

Muslim Girls Education In India: Problems And Concerns

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In India, when a girl child is born not only to Muslim parents but also to Hindu parents in some regions, she comes loaded with aspirations from the parents and society about what responsibilities she will have to take once she grows up, what kind of job would be suitable for her so her family is not neglected, she is told time and again that she has to make adjustments with her husband and his family so she should choose a profession that doesn't require absence from family because that is her prime responsibility. The groom is still found by the parents and divorce has a stigma attached to it. When the world is talking about liberal education and freedom of thought, in many regions of India every step is still governed and monitored by the society, religious leaders, and the parents. If Freedom of thought begins at all, it is curbed at its inception and a boundary is drawn. Women are excluded from the mainstream and decision making about women is still taken by men and the society.

Status of muslims girls :

The socioeconomic status of Muslim women in India seems to conform to the stereo typical image of female Muslims throughout the world as being apathetic, uneducated, suppressed, and dependent upon men. A member of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, rightly points out that Muslim women are faceless, voiceless, and marginalized within their own social circles and in the larger Indian context as (Uzma Naheed 2009), Though more than six decades have passed since India achieved independence, Muslim women remain behind the Indian population in almost every respect, one of them being education. Muslim women have a lower level of education than women from Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Parsi, Buddhist, and Jain communities, (Jalil 2011). However, this lower level of education is often attributed to low aspirations and a lack of ambition. Such reckless conclusions only perpetuate the many misconceptions about Muslim women. Muslim women in India do indeed have educational and professional aspirations. Regrettably, however, just a handful of studies document this. One such work is the The Sachar Committee Report published in 2006 by the Government of India. According to the report, "In this dismal scenario there is

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one big ray of hope, while the education system appears to have given up on Muslim girls, the girls themselves have not given up on education. There is a strong desire and enthusiasm for education among Muslim women and girls across the board (Sachhar Committee Report 2009). Muslims somehow militates against educating girls, current research indicates that poverty and financial constraints are the major causes that prevent Muslim Girls from accessing modern/secular education." Other factors mentioned in the report include, "low perceived returns from education," "poor access to schools," and "low quality schools in Muslim-concentrated areas," among others.

However, the fact that a massive number of Muslim women are working with unorganized sector might also be a significant cause of their low level of educational attainment. According to the Sachar Report, Muslim women are largely self-employed and heavily represented in occupations such as sewing, embroidery, and beedi rolling. No matter what the causes are behind the deplorable state of Muslim women, there is undoubtedly a high level of enthusiasm among them to attain some form of education. Unfortunately, a lack of research, as well as insensitivity to their struggle, exacerbates the existing stereotypes. In this globalized world, where sending a message is just a click away, such a stereotypical image quickly travels far and wide, adding to the problem. However, not all aspiring Muslim women are suffering from the same fate. There are many countries where Muslim women do not have to overcome parochial outlooks to obtain educational freedom.

When Malala Yousufzai expressed her desire for education, she got shot. People and organizations responded by coming forward and provided her unflinching support, the rest as they say, is history. A certain community still exists that dominates women; embedding the daily life of girls with sacrifices, duties, responsibilities, marriage, dress code, and gender disparities which are not allowing them to aspire for more than these rigid expectations. Not only is the issue one of oppression of women, but the bigger issue is the growing realization amongst women of their rights which has the potential to release them from the societal domination that has curbed their freedom of thought for centuries. Access to education is a telling indicator of women's status in a given society (Verma, 2006). Debated is that Islam gives equal educational rights to men and women equally. Within Muslim communities in India, one of the largest democracies in the world, women still struggle for basic rights being expected to think in a certain way, however we see that there are women from the same community who are in fact thriving in another civil and democratic world that allows them freedom of thought.

“What we're seeing now in America is what has been sort of a quiet or informal empowerment of women,” said Shireen Zaman, executive director of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a nonprofit research institute founded after the 2001 attacks to provide research on American Muslims. “In many of our home countries, socially or politically it would've been harder for Muslim women to take a leadership role. It's actually quite empowering to be Muslim in America (Knowlton, 2010).”

In India, Muslim women are not a homogeneous community. Muslim women are differentiated across class, culture, and community. India exists today at many levels and what determines the access and success of female education is the overall social and economic development of a region and the rural urban divide in every region. Within all communities within all social groups and among women themselves a diversity of community characteristics can be seen. Minority-majority status does not really determine equitable access to education. Analysis of relative regional development and underdevelopment is crucial for understanding continued inequalities of gender, caste and class. Poverty and patriarchy constrain women more (Nayar, 2007).

Causes of low educational status :

Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), in India, pointed out the most tragic thing is that Muslim women have accepted this happily, internalizing the kinds of roles their men want them to live with. They are told that this is what they are created for and that for this they should be happy (Ali, 2009). Due to their lower level of aspirations they have been marginalized and this has created a significant lag in educational attainment. A minority of Indian Muslim women have indeed shown grit and courage to reach high levels in various strata of society. Unfortunately, there is not enough data and documentation available to highlight their ambitions and aspirations. The Sachar Committee Report, 2006, published by the Government of India notes, “In this dismal scenario there is one big ray of hope, while the education system appears to have given up on Muslim girls, the girls themselves have not given up on education. There is a strong desire and enthusiasm for education among Muslim women and girls across the board (Parween, 2013).” The state of higher education of Muslim women, in Independent India, gives rise for concern. Statistics with the Sachar Panel show that only five percent of women manage to attain higher education. The status of enrollment of Muslims to the country's top medical and engineering colleges is in a sorry state. And the panel says a lot needs to be done to provide the Muslims with quality higher education. In medical colleges, four per cent of women take up medicine at the undergraduate level and just 1.5 per cent at the postgraduate

level. The route to higher education for Indian Muslim women is hindered by the factors like basic education, transportation, societal and parental pressure, and religious issues (Qureshi, 2010). In India, freedom and access to education has shown effect only in urban areas with upper class Muslim families. On average, Christians are ahead of every other religious group in terms of overall enrollment in higher education as well as at the graduate level. Muslims in contrast lag behind the most and women are even farther behind. Also, fewer of them are in graduate programs. For example, Christian women have three times as high enrollment in overall higher education as compared to Muslim women and Muslims have the lowest GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) among all religious groups in India. Besides lower economic status in general, there are two important reasons cited for this observation. Firstly, Muslim women are usually not encouraged or allowed to go for higher education. Secondly, madrassas teach mostly Islamic faith and do not provide secular education (Higher Education In India: Issues Related to Expansion, Inclusiveness, Quality, and Finance, 2008). This is not completely true. There are many Muslim women who aspire to get into schools and become socially mobile but the policy makers and policy implementers have not been able to reach every village and city. Public schools in India are not performing and there is dearth of colleges and quality education. Lack of transport and non-availability of colleges in their areas as the reason for discontinuing studies was cited according to a household survey conducted in 2,000 houses in one of the areas in the old City of Hyderabad, in India. This was cited by seven out of ten girls who had passed their high school exam as the reason for not studying beyond high school.(The Times of India: City: Hyderabad, 2011). Some NGOs, such as Lok Jumbish, have done phenomenal work in this area but NGOs cannot reach every city due to a lack of resources and financial constraints. Moreover, Indian government's restriction on foreign funding will restrict NGOs to spread their wings (Freedom House, 2013). To travel the road to higher education Muslim women need to have at least access to schools and transportation.

Early marriage is another critical issue faced by Muslim girls. Kerala, a state in South India, has a highest literacy rate of Muslim women. In a study conducted in Kerala, 1981, it was found that out of 158 women who were illiterate 46 percent were married below 15 years, 51 percent between 15 and 19 years and in only about 3 percent of those who were married between the age of 21 and 24 (Menon, 1981). It has been widely debated these days that Islam preaches equality of education for men and women. But recently one of Kerala's most influential Sunni leaders said that education of women, according to Islam, does not provide them greater freedom, especially in relation to men. In an interview given to the

Malayalam weekly Mathrubhumi, Kanthapuram AP Aboobacker Musaliyar has said that modern times require that Muslim women are educated; however, some fundamental rules cannot be changed.

"...Islam has not changed its decrees regarding the life of women. Muslim women should not work in a place where only a woman and a man are present. They should work only in a place where there are enough number of women and trustworthy men. Ninety per cent of jobs do not require men and women to mingle. These rules cannot be changed." Musaliyar further said Muslims in Kerala did not support the move by the government to fix the minimum age of marriage of women of the community at 18, and they were exploring ways to get the government to reverse its order (Philip, 2013)."

However, a survey conducted by the Muslim Education Society (MES) among Muslim students of its educational institutions in Kozhikode and Malappuram districts, in Kerala, revealed that young Muslim men and women are against lowering the marriage age. According to the MES, nearly 99 per cent of the students said 'no' to the attempts to lower marriage age. Of the 5,139 Muslim girls who took part in the survey from 16 institutions, all except 67 maintained that the marriage age should be at least 18 years. All the girl students belonging to Muslim community at MES Raja School, Pavangad; MES Raja School, Chathamangalam; B Arch College, Kakkodi; MES Women's College, Nadakkavu, and MES Arts and Science College, Chathamangalam, were against the move of the religious outfits. "Out of 432 students of MES Arts and Science College, Villiapally, 31 did not object to lowering the age limit," MES district president C T Zakir Hussain said (The Indian Express, 2013). The changes that have taken place in the last decades demonstrate that regarding marriage the Muslim leaders haven't changed but the younger generation going to college have realized the drawbacks of child marriage.

Restrictions that they face in the society is yet one more reason for illiteracy among Muslim women. Families follow traditions in the society and restrict girls from educating themselves in the form of societal and religious pressure. A lot of people have a notion that education is not permitted for the Muslim women. But contrary to this, Islam emphasizes and encourages seekers of knowledge and does not discriminate between men and women. The Prophet stated that "whosoever follows a path to seek knowledge shall walk the path of paradise". Despite such importance to education given by the religion, many families restrict women from studying, ironically citing religious prohibitions, clearly showing their lack of knowledge about their own faith. It is also the responsibility of the religious leaders to educate the community the importance of women's education. It is

important to understand that education brings with it knowledge and ability to reason and it would in no way interfere in any religious belief or practice. It would only strengthen it (The Times of India: City: Hyderabad, 2011).

Some inspirational stories :

Dispite all of these barriers there are Muslim women who have against all odds succeeded in life. Clad in burqa, mother of two, teacher in school – outwardly Yasmin Sajid Shaikh, 29-year-old, is the state's first Muslim woman Deputy Superintendent of Police. Yasmin, who hails from a conservative Muslim family, attributes her success entirely to her family and husband. Yasmeen is ranked 13th in the merit list of women who have cleared the GPSC exams. The journey from burqa to khakhi is a matter of pride for her family (Patel, 2010). There are many such stories and the common threads that I found, during my research, in these stories was the support from their family implying educational aspirations of the family could overcome the various hurdles discussed above. Most importantly they understood what the true interpretation of the teachings of Islam is.

It turns out that in the states of Tamilnadu, Kerala, Andhra, and Karnataka Muslims are more literate than Hindus, and way ahead of the SC/ST (scheduled caste/scheduled tribe) groups. Consider Tamilnadu, Muslims have a 82.9% literacy rate compared to 72% for the Hindus and a paltry 62% for SC/ST (Reality Check India, 2014). Kerala is a state of highest literacy in India and Muslim women have done better than the rest of the states in India. The Kerala model of women empowerment in India clearly demonstrates that the progressive social movements, government policies, and a historically conducive climate can contribute significantly to the success of Muslim women in other parts of India as well.

These measures have to take place at an early stage and government and NGOs can play an important role. In Rajasthan, India, traditionally, Muslim girls were allowed only Din-e-Taleem (religious education) offered at the mosque and denied Duniya- ki-Taleem (general education). The Imam's dilemma was compounded by the fact that his villagers, in the state's Bharatpur district, firmly believed that the Hindi-medium education offered in local government schools was unsuitable for Muslim girls because the language was associated with Hindus. Finally, *Lok Jumbish* (People's Movement), a leading non-government organization (NGO) specializing in education, stepped in with a simple but workable solution. It offered Urdu (associated with Islam) as a medium of education. At the Kaman block of Bharatpur district where the Meos Muslim form 70 per cent of the 150,000 people

and where *Lok Jumbish* concentrates its activities, the impact has been truly dramatic. *Lok Jumbish* quickly emerged as the ideal mix between non-governmental organizations, local community, government and international donors and by 1998 had established 1,500 non-formal centers with 20,000 girls and 10,000 boys enrolled across Rajasthan (Raj, 2000). In India, educational institutions need to develop trust, as *Lok Jumbish* did, between two communities that can work together for Muslim women education.

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