

# **EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS OF VULNERABLE INDIAN MUSLIM GIRLS: REPORT**

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Indian Muslim girls' education has been the top most concern for any discussion regarding education of Muslims in India. Since the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has been of prime concern for Muslims on which wide variety of opinion have been expressed reflected in an extensive literature of articles, books and reports. Much of this has been polemical in nature. For example, a burning 19<sup>th</sup> Century issue on which there was a hugely divergent opinion related to the education of Muslim girls. A wide range of Muslim maulvis, and educators, community leaders and politicians, as well as English colonial administrators, Christian missionaries and others weighed in on whether they should receive formal education or not, whether they should attend schools / co-educational schools, and what should be the appropriate goals and content of school instruction for girls.

While in contemporary India, there would be very few who would argue that girls should not be enrolled in school, there would be still considerable disagreement among poor and lower middle class Muslim parents on what the content and purposes of a daughter's formal education should be, and whether this should be different from the schooling of their sons.

## **Educational Benefits of Muslim Girls:**

The need to pay particular attention to the education of girls in post-independence India is the result of a variety of factors including a growing consensus that educating them provides a various individual and societal benefits. The World Bank group noted that "Girls' education is a strategic development priority. Better educated women tend to be healthier, participate more in the formal labor market, earn higher incomes, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and enable better health care and education for their children, choose to become mothers. All these factors combined can help lift households, communities, and nations out of poverty." (World Bank Group, Girls' Education Overview, 2017).

It is therefore not surprising that educational opportunities for educating Muslim girls considerably expanded in post-independence India, building on earlier pioneering efforts to provide formal education to Muslim girls in colonial India by government authorities, as well as Muslim organizations and other groups and individuals. Despite considerable expansion, most commentators have felt that their progress has been limited. Based on various data sets, the 2006 Sachar Committee Report noted that Muslim girls were performing worse than Muslim boys

(PMO Report, 2006). As the following subsections indicate, contemporary enrolment data suggest a surprisingly very different picture of the educational participation of Muslim girls than the one outlined by the Sachar Report.

### **Muslim Girls exceed Boys in Enrolment:**

The general perception that girls lag behind boys in enrolment at different stages of education got transformational elevation with empirical data revealed by DISE in 2015-16 which suggested that more Muslim girls than Muslim boys now enrolled at upper stages of education. It is true to highlight that more Muslim girls are now enrolled than boys at the upper primary, high school and higher secondary stages. Equally true is that the proportion of Muslim girls as a proportion of total Muslim enrolment is higher than the corresponding all India, SC and ST figures at all stages of education. Table-1 indicates the percentage of Muslim girl's enrolment as compared to all India, SC and ST at different stages of education.

Table-1: Percentage of Girl's Enrolment to Total Enrolment at Different Stages of Education.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Primary (Stds. 1-5)</b>	<b>Upper Primary (Stds. 6-8)</b>	<b>Secondary (Stds. 9-10)</b>	<b>Higher Secondary. (Stds. 11-12)</b>	<b>Higher Education</b>
<b>All India</b>	48.2%	48.6%	47.6%	47.2%	46.2%
<b>SC</b>	48.4%	48.8%	47.7%	47.8%	45.8%
<b>ST</b>	48.3%	48.5%	48.6%	47.7%	46.2%
<b>Muslim</b>	<b>49.1%</b>	<b>51.3%</b>	<b>52.1%</b>	<b>51.7%</b>	<b>46.8%</b>

Source: DISE Data, 2015-16.

The above data that the gender parity enrolment ratios of Muslim girls exceed the corresponding national and SC / ST girls' figures are deceptive. A more realistic picture emerges in the following table comparing these rates to their share of the overall population. Table-2 highlight the data showing proportion of Muslim and SC students of total enrolment of students by gender and their indexes of social equity at each stage.

Table-2: Proportion of Muslim and SC Students of Total Enrolment of Students by Gender and Their Indexes of Social Equity at Each Stage

Category	Muslim Females	SC Castes Females	Muslim Males	SC Males
Percent of Total Higher Secondary Enrolment	8.8%	17.5%	7.4%	17.2%
Index of Social Equity at Higher Secondary Stage	62%	108%	52%	106%
Percent of Total Higher Education Enrolment	4.73%	13.78%	4.61%	14.0%
Index of Social Equity at Higher Education Stage	33%	85%	32%	86%

Source: DISE Data 2015-16 and AISHE, 2015-16

As indicated above, the share of Muslim and SC female student enrolment of total enrolment of Indian girls at the higher secondary stage was 8.8% and 17.5% respectively. Any meaningful comparison between both sets of figures can only be made by factoring in their respective shares of the Indian population – 14.2 % and 16.2 respectively – and calculating and comparing the Index of Social Equity for both groups, as has been computed in the above table for the higher secondary and higher education stages.

The Index of Social Equity for Muslim girls at the higher secondary stage at 62% in 2015-16, reflects their underrepresentation in enrolment in terms of their proportion of the population at this stage. The corresponding figure for almost equally disadvantaged SC girls at 108% % indicates that there were proportionately more SC higher secondary female students than their share of the population. Similar differences can be seen at the higher education stage. Larger differences are reflected in the enrolment of boys. The Index of Social Equity for Muslim boys at the higher secondary stage was a mere 52% while for SC boys; the corresponding figure was more than double at 106%. These differences were even more pronounced striking at the higher education stages where the Indexes of Social Equity for Muslim men and ST men were 32 % and 86% respectively.

#### **Private Education of Poor Muslim Girls and Gender Differences:**

In a note on Minority Education prepared for members of Parliament indicated that in 2011-12, though more Muslim girls than boys were attending government and government aided schools at the elementary level, the ratio of Muslim girls to Muslim boys in private unaided schools was 0.78. As the document noted that due to higher fee, poor parents may not be sending girls to

private unaided schools (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2013). Other studies also indicate a similar gender difference of parents in their choice of English medium schools for Muslim boys and Urdu medium for Muslim girls (Rekha Pandey, 2016).

This gender differential in parental choice of private schooling and medium of instruction reflects differing views of the purposes of education in the lives of Muslim boys and girls. Additional investments in both the education of Muslim boys and English medium instruction is seen by poor parents as improving their future employment choices, and the material prospects of the family. Unlike Muslim boys, girls contribute far more to domestic and other duties from an early age, and are simultaneously socialised by their families and immediate communities into becoming good Muslim wives and mothers.

Unlike their more affluent Muslim counterparts, the poverty of most poor and lower middle class Muslim girls, and the neighborhoods they live in, often circumscribes their options for education as well as employment. In this connection, patriarchy also plays a significant role in the lives of vulnerable Muslim girls and limits their own growth and potential contribution to the outside world (Abdul Shaban, 2016).

However, during the last two decades, there has been a change of attitudes to their education and employment, as a result of the changes in the cultural, economic and socio-political environment, especially in urban areas. The authors of a 2010 study, limited to Pune city, concluded that, “there is a positive change in the attitude of not only respondents but their parents also, and that realization of the necessity of being employed, proper utilization of talent, and growing sense of responsibility of not only improving the economic condition of family but contributing in economic growth and development of the society” (Shakeel Ahmed and Malika Mistry, 2010). In an interview, Amitabh Kundu who headed the Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee observed that “the employment rate among educated urban Muslim women is rising. Increasingly, they are breaking familial and traditional barriers to get education and employment” (Soumya Shankar, 2017).

Therefore, it has also been observed that many disadvantaged Muslim girls are delaying marriage by continuing with their formal education and are actively seeking careers off the beaten track and economic independence, especially in urban areas.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions:**

The importance of focusing on education of vulnerable Muslim girls of the new education agenda is reinforced by the recent DISE data indicating that both Muslim girls and more so boys are hugely underrepresented at middle and upper stages of school education. However, the superior gender parity educational performance of Muslim girls has suggested that attitudes to girl's education have significantly changed, and that – like other disadvantaged groups - there is little resistance from poor Muslim parents to sending their daughters to school. Even in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the enrolment of Muslims is particularly poor, more Muslim girls are enrolled at the upper primary level, high school and higher secondary stages than boys. Further, it is also true that women are not only contributing to family expenditures, but in a growing number of cases are the sole bread winners. Therefore, disadvantaged Muslim parents no longer need to be persuaded. In fact they are keen to educate their girls – a phenomenon noted earlier by the Sachar Committee (PMO Report, 2006).

The present analysis suggest that though the condition of vulnerable Muslim girls are improving, following measures need to be taken to accelerate their overall condition so that this section of society can be brought to the mainstream of development agenda.

- The highest priority should be given to implementing government policies, and policy advocacy, capacity building and community initiatives to improve their enrolment and learning.
- Specific gender strategies should be made for improving enrolment of girls such as location of schools, appointment of female teachers, proper health and hygiene facilities in the school, etc.
- The focus should be to ensure that all poor and lower middle class Muslim boys and girls are enrolled, retained and learning by 2030.
- It should be on priority that Muslim daughters need to be provided equal educational opportunities as sons to pursue 12 years of education, and acquire higher order reasoning skills as well as values to help them function as active citizens contributing to their individual, family, community and national development.
- Poor Muslim parents and students in terms of new education and career choices, need to be considered, including the importance of showcasing successful female role models from similar disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Muslim and other civil society organisations currently working in the field of raising awareness, empowerment and education of Muslim girls and women, can play an important role in this regard.
- Towards this vision of equality and development, much more needs to be done with Muslim communities, parents and students by Muslim organisations and other civil society groups to minimise gender differences in the choice of government/private schooling and the medium of instruction.
- More importantly, they should work towards repurposing the content and goals of the formal education of Muslim girls, and to help them visualise and secure employment alternatives and channel their aspirations for a better future.

### **Further Readings:**

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3. Lok Sabha Secretariat, Minority Education - No.32/RN/Ref./December/2013, [http://164.100.47.193/intranet/Minority\\_Education.pdf](http://164.100.47.193/intranet/Minority_Education.pdf), p. 9
4. Rekha Pande, "Muslim Women and Girl's Education, A Case Study of Hyderabad", *Journal of Indian Education*, Vol.XXXII, No.32, May 2006; Abdul Shaban, "Muslim Girls in Urdu Medium Schools of Maharashtra: Progress, Retention and Aspiration", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, Issue No. 25, June 18, 2016, p.66
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7. Soumya Shankar, "NDA reluctant to work for Muslims due to 'pressure groups'– Interview with Amitabh Kundu ", *Catchnews*, <http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/nda-is-reluctant-to-work-for-muslimsbecause-of-quot-pressure-groups-quot-amitabh-kundu-1452241231.html>, Feb 14, 2017.

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