

Religiosity and Superstitious Beliefs among Women: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Religiosity and superstitious beliefs are deeply embedded within women's socio-cultural and psychological lives, particularly in traditional and collectivistic societies. Women frequently function as custodians of religious values and ritual practices within families, positioning them centrally in the transmission of belief systems across generations. The present paper aims to critically review existing literature examining the relationship between religiosity and superstitious beliefs among women. A narrative review methodology was adopted, drawing on peer-reviewed literature published between 2000 and 2024 and retrieved from databases including Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and PubMed. Findings consistently indicate a positive association between religiosity and superstitious beliefs among women, especially in domains related to health, fertility, family welfare, and uncertainty management. Socio-demographic variables such as education, age, and cultural context were found to moderate this relationship. Importantly, the literature suggests that women's superstitious beliefs are not merely expressions of irrationality but are culturally learned, psychologically meaningful coping mechanisms embedded within religious and social frameworks. The review highlights conceptual and methodological gaps in existing research and emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive, gender-informed psychological models and empirical investigations, particularly within non-Western contexts.

Keywords: *Religiosity, Superstition, Women, Gender, Culture, Psychological Coping*

Belief systems play a fundamental role in how individuals interpret uncertainty, adversity, and existential concerns (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2010). Religiosity and superstition represent two interrelated yet conceptually distinct belief systems that frequently coexist in everyday life. Religiosity generally refers to organized beliefs and practices associated with institutional religion, whereas superstition involves beliefs in supernatural causation that are not formally sanctioned by religious doctrine (Vyse, 2014). Despite this distinction, both systems often function synergistically, particularly in culturally traditional settings (Tobacyk & Milford, 1983).

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that women report higher levels of religiosity and superstitious beliefs than men (Francis & Penny, 2014; Wiseman & Watt, 2004).

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Women's roles as caregivers, socialization agents, and emotional anchors within families place them at the center of ritual maintenance related to health, fertility, protection, and family well-being (Burr, 2015; Rao, 2018). However, women's belief practices are often trivialized or pathologized as irrational, overlooking their psychological, cultural, and adaptive significance (Beck & Forstmeier, 2007). Existing research frequently treats superstition as cognitive error while neglecting its meaning-making and coping functions, especially among women (Risen, 2016).

Although scholarly interest in superstition and religiosity has increased over the past two decades, integrative reviews that adopt a gender-sensitive lens remain scarce (Mahalik & Coley, 2021). Most studies either generalize findings across genders or include women merely as part of mixed samples. The present narrative review addresses this gap by synthesizing psychological, sociocultural, and gender-based literature on religiosity and superstitious beliefs among women.

Objectives of the Review

1. To review existing literature on religiosity and superstitious beliefs among women.
2. To examine psychological, social, and cultural explanations underlying women's superstitious beliefs.
3. To identify conceptual and methodological gaps in existing research.
4. To suggest future research directions and implications for mental health practice.

METHODOLOGY

A narrative review approach was employed to allow conceptual integration across diverse theoretical and empirical traditions (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). Peer-reviewed literature published between 2000 and 2024 was identified through databases such as Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and PubMed. Search terms included *religiosity*, *superstition*, *women*, *gender and religion*, *belief systems*, and *cultural practices*. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were included if they examined religiosity and/or superstition and involved women as a primary or significant subgroup. Narrative review methodology was chosen due to the conceptual heterogeneity of the field and the limited availability of systematic gender-focused syntheses (Ferrari, 2015). Non-English publications and studies lacking theoretical or empirical relevance were excluded.

Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives

Psychological Needs and the Illusion of Control

Research consistently identifies uncertainty reduction and perceived control as key psychological drivers of superstitious belief (Langer, 1975; Keinan, 2002). Superstitious rituals provide individuals with an illusory sense of control in situations characterized by unpredictability and low personal agency, thereby reducing anxiety and enhancing perceived efficacy (Hamerman & Morewedge, 2015).

Existential Concerns and Death Anxiety

Drawing on Terror Management Theory, several studies suggest that superstition and religious rituals function as cultural worldviews that buffer death anxiety (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Vail et al., 2010). Under conditions of mortality salience, individuals—particularly women—demonstrate increased reliance on culturally validated superstitious practices that provide meaning, order, and symbolic protection (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006).

Cognitive and Evolutionary Foundations

From an evolutionary perspective, superstitious thinking may represent an adaptive cognitive bias arising from error management processes, where false positives are less costly than false negatives (Haselton & Buss, 2000). Cognitive dissonance theory further explains how individuals rationalize superstitious practices despite conscious skepticism, particularly when beliefs are culturally reinforced (Festinger, 1957).

Sociocultural and Gendered Interpretations

Scholars argue that women's religious and ritual practices are disproportionately labeled as superstition due to patriarchal control over religious authority (Woodhead, 2001; Sered, 1994). Historically, women's informal and domestic religious expressions have been delegitimized, reinforcing the feminization of superstition across cultures (Bourdieu, 2001). Gendered power relations and limited access to institutional authority further shape women's reliance on informal belief systems as sources of agency and meaning (Kabeer, 1999).

Empirical Findings on Women and Superstition

Empirical studies across diverse cultural contexts consistently report higher endorsement of superstitious beliefs among women (Vyse, 2014; Wiseman & Watt, 2004). Research from South Asia indicates a strong association between religiosity and superstition among women, particularly in domains related to health, fertility, and family protection (Rao, 2018; Singh & Sinha, 2020). Education emerges as a significant moderating variable, with lower educational attainment associated with stronger superstitious beliefs (Tobacyk, 2004).

Qualitative research further highlights the adaptive role of superstition as a coping mechanism among women living under socio-political uncertainty, gender inequality, and limited access to institutional support (Khan, 2019; Patel, 2021).

Synthesis of Literature

The reviewed literature establishes a robust positive relationship between religiosity and superstitious beliefs among women. These beliefs serve psychological functions such as anxiety reduction, emotional reassurance, and perceived control, while also fulfilling sociocultural roles within patriarchal and collectivistic contexts. Rather than reflecting irrationality, superstition among women often represents culturally embedded meaning-making strategies.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite growing scholarship, gender-specific analyses remain limited. Research is heavily skewed toward Western and urban populations, with inadequate representation of non-Western and marginalized women. Future studies should employ longitudinal, qualitative, and mixed-method designs and integrate psychological, sociological, and gender-theoretical frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Religiosity and superstitious beliefs among women are shaped by complex psychological, social, and cultural forces. The reviewed literature demonstrates that women's engagement with superstitious practices is often rooted in culturally embedded coping strategies aimed at managing uncertainty, anxiety, and perceived lack of control. Recognizing these beliefs as adaptive meaning-making processes rather than irrational errors is essential for developing culturally sensitive and gender-informed psychological frameworks. Future empirical

research grounded in non-Western contexts is crucial for advancing nuanced understanding of belief systems and women's mental health.

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Religiosity and Superstitious Beliefs among Women: A Narrative Review

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Conflict of Interest

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