualitative evidence, higher religious engagement is associated with greater autonomy, joint household decision-making, and social participation, while structural barriers persist in education, financial control, and skill development. Overall, the study reveals that religion, when interpreted inclusively and coupled with supportive community practices, can serve as a powerful catalyst for gender-sensitive social transformation. Faith-based initiatives that integrate skill development, education, and leadership opportunities have the potential to advance women's dignity and participation in both private and public spheres. These insights emphasize the need for collaborative efforts between religious institutions, policymakers, and communities to foster equitable, sustainable empowerment in rural Sri Lanka.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that religious institutions, policymakers, and community stakeholders collaboratively implement strategies to enhance women's empowerment in rural, multi-religious contexts, guided by both sociological and feminist theoretical perspectives. From a structural-functional perspective, faith-based organizations can be leveraged as social institutions that provide cohesion, leadership opportunities, and skill development programs, linking spiritual engagement with practical economic and social participation. Drawing on feminist and empowerment theories, promoting gender-sensitive interpretations of religious teachings is essential to challenge patriarchal norms, reinforce women's agency, and uphold human dignity, enabling women to actively negotiate household and community roles. Social capital theory further supports fostering cross-religious collaboration and interfaith women's initiatives, as these networks build trust, collective efficacy, and social support that facilitate broader social transformation. Additionally, integrating community-based measures, such as educational scholarships, accessible training facilities, and childcare support, addresses structural constraints, thereby expanding women's participation in both public and domestic spheres. Finally, aligning these faith-driven interventions with

policy frameworks and development programs ensures that empowerment efforts are sustainable, contextually relevant, and theoretically informed, advancing gender equality and inclusive social change in rural Sri Lanka.

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