

Constructing and contesting women's roles in Islam: A feminist critical discourse perspective

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Article Information	Abstract:
Submitted: 2023-08-07 Revised: 2023-10-09 Published: 2023-12-09	Women's roles in Islam remain contested because male-dominated norms embedded in religious traditions shape dominant interpretations, constrain women's agency, and generate tensions between gender constructions and feminist movements. Previous studies, however, have tended to examine traditional constructions and feminist resistance separately. This study analyzes the social construction of gender roles in Islam, the controversies surrounding traditional understandings, and the contributions of feminist movements to the reconstruction of women's positions. It employs a descriptive-interpretive literature review and qualitative content analysis. Data were analyzed deductively and inductively using Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory and Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings show that gender roles in Muslim societies emerge through a dialectical process of institutionalization, contestation, and social reconstruction. First, gender interpretations are reproduced through families, religious organizations, and social institutions before being objectified and internalized as legitimate norms. Second, gender constructions are negotiated through debates concerning family, the body, economic rights, education, employment, public participation, and religious authority. Third, feminist movements construct counter-discourses through religious reinterpretation, <i>ijtihad</i> , education, legal advocacy, institutional reform, and digital activism. Gender constructions are historically and contextually situated and continuously negotiated through power relations and women's agency. The study's contribution lies in integrating Berger and Luckmann's theory with Lazar's framework to explain the production, contestation, and reconstruction of gender norms. Theoretically, this integration improves understanding of the relationship between normative institutionalization and discursive resistance. In practical terms, the findings provide a foundation for inclusive religious interpretations, gender-responsive policies, the protection of women, and public participation.
Keywords: Women's Roles; Islam; Feminist Critical Discourse; Gender Construction.	



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To cite this article (APA Style):

Karimullah, S. S., & Aliyah, S. R. (2023). The effectiveness of Qanun Jinayat in addressing sexual violence against children: A psychological perspective. *An-Nisa' Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(2), 187-202. <https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v16i2.177>

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INTRODUCTION

Islam plays an important role in shaping social, cultural, and political orders, including the roles and responsibilities assigned to women in Muslim societies. Nevertheless, women's position in Islam remains contested, particularly regarding their rights, leadership, and social participation, due to divergent religious interpretations and the influence of sociocultural contexts in shaping women's roles (Suraiya, 2022; Yakar, 2022). This issue arises because interpretations of Islamic teachings are shaped by particular social, cultural, and historical contexts, thereby producing diverse understandings of women's position (Sidani, 2005). Traditional interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith, for example, have generated varying perspectives on women's rights and leadership (Azkiyah et al., 2022; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019). Some studies have criticized these interpretations for reproducing patriarchal constructions and restricting women's rights (Karimullah, 2022). Amid modernization, these debates have intensified around women's education, employment, freedom of expression, and reproductive rights (Fuad & Ramadhan, 2023). A more critical and contextually grounded understanding of gender relations in Islam is therefore required.

Previous studies have examined women's roles in Islam from various perspectives that can be classified into three major strands. First, the normative interpretive strand addresses gender equality and critiques historical interpretations that restrict women's leadership (Dutta, 2022; Koburtay & Abuhussein, 2021; Rehman, 2020; Sugitanata & Karimullah, 2022). Second, the Islamic feminism and reinterpretation strand emphasizes justice, equality, critiques of patriarchal exegesis, and contextual readings of the Qur'an (Zainal & Wong, 2017; Karimullah, 2021; Wadud, 2021). Third, the policy and sociopolitical strand examines how policies in Muslim-majority countries influence women's rights and participation (Ertan, 2021; Gouda & Potrafke, 2016; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2009; Nasruddin & Muliana, 2023). However, these three strands remain largely disconnected and have yet to provide an integrated explanation of how gender norms are constructed, institutionalized, contested, and reconstructed through interpretation, institutions, power relations, and women's agency. This study addresses this gap by integrating Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory with Lazar's *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* to examine these dynamics within a unified analytical framework.

This study aims to analyze the social construction of gender roles in Islam, the controversies surrounding traditional understandings, and the contributions of feminist movements to the reconstruction of women's position. It addresses three research questions: (1) How do religious interpretations, social institutions, and power relations shape and internalize gender roles? (2) How are traditional understandings of women's bodies, family roles, economic rights, and authority contested? (3) How do feminist movements expand Muslim women's agency through reinterpretation, institutional reform, and public participation? Theoretically, this study integrates Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory with Lazar's *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* to explain the relationships among the institutionalization of meaning, patriarchal ideology, discursive contestation, and gender transformation. Practically, it provides a foundation for religious leaders, policymakers, educators, and activists to develop contextually grounded, inclusive, and gender-just interpretations, policies, educational practices, and advocacy initiatives.

Conceptually, this study approaches gender roles in Islam not as fixed social prescriptions but as realities that are constructed, institutionalized, contested, and reconstructed through religious interpretations, social institutions, power relations, and women's agency. Understandings of women's bodies, family roles, economic rights, leadership, and participation may vary according to historical, social, and political contexts,

as well as the authority of interpreters. To explain these processes, the study applies Krippendorff's qualitative content analysis through unitization, coding, categorization, and inference, followed by the interpretation of findings using Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory and Lazar's *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*. The study's contribution lies in integrating norm formation, discursive contestation, power relations, and institutional transformation into a single analytical framework that explains how women's agency and feminist movements contribute to the reconstruction of Islamic gender roles in contextually grounded, inclusive, and substantively equitable ways.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive interpretive literature review design to identify, compare, and synthesize scholarship on the construction of gender roles, controversies surrounding traditional understandings, and feminist movements in Muslim societies. Textual data were examined using qualitative content analysis to identify patterns of meaning, categories, and arguments across the literature (Krippendorff, 2019). Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction theory was used to explain the externalization, objectivation, and internalization of gender norms, while Lazar's (2007) *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* was applied to identify gender ideologies, power relations, discursive authority, dominant discourses, and feminist counter-discourses. The analysis generated conceptual interpretations guided by the research questions and recurring patterns within the literature corpus.

Data Sources

The data comprised academic literature and scholarly documents addressing the construction of women's roles in Islam, including journal articles, academic books, book chapters, and other scholarly publications on gender construction, traditional understandings, Islamic feminism, religious authority, and women's agency. The Qur'an and Hadith were treated as normative sources referenced within the literature rather than as primary texts subjected to direct analysis. The literature was selected according to its relevance, source traceability, argumentative strength, and representation of traditional, egalitarian, and feminist perspectives. Sources discussing Islam or women in general without advancing arguments concerning gender construction were excluded. Classical literature provided the theoretical foundation, whereas contemporary publications illuminated social developments, legal reforms, activism, women's participation, and digital discourse.

Data Collection

Data were collected through document analysis involving the identification, retrieval, screening, close reading, and extraction of relevant literature. Searches were conducted using keywords such as "gender roles in Islam," "Muslim women," "Islamic feminism," "religious authority," and "women's agency" across Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar. Publications were screened for relevance based on their titles, abstracts, keywords, and full texts. The analytical corpus comprised 21 substantive publications published between 2008 and 2023, including journal articles, book chapters, and academic works addressing gender, Islamic feminism, religious authority, legal reform, and women's agency. In addition, Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Lazar (2007), based on the editions consulted, served as the two principal theoretical references. Relevant quotations, propositions, and arguments were designated as data units and recorded in an extraction matrix to facilitate comparisons among traditional, egalitarian, and feminist perspectives.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis through unitization, analytical sampling, coding, data reduction, inference, and interpretation (Krippendorff, 2019). Units of analysis comprised statements, propositions, and arguments concerning women's roles and rights, religious authority, patriarchal norms, power relations, reinterpretation, and agency. Deductive coding drew on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, as well as Lazar's (2007) concepts of gender ideology, power relations, discursive authority, and counter-discourse. Inductive codes included hijab, polygamy, child marriage, inheritance, education, employment, leadership, legal reform, and digital activism. The analysis generated three analytical domains and 12 themes: social construction of gender roles, controversies surrounding traditional understandings, and feminist movements. Inferential analysis connected patterns across sources and social contexts with both theoretical frameworks.

Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

Interpretive trustworthiness was ensured through source and theoretical triangulation, repeated readings, negative-case analysis, and an audit trail to maintain consistency, transparency, and traceability (Lub, 2015). Source triangulation compared arguments across different types of literature and contexts within Muslim societies, including traditional, egalitarian, and feminist perspectives. Credibility was strengthened by tracing relationships among source arguments, codes, categories, and themes (Sundler et al., 2019). Dependability was maintained through a systematic extraction matrix and consistent coding guidelines, while confirmability was enhanced by documenting analytical decisions and distinguishing source-based arguments from researchers' interpretations. Transferability considered social, cultural, political, and religious contexts, while reflexivity prevented the homogenization of Islam, Muslim societies, and feminism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The social construction of gender roles in Islam

Qualitative content analysis was conducted through unitization, coding, category development, and inference from literature on gender roles in Islam. Units of analysis comprised arguments concerning role differentiation, interpretive authority, women's rights, patriarchal norms, social change, and feminist reinterpretation. The analysis generated four interrelated themes: (1) institutionalization of gender interpretations; (2) internalization of gendered role differentiation; (3) contestation between traditional and egalitarian discourses; and (4) reconstruction of gender roles through women's agency and social change. These themes demonstrate that gender roles are not constructed linearly from religious texts to social practices but through interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, internalization, contestation, and reconstruction, shaped by religious authority, social institutions, power relations, and women's agency.

Table 1

Analysis of the Social Construction of Gender Roles in Islam

Theme	Codes and Key Findings	Berger–Luckmann Analysis	Lazar's Critical Perspective	References
Institutionalization of gender interpretations	Religious authority, gendered division of roles, family responsibilities, and	Gender interpretations are externalized and objectified as	Religious discourse may legitimize gender-based distributions of	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Bakhshizadeh

	women's rights	socially constructed realities.	power.	(2023); Hamisan Khair (2020)
Internalization of gender roles	Domestic roles, breadwinning, marriage, education, and employment	Institutionalized gender roles are internalized as social identities and normative expectations.	Internalized norms may naturalize inequality and constrain women's agency.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Saeidi (2021); Sugitanata et al. (2021)
Contestation between traditional and egalitarian discourses	Hijab, freedom of choice, employment rights, education, and sociopolitical participation	Contesting interpretations demonstrate that gendered realities remain subject to ongoing negotiation.	Feminist discourse functions as a counter-narrative to patriarchal authority and ideology.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Bashri (2023); Rottmann & Ferree (2008)
Reconstruction of gender roles and women's agency	Reinterpretation, legal reform, education, leadership, and women's activism	Women's agency externalizes alternative and more inclusive constructions of gender.	Women are positioned as subjects who produce counter-discourses and promote social transformation.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Orakzai (2014); Shapiro (2014); Topal (2019)

Source: Author's analysis (2023).

The first theme demonstrates that gender roles in Muslim societies do not derive directly from religious texts but are constructed through interpretations shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts and disseminated by religious scholars, religious institutions, families, the state, and society (Bakhshizadeh, 2023). From Berger and Luckmann's (1966) perspective, the positioning of men as breadwinners and protectors and women as homemakers and caregivers results from processes of externalization and objectivation through which these roles become accepted as social realities, although women are also recognized as possessing rights to inheritance and education (Hamisan Khair, 2020). Lazar (2007) emphasizes that such institutionalization can legitimize unequal distributions of rights, responsibilities, authority, and opportunities.

The second theme shows that institutionalized gender interpretations are internalized through families, education, religious practices, and everyday social life. This process creates expectations that women should prioritize domestic responsibilities and caregiving, whereas men should assume leadership and economic responsibilities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). However, this process is not uniform, as different social, cultural, and political contexts produce diverse understandings of women's education, careers, marriage, divorce, clothing, and political participation (Saeidi, 2021; Sugitanata et al., 2021). From Lazar's (2007) perspective, the internalization of norms can naturalize inequality by obscuring the underlying power relations. Gender analysis must therefore consider who possesses the authority to define women's roles and how these definitions affect women's education, employment, leadership, and decision-making.

The third theme indicates that the social construction of gender roles constitutes an arena of contestation between traditional discourses that preserve institutionalized role divisions and progressive discourses that reinterpret gender roles in terms of justice, compassion, equality, and human dignity (Bashri, 2023). Debates over the hijab illustrate competing meanings: traditional discourses emphasize it as a symbol of obedience and purity, whereas feminist discourses associate it with religious freedom, bodily autonomy, and women's personal choice (Rottmann & Ferree, 2008). Within Berger and Luckmann's

(1966) framework, these competing interpretations demonstrate that gender realities are continually negotiated, while Lazar (2007) conceptualizes feminist discourse as a counter-discourse challenging patriarchal authority and ideology. Similar contestations occur in relation to marriage, divorce, education, employment, and politics (Sugitanata et al., 2021).

The fourth theme demonstrates that women's increased access to education, employment, politics, business, and activism generates alternative constructions of Muslim women's identities and roles. Within Berger and Luckmann's (1966) framework, such participation represents a new form of externalization through which women produce and disseminate alternative meanings that may subsequently be objectivated and internalized as more inclusive gender realities. Legal and political developments in several Muslim-majority countries further demonstrate that gender constructions can evolve in response to social transformation and public demands (Shapiro, 2014; Topal, 2019). Lazar (2007) positions women as subjects who produce counter-discourses through religious reinterpretation, education, legal advocacy, leadership, interreligious dialogue, and social mobilization, despite resistance from groups that perceive such changes as threats to religion or tradition (Orakzai, 2014).

Overall, the four themes demonstrate that gender roles in Islam are constructed through dynamic processes involving religious interpretation, institutionalization, social internalization, discursive contestation, and women's agency. Gender interpretations acquire social legitimacy when reproduced through religious and social institutions, while their internalization can normalize gender-based divisions of roles and authority. At the same time, contestation between traditional and egalitarian discourses demonstrates that gender norms remain open to negotiation and reinterpretation. Women's participation in education, employment, leadership, legal reform, and activism facilitates the emergence of alternative gender meanings. From the perspectives of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Lazar (2007), gender construction is therefore not a fixed outcome of religious doctrine but an ongoing social process shaped by interactions among institutionalized meanings, power relations, and women's agency.

Controversies surrounding traditional understandings

Krippendorff's qualitative content analysis was conducted by identifying units of argument concerning the hijab, polygamy, child marriage, inheritance, interpretive authority, legal reform, and women's participation. The coding and categorization processes generated four interrelated themes: (1) the institutionalization and legitimation of traditional understandings; (2) contestation over women's bodies, family roles, and economic rights; (3) struggles for authority within religious, state, and media spheres; and (4) *ijtihad* and the transformation of gender constructions. These themes were interpreted using Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, while Lazar's *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* was employed to uncover gender ideologies and power relations within the contested discourses.

Table 2

Analysis of Controversies in Traditional Understandings

Theme	Codes and Key Findings	Berger–Luckmann Analysis	Lazar's Critical Perspective	References
Institutionalization and Legitimation of Traditional Understandings	Tradition, religious authority, hijab, polygamy, child marriage, and	Repeated interpretations undergo objectification and become accepted as	Dominant discourses may naturalize gender hierarchies and legitimate male authority.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Mishra & Bakry (2021); Al

	inheritance	socially constructed realities.		Hameli et al. (2023)
Contestation over the Body, Family, and Economic Rights	Hijab choices, polygamy, marriage, education, employment, and inheritance	Gendered realities are continuously negotiated through competing interpretations and social practices.	Feminist discourses challenge the control of women's bodies, choices, and access to resources.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Mishra & Bakry (2021); Al Hameli et al. (2023)
Struggles over Religious, State, and Media Authority	Religious figures, legal reform, globalization, social media, and polarization	Social institutions may reproduce or transform institutionalized gender realities through changing practices and discourses.	Access to discursive production shapes which groups have the authority to define women's roles and identities.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Arat (2022); McGregor (2012); Goehring (2019)
Ijtihad and the Transformation of Gender Constructions	Reinterpretation, education, dialogue, legal reform, and economic and political participation	<i>Ijtihad</i> externalizes new meanings that may subsequently become institutionalized as alternative social realities.	Counter-hegemonic feminist discourses create space for women's agency and broader social transformation.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Arat (2022); Goehring (2019); Koburtay et al. (2023)

Source: Author's analysis (2023).

The first theme demonstrates that traditional understandings of the hijab, polygamy, child marriage, and inheritance gain legitimacy through the repeated circulation of particular interpretations and the support of religious authorities and customary traditions. From the perspective of Berger and Luckmann (1966), these interpretations result from the externalization of social actors' meanings, which subsequently become objectified and treated as established religious realities. The hijab is constructed as an obligation signifying purity and obedience, while polygamy is legitimized through interpretations permitting men to marry up to four women, provided that justice is maintained (Mishra & Bakry, 2021; Al Hameli et al., 2023). Lazar (2007) demonstrates that such institutionalization is embedded in power relations that naturalize male authority over women's bodies, families, and economic resources.

The second theme reveals that women's bodies, marriage, and economic rights constitute arenas of contestation between traditional and egalitarian discourses. Traditional discourse maintains established interpretations of the hijab, polygamy, marital regulations, and inheritance distribution, whereas feminist discourse evaluates these issues in terms of autonomy, substantive justice, and their consequences for women. From the perspective of Berger and Luckmann (1966), this contestation indicates that gender realities are continuously renegotiated in response to emerging experiences and forms of knowledge. Critiques of compulsory veiling frame clothing as a matter of women's personal choice, while critiques of polygamy emphasize inequality and the abuse of power relations (Mishra & Bakry, 2021; Al Hameli et al., 2023). Lazar (2007) conceptualizes feminist discourse as a counter-narrative that challenges control over women's bodies, families, and resources.

The third theme demonstrates that controversies surrounding women's roles reflect a struggle for authority among religious leaders, the state, activists, academics, and society in determining which interpretations are considered legitimate. Some religious leaders support reinterpretation and the reform of women's rights, while others defend more restrictive

traditional understandings (Arat, 2022). Tensions also emerge within the relationship between religion and the state when public policies bring religious values into negotiation with individual rights, gender equality, and democracy (McGregor, 2012). Berger and Luckmann (1966) demonstrate that religious, legal, and media institutions may either preserve or transform gender realities. Lazar (2007) further emphasizes that the power to define women's identities and roles is shaped by access to authority and spaces of discourse production. Social media has expanded the space available for feminist discourse, but it has simultaneously strengthened conservative narratives and intensified polarization (Goehring, 2019).

The fourth theme demonstrates that *ijtihad*, education, dialogue, legal reform, and women's increased participation in economic and political life constitute important mechanisms for reconstructing gender roles. *Ijtihad* creates opportunities to reinterpret religious texts in contemporary contexts, while education and economic-political participation strengthen women's capacity to produce knowledge and influence public policy. Berger and Luckmann (1966) conceptualize reinterpretation as the externalization of new meanings that may subsequently undergo objectification and internalization as a more inclusive gender order. Lazar (2007) frames this process as the production of counter-discourses that transform women from objects of interpretation into agentic subjects. Such reforms require the involvement of religious leaders, academics, activists, and communities through open dialogue so that gender equality can be understood as an embodiment of justice and human dignity (Arat, 2022; Goehring, 2019; Koburtay et al., 2023).

Overall, controversies surrounding traditional understandings do not merely represent a confrontation between tradition and modernity; rather, they reflect a struggle for authority over the definition of religious teachings, women's identities, and the boundaries of gender equality. Berger and Luckmann (1966) demonstrate that traditional understandings attain stability through externalization, objectification, and internalization, yet remain open to change through reinterpretation and institutional transformation. Lazar (2007) shows that these processes operate within power structures that may privilege male voices while marginalizing women's experiences. Thus, the transformation of gender constructions occurs through the institutionalization of norms, contestation over women's bodies and rights, struggles for discursive authority, and the production of alternative meanings through *ijtihad* and women's agency. This transformation encompasses legal frameworks, interpretive authority, social practices, and the norms governing the acceptance of women's roles.

The role of feminist movements in redefining women's roles in Islam

Krippendorff's qualitative content analysis was conducted through unitization, coding, categorization, and inference-making concerning arguments on religious reinterpretation, women's rights, socio-legal reform, public participation, and resistance to feminism. The analysis generated four interrelated themes: (1) reinterpretation of religious texts and construction of counter-discourses; (2) transformation of women's rights and institutional reform; (3) expansion of women's agency in public and digital spheres; and (4) contestations over legitimacy and the diversity of Islamic feminism. Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory explained the production and institutionalization of new meanings, while Lazar's perspective uncovered patriarchal ideologies, power relations, and feminist strategies for transformation. These analytical frameworks demonstrated how reinterpretation, reform, agency, and contestation contribute to the transformation of gender relations within Islamic contexts.

Table 3

Analysis of the Role of Feminist Movements

Theme	Codes and Key Findings	Berger–Luckmann Analysis	Lazar’s Critical Perspective	References
Reinterpretation of Texts and the Construction of Counter-Discourses	Qur’anic and Hadith interpretation, equality, justice, and critiques of patriarchy	Reinterpretation constitutes the externalization of alternative meanings of religious teachings.	Feminist discourse challenges the patriarchal monopoly over interpretive authority.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Althalathini et al. (2022)
Transformation of Rights and Institutional Reform	Education, healthcare, employment, family law, violence, inheritance, and land rights	The idea of equality becomes objectified through laws, policies, and institutional arrangements.	Feminist critiques connect gender discourse with its material consequences for women.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Althalathini et al. (2022); Kenny (2015); Uzgören (2021); Giorgi (2021)
Expansion of Agency in Public and Digital Spaces	Politics, leadership, education, business, activism, and social media	Women’s participation generates new social realities and gender identities.	Women gain spaces to produce and disseminate counter-discourses.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Beta (2019); Garcia Yeste et al. (2020)
Contestation over Legitimacy and the Diversity of Islamic Feminisms	Conservative resistance, religious identity, religious and secular feminisms, and dialogue	Different groups construct and maintain their respective symbolic realities.	Feminist analysis should remain reflexive and contextual rather than producing a new form of orthodoxy.	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Lazar (2007); Garcia Yeste et al. (2020); Giorgi (2021)

Source: Author’s analysis (2023).

The first theme demonstrates that feminist movements redefine women’s roles by reinterpreting the Qur’an and Hadith to foreground equality, justice, and human dignity as guiding principles of interpretation. From the perspective of Berger and Luckmann (1966), reinterpretation is a process of externalization through which Muslim activists and intellectuals produce alternative meanings of religious teachings that were previously dominated by patriarchal interpretations. When accepted by religious communities and institutions, these meanings may be objectified, thereby legitimizing egalitarian gender constructions. Lazar (2007) conceptualizes this process as the production of counter-discourses that challenge the patriarchal monopoly over interpretive authority by asserting that inequality may arise from patriarchal social interpretations rather than from the fundamental values of Islam (Althalathini et al., 2022).

The second theme reveals that religious reinterpretation is translated into advocacy for women’s rights and institutional reform across education, healthcare, employment, family life, politics, and protection from violence (Althalathini et al., 2022). Such advocacy encompasses family law reform, inheritance and land ownership rights, protection from domestic violence, the equitable distribution of familial responsibilities, and the elimination of cultural practices detrimental to women (Kenny, 2015; Uzgören, 2021; Giorgi, 2021). Within Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) framework, legal and institutional changes represent objectification, whereby the principles of equality are translated into formal regulations, public policies, and enduring protection mechanisms. Lazar (2007) emphasizes that

discursive transformation must produce material consequences, including improved access to resources, security, autonomy, and decision-making processes for women.

The third theme demonstrates that feminist movements expand women's agency through education, leadership, politics, business, social organizations, and digital activism. Women's participation in elections, diplomacy, political leadership, and social movements challenges the assumption that the public sphere is an exclusively male domain (Beta, 2019). From the perspective of Berger and Luckmann (1966), such participation constitutes the externalization of new meanings that position women as social, political, and intellectual actors. Through repetition and social acceptance, these meanings may subsequently undergo objectification and internalization, thereby contributing to more inclusive gender identities. Social media further facilitates this process by enabling women to share their experiences, build solidarity, and reach wider audiences (Garcia Yeste et al., 2020). Lazar (2007) demonstrates that public and digital spheres broaden women's access to the production and circulation of discourse.

The fourth theme demonstrates that feminism within Islam is not a homogeneous entity but encompasses groups operating through religious reinterpretation as well as those employing more secular frameworks. This diversity encounters resistance from certain religious figures, institutions, and segments of society that perceive feminism as a threat to Islamic teachings or identity. Berger and Luckmann (1966) conceptualize this condition as a competition between groups seeking to preserve a traditional symbolic reality and those constructing alternative understandings of women's roles and identities. Lazar (2007) underscores the need for feminist transformation to remain reflexive and context-sensitive so that it neither generalizes Muslim women's experiences nor replaces one form of orthodoxy with another. Local dialogue, sensitivity to interpretive diversity, and communication that clearly distinguishes critiques of patriarchy from rejection of Islam are therefore essential.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that feminist movements redefine Muslim women's roles and identities by transforming religious interpretations, institutional structures, and patterns of social participation. Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain this process as progressing from the externalization of alternative meanings to their objectification through legal and institutional arrangements, followed by the social acceptance that facilitates the internalization of inclusive gender constructions. Lazar (2007) further reveals that this process simultaneously constitutes a discursive struggle against patriarchal ideologies and power relations. Feminist contributions, therefore, encompass the production of religious knowledge, legal reform, changes in family norms, the expansion of women's participation in the public sphere, and the strengthening of women's agency. The diversity of Islamic feminism and the resistance it encounters demonstrate that gender transformation unfolds through continuing negotiations over legitimacy, identity, and social context.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that gender roles in Muslim societies are shaped through a dialectical relationship among institutionalization, contestation, and social reconstruction. First, religious interpretations reproduced through families, religious organizations, and social institutions undergo objectification and internalization, enabling gendered divisions of roles and authority to be accepted as socially natural. Second, these constructions are continuously negotiated through debates concerning the body, marriage, economic rights, education, employment, and public participation, while simultaneously revealing struggles for authority within religious, state, and media spheres. Third, feminist movements and

women's agency generate counter-discourses through religious reinterpretation, *ijtihad*, education, legal advocacy, institutional reform, political participation, and digital activism. Overall, the findings confirm that gender norms are neither singular nor static consequences of Islamic teachings; rather, they are historically and contextually contingent constructions continuously shaped by interpretation, power relations, institutional practices, and women's agency.

These three findings are particularly relevant to contemporary Muslim societies undergoing transformations in education, the economy, technology, family life, and politics. Gender norms continue to be institutionalized through families and religious institutions, yet they simultaneously encounter interpretive contestation and the growing agency of women. Religion remains an important source of gender norms, although its practical application interacts with local social and cultural conditions (Bakhshizadeh, 2023; Saeidi, 2021). The allocation of familial responsibilities, accompanied by recognition of women's rights to inheritance and education, demonstrates the complex relationship between protection and restriction (Hamisan Khair, 2020). Globalization and digital media have further expanded women's participation while intensifying debates over religious authority. Developments in women's rights in Saudi Arabia and women's increased access to political leadership in Indonesia demonstrate that gender constructions can change through interactions among religious norms, state policies, and broader social transformations (Shapiro, 2014; Topal, 2019). Nevertheless, tensions among religious law, individual rights, democracy, and gender equality continue to shape women's experiences at familial, societal, and institutional levels across diverse contexts (McGregor, 2012).

Theoretically, the findings demonstrate that gender roles constitute social realities produced through externalization, institutionalized through objectification, and accepted through internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The division of domestic and public roles is therefore not merely a direct consequence of religious texts but is also constructed through interpretive processes that acquire social legitimacy. Reinterpretations advanced by Muslim thinkers demonstrate that these constructions can be renegotiated in light of the principles of justice, compassion, and human dignity (Bashri, 2023). Debates surrounding the hijab reveal competition between discourses of religious obedience and women's autonomy (Rottmann & Ferree, 2008; Mishra & Bakry, 2021), whereas polygamy and family law illustrate tensions between normative legitimacy and lived experiences of inequality (Al Hameli et al., 2023; Sugitanata et al., 2021). Lazar's (2007) perspective further demonstrates that these processes operate within power relations in which dominant discourses may naturalize patriarchy, while feminist counter-discourses represent women as agentic subjects. This study, therefore, extends the social-constructionist understanding of gender by demonstrating that gender roles are not only produced and institutionalized but also contested through struggles over interpretive authority, counter-discourses, and women's agency.

The findings provide a conceptual basis for understanding that gender equality in Muslim societies need not be positioned in opposition to religion. Reinterpretation may instead draw upon the values of justice, compassion, protection, and human dignity embedded within Islamic traditions. This perspective avoids two forms of reductionism: regarding all Islamic traditions as inherently oppressive toward women and perceiving all feminist criticism as a threat to religion. Women's activism demonstrates that change can emerge from within communities through education, dialogue, and struggles for rights (Orakzai, 2014), while religious leaders' support for reform highlights the importance of religious authority that is responsive to social change (Arat, 2022). At the family level,

equality involves both the equitable distribution of responsibilities and autonomy in decision-making (Kenny, 2015), while eliminating practices detrimental to women requires broader cultural transformation (Uzgören, 2021). Dialogue among religious scholars, academics, and activists can therefore be understood not merely as a practical strategy but also as a mechanism for negotiating meaning within the social reconstruction of gender roles (Koburtay et al., 2023).

The findings are consistent with Bakhshizadeh (2023) and Saeidi (2021), who demonstrate that gender roles are shaped through interactions among religion and social, cultural, and political contexts. The findings on reinterpretation and advocacy for women's rights also reinforce those of Althalathini et al. (2022), who identify feminist movements as agents of change in education, healthcare, employment, and politics. The expansion of women's public participation is likewise consistent with Beta (2019), while the use of social media to build solidarity and circulate alternative narratives supports the findings of Garcia Yeste et al. (2020) and Goehring (2019). The findings on legal reform also align with Giorgi (2021). However, this study goes beyond the sector-specific focus of earlier studies by integrating social construction theory with feminist discourse analysis to explain the relationships among the production of gender norms, their internalization, struggles for authority, resistance, and women's agency. Its principal contribution, therefore, lies in demonstrating that changes in women's roles within Islam occur not solely through religious reinterpretation but through a dialectical relationship among struggles over meaning, institutionalization, and collective action.

The study's implications call for an integrated strategy that connects religious reinterpretation, policy reform, education, and the strengthening of women's agency. Religious and educational institutions should create spaces for inclusive interpretation by engaging female religious scholars, academics, and activists, as well as women with diverse lived experiences. Governments and other stakeholders should review policies on family relations, inheritance, protection from violence, education, employment, and political participation, applying the principle of substantive equality. Educational institutions should develop gender literacy grounded in the values of justice, compassion, and human dignity while acknowledging the diversity of interpretations within Islam. Civil society organizations should facilitate dialogue among conservative, moderate, and progressive groups to reduce polarization and promote a more contextually informed understanding. Digital platforms can be used to expand public education, support anti-violence campaigns, and disseminate narratives reflecting the diversity of Muslim women's experiences. Policy evaluations should assess changes in women's access, participation, security, representation, and decision-making authority. All these strategies must be adapted to local contexts and position women not merely as policy beneficiaries but as active participants in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of social change.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that gender roles in Muslim societies are historically and contextually contingent constructions shaped through a dialectical relationship among institutionalization, contestation, and social reconstruction. First, religious interpretations reproduced through families, religious organizations, the state, and social institutions may undergo objectification and internalization, thereby enabling gendered divisions of roles and authority to be accepted as socially natural. Second, these constructions are continuously renegotiated through debates concerning the body, marriage, economic rights, education, employment, and public participation, which simultaneously reflect struggles for authority

within religious, state, and media spheres. Third, feminist movements and women's agency produce counter-discourses through religious reinterpretation, *ijtihad*, education, legal advocacy, institutional reform, political participation, and digital activism. Changes in gender roles therefore occur not solely through religious reinterpretation but through interactions among struggles over meaning, power relations, institutional transformation, and collective action across diverse Muslim societies.

Theoretically, this study advances the social-constructionist understanding of gender by integrating Berger and Luckmann's perspective with Lazar's feminist discourse analysis. This integration demonstrates that gender norms are not only produced, objectified, and internalized but also contested, negotiated, and reconstructed through power relations and women's agency. In practical terms, the findings provide a foundation for religious organizations, governments, educational institutions, and civil society organizations to promote more inclusive interpretations, gender literacy, policy reform, the protection of women, and expanded public participation. Such initiatives should account for diverse local contexts and meaningfully involve women in policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation to advance substantive gender equality.

This study is limited by its reliance on literature analysis; consequently, the findings represent gender constructions and debates documented in scholarly sources rather than the direct experiences of Muslim women within particular communities. The broad scope of Muslim societies also limits the study's ability to capture variations across Islamic schools of thought, social classes, generations, ethnicities, geographical regions, and political contexts. Future research should employ ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews, policy analysis, and multisite research to examine the relationship between discourse and practice. Comparative and longitudinal studies are also required to trace changes in gender norms, resistance strategies, the role of digital media, and the influence of intersectional factors on women's agency, participation, and lived experiences across diverse Muslim societies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges colleagues for their insightful discussions and valuable feedback throughout the preparation of this article. Their support and exchange of ideas significantly enriched the analysis and improved the overall quality of the manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Suud Sarim Karimullah: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Writing Original Draft; Visualization; Writing Original Draft. **Siti Rutbatul Aliyah:** Conceptualization; Methodology; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft.

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