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Holy Whispers: Unveiling Women's Spiritual Narratives in the Ismaili Community of Chitral

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Abstract

Framed within a feminist narrative approach, this study examines the role and position of women, their spiritual relationships, and the impact of spirituality on gender within the Ismaili community of Chitral. This study found that in the Ismaili community, women perform several specific roles and are present in leadership positions, which are *Mukhiani, Kamriani* (in general and *Baitulkhyal Majlis), Waiza, REC* teachers, volunteers, and women in *the Khanah-yi-Hikmat Group*. Women's roles also play an important role in their spiritual development, community service, and love for their Imam. Ismaili women draw their inspirations from historical and contemporary figures like Hazrat Khadija (wife of Prophet Muhammad SAWW), Bibi Fatimah (wife of Hazrat Ali as), Princess Zahra Aga Khan (daughter of Prince Karim Aga Khan as), and Meher Angez Hunzai (Teacher in *Khanah-yi-Hikmat Group, Ginan and Qasida reciter)*. This study adopted a qualitative research approach. The sample size was guided by the saturation point technique, leading to interviews with 14 women from Upper, Middle, and Lower Chitral. Data were gathered using a structured interview guide. To capture and understand both personal and collective experiences, a feminist narrative approach was used, highlighting the depth and richness of each woman's story and lived reality. Women were found as guides, teachers, and seekers in their spiritual journey. The impact of spirituality on women's lives was defined as positive self-development, women's empowerment, gender equality, positive health development, and mental well-being.

Keywords: Spirituality, Ismaili community, Women's Role, Gender Empowerment, Religion.

Introduction

For shaping gender roles within Islam, religious institutions play a significant role (Amir-Moazami & Salvatore, 2003). Scholars from South Asia inspected how religiosity can either constrain or empower Muslim women (Ahmad, 2020). Ibrahim & Namitha (2020) noted that within the traditional framework, women often face challenges and restrictions, which include access to sacred places like mosques, due to societal norms that strengthen patriarchal structures and limit their participation in certain rituals. For women's full participation in religious practices, South Asian scholars have contributed to documenting these challenges, addressing the need for

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various interpretations of Islamic teachings, and deconstructing cultural barriers. Religiosity and spirituality represent different yet interrelated aspects of human experience (Simpson, Cloud, Newman & Fuqua, 2008). To establish a clear understanding, it is important to provide specific definitions for each term. Sketching from the work of Mattis (2000) and Zinnbauer et al. (1997), "religiosity" is characterized as the extent to which individuals adhere to the prescribed beliefs and practices of an organized religion. On the other hand, "spirituality" includes an individual's belief in the sacred and transcendent aspects of life, expressed through a sense of connectedness with others, such as humans, spirits, and God, and a pursuit of goodness. Mirola (1999) found that women might experience greater advantages from engaging in religious activities compared to men.

Krause, Ellison and Marcum (2002) clarify that women tend to receive increased social support within a religious institution compared to men. Reich (1997) notes that currently, women are actively scrutinizing theology and religion to safeguard their beliefs and maintain a distinct religious position as women, aiming to prevent the influence of socio-cultural norms. Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) noted that the central element of women's spirituality was a distinct and personalized connection with God. Within Asian cultures, where religious and spiritual practices are important, global and academic viewpoints are influenced (Marshall, 1998). Especially, the spirituality of women within South Asian contexts has historically received minimal attention (Silver et al., 2014). Drawing from the poetry of Rabi'a al-Basri to the modern or contemporary narratives of women engaging in Sufi practices, these researchers highlight the agency of Muslim women in shaping their spiritual journeys despite societal constraints (Hall, Seyfi & Rasoolimanesh (Eds.), 2024; Nourbakhsh, 2017 & 2004). Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) underscored three perspectives on spirituality. The initial perspective views spirituality as an internal affair, the second associates it with religion, and the third perspective regards it as encompassing the search for meaning (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002).

The equality of men and women in achieving or attaining spiritual dominance challenges gender-dependent spiritual statuses (Kakkar, 2006). However, past demotivation in the spiritual journey, like in the Sufi journey for women in South Asia, including their withdrawal from khanqas, is evident (Rizvi, 1978). Sufism offers a unique lens to examine gender dynamics, with discussions on the merging of masculine and feminine qualities (Sharify-Funk, 2017). Sufism has historically been described as a 'path to God,' including the elimination of all barriers between individuals, particularly women, and their connection to God through transformative lifestyle changes (Shaikh, 2009 & 2012). According to the Sufi tradition, it has observed active participation by women as teachers, mentors, and seekers, questioning the conventional perceptions of Islamic esoteric knowledge with men (Dakake, 2006; Buehler, 2016). Men and women were believed to be of equal value in the eyes of God, with no insurmountable barriers preventing them from attaining

the complete inner spiritual experience and dedicated practice of faith, an achievement deemed attainable for men and, as a matter of fact, equally attainable for women (Smith, 1997). In the beginning, Sufi mystics like Rabia al-Basri in the 8th century, to more current individuals such as Rabia Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya and Fatima al-Yashruti in the 20th century, women have played important roles in shaping the spiritual landscape of Sufism (Diaz, 2014). History acknowledges women in Sufism and their significant contributions as spiritual teachers; they became gradually and slowly invisible in mainstream Sufi discourse (Knysh, 2019), partially because of factors like the prevalence of Purdah (veiling) in Muslim societies (Khan & Bano, 2020). Even with their notable contributions, women within Sufism often faced societal and cultural challenges that aimed to limit their participation in mystic practices, dominating gender norms and institutional barriers created obstacles for women seeking to engage in Sufi rituals or pursue a path of spiritual asceticism (Pemberton, 2004). Although some women engage in traditional Sufi practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God), meditation, and spiritual music, others adopt more private and contemplative approaches (Abraham, 2017).

The variety in their mystical expressions challenges stereotypes and highlights the individuality of their spiritual journeys (Fukuyama et al., 2014; Haeri, 2002). However, women's leadership roles in traditional Islamic spaces have been debated (Hoare & Gell, 2009). Sufism has provided a more inclusive venue for female spiritual leaders (Liberatore, 2019; Brue & Brue, 2018). Several females, known as "Pirzadi" or female Sufi leaders, have constituted their own Sufi orders and served as spiritual guides for both men and women. Their influence extends beyond gender boundaries, challenging established norms within broader Islamic communities (Kuehn, 2023). Historical accounts demonstrate the involvement of both genders in Sufi practices, yet women often find themselves relegated to secondary roles within shrine complexes, reflecting wider societal norms of gender segregation and patriarchy (Kasmani, 2016). Despite these challenges, instances exist where women maneuver societal expectations to establish spiritual roles within the confines of traditional gender norms.

In regions like Sindh, women fakirs employ distinctive strategies to validate their spiritual legitimacy, sometimes aligning with or being granted authority by male figures within Sufi hierarchies (Kasmani, 2016). However, women's ascent to positions of spiritual leadership is significantly constrained by patriarchal structures, often necessitating approval from male figures for legitimacy within Sufi orders (Pemberton, 2006). Gendered imagery, perpetuated through historical texts and rituals, further reinforces hierarchical power dynamics, with male Sufi masters depicted as embodying authority and dominance. Women's engagement in Sufism faces various challenges, including societal disapproval, restricted access to spiritual spaces like khanqas, and the struggle for recognition within a traditionally male-dominated spiritual hierarchy (Pemberton, 2004; Rizvi, 1978). Moreover, the

institutionalization of Sufism has led to a male-dominated public sphere, where leadership roles are exclusively male, sidelining women from significant religious and spiritual leadership (Funk et al., 2018). Despite these challenges, some women navigate these constraints through the role of 'khalifa,' albeit in marginal and privately sanctioned spaces, contingent on male permission (Pemberton, 2006). This reflects a broader critique within contemporary Sufism, where the welcoming of women into spiritual circles is both criticized and seen as indicative of moral decline (Pemberton, 2016). Women's spirituality has been studied through various themes by scholars in Sufism, like women's spiritual roles and position, women in spiritual communities, and the impact of spirituality on women (Sharify-FUNK, 2017; Pemberton, 2006; Mahmood, 2005; Rizvi, 1978; Smith, 1997; Kasmani, 2016).

Research Objectives

- This work focuses on exploring women's spiritual roles and position, spiritual relationships and attachments of women with their spiritual community, and the impact of spirituality on women's lives.

Research Questions

- What is the role of women in spirituality, particularly in the Ismaili community?
- What is the relationship of Ismaili women with the people in their spiritual community?
- How and in what ways does spirituality impact/influence their gender identity as a woman?

Review of the Literature

This paper explores the scholarly literature relevant to the spiritual lives of Muslim women, with a focused lens on the themes informing the research question: Sacred roles, spiritual practices, community relationships, and the construction of gender identity through spirituality (Ghorbani et al., 2014). While direct literature on Ismaili women of Chitral is limited, extensive studies on spirituality in Islamic, Sufi, and feminist contexts provide a crucial interpretive framework for understanding women's narratives within the Ismaili tradition (Marsden, 2005; Haserodt, 1996).

Sacred Roles and Positions of Women in Islamic and Mystical Traditions

Within Islamic mystical tradition, such as Sufi, women have historically occupied sacred roles as teachers, mentors, and spiritual leaders (Dakake, 2006; Buehler, 2016). These roles, often marginalized in mainstream discourse, challenge patriarchal

structures by placing women in positions of spiritual authority and influence. Notably, female Sufi leaders, or *Pirzadis,* have guided mixed-gender congregations, established spiritual orders, and embodied divine proximity in ways that transcend traditional gender hierarchies (Sargut, 2017; Kuehn, 2023). The precedent set by historical figures such as Rabi'a al-Basri, an 8th-century mystic, showcases the sacred status attainable by women through mystical devotion. Rabi'a introduced the idea of unconditional love for the Divine, which redefined the spiritual path beyond fear or reward, and continues to inspire modern Muslim women in their pursuit of inner sanctity (Jagot, 2025). These examples, while situated within broader Islamic frameworks, provide theoretical grounding for examining the Sacred roles women may occupy in the Ismaili community, particularly within ritual leadership, moral instruction, and spiritual mentorship (Dusuki, 2008).

Women's Role in Spirituality: Embodied Practice and Mystical Engagement

Across Islamic scholarship, spirituality is increasingly recognized as gender-inclusive, allowing both women and men to access divine connection through ritual, moral conduct, and inner purification (Rahman et al. 2023). In the South Asian context, studies show that Muslim women engage deeply in spiritual practices such as prayers (salat), Quranic recitation, fasting, and charity, reflecting a commitment to both religious orthodoxy and mystical self-realization (Hussein, 2018; Hawa, 2006; Ibrahim & Namitha, 2020). Sufism, Islam's mystical dimension, further amplifies women's role by legitimizing diverse expressions of spirituality, including dhikr (remembrance of God), meditation, and poetry (Helminski, 2003). Despite cultural restrictions, women's participation in these practices illustrates a sustained engagement with the inner dimensions of faith, marking their role as active spiritual agents rather than passive adherents (Fukuyama et al., 2014; Haeri, 2002). Women's spirituality is not only doctrinal but also embodied and relational, often shaped by themes of self-transcendence, interconnection, and meaning-making (Hickson & Phelps, 1998). These attributes align closely with Ismaily teachings, which emphasize personal ethical development and the integration of spiritual life into daily experience. Thus, the literature supports the argument that Ismaili women's spirituality is multifaceted, involving ritual engagement, personal reflection, and mystical connection with the Divine (Wade-Gayles & Finch, 1995).

Spiritual Relationships and Community Bonds

A recurring theme in both Islamic and feminist spiritual literature is the centrality of community relationships in women's spiritual lives. Studies affirm that women often view spirituality as deeply intertwined with relational networks, including family, peer groups, and spiritual communities (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004). This interdependence fosters a spiritual environment where communal rituals, shared narratives, and mutual support shape individual experience of the sacred.

Research has also found that women receive greater social support within religious institutions than men, a dynamic attributed to early socialization emphasizing empathy, care, and interpersonal connection (Krause, Ellison & Marcum, 2002). These relationships function as both spiritual scaffolding and cultural affirmation, enabling women to navigate their roles within both empowerment and collective belonging. For the Ismaili women in Chitral, these findings suggest that their spirituality may be intimately tied to communal roles, such as participating in majlis (spiritual gatherings), contributing to community service, or offering moral guidance to peers. These social-spiritual relationships are not only expressions of faith but also affirmations of gendered identity within the spiritual fabric of the community (Fowler, 1982).

Gender Identity and the Transformative Power of Spirituality

Spirituality offers Muslim women a potent framework through which to redefine and assert gender identity. Feminist scholars argue that spiritual experiences can counteract patriarchal narratives, allowing women to reclaim agency and self-worth in ways that challenge both cultural and religious limitations (Aune, 2015; Arnott, 2009). Through reinterpretation of religious text, women promote equality, justice, and spiritual autonomy, reshaping gender identity in light of divine principles rather than societal expectations. Sufi traditions provide further evidence that spiritual elevation is not gender-bound, as men and women are equally capable of attaining mystical closeness to God. In some cases, Sufi discourse even discusses the merging of masculine and feminine spiritual qualities, offering a more fluid understanding of identity (Sharify-Funk, 2017). These teachings resonate with many contemporary Muslim women, who view spirituality as a path towards inner wholeness and gender empowerment.

Within the Ismaili framework, where the Imamat emphasizes pluralism, education, and gender inclusion, women's spiritual experiences are likely to be significant sites of identity construction. By actively participating in rituals, engaging with theology, and forming a supportive spiritual network, Ismaili women shape their sense of self not just as women, but as spiritual agents, resisting restrictive gender norms through their sacred practices. The literature highlights that Muslim women, through mystical practices, communal engagement, and feminist reinterpretation, assert themselves as spiritual being with sacred roles, powerful agency, and evolving gender identities (Dilley, 2019). Although empirical data on the Ismaili community of Chitral is limited, the theological and cultural frameworks revealed here provide compelling parallels and theoretical support for analyzing Ismaili women's spiritual Narratives. This foundation informs the present research, which aims to document and interpret how Ismaili women in Chitral experience, express, and are shaped by their spirituality, particularly through the lens of sacred roles, positions, community bonds, and gendered identity.

Research Methodology

This research is framed under a feminist qualitative research design. Participants/sample selection was convenient and purposive. This purposeful criteria include a) female aging eighteen years and above b) those women who are involved in spiritual practices c) and those women who are in leadership position performing specific roles women such as *Mukhiani* (R1), *Kamriani (R2),* women in *Baitulkhyal Majlis* (R3)*,* female *Waizas* (R4), women as teachers in the religious education center *(REC)* (R5)*,* and female volunteers (R6), and members from Khanah-yi-Hikmat group (R7), in the Ismaili community were sampled. Sample size was determined through the saturation point technique, whereby 14 female participants were interviewed, who belonged to the upper and lower Chitral. Gatekeepers were used in accessing individuals who were Khanah-yi-Hikmat members.

An interview guide was used as a tool to collect data from the respondents, as Bhandari et al. (2020) assert that exploring issues in an in-depth manner provides an opportunity for the researchers. The feminist narrative approach was employed to explore and understand the collective and personal lived experiences of women, which relies on personal stories, as noted by Clandinin and Connelly (1994), and is a goal of feminist research (McHugh, 2014). For the exploration of religious and cultural issues, qualitative research is effective, as highlighted by (Bhandari et al., 2020). Narrative analysis technique was used as per Monforte and Smith (2023), to analyze data. Analyzing data from feminist perspectives mostly qualitative researcher used (Wertz et al., 2011) involves several crucial steps, which are oneself familiarization with narratives, applying feminist lens, categorizing and coding the data, considering intersectionality, extracting feminist-relevant themes, contextualizing narratives in broader societal context (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023; Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017), and for enhancing the analysis using of feminist theories, triangulation and reflexivity (Pitre & Kushner, 2015). Following the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines, specifically anonymity, consent, and confidentiality were very crucial ethics in the settings of the current study (Edwards & Mauthner, 2012).

Data Analysis

Four themes were extracted from the conducted interviews. These themes are as follows:

Theme One: Roles and Position of Women in the Ismaili Community

Previous studies show that women's roles and involvement in spiritual practices are not merely highlighted in the Sufi literature in general and in the South Asian context, particularly in (Khan, 2020). Ernst (1997) through his work, highlights that most of the contributions of women in spirituality and in Sufism are related to men's

bibliographies. Likewise, Pande (2010) draws attention to the way that historical traditions have silenced women by the elite not representing women's contribution in spirituality and in general through their writings. For example, the first Persian work on Sufism in South Asia by Ai Usman Hajvari (Alias Data Gunj Bukhs), which is known as *Kahsf ul Mahjoob*, has discussed Sufis of South Asia in detail, but he hasn't discussed any single women. However, studies show women are often found with secondary roles within sacred palaces, which reflects the segregation of gender by wider societal norms and patriarchy (Kasmani, 2016). Women hold a prominent position in various sectors in the Ismaili community, driven by the guidance of their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan. The current study found seven prominent positions of women with diverse roles, which are as follows:

a) Women as Mukhiani: Holding the Role of Supreme Leadership: Within the Ismaili community, one of the highest leadership positions for women is that of *Mukhiani*, who is directly appointed by the Imam and serves for a minimum of five years. However, this term is subject to renewal or extension by the Imam. The position of Mukhiani is associated with varied important responsibilities, such as overseeing Jamati activities, directing religious practices, and serving as a representative of the Imam in the Jamatkhana. In the Ismaili community, Mukhiani is a highly esteemed status that symbolizes purity, respect, and a deep commitment to the Imam's teachings. Community members perform Bayat, a pledge of allegiance, with their hands, expressing their direct loyalty to the Imam. Their leadership fosters a sense of unity, spirituality, and community among the Ismaili followers, and their leadership highlights the influence that female leadership can impose in Jamat.

b) Women as Kamriani: The Esteemed Role. Second to Mukhiani: The second in command after Mukhiani, in the hierarchy of leadership, is *Kamriani.* Just like *Mukhiani,* she also holds a prominent place among *Jamatkhana's* females and is subject to great respect and authority. Although the duties and roles played by both *Mukhiani* and *Kamriani* are similar in nature, the latter is directly subordinate to the former, and they perform the leadership duties in the absence of *Mukhiani.* This ensures the smooth running of the religious and communal activities of Jamatkhana. This effort signifies their dedication to faith and the values of the Ismaili community. Like Mukhiani, the selection and extension of their tenure is also done by the Imam of the time.

c) Women in Baitulkhyal Majlis: A Specialized Spiritual Assembly: *Baitulkhyal Majlis* is a special assembly to inculcate spirituality and for individual spiritual growth of the members of the Ismaili community. It provides an environment for the members who want to enhance their spiritual path towards the light of *Nur.* Numerous activities like *Dhikr* (remembrance of God through recitation) and singing *Ginans* (spiritual verses and poems) are organized by *Baitulkhyal Majlis* to promote internal reflection and spiritual connection with the Divine. Both *Mukhiani* and *Kamriani* play a significant part in helping members of *Baitulkhyal Majlis* in this

unique practice. These positions of *Mukhiani* and *Kamriani* in *Majlis* are also nominated by the Imam, and despite the similarity in roles, they are not necessarily the same as those leading general prayers.

d) Female Waizas or Preachers in the Ismaili Community: The female *Waizas* also enjoy a dignified status in the Ismaili community since they impart religious and spiritual education. Ambitious topics, as diverse as the foundations of Islam, the life and teaching of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, the significance of the Quran, the history of the Ismaili community, and the role of the imam's guidance in everyday life, are core to their teaching. *Waiza* holds leadership positions and guides the Jamat in accordance with the *Farman* of the Imam. *Waizas* perform their duties, serving either as paid members or as unpaid volunteers of the Ismaili *Tariqa* and *Religious Education Board (ITREB)*. This structured approach ensures that their contributions are aligned with the official doctrines and educational objectives of the community. The primary responsibilities of Waizas include addressing religious queries, conducting religious discourses *(waz)* within the *Jamatkhana* or other religious forums, and organizing educational sessions for the youth of the Ismaili community. They seek to promote knowledge of the Ismaili faith and often represent the community in interfaith and intrafaith settings, promoting unity and shared understanding.

e) Women as Teachers in the Religious Education Center (REC): In the Ismaili community, the *Religious Education Center (REC),* also known as *Night School*, is pivotal in facilitating the understanding and learning about Ismailism. Every Ismaili child is enrolled in REC to explore the depth of their faith. Both male and female teachers volunteer in the REC, teaching the Quran, Duas, Ginans, and varied texts customized to different educational levels, all without financial compensation. Female teachers, however, are particularly prominent, representing a crucial presence within the institution.

f) Female Volunteers or Khedmadgar in the Ismaili Community: Volunteerism is deeply ingrained in the Ismaili community, and seen as a form of service to the Imam, whether it be roles of *Mukhiani* and *Kamriani*, paid and unpaid *Waizas* (preachers), *REC* teachers, or the Girl Guides. Female volunteers play versatile roles such as Girls Guides, assist with practical tasks in the Jamatkhana, manage community events, support seniors and children, and maintain the cleanliness of the Jamatkhana. They also contribute during special occasions like Didar (visit of Ismaili Imam to his community) and religious festivals such as reciting *Dua* (prayers), *Ginans* (devotional hymns), and the Imam's *Farman* (directives). All of these services are viewed as acts of Ibadat (worship), representing the volunteers' persistent commitment to serving the Imam, the community, and the sister communities where their needs are met.

g) Women in the Khanah-yi Hikmat Group: Khanah-yi Hikmat, which is also known as "Home of Wisdom," was founded by Allama Nasir Al-Din Nasir Hunzai, who is a devotee and follower of the Imam. It is an Ismaili scholarly organization, and its purpose is to foster Islamic knowledge in general and the Ismaili faith in particular. The participation of Ismaili women in *Khanah-yi-Hikmat* is also noteworthy, and their prominence is evident from notable figures like Meher Angez from Hunza and Ambareen from Chitral. Women serve in *Khanah-yi-Hikmat* in varied ways, such as reciting *Ginans,* spiritual prayers, and translation of Ismaili teachings from past scholars and Ismaili *Peers,* exploring the deep meaning of Quranic verses, and the study and propagation of Ismaili mystical teachings. Women's participation in the group ensures that the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the Ismaili community is promoted.

Theme Two: Women's Spiritual Roles

Women in spirituality remains as teacher, and guides like Rabia Basri, past studies regarding South Asian context shows that women are mostly defined with stereotypes/portrays specific images from the society side however some honorific titles are also highlighted relates to women like (Lalla, Bibi, Mai and Shaykha), social relations of female with male saints (mother, daughter, sister and wife) (Griffith, 1997), the representation of women as unmarried, virgin (Bonouvrié, 1995; Suvorova, 2011). However, available studies show that women still have to get permission and authority from male figures in their spiritual journey, as Kasmani (2016) noted, women fakirs in Sindh. In the Sufi order, however, women get a position, but this also passes through patriarchy, as Pemberton (2006) noted that women still face restrictions from traditional societal norms, restricted access to spiritual sacred places like khanqas, and struggle with patriarchy. Women in the Ismaili community play important and varied roles in shaping the spiritual fabric and communal life, contributing greatly to guidance, education, community service, and ritual practices. These contributions contrast with traditional gender roles in other religions or cultures, highlighting the community's commitment to gender equality. These roles are explained by the respondents in the following words:

> *"The role of women in our Ismaili community is significant, drawing inspiration from historical figures like Hazrat Fatima and Hazrat Khadija in Islam. Presently, we receive our spiritual guidance from Princess Zahra Aga Khan and Meher Angez Aapa. Our costumes surpass the traditional gender boundaries; equal opportunities are provided to females to offer their roles and serve their community. Historically, in Islam, women have played many pivotal roles, such as giving birth to spiritual leaders, as evident from the story of Hazrat Maryam in the Quran; hence, understanding their part in the journey of spirituality is important. In the Ismaili community, women like Princess Zahra Aga Khan, Mukhiani, Kamriani, and Waiza contribute significantly to spiritual knowledge and guidance, playing essential roles in Jamatkhana and educational institutions"(R7).*

"Women's role in spirituality is significant... Members of Baitulkhyal dedicate time to special Ibadat, ensuring regularity even if they can't come to Jamatkhana. Women serving as Waiza, volunteers, Mukhiani, Kamriani, and on the committee of Rec perform diverse roles to serve the Jamat. Their collective efforts contribute to both individual and communal spiritual development."(R4).

Theme Three: Women in Spiritual Communities

Despite societal restrictions women have notable contributed to the spirituality studies highlights different deep spiritual experiences of Muslim women that act as a leaders and guides like Rabia al–Basri 8th century to contemporary figures like Fatima al-Yashruti in the 20th century engaging in spiritual practices, these studies show the agency of Muslim women in shaping their spiritual journey despite constrains (Nourbakhsh, 2017; Jalal, 2002; Smith, 1997, 2015). Women in the Ismaili community are emotionally and spiritually attached to their spiritual community through their shared spiritual practices and diverse roles such as guides, teachers, leaders, or volunteers. These attachments are explained by the participants in the following words:

"In my role as a guide, teacher, and volunteer within the Ismaili community, I actively engage in fostering understanding and knowledge among fellow members. I share Mowla's Faramins, aiming to clarify misconceptions and promote unity. While I am currently a knowledge seeker."(R7).

"My relationship with my spiritual community is intertwined with the soul. As our imam emphasizes our spiritual kinship, I am a Mukhiani, serving as a leader and a teacher in REC. We are connected through a shared soul."(R1, R5).

"My relationship with my spiritual community is rooted in our shared humanity and soul. We are all born from one soul, and our Mowla emphasizes the equality of souls between men and women. The purity of our souls allows us to connect with the larger soul of which we are a part."(R2, R3).

"My relationship with my spiritual community is that of a preacher and a role model. When I visit various platforms and conduct sessions, particularly with female community members, many express appreciations and wish to emulate me, aspiring to be a Waiza, a guide, and a teacher."(R4).

Theme Four: Impact of Spirituality on Women

Studies show that women describe spirituality as a source of self-development and empowerment, understanding and valuing interconnections between relationships with all forms (O'Brien, 1998). Phelps and Hickson highlighted that a main contribution women make to spiritual perspectives regarding their awareness of community and interconnectedness (1998, p. 51). Literature highlights that women are usually more spiritual than men, showing a stronger connection to religion and engaging more in activities of spirituality (Bryant, 2007; Smith et al., 2002; Smith & Denton, 2009). Feminist studies highlight spirituality as a means for women to find healing and meaning, both with or without religious affiliation (King, 2008). Study from the remarks of respondents highlights that spirituality acts as a source of empowerment for women, transcending societal norms, and fostering self-development. Narratives also touch on mental health and well-being, the importance of spiritual practices, which creates a tension-free and depression free life. These impacts are explained by the participants in the following words:

> *"Speaking about gender identity, I take pride in being an Ismaili daughter. In comparison to other communities, where opportunities for females to pursue education are often restricted by societal norms that confine them to their homes, the Ismaili community stands out. Here, thanks to the blessings of our Imam, obstacles for females in achieving education are overcome. Both sons and daughters are granted equal opportunities in all aspects of life, whether it's formal education or spiritual learning. The Farman of our Imam reinforces this equality by advising that if a family has one son and one daughter, education should be provided to both, with a preference for the daughter if supporting both is challenging."(R7).*

> *"Working with organizations of Imamat has brought peace and positive change to my life. However, attending early morning Ibadat poses challenges due to cultural barriers and security concerns for women. Traveling alone to the distant Jamatkhana is a source of fear, despite the peace and fulfillment derived from volunteer duties." (R5, R6).*

> *"As a woman, I have not faced difficulties in spirituality. On the contrary, the spiritual journey has had a positive impact on my life. Despite facing psychological challenges and being advised to take medication for a lifetime, I chose to prioritize the prayers of Baitulkhyal. This decision brought peace into my life, resulting in a significant positive transformation. I am now a person free from tension, experiencing tranquility."(R2, R3).*

Discussion

In the realm of spirituality in Sufi studies in general, women's role in spirituality, particularly in South Asian settings, remains not merely highlighted, as Khan (2020) and Ernst (1997) noted that most studies were about male Sufis and about their roles. Historical traditions have silenced women's spiritual contributions by the elite through their writing, as noted by Pande (2010). However, studies show that women have mostly been highlighted with secondary roles in sacred places due to patriarchy and gender segregation by wider societal norms (Kasmani, 2016). In the Ismaili community, women secure specific positions and plays an important role in spirituality like as the study found that women inside Ismaili community were *Mukhiani, Kamriani (in general prayers and in Baitulkhyal Majlis), Waiza, REC teachers, Volunteers and in Khanah-yi-Hikmat Group* plays their key role in self and communal Spiritual development with their nominated positions and diverse roles in the sacred places. This finding shows contradictions with the present literature regarding women's roles in spirituality. Females extending their boundaries beyond the gender build their own Sufi order, remaining as teachers and guides for males and females in Sufism in the journey of spirituality. Sufism has given a vast space to female spiritual leaders who are also known as 'Pirzadi' (Liberatore, 2019; Kuehn, 2023). Pemberton (2006) highlighted that women still faces challenges in accessing sacred places for example Khanqas due to traditional and societal norms which also noted by Khan (2020) that women faces challenges in access to sacred places like within Sufi shrines to the tombs of male saints due to the concept of impurity but inside the Ismaili community women serves spiritual practices and play their roles without any such restrictions even they holds equal leadership positions and roles same as male community members holds insides the sacred places and in the community (Daftary, 2010).

In comparison to males, females are more likely to show a strong relationship with religion and be more involved in spiritual practices (Bryant, 2007; Smith et al, 2002; Smith & Denton, 2009). An important contribution regarding the spiritual angle is their awareness of community and interconnections, as highlighted by (Hickson & Phelps, 1998). Women’s spirituality: A proposed practice model. In E. Canda (Ed.), *The family, spirituality, and social work* (pp. 15–28). Routledge. (1998, p.51). The concept of "perfect human being" (Insan-i-kamil) and "Allah's friend (Waliullah) inside Sufism means a state where masculine (Jalal) and feminine (Jamal) qualities merge (Sharify-Funk, 2017). As shown from the extracted narratives of respondents' Ismaili community women, shared spiritual practices and their relationships are emotionally and spiritually connected to their spiritual community members through the soul purity connection. Present literature shows Spirituality is considered and described as a source of empowerment and self-development by women and understanding and valuing the

relationship between all forms of interconnections (O'Brien, 1998). Feminist studies show that, with or without religion, for women spirituality is meant to find healing and meaning. (King, 2008). As extracted from the participant narratives, women consider spirituality to act as a source of positive self-development, decision-making, mental well-being, and gender empowerment.

Conclusion

Studying Ismaili women's spiritual narratives, their position, and the roles they perform within the Ismaili community of Chitral, is of increasing interest in the present debate surrounding spiritual empowerment, equality, and gender. This study found that within the Ismaili community, women hold specific roles and positions, similar to equal roles played by male members. The most prominent roles through which women serve are *Mukhiani, Kamriani* (in general and *Baitulkhyal Majlis), Waiza, REC* teachers, volunteers, and women in *the Khanah-yi-Hikmat Group*, which further promotes the community's commitment to equality and shared spiritual practices. All women consider their spiritual roles as a part of their worship, which leads to their spiritual development, community development, and love for their Imam. Ismaili women draw their inspirations from historical and contemporary figures like Hazrat Khadija (wife of Prophet Muhammad SAWW), Bibi Fatimah (wife of Hazrat Ali as), Princess Zahra Aga Khan (daughter of Prince Karim Aga Khan as), and Meher Angez Hunzai (Teacher in *Khanah-yi-Hikmat Group, Ginan and Qasida reciter)*. Their relationship to other spiritual members within the spiritual community is through emotional and spiritual attachment with the belief of soul's purity connections, and all souls are part of the divine soul with shared spiritual practices; they are found as teachers, guides, and seekers. Impact of spirituality on women's gender was found as a source of empowerment in their daily life, like in decision making, positive self-development, gender equality, as well as mental well-being and positive health development.

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