

The Burden of Honor: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Social Pressure Faced by Single Muslim Mothers in Coimbatore

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Abstract: *Single motherhood within Muslim communities in India remains an underexplored sociological phenomenon particularly when examined through the intersecting lenses of gender, religion and social control. Dominant cultural narratives surrounding family honor, morality and female respectability often intensify the lived struggles of single Muslim mothers subjecting them to heightened surveillance and social regulation. This study explores the nature, forms and consequences of social pressure experienced by single Muslim mothers in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Employing a qualitative research design, in depth interviews were conducted with twenty single Muslim mothers selected through purposive sampling. The findings reveal that the notion of izzat (honor) operates as a powerful disciplinary mechanism, shaping women's everyday lives, social interactions and self-perceptions. Participants reported stigma, moral judgment, economic vulnerability, emotional isolation and restricted mobility as recurring experiences. The study argues that social pressure is not merely interpersonal but structurally embedded within familial norms, community institutions and gendered religious interpretations. This research contributes to feminist sociology, social exclusion and minority studies by foregrounding the voices of single Muslim mothers highlighting the urgent need for socially inclusive policies and community level interventions.*

Keywords: Familial Norms, Gender, Honor, Single Muslim Mothers, Social exclusion and Qualitative Study

1. Introduction

Family structures in Indian society are deeply embedded within patriarchal norms, religious values and cultural expectations that prioritize the collective over the individual. Marriage is not merely a social contract but a sacramental and central institution that governs women's social legitimacy, sexuality and moral respectability (Uberoi, 2006). Scholars have long noted that in the Indian context a woman's identity is inextricably linked to her marital status, with "kanyadan" (gift of the maiden) and "suhag" (marital auspiciousness) serving as defining cultural markers (Dube, 1997). The single motherhood whether arising from divorce, separation, widowhood, and abandonment represents a profound disruption of the normative social order. It challenges dominant ideals of family stability, femininity and the safeguarding of lineage (Chakravarti, 1993). For Muslim women these challenges are further compounded by their intersectional location at the crossroads of gender and religious minority status. While Muslim women navigate a specific socio-political landscape shaped by Personal Laws and community specific notions of *izzat* (honor) and *sharam* (modesty) (Hasan & Menon, 2004). The concept of honor in South Asian Muslim communities is often "gendered," where the woman's body and conduct become the repository of the family's and the community's collective reputation (Jalal, 2002). So a single Muslim mother does not just face the economic struggle of running a household alone. She faces an amplified "surveillance" from her community which may view her independent existence as a potential threat to moral order (Kirmani, 2013). Sociological research has increasingly focused on single motherhood as a category

shaped by structural inequalities, gendered power relations and socio-economic marginalization. Studies have highlighted how single women are often stigmatized as "incomplete" and "deviant," facing exclusion from social rituals and economic networks (Lamb, 2000; Datta, 2003). The existing body of literature on single mothers in India has largely centered on Hindu upper caste and secular urban contexts. There is a marked paucity of research addressing the specific lived realities of Muslim single mothers, who are often statistically invisible and homogenized within broader studies on "minority welfare" (Vatuk, 2017). This absence is particularly significant given the ways in which Muslim women's lives are frequently framed through external stereotypes, moral anxieties and politicized discourses rather than their own narratives (Lateef, 1990). Emerging scholarship is beginning to address this gap; for instance, Salihu, Babu and Ambika (2025) have highlighted how religious periods like *Iddah* are not merely restrictive but serve as complex sites of "embodied faith" and resilience.

Coimbatore is rapidly urbanizing industrial hub in Tamil Nadu with a sizeable Muslim population that provides a unique and critical social context to examine these dynamics. While the city is characterized by high literacy rates and economic development often referred to as the "Manchester of South India" sociological observations suggest that modernization in the public sphere does not automatically translate to liberalization in the private sphere (Mines, 1978). Despite educational advancements, traditional norms related to endogamy, seclusion and family honor continue to exert strong influence within Tamil

Muslim communities (Tschacher, 2014). Single Muslim mothers in this setting navigate a complex, dual terrain: they must fulfill modern economic roles as breadwinners while simultaneously adhering to traditional expectations of modesty to avoid social sanctions. This study seeks to examine how social pressure is experienced, interpreted and negotiated by single Muslim mothers in Coimbatore. It specifically focuses on how honor based norms shape their everyday lives, limit their mobility and constrain their agency. By adopting a qualitative, voice centered approach specifically utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) the study aims to move beyond generalized assumptions. Aligning with recent decolonial phenomenological research in this domain (Salihi, Babu, & Ambika, 2025), it seeks to offer nuanced sociological insights grounded in lived experience, exploring how these women reconstruct their identity and dignity amidst the "burden of honor" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Single Motherhood and Social Stigma

Sociological literature consistently identifies single motherhood as a socially stigmatized family form in societies where marriage is positioned as the normative foundation of family life. The stigma attached to single motherhood arises from dominant moral frameworks that equate women's respectability with marital status and male association (Goffman, 1963; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Within such frameworks single mothers are often perceived not merely as caregivers but as moral deviants whose family circumstances symbolize a breakdown of social order. Research across diverse cultural contexts demonstrates that stigma directed at single mothers is deeply gendered. While men's absence from family life is often normalized and overlooked, women are held disproportionately accountable for marital dissolution and non-marital childrearing (Letablier & Wall, 2018). This moral asymmetry reinforces patriarchal norms that define women primarily through relational identities such as wifehood. Consequently, single mothers are frequently subjected to moral judgments that frame their circumstances as evidence of irresponsibility, personal failure, and moral inadequacy (Hays, 2003). Empirical studies further indicate that stigma has material and psychological consequences. Single mothers often encounter restricted access to social support networks, discrimination in employment settings and limited opportunities for upward mobility (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Social exclusion is not always overt; it often takes subtle forms such as avoidance, gossip, and conditional support, which cumulatively produce emotional distress and social isolation. These experiences illustrate how stigma operates as a form of symbolic exclusion, positioning single mothers at the margins of social legitimacy while maintaining the dominance of conventional family ideals. In patriarchal societies where family honor and collective reputation are highly valued, motherhood outside a stable marital framework is perceived as a challenge to normative gender order. Single mothers embody a contradiction: they fulfill caregiving responsibilities while simultaneously violating expectations of marital dependency. Stigma functions as a regulatory mechanism that discourages

deviation and reinforces conformity to dominant family structures.

2.2 Gender, Religion and Honor

Honor has been extensively examined in sociological and feminist scholarship as a gendered construct through which women's behavior is monitored and regulated (Abu Lughod, 1998; Kandiyoti, 1988). Rather than functioning as a neutral moral value, honor operates as a system of social control that assigns women the primary responsibility for preserving family and community reputation. Women's bodies, mobility, sexuality and social interactions become key sites where honor is performed, evaluated and enforced. Within Muslim communities, honor is often articulated through idioms of modesty, obedience and moral discipline. While Islamic teachings emphasize ethical accountability, justice and dignity for both men and women, everyday social practices frequently reflect patriarchal interpretations that privilege male authority and female conformity (Mir Hosseini, 2016). These interpretations blur the distinction between religious doctrine and cultural norms, rendering honor a powerful tool for legitimizing gendered restrictions.

Feminist scholars argue that honor functions less through direct coercion and more through normalization and internalization (Bourdieu, 2001). Women learn to regulate themselves in anticipation of social judgment, often limiting their choices to avoid gossip and reputational damage. For single women and particularly single mothers this surveillance intensifies due to the absence of a socially sanctioned male guardian. Divorce, separation, and independent living is frequently framed as a moral threat to communal respectability rather than as a legitimate life circumstance. Empirical research shows that honor based norms influence everyday practices such as restrictions on mobility, employment and participation in public life (Joseph, 2015). These norms place disproportionate pressure on women to demonstrate moral compliance often at the cost of autonomy and well-being. Honor thus operates as a form of symbolic power that reproduces gender inequality while appearing culturally justified and socially necessary.

2.3 Muslim Women and Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory provides a critical framework for understanding the layered social positions occupied by Muslim women in India. Gender intersects with religion, class and minority status to produce distinct patterns of marginalization that cannot be understood through single axis explanations (Crenshaw, 1991). Muslim women experience not only patriarchal constraints within their communities but also broader structural disadvantages associated with minority status, including economic exclusion and social stereotyping (Sachar Committee Report, 2006). Single Muslim mothers represent an especially marginalized group within this intersectional landscape. As women, they are subject to patriarchal expectations that prioritize marriage and male protection. As single mothers, they challenge dominant family ideals and attract heightened moral scrutiny. As members of a religious minority, they navigate social spaces shaped by prejudice and political marginalization. These intersecting identities

create what scholars describe as cumulative disadvantage, intensifying vulnerability to social pressure and exclusion (Anthias, 2012).

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of centering Muslim women's lived experiences rather than relying on homogenizing narratives. Salihu, Babu and Ambika (2025), through an interpretative phenomenological approach, demonstrate how Muslim single mothers negotiate faith, embodiment and marginalization during the *Iddah* period. Their study reveals that religious practices function simultaneously as sources of spiritual resilience and sites of social regulation. The authors show how women's bodies and emotions become terrains where faith, honor and community expectations intersect, producing both constraint and agency. This emerging body of literature highlights the need for context specific research that captures the diversity of Muslim women's experiences. By situating single Muslim mothers at the intersection of gender, religion, family structure and minority status, intersectional scholarship underscores the importance of examining how macro level power structures are experienced in everyday life. Such an approach moves beyond victim centric narratives and instead illuminates the complex ways in which women negotiate, resist and reinterpret social norms.

2.4 Research Gap

Although scholarly engagement with Muslim women's issues in India has increased over the past two decades, significant gaps remain in both the focus and methodological orientation of existing research. Much of the literature on Muslim women has concentrated on broad indicators such as education, employment, fertility and legal status, often drawing upon large scale surveys, census data, and policy reports. While these studies have been valuable in documenting structural inequalities, they tend to treat Muslim women as a homogeneous category, thereby overlooking the differentiated experiences that emerge from variations in marital status, family structure and local social contexts. Single Muslim mothers remain particularly underrepresented. Existing studies frequently subsume them under broader categories such as "Muslim women," "female headed households," and "single parents," without attending to the specific social pressures that arise from the intersection of gender, religion and single motherhood. The unique challenges faced by single Muslim mothers especially those related to moral surveillance, honor based regulation and community stigma remain insufficiently theorized and empirically examined. A further limitation of existing scholarship lies in its methodological emphasis. Much of the available research relies on secondary data, legal analysis, and macro level policy discussions, which, while informative, offer limited insight into everyday social interactions and lived realities. Such approaches often fail to capture how abstract concepts like honor, respectability and morality are enacted in daily life through informal practices such as gossip, social exclusion and behavioral monitoring. Consequently, the micro level mechanisms through which social pressure is produced and sustained within families and communities remain poorly understood.

Geographically research on Muslim women in India has been uneven with a disproportionate focus on North Indian and nationally aggregated contexts. Urban South Indian settings, where rapid urbanization coexists with deeply rooted cultural norms, have received comparatively little attention. Cities like Coimbatore present a distinctive social environment in which traditional notions of honor intersect with urban anonymity, economic change and shifting family forms. The absence of localized studies from such contexts limits the ability to understand how regional cultures mediate the experience of single motherhood within Muslim communities. While recent qualitative studies have begun to foreground Muslim women's voices, these works often focus on marriage, veiling, and religious practice, leaving single motherhood largely peripheral. There is a lack of research that explicitly centers single Muslim mothers as subjects of inquiry and examines how they navigate social expectations, negotiate autonomy and interpret honor in their everyday lives. Without such focused inquiry, dominant narratives risk reproducing assumptions about Muslim women's passivity and uniformity, rather than recognizing their agency and diversity.

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a context specific, empirical examination of single Muslim mothers in an urban South Indian setting. By focusing on Coimbatore, the research moves beyond generalized representations and situates women's experiences within a concrete social and cultural environment. By examining social pressure and honor based regulation as lived and measurable social processes, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gendered norms operate at the intersection of family, religion and community life. In doing so, it responds to calls within feminist and intersectional sociology for research that bridges macro level structures and micro level experiences, thereby enriching the empirical and theoretical literature on Muslim women and single motherhood.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the objective of developing a nuanced sociological understanding of the social realities faced by single Muslim mothers in Coimbatore. It seeks to systematically examine the various forms of social pressure that shape their everyday lives, paying particular attention to how these pressures are produced, experienced and sustained within family and community settings. Central to this inquiry is an exploration of the role played by honor based norms in influencing community perceptions and moral judgments toward single Muslim mothers, as well as the ways in which such norms regulate women's behavior and social positioning. The study aims to assess the broader consequences of social pressure on women's emotional well-being, patterns of mobility and levels of participation in social and public life. By examining these dimensions together, the research seeks to capture the interconnected nature of psychological, social and spatial constraints experienced by single Muslim mothers. Finally, the study endeavours to analyse the strategies through which women negotiate, manage and at times resist social expectations, highlighting their agency within structurally constrained contexts. Through these objectives, the research aspires to

contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender, religion and family structure intersect to shape the lived experiences of single Muslim mothers in an urban South Indian setting.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the "burden of honor" as a lived social reality. IPA is uniquely suited for this inquiry because it focuses on the idiographic the particular experiences of single Muslim mothers rather than treating them as a homogeneous group. By utilizing a double hermeneutic approach the researcher seeks to interpret how participants make sense of their personal worlds, specifically how they navigate the "dual terrain" of modern economic roles and traditional expectations of modesty (*sharam*). This approach foregrounds marginalized voices allowing for a nuanced understanding of how abstract concepts like *izzat* (honor) are enacted through micro-level mechanisms of surveillance and moral labelling.

4.2 Study Area

The present study was conducted in Coimbatore, a major urban center in the western region of Tamil Nadu. Coimbatore is characterized by rapid industrial growth, expanding educational institutions and increasing urbanization, alongside the continued presence of traditional social and cultural norms. This coexistence of economic modernity and cultural conservatism makes the city a particularly relevant setting for examining evolving family structures and gender relations within minority communities. The city has a diverse socio economic composition, encompassing affluent residential areas, middle class neighbourhoods, industrial zones and informal settlements. Such diversity offers a varied social landscape in which experiences of single motherhood are shaped not only by gender and religion but also by class position and access to resources. For single Muslim mothers, these intersecting factors influence everyday life in complex ways, affecting housing arrangements, employment opportunities, social mobility and community interaction.

Coimbatore is also home to a sizeable Muslim population that is socially heterogeneous, comprising families engaged in trade, industry, service sectors and informal occupations. Despite the city's urban character, many Muslim neighbourhoods continue to be organized around close knit community networks where social relationships are governed by shared cultural norms, religious practices and collective notions of honor and respectability. Within such contexts, family reputation and moral conduct remain significant markers of social acceptance. At the same time, urbanization has introduced new possibilities and tensions. Increased exposure to education, employment and public spaces has altered expectations surrounding women's roles, while traditional values continue to exert strong influence over family life and gender behaviour. This dynamic creates a complex social environment in which single Muslim mothers navigate both opportunities for independence and

persistent forms of social regulation. By situating the study in Coimbatore the research is able to capture how honor based norms and social pressure operate within an urban South Indian context that is neither entirely traditional nor fully detached from customary social frameworks. The city thus provides a meaningful empirical setting for understanding how single Muslim mothers experience and negotiate social expectations amid broader processes of urban change and cultural continuity.

4.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

The study draws upon a purposively selected sample of twenty single Muslim mothers residing in Coimbatore. Purposive sampling was adopted in order to identify participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the social realities under investigation. Given the sensitive nature of single motherhood within Muslim communities, random sampling was neither feasible nor appropriate, as many potential participants may be reluctant to disclose their status in formal and publicly accessible settings. The inclusion criteria were defined to ensure that participants shared key characteristics central to the research focus. All participants were Muslim women who were currently raising at least one dependent child without a spouse. The sample included women who were divorced, separated and widowed, reflecting the different pathways through which single motherhood occurs. This diversity allowed the study to capture variations in social experience shaped by marital history, social perception and community response. Efforts were made to include participants from a range of age groups, educational backgrounds and socio economic positions. Women in early adulthood as well as those in middle age were included to reflect differing life stages and responsibilities. Socio economic diversity was sought by engaging women employed in formal and informal sectors, those engaged in home based work and those who were economically dependent on family members. Such variation was important for understanding how social pressure and honor based norms are mediated by class position and economic autonomy.

Access to participants was facilitated through informal community networks, women's support groups and personal referrals. In several cases snowball sampling complemented the purposive approach, as initial participants referred other single Muslim mothers who met the study criteria. This method proved particularly effective in reaching women who were socially withdrawn and hesitant to participate due to fear of stigma. The sample size was determined by the principle of informational saturation, where data collection continued until recurring themes and patterns became evident. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the study prioritized depth, diversity and contextual richness. The selected sampling strategy thus enabled a nuanced exploration of single Muslim mothers' experiences while remaining sensitive to the ethical and social complexities of the research setting.

4.4 Data Collection

Data for the study were collected through in depth, semi structured interviews, a method chosen for its ability to elicit

detailed narratives and capture the complexity of lived experiences. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, in depth interviewing provided a flexible and empathetic space in which participants could articulate their experiences, emotions and interpretations without the constraints of rigid questioning. This approach was particularly important for engaging with issues related to stigma, honor and personal struggle, which are often difficult to express in structured and survey based formats.

Interviews were conducted in Tamil depending on the linguistic comfort of the participant. Allowing participants to speak in their preferred language was essential for fostering trust and enabling nuanced expression, especially when discussing emotionally charged and culturally embedded experiences. The interviews were carried out in locations chosen by the participants, typically within their homes and other private settings, to ensure comfort, confidentiality and minimal external influence. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, although some extended beyond this duration when participants chose to elaborate on their experiences. The semi structured interview guide consisted of broad thematic prompts rather than fixed questions, allowing the conversation to evolve organically. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their family relationships, interactions within the community, experiences of social judgment and the everyday challenges associated with single motherhood. Attention was also given to changes in their social lives following marital dissolution and widowhood as well as to moments of resilience negotiation and self-reflection.

Open ended questioning enabled participants to frame their narratives in their own terms, highlighting what they considered most significant in their lives. This narrative approach allowed the researcher to observe not only the content of participants' responses but also the emotional tones, pauses and emphases through which meanings were conveyed. Probing questions were used sensitively to clarify points and explore emerging themes, while care was taken to avoid imposing assumptions and interpretations during the interview process. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and, with permission, were audio recorded to ensure accuracy. Field notes were maintained alongside recordings to capture contextual observations, non-verbal cues and immediate reflections following each interview. This combination of recorded narratives and observational notes enriched the data and contributed to a more holistic understanding of participants' social worlds. Through this data collection process, the study sought to generate rich, contextually grounded accounts of how single Muslim mothers experience and navigate social pressure within their everyday lives.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to all stages of the research process, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the social vulnerability of the study participants. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all

participants after clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation and the intended use of the data. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that there would be no negative consequences for choosing not to participate and for withdrawing at any point during the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained to protect participants from potential social repercussions. Given the stigma associated with single motherhood within many community contexts, particular care was taken to ensure that no identifying information such as names, addresses, and specific personal details was recorded and disclosed. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study and any contextual details that could inadvertently reveal participants' identities have been modified and omitted without compromising the analytical integrity of the data.

Emotional sensitivity was a key ethical concern, as interviews often involved discussions of personal loss, marital breakdown, social exclusion and emotional distress. The interview process was conducted with empathy and respect, allowing participants to guide the depth and direction of their narratives. Participants were not pressured to answer any questions that caused discomfort and interviews were paused and redirected whenever emotional strain was evident. This approach was intended to minimize harm while creating a supportive environment in which participants felt heard and respected. The researcher remained attentive to the power dynamics inherent in qualitative research, particularly when engaging with women who occupy marginalized social positions. Efforts were made to establish rapport and trust, emphasizing that the study sought to understand participants' experiences rather than to evaluate and judge their life choices. Data were stored securely, with access limited to the researcher, to prevent unauthorized use and disclosure. By prioritizing ethical responsibility throughout the research process, the study aimed to uphold the dignity, autonomy and well-being of participants. These ethical practices were not treated as procedural formalities but as integral to the production of responsible and respectful sociological knowledge.

4.6 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original language and subsequently translated into English with careful attention to meaning and context. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, an inductive approach that allows patterns and meanings to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori. Initial open coding was conducted through repeated readings of the transcripts to identify significant phrases, expressions and experiences. These codes were then compared across interviews to identify recurring patterns, which were clustered into broader categories. Through this iterative process, core themes were developed that reflected shared experiences related to honor, stigma, social regulation, economic vulnerability, emotional well-being and resilience. Thematic refinement continued until conceptual clarity and internal coherence were achieved.

Theme	Sub Themes	Indicative Codes	Illustrative Meaning
Honor as Social Surveillance	Community monitoring	Being watched, looking suspicious, fear of gossip	Honor functions as a mechanism through which women's behavior is continuously observed and regulated
	Behavioral control	Restrictions on dress, interaction, mobility	Everyday actions are evaluated for their perceived impact on family reputation
Stigmatization and Moral Labeling	Moral suspicion	Character judgment, lack of trust, blame	Single motherhood is framed as moral failure rather than life circumstance
	Social exclusion	Avoidance, silence, exclusion from events	Women experience symbolic exclusion from community life
Economic Pressure and Dependency	Employment restriction	Discouraged from working, workplace judgment	Economic autonomy is limited by honor based norms
	Familial dependence	Financial obligation, lack of decision power	Dependency on natal families reinforces loss of autonomy
Emotional Isolation and Mental Health	Emotional distress	Anxiety, sadness, exhaustion	Constant self-monitoring produces psychological strain
	Social loneliness	Lack of support, emotional withdrawal	Absence of safe community spaces intensifies isolation
Coping and Resistance	Faith based resilience	Prayer, spiritual meaning, acceptance	Religion serves as emotional support and source of strength
	Negotiation of norms	Selective silence, boundary setting	Women actively manage and reinterpret social expectations
	Redefining honor	Self-respect, dignity, motherhood	Honor is reframed away from community approval toward personal worth

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Honor as a Source of Social Surveillance

Participants consistently described honor (*izzat*) as a pervasive and everyday force that structured their interactions within both familial and community spaces. Rather than being an abstract moral value, honor emerged as a lived social reality operating through continuous observation, judgment, and informal monitoring. Women spoke of feeling "constantly watched," particularly regarding their mobility, interactions with men, and bodily presentation. These findings resonate with feminist sociological analyses that conceptualize honor as a gendered mechanism of social control, wherein women are positioned as the symbolic carriers of collective reputation. Ordinary activities such as attending social functions, speaking to male colleagues, or returning home after sunset were frequently interpreted through the lens of family honor and viewed with suspicion when performed by single mothers.

This differential scrutiny reflects what Foucault (1977) describes as disciplinary power, where regulation occurs through surveillance rather than direct coercion. The awareness of being watched produced a heightened self-consciousness, leading participants to pre-emptively regulate their own behavior to avoid communal judgment. This internalization of surveillance aligns with Bourdieu's (2001) concept of symbolic violence whereby dominated groups come to accept and reproduce the very norms that constrain them. By justifying these restrictions as necessary for maintaining family peace and protecting their children from stigma, honor functioned not only as an external constraint but as an internalized framework shaping the participants' sense of responsibility and self-worth.

5.2 Stigmatization and Moral Labelling

Stigmatization emerged as a central and persistent feature of participants' social experiences. Regardless of the circumstances that led to their single status, women reported

being subjected to moral labelling that framed them as socially suspect and morally unreliable. Divorce, in particular, was commonly interpreted as a personal failure rather than as the outcome of marital conflict, domestic violence, and unequal power relations. This finding reflects broader sociological observations that women are disproportionately blamed for marital breakdown, while men's roles remain comparatively invisible (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Participants described how moral labelling resulted in subtle yet powerful forms of exclusion, including avoidance by neighbors, withdrawal of social invitations and silence in communal settings. Such practices align with Goffman's (1963) notion of stigma as a process that reduces individuals from "whole and usual" persons to socially discredited identities. The narrowing of social networks not only intensified isolation but also limited women's access to informal support systems that are crucial in contexts where state welfare provisions are weak. Stigma also had long term implications for women's future prospects. Several participants expressed concerns that their reputations as divorced and single mothers reduced the likelihood of remarriage, further entrenching social marginalization. These experiences illustrate how moral labelling operates as a form of social closure, reinforcing normative family structures by penalizing deviation and discouraging alternative life trajectories.

5.3 Economic Pressure and Dependency

Economic vulnerability was a recurring theme in participants' narratives, closely intertwined with honor based norms and gender expectations. Many women reported facing restrictions on employment due to social disapproval of women working outside the home, particularly in environments involving interaction with men. For some, employment was permitted only under strict conditions related to location, timing, and nature of work, while others were discouraged entirely to avoid community judgment. These findings reflect existing research that links women's economic participation to moral regulation in patriarchal contexts (Kabeer, 1999; Joseph, 2015).

Dependence on natal families emerged as a double edged reality. While familial support provided financial stability, it often came at the cost of autonomy and decision making power. Participants spoke of being reminded of their dependent status through subtle comments and expectations of compliance, reinforcing hierarchical family relations. This dynamic illustrates how economic dependency can reproduce gendered power relations within families, even in the absence of a husband. These findings underscore the interconnection between economic structures and cultural norms. Economic dependency not only limits material independence but also strengthens the moral authority of family members to regulate women's behavior. Honor based expectations and economic vulnerability mutually reinforce one another, constraining women's capacity to negotiate alternative roles and identities.

5.4 Emotional Isolation and Mental Health

The emotional consequences of sustained social pressure were pronounced across participants' narratives. Feelings of loneliness, anxiety and emotional exhaustion were frequently reported, stemming from the constant need to monitor one's actions and emotional expressions. Many women described living in a state of vigilance, carefully calibrating their behavior to avoid gossip and judgment. This emotional labour aligns with Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotion management, wherein individuals regulate their feelings to meet social expectations. Social withdrawal emerged as a common coping strategy, with women limiting participation in community events and public spaces to protect themselves from scrutiny. While withdrawal provided temporary relief from judgment, it often deepened isolation and reduced opportunities for social connection. The absence of supportive community spaces and institutional support further exacerbated mental health challenges, leaving women to navigate emotional distress largely on their own. These findings highlight the psychological toll of honor based regulation, which extends beyond visible restrictions to affect inner emotional worlds. The normalization of women's suffering as a necessary sacrifice for family reputation obscures the mental health costs of social control and reinforces silence around emotional distress.

5.5 Coping and Resistance

Despite the pervasive structural and cultural constraints of the "culture of honor," the participants in this study did not remain passive victims of surveillance; instead, they demonstrated significant agency by actively reinterpreting and negotiating traditional norms. Their resilience was not an overt rebellion but a subtle, strategic navigation of their social environment. While religious periods such as *Iddah* and daily faith-based practices were often identified as sites of social regulation, they simultaneously functioned as spaces of "embodied faith". For many participants religion provided a sense of spiritual resilience, moral reassurance, and an internal sense of meaning that shielded them from the psychological impact of social exclusion. Faith was thus experienced as a dynamic terrain, functioning as both a source of comfort and a tool for negotiating community expectations.

Many women engaged in a form of everyday resistance by shifting the locus of honor away from external community approval and toward internalized values such as "self-respect, personal dignity, and responsible motherhood". By reframing honor as a private commitment to their children's well-being rather than a public performance for community surveillance, these mothers effectively reclaimed their moral legitimacy. This strategic redefinition allowed them to carve out essential spaces of autonomy while maintaining a veneer of cultural continuity that protected them from further social sanctions. The formation of informal support networks particularly relationships with other women in similar circumstances served as "alternative social worlds". These networks provided a safe haven for empathy and mutual understanding, free from the moral judgment prevalent in broader community spaces. Through selective silence careful boundary setting, and strategic conformity, the single Muslim mothers in Coimbatore demonstrated that even within the "burden of honor," there are profound opportunities for reconstructing identity and dignity.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

6.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the social pressures faced by single Muslim mothers in Coimbatore, with particular attention to the role of honor based norms in shaping everyday experiences. Drawing on in depth qualitative interviews, the findings demonstrate that honor operates not merely as a cultural value but as a pervasive social mechanism that regulates women's behavior, relationships and emotional lives. For the participants in this study, honor was experienced as an ongoing condition of surveillance, producing constant self-monitoring and constraining autonomy across social, economic and spatial domains. The findings reveal that single Muslim mothers encounter layered forms of marginalization rooted in gendered expectations, marital status and minority identity. Stigmatization and moral labelling emerged as persistent experiences, often framing women as morally suspect regardless of the circumstances that led to single motherhood. Such labelling narrowed social networks, reduced access to community support and reinforced long term exclusion. Economic dependency further intensified vulnerability, as restrictions on women's employment and reliance on natal families reproduced unequal power relations and limited decision making capacity. At the emotional level the study highlights the psychological costs of sustained social pressure. Feelings of isolation, anxiety and emotional exhaustion were common, reflecting the burden of continuous self-regulation required to navigate honor based expectations. The study also documents women's agency and resilience. Through informal support networks, faith based practices and the redefinition of honor in terms of self-respect and responsible motherhood, participants actively negotiated social norms rather than passively accepting them. The study contributes to sociological scholarship in several ways. Empirically it foregrounds the voices of single Muslim mothers, a group that remains underrepresented in existing research. It demonstrates how concepts such as honor, stigma and symbolic power operate in everyday life, bridging macro

level structures and micro level experiences. Contextually by focusing on an urban South Indian setting the research complicates assumptions that honor based regulation is confined to rural and "traditional" spaces, showing instead how such norms adapt and persist within urban environments.

6.2 Policy Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that the marginalization of single Muslim mothers in Coimbatore is not merely a product of economic scarcity, but is deeply rooted in a "culture of honor" that utilizes surveillance and moral labelling as tools of social control. Consequently, effective policy interventions must transcend traditional financial aid and address the symbolic and structural exclusion these women navigate daily. To foster true dignity and autonomy, a multi-dimensional policy framework is required that bridges the gap between macro-level structures and the micro-level lived realities of these women in an urbanizing hub like Coimbatore. At the structural level, there is an urgent need for targeted identification and autonomous welfare systems. Currently the state and local programs often subsume single mothers under broad categories, which masks the specific vulnerabilities of the Muslim community in Coimbatore. Policies should recognize single Muslim mothers as a distinct "at-risk" category to ensure they are not statistically invisible. To reduce the "familial dependence" that often reinforces a loss of autonomy, the government should prioritize independent housing vouchers, subsidized community childcare, and direct income-generation schemes. By providing these resources directly to the woman, policy can mitigate the "moral authority" extended families exert over her mobility and choices, thereby reducing her vulnerability to honor-based social regulation.

Employment-related policies must address the informal social barriers such as community judgment that restrict workforce participation in Coimbatore's urban landscape. As the study indicates, economic participation is frequently restricted by community disapproval and the fear of "looking suspicious". To navigate these honor-based constraints, policies should incentivize the creation of safe, women-led cooperatives or home-based digital labour schemes that allow for economic independence without triggering severe social sanctions. These initiatives must be accompanied by community-level awareness efforts that challenge the moral labelling associated with women's work and single status, framing these life circumstances as a normal part of urban social change rather than personal moral failure. The "emotional exhaustion" and "vigilance" reported by participants also highlight a critical gap in institutional support for mental health in Tamil Nadu. There is an urgent need for accessible, stigma-free counselling services and peer-support networks. By funding partnerships with non-governmental organizations to facilitate "alternative social worlds," policy can create safe spaces where single Muslim mothers build relational resilience and share coping strategies without fear of judgment. Rather than viewing religious and cultural norms solely as obstacles, policy interventions should engage with community and religious institutions in Coimbatore as potential sites of change. Collaborative efforts can promote

interpretations of dignity and compassion that counter stigmatizing practices from within the community framework. Single Muslim mothers must be recognized as knowledgeable actors rather than passive recipients of aid. Incorporating their voices into policy design ensures that interventions are contextually grounded, participatory and capable of fostering meaningful autonomy within the complex "burden of honor" they navigate daily.

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