

## Factors behind taking up social status of Nun

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### ABSTRACT

In Protestantism, Christianity encourages nunship where nuns are also known as 'Brides of Jesus' or called 'Deaconesses' (one with the duties of a deacon, a lady ranking below a priest or who is supposed to help a minister); they devote their lives to God. This study was designed to determine the social factors that lead women to become nuns and to uncover the causes for assuming religious life. Case study method was used to collect the data. In total, 14 nuns were recruited from the Punjab district of Faisalabad for the study. Each subject underwent a detailed interview in order to elicit information about their sociocognitive development and aspects of life as a 'Nun'. The findings concluded that this shift in religious life made these young females more confident, mature, conscious observers, self-reliant, and close to God; it enables them to obtain a quality education and groom their personalities with a prestigious social status.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the first century C.E., the religion 'Christianity' derived itself from Judaism. The basis of this religion rests on the teachings, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the followers of Jesus are called 'Christians'. There are several sects within Christianity with certain variations in their set of beliefs and practices. The three main divisions within 'Christianity' are Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism, with certain sub-sects in each division. Initially, the main bulk of Christians hailed from the West, but then the whole world. Conventional Christian teachings are monotheistic, and Jesus is the divine savior of the world. The Bible is the sacred book of Christianity, including the Old Testament (Hebrew) and the New Testament (Patheos, 2008). The Roman Catholics are foremost in encouraging women to become nuns. According to other researcher, these nuns devote their lives in service to God, remaining chaste, subservient, and obedient to God. Nuns are involved in alleviating social problems in the community and serving ailing humanity (Ebaugh, 1993).

The concept of body image has been significant in the lives of human beings since times immemorial. It forms an integral part of our self-identity and is difficult to elude. Therefore, it produced a quest among the researchers to discover Buddhist nuns' ideas about their body image, which, prima facie, is different from other females. The thematic analysis of the data revealed various themes like satisfaction, dissatisfaction, surrender of the body self, defense mechanisms, or transcendence. This showed that the subjects had an

overall satisfactory body image, mainly due to the overpowering affect their religious practices have on them (Batra & Kohli, 2015).

Christians predominantly consider Islam as a theological, political, and economic adversary. Similarly, they perceive Islam negatively as many Muslims decipher Christianity as a crusade against them. While giving a second thought to their perception regarding Islam, a lot of Christians admit that much of the so-called anti-Islam research conducted in the preceding years cannot be regarded as free of prejudice and falsehood. Efforts are underway to bring about understanding and reconciliation between the two on the initiative of the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and both national and international Muslim organizations.

Muslims do acknowledge the validity of other religions, as enunciated in the Holy Quran, that God never left the people without a guide or prophet. Despite the desire to expand, Muslims adhere to the Quranic injunction that "*there shall be no compulsion in religious matters*" (Q.2.256). The Holy Quran also confirms that Jews and Christians bow in front of the same God whom Muslims worship (e.g., Q.29.46).

Despite many commonalities, tangible and significant dissimilarities between Christian and Islamic teachings do exist. It is pertinent to mention that numerous Christian organizations are promoting the idea of studying Islam and, likewise, Muslim religious bodies are also making concerted efforts to gain in-depth knowledge about Christianity (Faul, 1964). Muslims do not assign any specific religious role to anyone based on class or gender. Whereas Christians assigned a significant duty to the females in the form of nuns to perform functions not only for the spread of Christianity but also for the development of better virtues in the society.

Several factors led to the taking up of nunship by young females but the availability of convent education was a dominant factor that inspired young females to become nuns. Moreover, the regular visits of Christian families with their children to the churches also attracted young girls to adopt the profession of nuns.

### *1.1 Research Objectives*

- (i) Determination of the factor(s) influencing the decision to become a nun and assessment of the social context in which young Christian females choose to become nuns.
- (ii) Identifying the effect of a nun's self-image on the adoption of nunship and comprehending the preferences and reactions of parents/family members.
- (iii) Understanding distinguishing characteristics between nuns and the rest of society.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEWS**

Stark and Finke (2000) revealed that a popular explanation for the decline in religious vocations is that the Church hierarchy has refused to address the concerns of new generations of Catholics who are unwilling to accept the traditional sacrifices required of priests and religious people, most notably the vows of celibacy, obedience, and poverty. Puthiadam and Selvaraj (2008) described a religious person as the one whom God loves for their service to His creation. They found that this devout individual carries out the church's mission, which is to build the kingdom of God. Another study (e.g., Cada, Fritz, Foley, & Giardino, 1985), addressed the reverence with which Islam regards Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the Holy Bible. These scriptures are regarded as God's word. According to Hefner (1998) religious freedom is often construed as the freedom to hold religious beliefs and practices. However, this is subjective to the individual's opinion on the various facets of a given religion. Secularism regards religion as distinct from the state, education, and the private life of an individual in this context. Other researcher considers Catholicism to be most adapting to nuns whereas Protestant and Orthodox communities are supportive of becoming nuns. These nuns have dedicated their lives in service to God, remaining chaste and subservient to God even in adverse circumstances. Stark and Finke (2000) noticed that as economic and technological development progresses, religious people increasingly find themselves unwelcome. Only a small percentage of younger men and women are drawn to monastic or priestly life. Apart from these considerations, rigorous obedience to regulations, self-denial, and a lack of personal choice all contribute to the downfall of this vocation. Sharma (1977) questioned the traditional categorization of men as monks and women as nuns. He said that sociologists are fixated on the question of what motivates people to join new religious factions. According to Faul (1964), 95% of grammar school students are preparing for life as lay Catholics, whether knowingly or unknowingly, their education is structured to foster vocations to the priesthood or sisterhood. Stark (2015) developed a novel concept that was unconcerned with the notion of a monastic drive. Adopting monasticism was motivated by the philosophy of sour grapes, as well as a cultural and emotional disadvantage.

### 3. METHODS

The research assignment was purely qualitative in nature. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain data. Additionally, observation was used as a technique of research.

#### 3.1 Universe

The study's universe included nuns, sisters, and respondents from formation houses. Because one of the objectives of this paper was to ascertain the reasons for the decline of the nun profession, superiors (i.e., the head of the formation house and trainers) were purposefully approached as respondents; this was because these individuals appeared to be the most credible sources of information in this regard.

#### 3.2 Sample and Case study

The sample for this study was drawn from the Punjab district of Faisalabad. All samples were drawn from Sacred Heart Convent High School, Mission Hospital, Convent of Jesus and Mary, and St. Peter High School, all of which are home to nuns from over Punjab, and a specific interview schedule was created for each case. The snowball sampling technique was used to choose a sample of nuns in particular because no list or published information on formation houses and other facilities where sisters stay was available. This research utilized the case study method in order to elicit extensive information while adhering to established literature norms (e.g., Neuman, 2014). The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with individual respondents. Numerous closed and open-ended questions were asked throughout these interviews, taking into account the ideas made in the literature (e.g., Toyon, 2021; Neuman, 2014). The interviewer's schedule was used to collect data in a face-to-face context. Notes on the interviews were taken for future reference. The questions were written in English but were also asked in the respondents' native language. Every effort was made to record the respondents' exact words, phrases, and sentences. Attempts have been taken to clarify the goal of this study in order to elicit the maximum amount of information. To respect research ethics and protect respondents' anonymity, this work refers to respondents' interviews using fictitious identities (names).

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The respondents' narratives were analyzed in-depth using qualitative themes or subthemes. The findings are provided, outlining the primary criteria that influence a person's decision to embrace the social status of a nun.

#### 4.1 Significant themes and sub-themes relating to the factors for attaining Nun social status

##### 4.1.1 Social background

The respondents were questioned about the size of their family and the number of siblings they had, in order to assess whether or not they adhered to the traditional practice of dedicating one female child to the Church in the case of numerous female siblings. All of the interviewees were from Punjab and came from well-to-do households with good socio-economic backgrounds.

##### 4.1.2 Convent education

The majority of respondents received some of their schooling in convents or missionary institutions. The majority of them resided in convent dormitories that were supervised by nuns/sisters. They were all profoundly inspired by the nuns of their respective schools and hostels. Convent education played a significant role in young girls' attraction to the vocation system.

##### 4.1.3 Physical attributes

Four of the respondents were quite pretty, especially sister Zara who has got a charismatic personality and the other three were also very attractive. All of them meet desirable standards of beauty. Many people had an inclination towards them, but they were interested in religious life. The rest of the respondents were also socially acceptable.

##### 4.1.4 Personality traits

Six of the respondents (sisters Zara, Lubna, Anila, Naila Yousaf, Sobia and Rozeena) had a very good command over English language. Most of the respondents were accommodating and soft natured, especially sister Lubna and sister Zara.

##### 4.1.5 Religious background

The majority of responses come from religious families, particularly sister Lubna and Zara, whose direct family members are also involved in the vocation system. The family of sister Lubna, sister Saleena, and sister Munaza were very engaged in organizing prayers at their residences.

#### 4.1.6 Church attendance

The overwhelming majority of respondents' families attended church on a consistent basis (every day and every Sunday). Sister Rehanna's family visited Church only on religious occasions. All of the families brought their children with them whenever they attended the Church, as is customary in Christian families when they go to pray. Regular church attendance triggered religious affiliation in young females, which subsequently drew them into religious life.

#### 4.1.7 Source of inspiration towards life

All respondents were inspired by their school and hostel sisters. Sister Naila was not educated in a convent or missionary school; nonetheless, as her father was a catechist, nuns frequently visited her home. These nuns became role models for the respondents.

#### 4.1.8 Characteristics of the role model

According to the respondents, there were some particular characteristics that they observed in their role models which attracted and motivated them. Characteristics like their (nuns) universal love, mannerism, regular prayers, cultured and concerned behavior, soft nature, disciplined and punctual life (as everything goes by the clock in their lives), sacrificial work and devotion to God and His mankind.

#### 4.1.9 Training experience

By and large, all responders enjoyed their time at the formation house. They learned a variety of skills, including managing their tempers, maturing, developing confidence, being mindful observers, developing a closer relationship with God, interacting with individuals of diverse natures and backgrounds, as well as developing affection and compassion.

#### 4.1.10 Coping with different life-situations

During their training, the respondents were made to learn how to help themselves and others in different situations of life and they were trained by putting them in a hypothetical trial. As sister Rehanna mentioned:

*"Despite the fact that I had never eaten pickle at home, I was compelled to do so during the training program (because trainers want us to be ready to cope with any situation where sometimes good food is not available). We were taught and schooled how to collaborate with people of the opposing sex while maintaining a certain level of separation. Our educators instructed us on topics that many mothers do not discuss with their children. We were required to watch a variety of films on nuns' lives in order to prove how complicated their lives are (it was done to check the determination of the students, to make them decide whether they can live this life or not). They showed us different movies such as wo lamhay", which is based on a psychological problem (in order to figure out how we would have reacted if we had been in the same situation (as the characters in the movie were) and how to react and cope with it if we encounter something similar in the future), and "observation," in which it is shown that how a female goes through this (observation) process and how to take care of her and console her, among other things (as nuns also render their services in the field of medicine) "*

Sister Naila, while sharing her experience said: *"We were trained to handle ourselves and others in a variety of situations. We develop an ability to be content with what we have. Whatever is in the meal, we take it; if we go to the market, we attempt to purchase the cheapest item that meets our needs - if a less costly item meets your needs, you do not need to purchase the more expensive item; this does not concern me at all (as we are supposed to live in poverty) "*

#### 4.1.11 Convent life (life as a nun)

All the respondents like convent life because of the peaceful and serene environment of the convent, prayer regulation, commitment to the work, devotion to God, equality and oneness and no boundness to one person in the sense of freedom. Sister Zara stated it as: *"I am no bound to one man; instead I am bound to everyone. If common person (female) loves/helps someone she may be cautioned or may become talk of the town, but I cannot be cautioned or remarked because I am supposed to love everyone. In one way, you are bound to everyone and in another way, you are not bound to anyone. There is equality and freedom and no boundness at all"*.

Sister Munaza expressed her views in the following words: "*There is no limit to one guy. Everyone is loved universally — this existence is for humanity*". However, some of them pointed out some negative points, like strict adherence to the rules and regulations. Sister Rehanna stated it as: "*The negative aspect of convent life is the boundness and strict adherence to rule- something you don't feel like doing anything or going anywhere but you have to do and go whatever you are asked for. There is a less personal choice in this aspect (you have to follow the rules)*".

#### 4.1.12 Opportunities structure

There are certain opportunities that the respondents would not have been able to avail if they were lay Christian girls to the extent they availed by being nuns. These opportunities are also significant factors that might attract females to vocation system.

#### 4.1.13 Social mobility

The majority of respondents indicated that they would have been socially mobile regardless of their profession, although it would have been restricted and conditional (it would depend on the nature of their job and position). However, sister Zara stated in discussing her social mobility, "*...I traveled abroad numerous times for studies and training. I traveled to Rome, Sri Lanka, and Korea, among other places. Even within the country, I have lived in a number of the country's largest cities*". In addition, sister Rehanna stated: "*If I had been a nun, social mobility would have been impossible for me*".

#### 4.1.14 Better education

All respondents were adamant that they would never have obtained the type of education they had throughout their training. Nuns are sent to reputable institutions (both within the country and abroad) for study and various forms of training. They are taught and trained by highly qualified trainers in areas for which they do not participate.

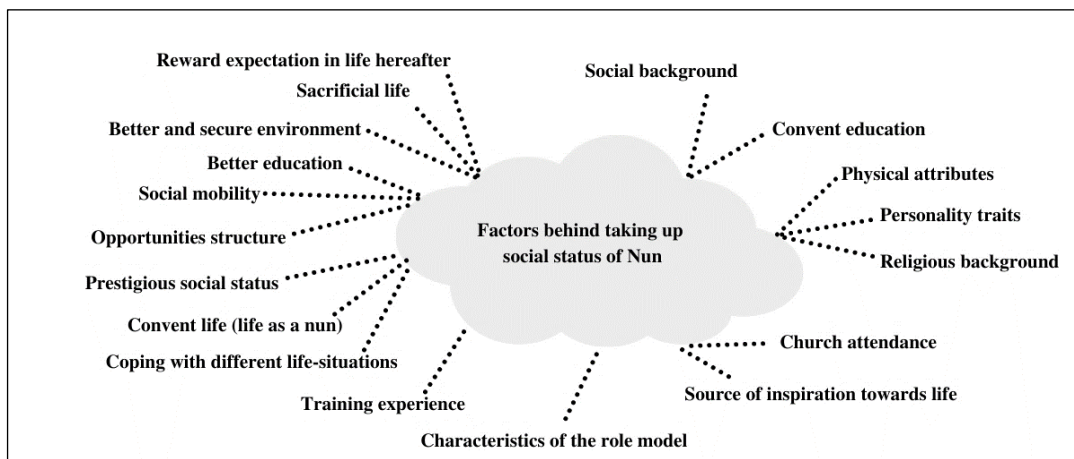


Figure 1: Factors behind taking up social status of Nun (developed by authors based on empirical data)

#### 4.1.15 Better and secure environment

The majority of respondents stated that they would have benefited from a more secure atmosphere even if they had not been nuns. Sister Zara felt the convent environment to be more secure and comfortable in the following ways: "*There is feeling of oneness and equality. All live under the same circumstances. No one gets special privileges. As far as security is concerned, inside the home it's fine but outside the home sometimes people comment on your job/profession, our white/grey clothes means nothing to some people and a lot to others*". Sister Naila stated the same thing in the following words: "*I have learned to live alone, to move everywhere alone as it is very common practice here that if you want to go outside a male should be there with you even if it's a child. I have become more practical. I don't need to wait for any to take me somewhere – I can manage everything myself*". On the other side, two respondents stated that they would not have benefited from a more secure atmosphere had they been lay Christian girls, as one of them is a member of a 'basti' in the Faisalabad area.

#### 4.1.16 Prestigious social status

Majority of the respondents said that the prestigious social status would have been depended on their life situations and life changes but certainly, by being a nun they are recognized, respected and approved by society (especially in their community ). We are somebodies among many nobodies (by the grace of God) and we are recognized for the service we render for the will of God.

#### 4.1.17 Sacrificial life

All the respondents' nuns said that nuns don't get paid directly. Their pay is received by their superior, who uses it to maintain household activities or it is distributed among some underprivileged community. There is no pension or compensation (in monetary terms) for the older nuns. Older nuns live in the convents and serve as mentors for the young ones.

#### 4.1.18 Reward expectation in life hereafter

The majority of respondents anticipate to live a holy life similar to Jesus and to spend eternity with him (as they regard themselves as his brides) in heaven, in the world to come. Sister Rehanna stated on the reward, "*I have not considered it yet. One positive thing I can say is that people will remember me (us) positively*". Sister Shamsa Haroon stated, "*I have no expectation of recompense because it is God's kindness that He chose me to serve Him; there is nothing I can do to earn it.*" Moreover, sister Aneela Jamil stated, "*I am not expecting any recompense because I chose to devote myself to God and serve Him on my own volition*".

### 4.2 Decline of nun vocation system

Every respondent agreed that the vocation system had deteriorated noticeably. They propose a variety of probable causes, one of which is media and glamour. Majority of the respondents pointed out the role of media in spreading glamour, awareness (about this life that how tough and challenging it is). Simplicity is less desirable among young females nowadays. Indicating the media's and advanced technology's contribution sister Naila said: "*Media is the main factor in the decline of this profession. Now there are mobile phones and internet everywhere which keep more and more people in contact that make it difficult for people to come to this life. There is more glamour and now simplicity is less preferred*". And sister Shamsa said: "*Through the media people have become more aware about this life that it is tough and struggling. Other life opportunities are more active for them than the life of obedience and poverty*". Concerning the role of social welfare organizations, some respondents stated that social welfare organizations had begun performing the same functions as monastic communities in recent years.

While discussing the causes for decline, Sister Rehanna stated, "*Girls do not come to this because it is difficult; you are expected to confront everything on your own*".

Sister Munaza explained: "*These days, people are wealthy and preoccupied with gaining ever more money; there is an excessive amount of rivalry in society*".

Sister Lubna stated: "*The church is now involving an increasing number of lay people in church-related activities, and their services are recognized as valuable as those of monastic communities; there is less recognition of monastic communities' services now, which is why people are less likely to join the vocations system*".

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research reveals that girls educated in convents are more likely to become nuns due to an innate love for monastic life. It was improbable that they would be compelled to choose this vocation. This is consistent with the review of other prior literature (e.g., Thompson, 1986). Females are drawn to a life of chastity, obedience, and poverty by their spiritual drive and inner desire for closeness to God and service to humanity, as other experts have determined (e.g., Mooney, 2016). Additionally, it was discovered that the accessible opportunity structure was a key factor in attracting young girls to become nuns, which contrasts with the findings of other studies (e.g., Ebaugh, Lorence, & Chafetz, 1996). As with a similar proposition stated by another researcher (Brandon, 1970), our data analysis revealed technological advancement, the emergence of social welfare organizations, the expansion of opportunities, or other distinct reasons for the fall of the nun vocation system. Additionally, as indicated in previous works (e.g., Cengage, 2005), rigid adherence to rules and regulations, the harsh regime of this nun-life, diminishing personal choices, and self-denial all contribute to the downfall of the nun vocation system.

By disclosing these findings (e.g., Figure 1), this study established its significance and uniqueness across academic disciplines and beyond. Religion played a significant role in acquiring the social position of a nun. Regular church attendance by respondents' families was a significant factor, as was a sense of religious affiliation and spiritual purity among girls. Convent schooling (frequent appeal to nuns and the convent

milieu) was another significant factor that influenced respondents' decision to enter the vocation system. Nuns receive a quality education and are placed in famous institutions around the country and overseas. They are taught by highly qualified teachers. They are more mobile and self-sufficient than the average Christian. They occupy a prestigious and respectable position in society and, more specifically, in their community. These opportunities (for example, improved education, social mobility, and a prestigious position) were thoroughly identified during the research process. However, the vocation system has seen a major fall in recent years. The study identified a number of possible explanations for this, including increased media coverage and technological advancements, the rise of social welfare organizations, and increased opportunities for young people.

This study, however, has several limitations. It is believed that future scholars would be able to construct their thesis around these boundaries. It was difficult to approach nuns since there is no central information database that has (written) records regarding nuns, their residences and jobs, the number of formation houses and their locations. The conditional response of some respondents was also a constraint in that respondents were of the mindset that "if sister A gives an interview and then asks her to call me, I will give". Due to a lack of time, the researchers were unable to perform a cross-comparative study of several nun orders. Due of Pakistan's current state (fear of terrorism), meeting respondents is extremely challenging (security issues).

Keeping these limitations in mind, this research also leaves some room for future investigation. Participant observation should be employed as a data gathering technique in future study to gain insights into the life of a nun. Those nuns who backed out and left this life should be contacted to ascertain the true nature of the primary reasons for leaving (as many of our responders' batch mates abandoned this life—some during training and some after becoming nuns). A comparative study of the various orders of nuns might be done.

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## Notes

### *Disclosure of conflicts of interest*

The authors declare that no perceived, potential, or actual conflict of interest exists.

### *Statement of contribution*

The practical research was undertaken by the first author (Qandil Ahmad). As the primary researcher, she was accountable for this project. She was primarily responsible for gathering research materials and related literature. The second author (Hira Ahmad Farrah) assisted the primary researcher in conducting this study. She also assisted in the organization of data and the authoring of content. Her involvement in this endeavor stretched all the way to the writing stage. The third author (Tanvir Shirwany) aided the first two researchers in organizing the data and doing the scientific analysis for this study. He played a significant role in the writing of this research work. He assisted the two authors in revising and polishing their written work.

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