

## Educational Status of Muslim Women in India: Issues and Challenges

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### Article History

Received: 18.01.2018

Accepted: 04.02.2018

Published: 15.02.2018



**Abstract:** Education is the basic and fundamental requirement for the progress and development of overall society. Gender disparities in education reflect the unequal position of women in highly gender biased social order. This is true not only of developed societies but also of developing societies like India where women are at a disadvantage despite a series of educational programs and reforms. Among all the religious communities, Muslims are the lowest educated section of Indian Society and Muslim women the least one. The backwardness among Muslim women in comparison with non-Muslim women in India has become a matter of concern at present. Although Islam as a religion gives its full emphasis on attainment of women's education, yet there are several social reasons for their backwardness such as large family size, poverty, negative attitude towards girl's education, lack of link between madrasa education and modern education, etc. The study aims to highlight the educational status of Muslim women in India, the reasons for their backwardness, the issues and challenges they face and recommendations for their integration with the mainstream society.

**Keywords:** Indian Muslim women, Educational status, Issues and challenges, Islamic perspective.

### INTRODUCTION

Education [1] is the single most important tool for social and economic transformation. Especially women must have equal roles to play for the progress of the society.

A well-educated population, adequately equipped with knowledge and skill is not only essential to support economic growth but is also a precondition for growth to be inclusive since it is the educated and skilled person who can stand to benefit most from the employment opportunities which growth will provide. Education is the most important thing for any nation. Right to Education Act (RTE)[2] gives fair and equal opportunities to every Indian child to get free and compulsory primary education[3]. Modern studies suggest that female education is more important than male education for social and economic development. According to *Nelson Mandela*, "Education is the greatest engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that children of a farm worker can become the president of a great nation [4]. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another." Muslims<sup>5</sup>, the largest minority community in India, consisting almost 14.20 percent of the population, are seriously lagging in terms of most of human development indicators. The Muslim girls

and women lag behind their male counterparts and women of all the other communities.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### Purpose of the study

The present study aims to study the educational status of Muslim women in India, the reasons for their backwardness, the issues and challenges they face, the Islamic perspective on women education and recommendations for their integration with the mainstream society. After the comprehensive literature survey, results of various studies were correlated in a systematic manner for further analyses to reveal the findings and draw conclusions.

### METHODOLOGY

The comprehensive literature survey was conducted through various online and offline secondary sources to observe the present educational status of Muslim women in India and correlate the data available in order to reveal the findings.

**Importance of women education in India**

Women education refers to every form of education that aims at improving the knowledge, and skill of women and girl. It includes formal education at schools and colleges, vocational and technical education, professional education, health education, etc. Women education encompasses both literary and non-literary education. Educated women are capable of bringing socio-economic changes. The constitutions’ of almost all the democratic countries, including India, guarantees equal rights to both men and women. ‘Education for all’ is one of the main tasks being carried out by the government of India but still we have the lowest female literacy rate in Asia. India is working but pace is slow as we haven’t achieved what we should have achieved a long before<sup>6</sup>. Parents especially in lower strata of society economically send their male child to school but not girl child due to poverty and orthodox thinking. This is one problem where parents do not send their girls to schools. Secondly, it is also common to see that the parents of urban areas often send their male children to better and quality schools. According to Napoleon, “Nation’s progress is impossible without trained and educated mothers. If the women of my country are not educated, about half of the people will be ignorant.” Education liberates women from ignorance, increases self-esteem and helps them take control over their lives and guide the progress of their families. Women are the backbone of a society. They are equally important as men are. The role of women cannot be denied in any society or culture[7].

Women must be educated for a happy and healthy life. Educated women can be a better human being, successful mother and responsible citizen. Educating women will unquestionably increase the living standard both at and outside home. Educated women will give education to her kids and wish them to live a better life. Napoleon once said, “Give me educated mothers I will give you educated nation.” On the other hand, women are more vulnerable to trafficking when they are under or un-

educated and poor, says the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human trafficking (UNIAP)[8].

**The present educational status of Muslim women in India**

Women’s education in India is one of the major preoccupations of the government as well as the civil society. This is because educated women are able to play a vital role in developing India.<sup>9</sup> There is a famous saying that to educate a girl child means to educate a family. Education is the milestone of the empowerment<sup>10</sup> of women as education helps them to change their lives, response to their challenges and question their traditional roles. In the Indian society which is patriarchal girls have fewer privileges and lower status than boys. Traditionally very few girls are admitted to school and among them many are drop outs. Many girls cannot attend school due to conservative cultural attitude[11].

According to Islam, “A mother’s lap is the first school for child.” There is no priority for men over women in relation to the right to education. Both are equally encouraged to acquire education. Indeed, all the Quranic verses which relate to education and which advocate the acquisition of knowledge were directed to both men and women alike [16] but unfortunately educationally Muslims comprises one of the backward communities in the country[12]. Muslim girls and women lag behind their male counterparts and women of all other communities. Among Muslims, 17.6 percent is the dropout rate, higher than the national average of 13.2 percent. As many as 25 percent of Muslim children in the age group of 6 to 14 years have either never attended school or have dropped out. Only one out of the 25 under-graduate students and one out of 50 postgraduate students is in the premier colleges of the country. The share of Muslims in all courses is low, particularly at the postgraduate level and marginal in the science stream [8].

It is generally believed that Indian Muslim has failed to cope up with the change that is taking place in Indian society at large.

**Table 1: Gross enrolment ratio by religious groups (2004-2005)**

Religious Groups	Higher education			Graduation		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Hindu	15.19	10.86	13.13	13.07	9.32	11.29
Muslim	9.09	6.16	7.70	7.77	5.81	6.84
Christian	19.72	19.98	19.85	17.21	16.02	16.60
Sikh	10.77	14.99	12.01	9.01	12.4	10.62
Total	14.42	10.57	12.59	12.42	9.11	10.84

Source: UGC (2009)

As shown in the table no1, GER in higher education and graduate programmes widely differs across religious communities. Muslims have the lowest GER of 7.70 in higher education as against

Christians who enjoy highest enrolment ratio of 19.85. Muslims are far behind the national GER of 12.59 in higher education. They are the only community who lag behind the national GER.

Their woman folk is further backward in higher education as their GER is the lowest in the country which is almost one half one half of the National female GER. Higher education equips youth contribute to the economic development of society and lead it in intellectual, political and social spheres. Development of higher education depends on out turn of the student from secondary schools provision of appropriate educational avenues and facilities for them and availability of suitable conditions of their accesses for these facilities. It is observed that Muslims have limited attainment of education for higher which has its effect on their higher education, while some progress has been made in their enrolment in higher education, still in they are backward in education[13].

As per the NSS, 55th and the 61st rounds, attainment of Muslim woman in higher education i.e. graduation and above improved from 1.3percent

to 1.8percent in rural areas and from 4.7percent to 7.1percent in urban areas during 1999-2000 and 2004-2005 .Attainment of Muslim females improved in higher education. Attainment in urban areas from 3.4 percent to 5.3 percent but only marginally from 0.4 percent to 0.8 percent in rural areas. Sachar Committee observed that while some progress has been made overtime, differences remain and the current generation of Muslim females are lagging behind in the higher education.

**Like attainment**

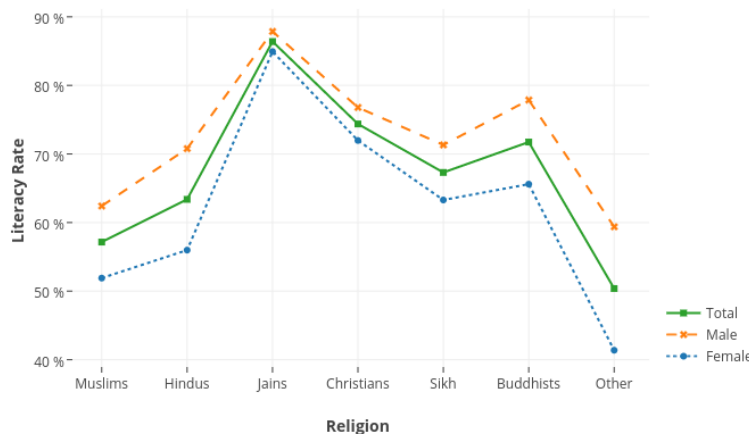
Like attainment at a particular level of education as an indicator, gross enrolment ratios (GER) also indicate extent of person’s engagement with higher education. The attainment level is generally lower than enrolment ratio as there is some amount of wastage in the course of completion of education by the enrolled persons.

**Table-2: Literacy Rate among Religious Communities: (in % age)**

Religious community	Female	Male	Total
Muslims	51.9	62.41	57.155
Hindus	55.98	70.78	63.38
Jains	84.93	87.86	86.395
Christians	71.97	76.78	74.375
Sikhs	63.29	71.32	67.305
Buddhists	65.6	77.87	71.735
Others	41.38	59.38	50.38

Source: 2011 census

**Literacy rates among the religious communities in India according to the census 2011**



**Fig-1: Literacy Rate among Religious Communities**

The above graph shows the literacy rates among the religious communities in India according to the census 2011. It is seen that the literacy rate of Muslim females is only 51.9 percent which is lower than all other religious communities and it is even lower than the national average of female i.e. 65.46 percent.

**Islamic perspective on women education**

Religion is a means for the people to express collective beliefs concerning the social commitment and social solidarity and provides a way for the people to affirm common values, beliefs and ideas and hence serves as a central value system [14]. Islam is an Abrahamic religion based on prophecy, prophet hood, and the revealed text. It began in sixth-century Arabia and spread rapidly to

regions outside the Arabian Peninsula. Islam is the second largest religion, with an estimated 1.2 billion adherents, constituting about 20 percent of the world population in 1998. Approximately 900 million Muslims live in forty-five Muslim-majority countries[15]. After seeing the lower percentage of Muslim women education it becomes imperative to know what Islam says about women education in light of Holy Quran and Hadith (prophetic tradition). There are numerous verses (Aayat) and Sahih Hadith which insist of education equally to men and women. The very first revelation of holy Quran Surah Al-Alaq, (96:1-6)“ Recite in the name of your Lord who created man from a clinging substance, recite and your Lord is the most generous-who taught by pen-taught man that which he knew not”, Surah Fatir, (35:28) “And among people and moving creatures and grazing livestock are various colors similarly. Only those fear Allah Almighty, from among His servants, who have knowledge indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and forgiving”, Surah Al Baqra (2:151), “Even as We have sent unto you a messenger from among you, who recites unto you our revelations and causeth you to grow, and teacheth you the scripture and wisdom, and teacheth you that which knew not.”, Surah Jumma (62:2) “He it is who hath sent among the unlettered ones a messenger of their own, to recite unto them His revelations and to make them grow, and to teacheth them the scripture and wisdom, though hereafter they were indeed in error manifest”.

A basic principle of Islamic sharia states that when a commandment is revealed, even if the masculine form is used the female gender is also included in that commandment. So though Allah and the Holy Prophet Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him) use the masculine form of sentence to describe most of the commandments, women are also bound to act and follow those rules and regulations. The study of these verses clearly show, that the prophetic responsibilities of Prophet Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him) through His Prophet-hood included recital of these verses, purgation of the self-education of the book and wisdom and communication of knowledge. However if the doors of acquisition of knowledge are closed for women or imposed unjustified restrictions are imposed upon this acquisition, which religion will they follow? How can they come to know the nature of verses that have been revealed to them? How will they attain the wisdom and hikma that Allah Almighty wished them to know through Holy Prophet Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him)? How they will teach the fundamentals of faith to their children if they have no knowledge of it to themselves. Holy Quran also states in Surah Al-Zumar (39:9) “it is He who payeth adoration in the watches of the night, prostrate and standing,

bewaring of the Hereafter and hoping for mercy of his Lord, (to be accounted equal with a disbeliever)? Say (unto them O Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him): Are those who know equal with those who not? But only men of understanding will pay head.”

In one of the most famous sayings of Prophet Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him), He said “Acquisition of knowledge is obligatory up on both Muslim men and women” (narrated by Ibn e Maja in al-Sunan). In another Hadith He (blessings and peace be upon him), said “Allah Almighty makes the path to Paradise easier for him/her who walks on it for getting knowledge (narrated by Muslim in Al-Sahih). Aisha Al-Siddiq, the mother of the believers (wife of beloved Prophet Mohammad blessings and peace be upon him), was a Hadith narrator, a scholar, an intellectual and a jurist of great standard. She is believed to have reported 2,210 Hadith (traditions). Abu Hurayra (RA) Abdullah Bin Omar (RA), and Anas bin Malik (RA) (may Allah be well pleased with them) were the only ones from male Hadith narrators who had narrated more Hadith than she did. This, itself illustrates that women could not only teaches women but also men after fulfilling certain pre-conditions. Aisha Binti Talha (May Allah be pleased with her) reports; I stayed with Aisha Siddiq (May Allah be pleased with her). People from every city could come to me including old ones (who would put forward questions) because they knew I am her servant as well. And the students who were young would treat me like their sister and would present gifts too (to Aisha Siddiq (May Allah be pleased with her). Through me), many would also write me letters so that I could reply them back after soliciting answers from Aisha Siddiq (May Allah be pleased with her). I would submit: O aunt! Mr so and so has written a letter and there is his present as well, ‘Aisha Siddiq (May Allah be pleased with her) would say in reply to this O daughter answer her query and give him present in exchange as well, if you have nothing to give, let me know, I will give so she would return (the present in exchange and I would send it back along with the letter), narrated by Al-Bukhari in al-Adab-al-Mufarad. It is important to note that the concept of knowledge in Islam covers a broad spectrum of subjects. All the interpreters of the Holy Quran are in agreement that the first six verses (Aayats) of chapter Al-Alaq from begging of the sending of revelation (96:1-6)

It is apparent from the Holy Quran and Hadith that the acquisition of knowledge is obligatory for women in the same way as is in the case of men. The study of the life of Holy Prophet Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him) also shows that He Himself made special arrangements



for the education and training of women. Abu Sa'id Al Khudri (may Allah be pleased with him) reports that some women said to the Holy Prophet Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him), "men have gone ahead of us (in terms of acquisition of knowledge). Therefore, appoint a special day for our benefit as well" The Holy Prophet Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him), fixed one day for them. He Mohammad (blessings and peace be upon him), would meet them on that day, advise them and educate them about commandments of Allah Almighty (narrated by Al-Bukhari in Al- Sahih)

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Taking into consideration the above discussion on educational vision of Muslims, it can be concluded that Muslims are far behind than the other communities. Their vision towards education is still traditional. They don't want to accept modern education due to which they are suffering socially, economically and politically. They don't want to give higher education to their daughters due to many reasons, at present somehow they are now coming up for education and improving day by day for the last two decades and are learning to stand on their own feet, but this effort is just a drop in the ocean. Muslims have lower share in Professional education especially in management sector. Their Madarsa are following traditional and old syllabus in the time of globalization and information technology. Their syllabus is far away from scientific and commercial knowledge. Madarsas should transform into modern educational centers where both religious and vocational studies may be imparted. Thus there is need to change the vision of Muslims from traditional to modern education. If we really want to improve the women's position in our society improving Muslim woman, we have to take some serious steps in future and also improve the defaults of previous policies in primary to higher education. We have to establish some universities which only focus on women education like Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishvavidhaylay, Mother Teresa Woman University Jiyoti Vidyapeeth University, Banasthali Vidyapeeth University, and Jaipur in Rajasthan. U.P. is in need of Women University which provides the entire stream's education like medicine, engineering etc. And also have to believe them that they too are equal part of our society in the same manner as men are.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to overcome the constraints, faced by Muslim women to achieve empowerment, a multidimensional approach and efforts at both governmental and NGO level are necessary. The following recommendations are important:

- The recommendations of the Sachar Committee Report for socio-economic uplift of Muslims should be implemented rigorously.
- 15 Point Program meant for uplift of minorities, initiated by the Central Government, should be implemented rigorously.
- The central government should ensure that the fundamental rights guaranteed to every Indian citizen are enjoyed by Muslims in true letter and spirit.
- National Human Rights Commission, Minority Commission, and National Commission of Women should play effective role in dealing with the matters of violation of rights of minorities.
- NGOs with active participation of Muslim women should guide about availability of various schemes initiated by the government and various agencies for providing financial assistance to women, like loans for higher education, educated unemployed and self-employment etc.
- Effective steps at all levels should be taken to get rid of the curse of illiteracy which is the root cause of socio-economic backwardness among Muslim women at large.
- The educated, employed and empowered Muslim women should come forward and establish NGOs in order to guide and create awareness among the deprived Muslim women about the opportunities available. They should take initiative in forming 'self-help groups' by Muslim women and encourage self-employment and savings. Employment outside home may be encouraged by providing the facilities of crèches wherever possible. Such NGOs should focus on the awareness of legal rights of Muslim women including property rights.
- From religious point of view, religious scholars should ensure to create proper awareness among Muslims at large both men and women about the social and economic rights given to women in Islam. Once these issues are addressed effectively, there is no doubt that the Muslim community at large will march ahead in the direction of progress and development and in turn Muslim women will realize the dream of equality of status and empowerment.

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