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Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors Influencing Superstitious Beliefs: Evidence From Urban and Rural Populations of Hyderabad, Sindh

Muhammad Ali Shaikh
Department of Rural Sociology, Sindh Agriculture University, Tandojam, Pakistan

Dr Hammadullah Kakepoto
Department of Sociology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan

Dr Mumtaz Ali Khaskheli
Department of Sociology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan
Corresponding Author: * Muhammad Ali Shaikh sheikh_mali76@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Superstition, defined as irrational belief in supernatural causes, persists across societies despite scientific advancement. This study investigates the factors influencing superstition among rural and urban populations of Hyderabad District, Sindh, focusing on income, gender, cultural background, and religion. Data were collected from 300 respondents through multi-stage cluster sampling, and regression analysis was applied using SPSS. Results indicate that family income has a statistically significant negative relationship with superstition ($\beta = -0.262$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that economic stability reduces irrational beliefs. Gender also showed a significant association ($\beta = 0.174$, $p = 0.000$), with women reporting higher superstition levels. In contrast, cultural background ($\beta = 0.237$, $p = 0.483$) and religion ($\beta = 0.303$, $p = 0.202$) had weaker, non-significant impacts. The findings align with global literature that links poverty and uncertainty to irrational beliefs while highlighting gendered dimensions of superstition. The study recommends targeted educational and socioeconomic interventions to mitigate superstition's role as a barrier to development.

Keywords: *Superstition, Socioeconomic Factors, Gender, Culture, Religion, Hyderabad, Regression Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Superstition, defined as irrational belief in supernatural causes without scientific justification, has persisted across societies for centuries. From the ancient Greeks attributing misfortunes to the anger of gods, to contemporary communities fearing the evil eye or associating numbers with good or bad luck, superstition remains a universal social phenomenon (Vyse, 2013). Although often dismissed as folklore or harmless tradition, superstitions play a critical role in shaping individual choices and collective behaviours. They influence education, health practices, political participation, and economic development, often acting as hidden barriers to rational decision-making and modernization (Campbell, 1996).

Superstition is more alive in most developing countries that are full of uncertainty, poverty, and illiteracy. In African and Asian studies, it is emphasized that economically disadvantaged communities tend to resort to irrational beliefs more as a coping mechanism (Solomon and Ekong, 2015; Tahir et al, 2018). Cultural confinement, gender inequality as well as dependence on ritualistic ways of gaining security makes women especially susceptible to superstitious thinking (Buhrmann and Zaugg, 1981; Haider and Shaheen, 2008). Simultaneously, the quick modernization has presented a paradox: with education and technological solutions being the reasonable alternatives to it, younger generations remain attached to rituals and lucky objects when it comes to exams, sport games, and other life transitions (Dagnall et al, 2007).

Superstition is very strong in the South Asian context. Cultural pluralism and religious customs in such countries as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh tend to intersect with the local belief systems. Some of these manifestations include astrology, omens, magical, and the power of spiritual healers (Tahir et al, 2018). Both the rural and urban population practices superstition in Pakistan but not to the same extent. Societies living in the rural areas, because of lack of access to education and health, tend to use traditional healers and rituals, whereas the urban population can merge the modern life with the selective traditional beliefs (Kayani et al, 2017).

The District of Sindh, Hyderabad, and the region of Sindh in general, has a long and culturally diverse history, which provides the ideal case study of these processes. The area consists of both urban areas with industries and educational facilities, and country zones with agricultural reliance and a low level of literacy. This opposition offers a rich field of study of the relationship between superstition and demographic and socioeconomic factors.

The factors that affect superstition in rural and urban population in Hyderabad are specifically addressed in this paper. Although there are numerous forces that can influence superstition, the current research is limited to four major predictors, which are gender, cultural background, religion and the family income. Regression analysis was then used to test the variables to identify how they are statistically significant in determining the level of superstition.

By isolating these factors, the study aims to answer a critical question: *Which social and demographic variables most strongly predict superstition in the context of a rapidly urbanizing yet culturally rooted district of Sindh?* Addressing this question is vital because superstition is not merely an abstract belief system; it has tangible effects on development. Belief in luck rather than effort can diminish motivation, while reliance on spiritual healers can delay medical treatment. At a societal level, persistent superstition undermines rational decision-making necessary for education, healthcare, and governance (Tsang, 2004).

Thus, this research contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it tests whether classical sociological assumptions, such as the role of poverty and culture in reinforcing superstition, hold true in the Pakistani context. Practically, it can provide evidence for policymakers to design targeted interventions, especially in education and community development, to minimize superstition's negative impact on social progress.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative descriptive research design with an explanatory approach. The purpose was to examine the relationship between selected independent variables (gender, family income, cultural background, and religion) and the dependent variable (level of superstition). A cross-sectional survey was used, allowing data to be collected at a single point in time across diverse demographic groups. This design was chosen because it facilitates hypothesis testing through statistical analysis, particularly regression, which helps identify the predictive power of independent variables.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised adult residents of Hyderabad District, Sindh, including both rural and urban areas. Hyderabad was selected as the research site due to its socio-cultural diversity and the coexistence of traditional and modern lifestyles. The district encompasses four administrative units: Hyderabad City, Latifabad, Qasimabad, and Hyderabad Rural.

To ensure representativeness, the study adopted a multi-stage cluster sampling technique:

1. **Stage One:** Hyderabad District was divided into its four main administrative units.

2. **Stage Two:** Each unit was further divided into clusters (UCs or villages).

3. **Stage Three:** From each cluster, respondents were randomly selected ensuring a balance between male and female participants.

A total of 300 respondents participated, distributed proportionally across the four administrative units. This sample size was considered adequate for regression analysis, as it exceeded the minimum requirement of 10–15 cases per predictor variable (Field, 2013).

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure superstition levels and background characteristics. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

1. **Demographics:** Gender, age, education, occupation, religion, family income, and cultural/linguistic background.

2. **Superstition Scale:** Items adapted from the *Paranormal Belief Scale* (PBS) and modified for the South Asian context. Questions included beliefs in omens, astrology, evil eye, spiritual healers, and lucky/unlucky practices. Respondents rated items on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 10 = strongly agree).

3. **Independent Variables:** Specific items related to cultural practices, religious adherence, and socioeconomic status were incorporated.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire underwent a two-step validation process:

- **Content Validity:** Experts in sociology and psychology reviewed the items to ensure cultural appropriateness and coverage of the construct.

- **Reliability Testing:** A pilot study with 30 respondents from sample areas was conducted. Cronbach's alpha for the superstition scale was found to be **0.81**, indicating good internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted in Sindhi and Urdu, depending on respondent preference. Respondents were assured of confidentiality, and participation was voluntary. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were coded and entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 25. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were applied:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations to summarize respondent characteristics and superstition scores.

- **Inferential Statistics:** Regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of the independent variables (gender, income, culture, religion) on superstition levels. Significance was assessed at $p < 0.05$.

The regression model allowed for testing the central hypothesis: *Superstition levels in Hyderabad are significantly influenced by demographic and socioeconomic factors, particularly income, gender, culture, and religion.*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 300 respondents participated in the study. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics. The sample included both urban and rural residents of Hyderabad District, reflecting the region's socioeconomic and cultural diversity.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	152	50.7
	Female	148	49.3
Age	18–29 years	102	34.0
	30–44 years	115	38.3
	45 years and above	83	27.7
Education	Illiterate / Primary	67	22.3
	Secondary / Higher Secondary	96	32.0
	Graduate and above	137	45.7
Monthly Family Income	< 25,000 PKR	118	39.3
	25,000 – 50,000 PKR	102	34.0
	> 50,000 PKR	80	26.7
Cultural/Linguistic Background	Sindhi	129	43.0
	Urdu-speaking	88	29.3
	Siraiki	51	17.0

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Others (Punjabi, Balochi, etc.)	32	10.7
Religion	Islam	290	96.7
	Hinduism / Others	10	3.3

The demographic data show an almost equal gender distribution, ensuring balance in responses. Nearly half of respondents had a graduate-level education, but a significant proportion (22.3%) were illiterate or had only primary schooling, reflecting educational inequality. Family income distribution reveals that about 40% lived in low-income households, a factor strongly tied to superstition levels, as tested later. The cultural/linguistic breakdown illustrates Hyderabad's diversity, with Sindhi and Urdu-speaking groups dominating. Religion was overwhelmingly Islamic, though a small Hindu minority was included.

Regression Analysis of Factors Influencing Superstition

To address Objective effectively, regression analysis was conducted with superstition level as the dependent variable and gender, family income, cultural background, and religion as independent variables.

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Factors Influencing Superstition

Predictor Variable	B (Unstandardized Coefficient)	β (Standardized Coefficient)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Gender (Male = 0, Female = 1)	0.421	0.174	4.23	0.000***
Family Income	-0.389	-0.262	-6.75	0.000***
Culture (Dummy coded)	0.197	0.237	0.70	0.483
Religion (Dummy coded)	0.256	0.303	1.27	0.202
Constant	3.218	–	–	–

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.41$, $F(4, 295) = 51.62$, $p < 0.001$

Family Income: The strongest predictor of superstition. The negative coefficient ($\beta = -0.262$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that individuals from higher-income households exhibited significantly lower superstition levels. This supports the hypothesis that poverty reinforces irrational beliefs.

The most powerful factor influencing superstition was family income. The negative relationship indicates that individuals from wealthier households displayed significantly lower superstition levels, whereas poverty reinforced reliance on irrational beliefs. This finding is consistent with Bourguignon (1973), who argued that under conditions of deprivation, people construct supernatural explanations to cope with unpredictability. Similarly, Safaei & Khodabakhshi (2012) reported that higher income and

education levels in Iran were associated with reduced superstition, while Khan & Mohyuddin (2014) documented similar patterns in Pakistan.

In the Hyderabad context, this is not surprising. Low-income families often lack access to reliable healthcare, education, and social security. When rational options are scarce, supernatural explanations provide psychological comfort. For example, illness may be attributed to the evil eye rather than poor sanitation, or economic hardship to bad omens rather than structural inequalities. This reinforces a cycle where superstition acts as both a product and perpetuator of poverty.

Gender: Statistically significant ($\beta = 0.174$, $p < 0.001$). The dimension of superstition was higher in women compared to men, which was gendered and bore an indication of belief systems of the patriarchal societies.

The second important predictor was gender, and women scored higher in superstition when compared to their male counterparts. This has been in line with Buhrmann and Zaugg (1981) and Haider and Shaheen (2008), who noted that women tend to be more demonstrative of reliance on rituals and protective practices. This trend can be explained by a number of reasons.

To begin with, women in patriarchal cultures such as Pakistan have limited mobility, access to decision-making, as well as increased susceptibility to social forces. Such circumstances develop dependency on supernatural beliefs as an coping mechanism. Secondly, gendered socialization subjects women to childhood practices of rituals, which instill behaviors of shunning any omens, visiting spiritual healers or even believing that personal objects are lucky. Third, as Dhillon (2014) noted, gender effects may be mediated by education—educated women are less superstitious than uneducated ones, suggesting that structural inequalities intersect with gender to shape belief systems.

Interestingly, the gender effect persisted even after controlling for income. This indicates that superstition among women cannot be explained solely by poverty; cultural and psychological dimensions are also at play. Thus, the findings point to an "economic-gender paradox": while poverty is the strongest overall driver, gender amplifies superstition independently, reflecting entrenched cultural norms.

Culture: Although positive ($\beta = 0.237$), the relationship was statistically insignificant ($p = 0.483$). This suggests that while cultural background may colour specific forms of superstition, it is not a strong independent predictor in Hyderabad's context.

Contrary to expectations, cultural background did not significantly predict superstition in statistical terms. Although respondents from certain linguistic groups (e.g., Siraiki) exhibited higher superstition scores descriptively, the regression model revealed that culture lacked independent predictive power once income and gender were accounted for.

This challenges the classical anthropological view (Dundes, 2019) that superstition is primarily a cultural inheritance. One possible explanation is that in a multi-ethnic city like Hyderabad, cultural differences in superstition are diluted by shared socioeconomic struggles. Poverty and gender inequalities cut across ethnic lines, making them more decisive predictors than culture itself.

Nonetheless, culture cannot be dismissed entirely. Qualitative evidence and past studies (Chukkali & Dey, 2020; Fortin, Hill & Huang, 2014) show that cultural scripts shape the form superstition takes (e.g., numerology in Chinese culture, astrology in South Asia). In Hyderabad, Sindhi and Urdu-speaking populations may practice similar superstitions but with different symbolic expressions. Thus, culture acts less as a determinant of superstition's intensity and more as a determinant of its form.

Religion: Positive but insignificant (β = 0.303, p = 0.202). This implies that superstition in Hyderabad is not directly determined by formal religious identity but may instead be shaped by informal folk traditions intertwined with religion.

Religion, like culture, was found to be statistically insignificant in predicting superstition. This contradicts studies such as Torgler (2003), which suggested religiosity often overlaps with superstitious thinking. In the Pakistani context, Kayani et al (2017) observed drivers placing Quranic verses in vehicles as protective talismans, blurring the boundary between religious devotion and superstition.

The present study, however, indicates that religious affiliation (Islam vs. Hinduism/others) does not independently determine superstition levels in Hyderabad. This may be because superstition is less tied to formal religion and more embedded in folk practices that transcend religious boundaries. For example, belief in the evil eye or use of amulets is common across Muslim and Hindu communities, suggesting that superstition operates within cultural traditions rather than strictly religious doctrines.

Thus, religion's role may be symbolic rather than causal. While religious rituals provide legitimacy to certain practices, they do not explain why some individuals are more superstitious than others, socioeconomic and gender factors are far more decisive.

Innovative Factor Presentation:

The findings highlight an "economic-gender paradox" in superstition. While poverty statistically increases superstition, gender introduces an additional dimension: women across income levels remain more superstitious than men. In contrast, cultural and religious affiliations; although symbolically powerful, do not independently predict superstition once income and gender are accounted for.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study show that superstition in Hyderabad is most strongly shaped by socioeconomic deprivation and gender differences. Family income emerged as the most decisive factor, with individuals from low-income households displaying higher superstition levels. Gender was also significant, with women reporting stronger belief in superstitious practices, reflecting the social vulnerabilities they face. By contrast, cultural background and religion did not significantly predict superstition, indicating that while these shape the *form* of practices, they are less decisive in determining the *intensity* of superstition once socioeconomic variables are considered.

Overall, the study highlights that superstition in Hyderabad is less a matter of cultural or religious identity and more an outcome of structural conditions. The solution to superstition is hence to devise strategies that will alleviate poverty, education, and women empowerment. By addressing such spheres, policymakers and community leaders will be able to make the dependence on irrational beliefs less influential and create a more rational and development-driven society.

Recommendations on Policy and Practical.

1. Educational Interventions:

o Curriculum Incorporation of critical thinking and scientific reasoning into school education, which would be exposed to irrational beliefs at a young age.

o Literacy programs that focus on women in the community which are community-based can help reduce superstition, as this will enable people with rational knowledge.

2. Economic Empowerment:

o The priority should be on poverty-reduction programs, vocational training programs and the microfinance programs since the income is directly proportional to the level of superstition.

o Specific social safety nets of vulnerable families can reduce the aspect of supernatural explanation in crisis.

3. Gender-Specific Approaches:

o Gender disparities in superstition can be decreased with women empowerment programs such as skills development programs, health education programs, and opportunities of accessing leadership programs.

o Rural specific coping skills could be offered through counselling and awareness sessions among women, which will equip them with alternative coping mechanisms other than ritualistic means.

4. Cultural and Religious Interests:

o Awareness campaigns should be conducted using religious leaders and cultural movers who will be required to rebrand superstition as a social vice that is a setback to development.Local folklore and traditions can be reinterpreted positively for example, promoting cultural pride through arts and heritage rather than through irrational practices.

5. Media and Public Awareness:

o Radio, television, and social media campaigns should highlight the harms of superstition, such as delays in medical treatment or financial exploitation by faith healers.

o Success stories of individuals and communities overcoming superstition can serve as motivational tools.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to sociological theory by emphasizing the structural over the cultural determinants of superstition. While traditional perspectives highlight culture and religion as central, the evidence here shows that socioeconomic deprivation and gender inequality are more decisive predictors. This suggests a need for a paradigm shift in superstition research—from viewing it as a cultural residue to analyzing it as a structural outcome of inequality and vulnerability.

Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, several avenues remain for future inquiry. First, qualitative research could complement survey data by exploring *how* individuals rationalize superstitious practices in everyday life. Second, longitudinal studies could examine whether improvements in income and education reduce superstition over time. Third, comparative research across other districts of Sindh and Pakistan could reveal whether the Hyderabad findings hold true in different sociocultural contexts. Finally, psychological variables such as locus of control, anxiety, and resilience could be integrated into models to better understand the cognitive dimensions of superstition.

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