

# Unpacking The Layers of Oppression : Muslim Women's Experiences of Islamophobia, Misogyny and Patriarchy in Kerala

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## Abstract

Muslim women in Kerala, India face a unique combination of challenges that restrict their agency, autonomy, and decision-making power. Islamophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy intersect to perpetuate negative stereotypes, limit access to education and employment, and entrench societal inequalities. These interconnected forms of oppression can have severe consequences, including marginalization, exclusion, and violence. The societal expectations placed on Muslim women in Kerala can be particularly restrictive, with women often expected to prioritize domestic and familial responsibilities over personal aspirations. This can limit their ability to participate in public life, access education and healthcare, and exercise their rights as citizens. Furthermore, institutionalized discrimination and bias can perpetuate inequalities and limit opportunities for social mobility. Addressing these intersecting inequalities requires a nuanced understanding of the complex power dynamics at play. By exploring the experiences of Muslim women in Kerala, we can better understand the ways in which oppression operates and develop more effective strategies for promoting social justice and human rights.

**Keywords :** Islamophobia, misogyny, patriarchy, oppression, social justice.

## INTRODUCTION

Muslim women in Kerala, India face a complex web of oppression, including Islamophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy. These intersecting forms of oppression affect their daily lives, limiting their access to education, employment, and healthcare. Kerala, known for its high literacy rates and progressive policies, still struggles with deep-seated social and cultural biases against Muslim women. Islamophobia, fueled by national and global events, has led to increased marginalization and exclusion of Muslim women from public spaces and social services. They face discrimination, stereotyping, and bias in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and healthcare. Muslim women are often subjected to verbal and physical abuse, and are frequently asked to prove their "Indianness" or "Keralite" identity.

Misogyny, perpetuated by patriarchal norms and values, restricts Muslim women's autonomy, agency, and decision-making power. They face restrictions on their mobility, dress, and interactions with non-Muslims. Muslim women are often expected to conform to traditional roles and responsibilities, and are discouraged from pursuing education, employment, or other

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goals that may be seen as "un-Islamic" or "un-feminine." Patriarchy, embedded in both Muslim and broader Indian societies, reinforces gender-based violence, discrimination, and inequality. Muslim women face domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse, often with little recourse or support. They are frequently denied their rights to inheritance, property, and education, and are expected to prioritize their roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers over their own aspirations and goals. The intersection of Islamophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy has devastating consequences for Muslim women in Kerala. They face multiple barriers to education, employment, and healthcare, and are frequently denied their rights and dignity. Muslim women are often forced to choose between their identities as Muslims, women, and Indians, and are frequently expected to compromise their values, beliefs, and aspirations to conform to societal norms.

To address these intersecting forms of oppression, it is essential to adopt a nuanced and multifaceted approach. This includes:

- i. Challenging Islamophobic stereotypes and biases through education, awareness, and advocacy.
- ii. Promoting gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms and values through education, employment, and empowerment programs.
- iii. Supporting Muslim women's activism, advocacy, and community organizing efforts to address their rights and concerns.
- iv. Encouraging interfaith and intercommunity dialogue and cooperation to promote mutual understanding and respect.
- v. Developing policies and programs that address the specific needs and concerns of Muslim women in Kerala.

By unpacking the layers of oppression faced by Muslim women in Kerala, we can work towards creating a more just, equitable, and inclusive society for all. The experiences of Muslim women in Kerala are shaped by the state's unique history, culture, and politics. Kerala has a long history of Islamic presence, dating back to the 7th century. However, Muslim women in Kerala have historically faced marginalization and exclusion from public spaces and social services. Several social and cultural factors contribute to the oppression of Muslim women in Kerala. These include:

- i. Patriarchal norms and values: Muslim women in Kerala are often expected to conform to traditional roles and responsibilities, such as domestic work and childcare.
- ii. Islamophobic stereotypes and biases: Muslim women in Kerala face discrimination and stereotyping due to their religious identity.
- iii. Caste and class dynamics: Muslim women in Kerala often face intersecting forms of oppression based on their caste and class backgrounds.

Muslim women in Kerala face significant barriers to economic empowerment. Limited access to education and employment. Restrictions on mobility and autonomy Muslim women in Kerala often face restrictions on their mobility and autonomy, making it difficult for them to pursue economic opportunities. Discrimination in the workplace Muslim women in Kerala often face discrimination in the workplace, including lower pay scales and limited opportunities

for advancement. Muslim women in Kerala face significant challenges to their health and wellbeing. Limited access to healthcare is a major concern, with many Muslim women struggling to access quality healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare. Additionally, nutritional deficiencies are common among Muslim women in Kerala, due to limited access to nutritious food and cultural restrictions on food choices. Mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, are also prevalent among Muslim women in Kerala, often stemming from the intersecting forms of oppression they face. Furthermore, Muslim women in Kerala often lack access to safe and clean-living environments, exacerbating health problems. To address these challenges, it is essential to increase access to quality healthcare services, promote education and awareness about nutrition and mental health, and support community-based initiatives that prioritize the health and wellbeing of Muslim women in Kerala.

Muslim women in Kerala face significant challenges to their health and wellbeing. Limited access to healthcare is a major concern, with many Muslim women struggling to access quality healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare. This is often due to a lack of healthcare facilities in rural areas, as well as cultural and social barriers that prevent Muslim women from seeking medical care. Additionally, nutritional deficiencies are common among Muslim women in Kerala, due to limited access to nutritious food and cultural restrictions on food choices. Many Muslim women in Kerala suffer from iron deficiency anemia, vitamin D deficiency, and other nutritional disorders. This can have serious consequences for their health, including increased risk of illness, infertility, and maternal mortality. Mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, are also prevalent among Muslim women in Kerala. Often stemming from the intersecting forms of oppression they face, including Islamophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy. Muslim women in Kerala may experience trauma, stress, and anxiety due to their social and cultural circumstances, which can have long-term effects on their mental health and wellbeing.

Furthermore, Muslim women in Kerala often lack access to safe and clean living environments. Many live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, which can exacerbate health problems. Limited access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities can lead to the spread of diseases, such as diarrhea, cholera, and typhoid fever. The lack of education and awareness about health and nutrition is another significant challenge faced by Muslim women in Kerala. Many are unaware of the importance of nutrition, hygiene, and healthcare, which can lead to poor health outcomes. Limited access to education and information can also perpetuate harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and early marriage. Cultural and social norms can also play a significant role in shaping the health and wellbeing of Muslim women in Kerala. For example, the practice of purdah (seclusion) can limit Muslim women's access to healthcare services, education, and economic opportunities. Similarly, the emphasis on modesty and chastity can lead to restrictions on Muslim women's mobility and autonomy.

To address these challenges, it is essential to increase access to quality healthcare services, promote education and awareness about nutrition and mental health, and support community-based initiatives that prioritize the health and wellbeing of Muslim women in Kerala. This can involve training healthcare providers to be sensitive to the cultural and social needs of Muslim

women, as well as promoting community-based health programs that address the specific health concerns of Muslim women. Additionally, addressing the social and cultural determinants of health is crucial. This involves challenging harmful cultural and social norms, promoting education and awareness about health and nutrition, and supporting community-based initiatives that prioritize the health and wellbeing of Muslim women in Kerala. By addressing these underlying determinants, we can work towards creating a more equitable and just society that promotes the health and wellbeing of all individuals. Ultimately, improving the health and wellbeing of Muslim women in Kerala requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the complex interplay of factors that shape their lives. By working together to address these challenges, we can promote the health, wellbeing, and empowerment of Muslim women in Kerala, and contribute to a more equitable and just society for all.

The Muslim community in Kerala is significant, making up around 26.56% of the state's population. Despite their numbers, Muslim women in Kerala continue to face marginalization and exclusion from public spaces and social services. This is often due to a combination of factors, including Islamophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy. There are, however, organizations and initiatives working to challenge these forms of oppression and promote the rights and empowerment of Muslim women in Kerala. For example, the "Rising Beyond the Ceiling" (RBTC) initiative has recognized and celebrated the achievements of Muslim women in Kerala, including those in fields such as education, healthcare, and the arts. In addition, there are also organizations focused on promoting the rights and empowerment of Muslim women in Kerala, such as NISA, an autonomous Muslim women's organization.<sup>3</sup> These organizations are working to challenge the limitations of traditional Islamic frameworks and promote more inclusive and equitable forms of social and political engagement.

Overall, while Muslim women in Kerala continue to face significant challenges and forms of oppression, there are also many organizations, initiatives, and individuals working to promote their rights and empowerment. By supporting and amplifying these efforts, we can work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all. Some key areas where Muslim women in Kerala are making strides include education, where they are increasingly pursuing higher education and careers in fields such as medicine, law, and engineering. They are also making significant contributions in the arts and culture, where they are using music, literature, and other forms of creative expression to challenge dominant narratives and promote more inclusive and equitable forms of social engagement.

The "Rising Beyond the Ceiling" (RBTC) initiative has recognized and celebrated the achievements of 100 Muslim women from Kerala who have made significant contributions in various fields. These women are breaking stereotypes and shattering glass ceilings in fields such as uniformed services, governance, arts, literature, politics, social development, law, academics, medicine, entrepreneurship, and sports. Women like Nagma Mohamed Mallick, the first Muslim woman in the Indian Foreign Service, are inspiring others with their leadership roles in administration and governance. Education has played a crucial role in empowering Muslim women in Kerala, with many achieving success in fields like medicine, law, and academics. Muslim women in Kerala are challenging patriarchal norms and stereotypes, paving the way for future generations to pursue their dreams and ambitions. Initiatives like Rising

Beyond The Ceiling (RBTC) are recognizing and celebrating the achievements of Muslim women in Kerala, providing role models for young women and girls. RBTC aims to promote social change by changing the narrative surrounding Muslim women in India, highlighting their contributions to nation-building and development.

The inspiring stories of Muslim women in Kerala are a testament to their courage, resilience, and determination. One such initiative that celebrates these stories is "Rising Beyond the Ceiling" (RBTC), which has recognized and honored 70 Muslim women from Kerala for their exemplary achievements in various fields. These women are breaking stereotypes and shattering glass ceilings in fields such as uniformed services, governance, arts, literature, and entrepreneurship. For instance, Shabana Faizal, Chief Corporate Officer and Vice-Chairperson of KEF Holdings UAE, has been listed in the category of 'Global Inspirations' for her entrepreneurial achievements and philanthropic work. Another inspiring story is that of Sara Aboobacker, a Kannada fiction writer who has written extensively on the lives of Muslim women in Kerala and Karnataka. Her stories narrate the struggles and challenges faced by Muslim women in these regions, focusing on issues of equality and injustice. Nagma Mohamed Mallick, the first Muslim woman in the Indian Foreign Service, is another role model who has made significant contributions to nation-building. She has served as the High Commissioner of India to Brunei and as India's Ambassador to Tunisia, inspiring a new generation of Muslim women to pursue careers in diplomacy and governance. The RBTC initiative is not only recognizing the achievements of Muslim women in Kerala but also providing a platform for them to share their stories and inspire others. By celebrating these stories, RBTC aims to challenge the stereotypical narrative about Muslim women in India and promote a more inclusive and equitable society.

In addition to these individual stories, there are also efforts to address the broader social and economic challenges faced by Muslim women in Kerala. For instance, initiatives such as the Faizal and Shabana Foundation are working to improve education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for Muslim women and girls in Kerala. Overall, the stories of Muslim women in Kerala are a testament to their strength, resilience, and determination. By recognizing and celebrating these stories, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society that promotes the rights and empowerment of all women.

## CONCLUSION

The inspiring stories of Muslim women in Kerala are a testament to their courage, resilience, and determination in the face of adversity. Despite facing numerous challenges and obstacles, including Islamophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy, these women have broken stereotypes and shattered glass ceilings in various fields, including uniformed services, governance, arts, literature, and entrepreneurship. The "Rising Beyond the Ceiling" (RBTC) initiative has played a significant role in recognizing and celebrating the achievements of Muslim women in Kerala, providing a platform for them to share their stories and inspire others. By celebrating these stories, RBTC aims to challenge the stereotypical narrative about Muslim women in India and promote a more inclusive and equitable society. The stories of Muslim women in Kerala also highlight the importance of education, empowerment, and economic opportunities in promoting the rights and dignity of women. Initiatives such as the Faizal and Shabana

Foundation are working to improve education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for Muslim women and girls in Kerala, providing them with the tools and resources they need to succeed.

Furthermore, the stories of Muslim women in Kerala demonstrate the power of community and solidarity in promoting social change. By working together and supporting one another, Muslim women in Kerala are challenging patriarchal norms and stereotypes, promoting gender equality and justice, and creating a more inclusive and equitable society. In addition, the stories of Muslim women in Kerala highlight the importance of representation and visibility in promoting social change. By sharing their stories and experiences, Muslim women in Kerala are providing a platform for others to share their own stories, promoting a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the experiences of Muslim women in India. Overall, the inspiring stories of Muslim women in Kerala are a testament to the power of women's empowerment and the importance of promoting gender equality and justice. By recognizing and celebrating these stories, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society that promotes the rights and dignity of all women.

As we move forward, it is essential that we continue to amplify the voices and stories of Muslim women in Kerala, providing a platform for them to share their experiences and promote social change. We must also work to address the broader social and economic challenges faced by Muslim women in Kerala, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. By working together, we can create a more just and equitable society that promotes the rights and dignity of all women. The inspiring stories of Muslim women in Kerala are a powerful reminder of the importance of women's empowerment and the need to continue working towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

The stories of Muslim women in Kerala serve as a powerful reminder of the resilience and determination of women in the face of adversity. Despite facing numerous challenges and obstacles, these women have emerged as role models and agents of change, inspiring a new generation of women to pursue their dreams and ambitions. As we reflect on their stories, we are reminded of the importance of promoting gender equality and justice, and of the need to continue working towards a more inclusive and equitable society. By celebrating the achievements of Muslim women in Kerala, we can help to create a more just and equitable world, where all women have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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