

EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIA : PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

India is a multiethnic, multicultural and multi-linguistic country. The total population of India is 1029 millions, of which 138 millions (14%) are Muslims (Census, 2001). India had a female population of 496 millions, which accounts to be 15% of the world's women. The process of empowerment of Muslim women is a multidimensional. Its various dimensions i.e; educational, political, social, economic, psychological, legal, constitutional are all interrelated. Census 2011 report says that, except, the Muslims all other religious groups have higher literacy rates. Muslims have only 59.1% literacy rates, out of which literacy rates of Muslim women are 50.1% compared to 53.7% for all communities. The rural Muslim female literacy rate is just 42.66%. The most common factor for high incidence of non-enrolment, dropouts and low achievement among Muslim girls are poverty, lack of Muslim women teachers, absence of separate schools for girls, opposition to secular education for girls, early marriage and conservative attitudes. According to recent government reports, Muslim women are among the poorest, educationally, disenfranchised, economically vulnerable, politically marginalized group in the country. The Muslim women share in public employment is just dismal 3.7% and the Muslim women Work Participation Rate is only 14% a compared to Hindus women's being at 27.5% (Census, 2001). From the Islamic point of view, Islam provided education, legal and political empowerment to Muslim women centuries ago. Islam in spite of recognizing gender differentiation has consistently described the creation of human kind in egalitarian terms. Quranic verses 15:29 and 38.72 says, that, "By birth, all members of the human race have the same intrinsic worth and possess equal grace because of carrying the breath of God; 'wa nafakhtu fihi min ruhi'. The Quran cogently states, "O human beings have fear of our Lord Who created you from a single soul. He created its mate, and through them He filled the earth with countless men and women. Al Quran (Surah-an-Nisa'4:1) Thus, Quran has also placed equality and empowerment to Muslim women at par with men and the need of the hour is that Muslim women must draw inspiration and motivation from Quran and Hadith and they have to break free from the shackles of conservative attitudes, social biases, narrow social prejudices, social, cultural and political environment. The present paper attempts to explore and analyze the problems and obstacles which are there in the empowerment of Muslim women, in the light of their educational and socio-economic perspectives.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Muslim, literacy rates, Sacchar committee, Seema Kazi, Muslim women status, Muslim work participation rate.

INTRODUCTION

The Muslims in India are the single largest minority, numbering about 138 millions (14%) of the total population, constituting only 4.5 % of the elite—with Muslim women faring the worst. More than 50% of them live below the poverty line, with a monthly incomer of Rs.150 or less. The socio-economic backwardness of the Muslim community has been highlighted by a number of official reports and survey. The Panel on Minorities and weaker sections headed by Gopal Singh (1983)⁵, the

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43rd Round of the NSS (1987-88), the Programme of Action, 1992, National Policy on Education, 1986, the Planning Commission of 1987-88 and the Sachar Committee Report (2006)¹⁴ has all drawn attention to this. Among all the sections of Muslim community, it is the women who are the one of the most deprived segments of the society, despite their being constitutionally, legally and religiously empowered. Though the Census reports of 2001⁴ remain silent on the educational state of Muslim, but it is well known that the literacy and educational level of Muslims, is below the national average. NPE (1986) has acknowledged that the central issue is the “removal of disparities and to equalize educational opportunity by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far”. In this present scenario, there is a need to give immediate attention to the persistent educational backwardness of Muslim women, especially the high dropout rate, resulting in substantially fewer proportions of them managing to complete high school and even less availing higher education (Maniuddin, Md, 2010)¹¹.

Not surprisingly, Muslim women, accounts for the lowest levels of educational attainment. A Muslim woman faces a number of constraints in order to have access to better education. Several studies have been conducted, but all of these have pointed out to the relative educational backwardness of Muslims, especially the Muslim women. The most common factors which has been considered as a major obstacle to their education has been high dropout rates and low levels of their educational achievement, poverty, lack of women teachers, absence of separate schools for girls, withdrawal of Muslim girls from schools so as to engage them in household chores, opposition to co-education after puberty, opposition to girls’ working out of their homes, the stereotypical belief that the right place for women is the home, for which higher education is not required, opposition to secular education for girls, early marriage and conservative attitudes etc.

Many studies have been undertaken to study the status of education among Muslim women. Only few studies here, in the present paper have been taken, so as to highlight the plight and status of education and literacy among Muslim women and Muslim girls.

A Few studies on Education of Muslim Women

Many studies have been undertaken so as to study the status of education among Muslim women and girls. A few of them are as following:

*Abdul Hafiz Mabood (1993)*¹⁰ carried out a sample study of Muslim teachers in government and government aided schools and *Madradas* of the Azamgarh district in eastern UP. The study found that almost all the *Madrassa* teachers believed in the importance of girls’ education, but stresses that the ideal education that Muslim girls should receive is religious, plus modicum of general subjects, and there should not be any distinction between boys and girls. Among the parents, the study found that many parents were in favour of sending their girls to schools but were unable to do so, because of poverty or due to lack of all girls’ schools in the neighbourhood. This and the desire on the part of most parents that their girls should have a basic grounding in Islam, explains the high proportion of girls studying in *Maktabs* in the district. Some parents were also willing to send their girls to colleges outside their village but are unable to do so owing to the lack of proper girls’ hostels in the towns in the region where such colleges are located.

In another major study, *Hasan & Menon (2004)*⁶ pointed out several factors for the lack of education and its awareness among Muslim women. It has been found that, Muslim women had very little awareness of government schemes and had little power of decision-making in their homes. A

country wide survey was conducted by *Hasan & Menon* in 2004⁶, which comprised 40 districts and spanning in 12 states, which gave new data regarding educational status of Muslim women. The study divided the whole Indian territory into four regions including both rural and urban areas. In the survey reports, it was found that 58% Muslim women are illiterate and mere 4% are graduate and above and 10% have passed secondary and higher secondary (Table 1). Around 17% are middle class passed as compared to the primary passed which is around 11% and just two percent are getting any kind of non-formal education. (Table 1)

Table 1. Women Education Level among Muslim Community

Community	Illiterate	Non-formal	Primary	Middle	Secondary & Higher secondary	Graduate & above
SC	68.79	0.93	6.47	12.36	7.29	4.25
ST	71.73	0.00	9.45	8.46	8.99	1.37
OBC	56.63	0.93	6.71	17.96	12.34	5.43
Others	36.32	0.56	7.42	27.156	16.87	11.68
Muslim	57.66	1.80	10.51	16.75	9.71	3.56
Total	57.55	1.80	7.43	17.27	11.08	5.74

Source: *Hasan & Menon, 2004*

The rate of illiteracy is quite high in rural-northern part of India, with nearly 84% (Table 2), reporting themselves to be illiterate and at the other end in Urban south, it is only 22.4% illiterate Muslim women (Table 5), that is, to say, that the percentage of literate Muslim women in the Urban south is nearly four times more than that in the rural north. In the rural west, the rate of illiteracy is around 61% (Table 8) and in the rural east, the rate of illiteracy is around 45% (Table 6). However, the condition in urban areas is a little better. The rate of illiteracy is lowest in urban-south which is around 20% and the rate is worse in urban-north, where it is around 75%. While in urban-east and urban-west, the rate of illiteracy is 42% and 34% respectively (Table 7 & Table 9). In the rural belt, the ratio is a bit lower than urban region and the overall rate for Southern region is respectively high in comparison to other regions among all classes of education. While the percentage of illiterate Muslim women is higher in the Urban-west zone than in the urban-south, the relative positions of the communities in the latter are more in line with all India trends (Tables 2-5, given in Appendix-1). In their studies, *Hasan & Menon (2004)*⁶ points out that the cause for the low levels of education among Muslim girls, is the financial constraints, which once again underlie the poverty of Muslim households in various parts of the country and this provides the powerful explanation for the poor levels of Women's education, in the north as a whole. In South, Muslim girls belonging to lower Socio-economic class have as good a prospect of continuing in schools as girls from higher classes. This is because of higher levels of state investment in education, a larger percentage of female teachers, extensive network of roads and good transport facilities that enabler easy access to schools. In South, even though, Kerala is not a prosperous state, it is spending 6.3% of its GDP on education. UP's ratio is around 3.7%. Over 65 of teachers in Kerala and over 40% of primary school teachers in the South zone are Muslim women in contrast to 18% in UP.

As per 2001 census, the overall literacy rate for Muslim women is 50% compared to 53.7% for all communities, with 53.2% for Hindu females and 39.5% for SC/ST females (Table 6). The rural Muslim female literacy rate is just 42.66%. For urban Muslim females (Census 2001), literacy rates are better than rural rates for all the communities. It is lowest for urban Muslim females, which is 63.17% (Basant, R, 2012)³.

Table 6. Literacy Rate among Religious Communities, SCs & STs in India 2001

Community/ Caste	Total			Rural			Urban		
	Person	M	F	Person	M	F	Person	M	F
India	64.8	75.3	53.7	58.7	70.7	46.1	79.9	86.3	72.9
Hindu	65.1	76.2	53.2	59.1	71.7	45.7	81.3	87.9	73.9
Muslim	59.1	67.6	50.1	52.7	62.3	42.7	70.1	76.3	63.2
Christian	80.3	84.4	76.2	74.5	79.5	69.7	90.9	93.6	88.3
Sikh	69.4	75.2	63.1	64.2	70.6	57.2	63.6	87.5	79.2
Buddhist	72.7	83.1	61.7	66.9	78.8	54.6	81.6	89.8	72.9
Jain	94.1	97.4	90.6	87.5	94.2	80.3	96.1	98.4	93.6
Others	47.0	60.8	33.2	43.9	58.2	29.5	75.3	83.8	66.5
SCs	54.7	66.6	41.9	51.2	63.7	37.8	88.1	77.9	57.5
STs	47.1	59.2	34.8	45.0	57.4	32.4	69.1	77.8	59.9

Source: Census 2001, Final Totals

School Enrolment and Educational Attainment among Muslim Girls

In a survey, by *Hasan & Menon (2004)*⁶, it was found that Muslim girls' schooling is poor. The study also found that the enrolment rate of Muslim girls is 40.66%, which is higher than that of SCs (30.28%), but much below the upper castes (63.2%). In other words, nearly 60% (Table 7) of the Muslim women never attended school. In the rural north (13.52%) a very small proportion and less than a quarter in urban area (23.15%) report that they have at some stage attended the school, while the opposite is evident in the south where over three quarters in the rural (75%) and urban (77.26%) areas have attended school. The urban-west comes next in terms of proportion of Muslim girls ever having attended schools, while north zone overall reports lower figures than those for all India. The south on the whole reports a high proportion of women who have ever attended school.

Table 7. Regional Distribution of Women having Attended School (%) by Community

Community	All India	Rural North	Rural South	Rural East	Rural West	Urban North	Urban South	Urban East	Urban West
SC	30.28	10.95	50.00	54.93	36.36	32.79	80.65	65.62	59.09
ST	28.27	11.11	N.A	34.15	12.50	14.29	85.71	66.67	57.14
OBC	42.62	17.28	73.97	72.73	40.62	48.86	81.29	80.00	60.29

Others	63.20	41.38	80.00	63.08	62.50	73.68	84.38	77.23	76.06
Muslim	40.66	13.52	75.48	49.18	41.89	223.15	77.26	56.82	63.44

Source: Hasan & Menon, 2004

Thus, assessing the status of Muslim women by their level of education, it was found that the proportion of Muslim girls ever enrolled in schools attaining primary, Middle, higher, secondary and graduate levels of education is very low. Less than 17% Muslim girls completed 8 years of schooling and less than 10% complete higher secondary which is below the national average. There are noticeable zonal variations in the educational attainment of the north and south, even while in the north and east, the rural-urban difference is insignificant, that is urban location, has no great impact on Muslim women’s educational attainment, pointing once again to the poverty of Muslim households as the foremost constraint on access to education, notwithstanding the noticeably greater educational opportunities for them in urban areas. It has also been found that as we move up the education ladder, there is a significant drop in the proportion of Muslim women in higher education (3.56%) even lower than that of the scheduled castes (4.25%). However, Muslims in the urban north have extremely high illiteracy levels (74.36%) and very low proportions in higher secondary level education (6.97%), but the higher education percentage rises to 88% , which is only a little less than in the south (9.11%) and indeed exceeding that in the urban east and the west. This suggests that despite a small base of literacy in the north, a sizeable proportion manage to go to higher education.

Average Years of Schooling

The average number of years of schooling that Muslim women have received is very low. For Muslim women it is 3.7 years and for Hindus it is 3.8 years (Table 8). For Muslims, the average years of schooling is lower even than the SCs at the national and regional levels. Overall the low average number of schooling indicates a high dropout rate for them.

Table 8. Average Years of Schooling

Regions	Muslims	Hindu	Total
North	1.6	2.7	2.2
East	2.7	3.7	3.3
South	5.0	5.5	5.4
West	3.3	3.8	3.7
All-India	2.7	3.8	3.4

High Dropout Rates among Muslim girls: A Major Problem

Higher level of dropouts is the most serious issue which is affecting the education of Muslim girls. The high dropout rates among Muslims is higher, which is why disparities between Muslims and Hindus increase at higher levels of schooling in contrast to the primary level where the community differences are insignificant. The various reasons which were cited for dropping out in terms of their relative importance; are as given below:

- a. School is too far away.
- b. Non-availability of Transportation.
- c. Education is not considered necessary for them.
- d. Required for household chores and work.
- e. Required for work on farm/family business.
- f. Required for outside work for payment.
- g. No proper school facilities for girls in the village/locality.
- h. Family objections to attending the schools which are co-educational.
- i. Financial constraints.
- j. Not interested in studies.
- k. Married off early.
- l. Occurrence of Death of father/mother or of any other family member.
- m. Require for care of siblings.

But as, a whole one analyzes the three most important reasons cited by the Muslims are: financial constraints, followed by family objections and marriage. In sum, the most important reasons cited for higher dropout rates in order of decreasing frequencies are: financial constraints (38%); married off (22%), family objected (20%); required for household work (14%); not interested in studies (10%), death of father/mother (6%); school too far away (7%) and no proper school facility in village (5%), which all in all account for 99% of the total. The financial constraints as a reason cited, is a reflection of Muslims having low SES, in other words, economic reasons combined with family objections account for the low enrolment and high dropout rates among Muslim women.

Another major reason for dropout is the attitude of parents towards the girl child education. Most parents expressed a much stronger interest in their sons' education than their daughters'. Parents invest more in sons' education because if they are educated, they will have better employment opportunities. Thus, the general notion is that, in a community with high levels of male education, educating a daughter up to the primary or upper primary level may not raise the costs of her marriage, as there will be plenty of better educated boys. Thus to conclude it can be said that Muslims lag behind in educational attainment and their prospects of going beyond primary is rather lower than that of Hindus, and completing school even lower. In UP, the critical problem is non-availability of schools and the poor functioning or non-functioning of the schooling system (Siddiqui, Farasat et al, 2011)¹⁷. Schools are either not available or are in accessible or of poor quality, a problem aggravated by the paucity of resources, even of simple teaching materials, decrepit school building, and even lack of basic amenities such as drinking water and toilets, chronic shortage of teachers, lack of accountability of teachers leading to teacher absenteeism and negligence as potentially influential teachers have been more interested in their own financial betterment than the improvement of school facilities. This problem is further compounded by the reluctance of parents to send their girls to schools that are far away for fear of their safety. In addition, lack of female teachers and absence of other basic facilities combined are the key factors that hold back women's education in the north. Thus, the two major issues which come out from these findings are: one, that there do exist a set of

common problems that determine educational progress of women regardless of religion. Second, and more significantly, there are community specific problems, like: financial constraints, low standard of living, parental objection, low returns on education that make education less attractive for Muslim girls (Maniuddin, Md, 2011)¹². Gender bias, class inequality and community biases are there which reinforce each other and to put a brake a Muslim women’s education and consequently on their overall development and inclusion in the social mainstream.

Employment and Work Participation Rates among Muslim Women

The 1991 and 2001 Census data have attempted to capture the status of Muslim women as workers. The percentage of workers to total population for all religions is 39.1% and 25.6% for female (Siddiqui, Farasat et al, 2011)¹⁷. The Work Participation Rate (WPR) recorded for the Muslim population is 31.3%. Among Muslims, the female WPR is 14.1% and for males it is 47.5% (Table 9).

Table 9. Work Participation Rate among Different Communities (%)

Communities/Castes	Male	Female
All Communities	52.7	25.6
Hindus	52.4	27.5
Muslims	47.5	14.1
Christians	50.7	28.7
Sikhs	53.3	20.2
Buddhists	49.2	31.7
Jains	55.2	92.
Other religions	52.5	44.2

The gap between the female Work Participation Rates of different communities is very sharp, to the tune of 22.5% between the lowest and highest values. The data on Work Participation Rate among Muslims is shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Work Participation Rate among Muslim Women (%)

Community	Self-employed	Wage-worker	Salaried	Unpaid Family worker	None of them	Total
SC	3.97	21.02	2.11	2.57	70.33	100
ST	0.71	23.77	2.08	10.22	63.22	100
OBC	4.03	11.22	1.10	4.79	78.86	100
Others	4.13	6.12	2.81	1.02	85.92	100
Muslim	2.70	7.58	1.83	2.05	85.74	100
Total	3.67	13.44	1.87	3.37	77.65	100

From the Table 10, it can be seen that among the Muslims, the work participation like wage worker/employee is largest which is followed by self-employed groups. The WPR for Muslim women

is low as compared to the Hindu women. Among the Muslim women, the number of self-employed persons is merely 2.70%. This reflects the empty hand and financially weak position which had pushed the community to the margins. While the percentage for the wage worker is high in respect to other positions, which is around 7.58%. The percentage of salaried worker is unprecedentedly low, i.e. less than 2%. The percentage of persons working as unpaid labour is also around two (Sarikhani, N, 2008)¹⁵.

Category-wise Distribution of Muslim Women Workers

The data which is available on the basis of the study of *Hasan and Memon, (2004)*⁶. It can be seen from the Table 11 that among Muslim community, embroidery/tailoring is considered as a tool of earning for the family, as it needs little skill and even without proper schooling it could be done.

Table 11. Region-wise Distribution of Category of Women Workers in Different Jobs

Region	Category	E	M	AW	Unskilled work	Skilled job	White collar	Others	Total
North	Rural	12.00	4.00	20.00	20.00	24.00	16.00	0.00	100
	Urban	30.99	0.00	1.41	23.94	15.49	18.31	8.45	100
South	Rural	11.11	0.00	22.22	27.78	5.56	5.56	27.78	100
	Urban	12.28	5.26	0.00	28.07	8.77	17.54	26.32	100
East	Rural	12.12	6.06	18.18	18.18	18.18	18.18	9.09	100
	Urban	29.73	-	2.70	35.14	8.11	13.51	10.81	100
West	Rural	12.00	-	32.00	12.00	20.00	4.00	20.00	100
	Urban	27.63	-	2.63	21.05	6.58	10.53	30.26	100

Source: *Hasan & Memon, 2004* (E-Embroidery, M- Milching, AW-Agricultural Work)

From the Table 11, it can be seen that in the urban-east and west, the work involves many families i.e. around 30% and 27% respectively. In the urban zone this profession is more popular than in the rural zone. Only in the southern zone the profession involved around 12.28%. While in the rural belt, it is considered as a method of livelihood among the community. Further, from the Table 11 it can be seen that, running Animal husbandry is less popular among Muslim women. In the north zone, it is little popular among rural people which is around 4%. Agricultural activities are one of the most popular occupations among the Muslims. In the north, rate of involvement is around 20% (Table 11). While in the east, the rate is around 18.18%. And in the west, the rate is quite high, i.e. around 32%. Among Muslim women, the rate of participation in unskilled or casual work is quite high across all parts of the country. In the north, including both rural and urban, the average rate is 20%. The urban-east region experiences higher rate of unskilled or casual work in the country, which is around 35% while in the urban-west region, is 21%. Among the skilled jobs the rate is comparably slight better than in other categories of work. Muslim women seem to be more skilled as the percentage in the rural-north is around 24% and 16% in the urban locality. In the south, the rate is a bit low and on the rural-east rate of skilled labour is 18%, where as in the urban-east it is around 8.11%. in the west, rural the involvement rate is around 20%. Even the number of white-collared jobs among Muslims women

is a bit high in the north region i.e. around 16% & 18% for rural and urban population. In the eastern region the rate is 18% for rural and 13% for urban population. In the west zone of the country, it is low as compared to other zones of the country. Meanwhile, the working condition of Muslim women is not good across the country as compared to other counterpart communities.

Empowerment of Muslim Women from an Islamic Perspective

Islam regards both men and women as equal and never considers a woman as an impediment in the path of religion. The status accorded to Muslim women in Islam is much higher than in any other religion or community. Islam provides educational, legal and political empowerment to Muslim women centuries ago. Zoya Hasan (1994)⁷, contextualizes gender and identity in contemporary India in her milestone work, *“Forging Identities: Gender, communities and the State”*, in which she emphasizes, “As far as Muslim women are concerned, an important obstacle in the process of establishing equality before law is the complete absence of reform in family laws. Women’s lack of rights in laws was a crucial factor in maintaining their subordination to men and a sanctioned device for limiting their access to property and inheritance”. Shaukath Azim (1997)² in his book, *“Muslims Women’s Emerging identity”*, says that the major constraints in the path of development of Muslim women are 1) Illiteracy or low level of education of parents leading to rigid attitude of old people to change 2) the religious leaders/ Moulvis obstructing Muslim women from enjoying the fruits of modern education. 3) Low economic position of Muslim. 4) Lack of separate schools and colleges meant exclusively for girls. 5) lack of leadership among Muslims. Emphasizing the equality of genders in Islam, Dr. Rafiq Zakaria, quotes, Maulana Abul a’la Maududi (1998)¹³, words, as, “Men & women are two equal parts of the human race. Both have a heart, mind, intellect, emotions, desires and needs. In this respect, the claim of equality is totally correct and it is the duty of every virtuous society to allow women to progress but only according to the natural capacity and capability. It must give to women too their social and economic rights and a status of honour in the social order. Also, a sense of self-respect. Westernized women have morally debased; their own children do not respect them”.

Quran has consistently described the creation of human kind in egalitarian terms, in spite of recognizing gender differentiation. Quran says, that, “By Birth, all members of the human race have the same intrinsic worth and possess equal grace of God; *‘wa nafakhtu fih min ruhi’* (Quranic verses 8.15:29 & 38:72). The following passage from **Surah Al Ahzab** clearly asserts the equality between both genders: *“For Muslim men and Muslim women, For believing man and women, For obedient men and women, For true men and women, For patient men and women, For chaste men and women, For men and women who engage much in the zikr of Allah has forgiveness and a great reward. (Suran Al Ahzab: 33:35)*. Equality between males and females is further endorsed by the following saying of the Prophet (pbuh) being addresses to Prophet’s (pbuh) cousin, Ibn Abbas, as, “If a daughter is born to a man and he brings her up affectionately, shows her no disrespect and treats her in the same manner that he treats his sons, the lord will reward him with paradise”. In **Surah Al Nisa: 4:1**, the Quran cogently states, *“O human beings have fear of our Lord who created you from a single soul. He created it mate and through them, he filled the earth with countless men and women”*.

In Islamic scheme of ensuring empowerment and women’s status; men are commanded to support and take care of women, since men are blessed with more strength. But within each family unit, it is the mother, who is given precedence (Abusharaf, Adila, 2003)¹. Muawiyah, the son of Jahimah, reported, that Jahimah came to the Prophet (pbuh) and said, “O messenger of Allah! I want to join the fighting (in the path of Allah) and I have come to seek your advice, Prophet (pbuh) said, “Then remain

in your mother's service because Paradise is under her feet". Although it is conceded that man are given more strength; but kindness to women is highly recommended. Quran says, "*O you who believe! It is not lawful for you that you should take women as heritage against (their) will, and do not straighten them in order that you may take part of what you have given them, unless they are guilty of manifest indecency; and treat them kindly; then if you hate them, it may be that you dislike a thing while Allah has placed abundant good in it*". (Surah Al Nisa 4:19). Some close friends of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, like Maulana Mumtaz Ali Khan also advocated for cause of Equality between Muslim women and Men. *Mualvi Mumtaz* authored a book, *Huquq-e-Niswan* (Women's Rights), in which he boldly advocated equality for men and women. Thus, Quran has placed both equality and empowerment to Muslim women at par with men and the need of the hour is that Muslim women must draw inspiration form Quran and Hadith in the demand for justice and reclaim their right to religious knowledge and participate in the contemporary debate on Islam and women's right in the light of their personal experience as members of the contemporary society. Till recent past, a few decades back, a Muslim woman's life was confined to her home. But now, things are not that much stagnant for her. During the last few decades, many positive indications of change have been noticed. In parallel with the mergence of an educated Middle class that is well aware of societal changes and the imminent need for bringing about change among Muslim women. Educated Muslim women are working now not only as school and college teachers, typists, but also as a receptionist, lady secretaries, administrators,

engineers, doctors, social welfare workers and political activists. Consequently, developed confidence is rendering their role effectively in family affairs like marriage, family decision-making, socialization and children's affairs, not allowed to them in the past. Today's educated Muslim women are getting exposed to democratic politics, electronic and print media, social and community action, and have become aware of their due rights, both religious and secular. These changes demonstrate that the ambit of their interest has outreached almost all fields of human endeavour, though there is a caveat.

Steps Taken for Empowerment of Muslim Women

To empower the Muslim women of India, both male and female members of the society as well as the nation should cooperate in the process of women empowerment, such conscious efforts requires the following steps to be undertaken:

1. Taking initiatives to encourage Muslim women to take their decisions independently and control their own life.
2. Removing all those social, economic and gender disparities that directly or indirectly impinge on Muslim women's life.
3. Eliminating all obstacles that deprive the Muslim women of the fruits of economic, educational and social development.
4. Encouraging Muslim women to effectively share in decision-making process.
5. Changing the attitudes and practices of men in motivating women, especially young girls and unmarried women, for developing their human and professional qualities as responsible members of today's fast changing society.
6. Taking measures to eradicate out all the barriers for participation of Muslim women in the labour and work force

7. Providing credit and other monetary assistance to promising and talented Muslim women for their income generating activities.
8. Persuading all government and non-government agencies to formulate policies and measures for improving present social, economic, educational and health conditions that Muslim women have to face.
9. Initiating meaningful debate among members of Muslim society on the issues of gender equality, women empowerment and social reforms.
10. Empowering Indian Muslim women by recognizing women's productive and reproductive role at societal level.
11. Final, but the, foremost covenant with the society: woman should not be taken as an object of liability, property or a sex symbol, but as an equal human being.

Suggestions for Strengthening the Empowerment of Muslim Women

Some of the suggestions for strengthening the state of Muslim women, their education and improving the performance of Muslim managed educational institutions of the country are as following:

1. Considering the pathetic state of Muslim women's education in India, it seems quite plausible and highly desirable that separate educational institutions for them are established on priority basis.
2. Muslim girl students should be given reservation in higher education, especially in Muslim managed institutions. It will go a long way in this direction, if minority character of all educational institutions is announced, restores and maintained without any hassles or delay.
3. Schools which are Urdu-medium, should be encouraged, while more and more Urdu medium, schools should be opened and better provision of their teaching staff and Urdu textbooks should assured at all level and for all subjects.
4. Teachers' training institutions and schools for Muslim minority should be established ensuring adequate representation of Muslim women in them.
5. Technical training institutes for both Muslim boys and girls should be set up and special programmes should be run to train elder Muslim women in the arts, crafts and other technologies.
6. Special reading rooms and libraries should be opened in above-mentioned areas, with special arrangements ensuring easy access to them by Muslim girls.
7. Students' hostels in areas of Muslim domination and metropolitan localities should be established and run, preferably under Muslim management.
8. Scope of present scholarship schemes should be explained and special incentives should be offered to Muslim female students.
9. Funds allocation from State Wakf Boards should be increased for these programmes in order to upgrade Muslim community's education, especially of Muslim women.
10. Besides government assistance and private donations, proper utilization of Zakat funds may also be explored for above purposes.

11. Problems and performance of such institutions should be publicized in the media so that they come under public attention and scrutiny. This will on one hand, help them replenish resources and motivate them perform better on the other hand.
12. Isolationist tendencies and attitude of withdrawal and all other symptoms of a close society should be eliminated.

Recommendations for Empowering Muslim Women

No doubt, the status of Muslim women in general and educated employed women in particular has registered some changes in wake of policies for empowering the Muslim women, formulated by the State and Union governments. But, still gender equality is a distant dream even for educated women. So, emphasis should be placed on encouraging Muslim women to become aware of their position in the society, vis-à-vis their due rights and mobilize themselves by joining democratic women organizations and movements with a view to realize their potential for development and progress and, thus, become a powerful current of national mainstream. This task can be and should be accomplished at three levels, the government, Non-governmental organizations and individuals.

Several planned development activities have been undertaken during the last few decades that have helped Indian women, including Indian Muslim women, to realize their potential and participate in empowerment process. But almost each study conducted on Indian Muslim women reveals that Muslim women could not benefit from national development and other development schemes, like other women of the country. Government needs to adopt interventionist strategies so as to take special care for them as the situation seems crossing its limits (Kazi, Seema, 1999)⁹.

Non-governmental organizations have been playing significant role in development programmes aimed at empowerment of Muslim women, at grass-root level. One of the reasons for unsatisfactory participation of Muslim women in empowerment activities of the government is the lack of adequate presence of NGOs. Although, Muslim women have been utilizing opportunities and even handling responsibilities, their representation has not been up to the mark. More Muslim women organizations are urgently needed, especially for raising Muslim women's critical consciousness level, making them aware of government programs, initiating them in self-employment in household industries and thereby promoting self-reliance groups. Even at individual level, the basic approach should aim at uplifting Muslim women and empowering them by giving them their due rights and raising their status so that they may participate in national development, not as mere beneficiaries, but as contributors and partakers at par with men.

CONCLUSION

Today, the plight and status of Indian Muslim women has not improved even after sixty seven years of independence. Many challenges and issues are confronting and putting brakes in the empowerment and progress of Muslim women. To, overcome these challenges and issues, today Muslim women should build cooperation between genders and communities to define their own needs, priorities and space for what they feel is appropriate for their effective social evolution.

The role of Muslim women in Indian politics is also quite marginalized. Muslim women should overcome the constraints and barriers such as financial, physical as well as economical so as to join the Indian mainstream. In the Muslim community, education is one of the fronts, where the community is lagging behind their counterparts and more than 50% people of the community are below literacy level. All the regions-- covered, north south, east, west, more or less pose the same

level of challenges and issues which the Muslim women has to overcome. Employment status and work participation of Muslim women is also lower than expected. Given the poor educational and socio-economic status of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular, the Central and State governments should ensure the implementation of primary and secondary education programmes, especially for Muslim women. Muslim women in the society are also victims of communal divide as well as domestic and dowry related violence. There is a rampant misuse of *Sharia*, an Islamic Code of Law, which has further aggravated their miseries and problems. In this context, where the *Sharia* is used to justify the denial of rights and freedom to Muslim women, Indian Muslim women need to reclaim their right to religious knowledge, enter into the discourse on the *Sharia* and challenge their historic marginalization from religious knowledge and its discriminatory interpretations. The government, State as well as Central should also work out mechanisms for ensuring adequate representation of Muslim women through reservations or otherwise, in government services, the police etc.

Muslim women should be inducted into programmes like National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Dairy Development, Sericulture Development, Handloom, Handicrafts and Village Industry Development that should engage upto 50% of the Muslim women workforce. Muslims, especially the Muslim women are not adequately represented in modern industry and trade, as they rarely own large-scale industry or business and generally lack high entrepreneurial skills. There is not a single Muslim house among the top high industrial; groups in the country, while at the lower end of the scale most Muslims are poor and backward. Special attention must be paid to this aspect.

From the Islamic point of view, also, Muslim women should be given freedom and empowerment. Ulema and Madarsa people should be sensitized regarding existing economic and educational problems of the Muslim community, particularly the poor and the women, so that they help mobilize public opinion and streamline remedial action. Today, Muslim women have to break free themselves from the shackles of conservative attitudes, social biases, narrow social prejudices, social, cultural and political environment.

Thus, to conclude it could be said that Muslim women have to actively participate in decision making and implementation of national policies with regard to their constitutional and human rights through proper and systematic planning. Therefore, in order to empower themselves, both socio-economically as well as educationally, they should enhance their participation in political arena, and try to increase their employability in government as well as in private sector. Muslim women in rural areas should take up vocational courses like embroidery, tailoring, sewing, stitching, milching etc. and should try to fulfil their objectives through vocationalization of their education. Thus, in India, if Muslim women want to empower themselves and enter into the India's mainstream, and thereby fulfil their dream and aspirations, then they would have to overcome all the hurdles, constraints and impediments laid down in their path of their progress.

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Appendix-1 showing Tables 2 -5

Table 2. Regional Distribution of Women's Education Level: Rural North

Community	Illiterate	Non-formal	Primary	Middle	Secondary & Higher secondary	Graduate & above
SC	88.06	1.00	1.99	4.98	1.99	1.99
ST	88.89	0.00	0.00	11.11	0.00	0.00
OBC	82.72	0.00	1.57	10.47	2.09	3.14
Others	58.62	0.00	3.45	17.24	10.34	10.34
Muslim	83.58	3.02	2.35	4.58	4.25	2.23
Total	82.29	0.71	2.00	8.46	3.18	3.35

Source: Hasan & Menon, 2004

Table 3. Regional Distribution of Women's Education Level: Urban North

Community	Illiterate	Non-formal	Primary	Middle	Secondary & Higher secondary	Graduate & above
SC	65.57	1.64	4.10	12.30	9.02	7.38
ST	85.71	0.00	0.00	14.29	0.00	0.00
OBC	51.14	0.76	4.92	18.18	11.36	13.64
Others	25.26	1.05	3.16	12.11	21.58	36.84
Muslim	74.36	2.74	2.57	4.56	6.97	8.80
Total	49.37	1.22	3.94	13.74	13.25	18.47

Source: Hasan & Menon, 2004

Table 4. Regional Distribution of Women's Education Level: Rural South

Community	Illiterate	Non-formal	Primary	Middle	Secondary & Higher secondary	Graduate & above
SC	46.88	3.12	12.50	18.75	12.50	6.25
ST	-	-	-	-	-	-
OBC	24.66	1.37	16.44	30.14	23.29	4.11
Others	20.00	0.00	5.00	40.00	25.00	10.00
Muslim	23.64	0.70	14.01	39.23	18.21	4.20
Total	29.07	1.52	13.64	29.73	20.57	5.48

Source: Hasan & Menon, 2004

Table 5. Regional Distribution of Women's Education Level: Urban South

Community	Illiterate	Non-formal	Primary	Middle	Secondary & Higher secondary	Graduate & above
SC	17.74	1.61	8.06	22.58	33.87	16.13
ST	14.29	0.00	14.29	28.57	42.86	0.00
OBC	19.42	0.00	9.35	29.5	31.65	10.07
Others	15.62	0.00	3.12	28.12	34.38	18.75
Muslim	22.14	1.04	11.02	35.85	20.83	9.11
Total	19.09	0.54	8.87	29.16	30.51	11.83

Source: Hasan & Menon, 2004

Results obtained for Muslim Women's Education in terms of percentage of illiteracy, from Rural-east, Urban-east, Rural-West and Urban-west are: 50.10%, 41.72%, 57% and 35% illiterate respectively.

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