

A Comprehensive Study on Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Professional Education among Muslim Women

Dr. Heena Kowsar¹, Prof. R. Vijaya Krishna Naidu², Shaik Umami Salma³, L. Satish Kumar⁴, Maheswari Vikram⁵

¹Asst. Professor, Dept of Education, Sri Lakshmi Srinivasa College of Education, Kurnool, AP.

Email ID: saivivekvardhan2@gmail.com

²Dept of Sociology, SK University, Anantapuram, AP.

^{3,4} Assistant professor (c), Dept of Civil Engg, JNTUK University College of Engineering Narasaraopet, Palnadu (District), Andhra Pradesh, India-522601

⁵Assistant Professor, CSE AIML Department, Malla Reddy (MR) Deemed to be University, Medchal-Malkajgiri, Hyderabad, Telangana -500100

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the challenges Muslim women in India face when trying to pursue professional education. Despite progress in women's education worldwide, Muslim women in India still struggle with lower percentage of professional education. An attempt has been made in this study to find out the root causes for this phenomenon and also to identify possible measures to abate it. This research combines surveys and interviews with women between 18 and 35 age group in both urban and semi-urban areas, using a set of rubrics. The results pointed out to several factors such as economic hardships, cultural norms, early marriages and demanding family expectations, to be the root causes. Meagre government support and access to scholarships, especially in rural areas where transportation and educational facilities are lacking, too contribute to the lowered professional education rates among Muslim women. To tackle these issues, there's a need for government policy changes, better community support, and stronger educational infrastructure. On implementation of these changes, Muslim women could break free from the limitations of poverty and cultural inhibitions and gain better access to professional education, allowing them to not only improve their lives but also contribute to society as a whole. Thus, this study has explored the root causes for the low percentage of professional education among Muslim women and also suggests practical solutions for betterment of the same.

Keywords: Muslim women, education barriers, socio-economic, cultural norms, professional education

1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a vital role in empowering women. In fostering economic development, improving health of family members and in promoting gender equality, women's education plays a pivotal role. Participation in societal progress and empowerment of women is possible with education of women. As opined by Cherayi & Jose, (2016), progress of a society is directly proportional to women's active participation in societal activities. (Abbas et al., 2024) emphasized that: education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today. Educating women not only benefits society as a whole but also empowers individuals to invest more in education and health of their children, leading to an overall betterment in societal well-being (Abdollahian et al., 2024). Severe educational challenges are being faced by Muslim women in India, in spite of advancements in women's education at global level. Muslim women are the lowest in literacy rate compared with women of other religious communities, as per data on education by the Indian Census. According to this data, just 51.9% of Muslim women are literate, compared with 55.98% in Hindu women and 84.93% in Jain women (Nandi et al., 2023a). The educational backwardness of Muslims women, is due to a combination of cultural and socio-economic factors. Limited opportunities for higher education, high dropout rates and priority for early marriage over education are the causes for a smaller number of Muslim women in professional. Over emphasis on domestic responsibilities and early marriages limit the opportunities of Muslim women for formal education (Azim & Hasan, 2014). Also, lack of separate girls' schools, female teachers and adequate transportation facilities contribute to lower literacy among Muslim women. In spite

of a marginal improvement in access to education for Muslim women, the differences in male and female literacy rates within the Muslim community remains prevalent.

Muslim women's access to education is hindered due to several socio-economic factors. Parental educational background, financial constraints and poverty significantly influence their ability to pursue higher education. A large number of Muslim population live in poverty. This reduces their ability to afford the price to pursue higher education as it involves transportation, tuition fees and books. As several Muslim families depend on their daughters for domestic work, the chances for education are further thinned (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2024). Less emphasis is placed on the importance of professional education of daughters, in families where the educational background of parents is poor (Daouli et al., 2010). This is particularly true where there is gender bias especially in rural communities. The impact is felt more if mothers are uneducated, as they tend to undermine the importance of education of daughters (Daouli et al., 2010). Availability of government support is inadequate to address the educational needs of Muslim women. Process hurdles limit the access of various scholarship programs and financial aid to reach the needy Muslim families (Bilal et al., 2023). Intervention by governmental and non-governmental agencies is solicited to improve the educational levels of Muslim women.

Societal norms related to gender role act as hurdles in Muslim women's education. Several studies have emphasised the restrictive role of these practices, which tend to inhibit participation of women in co-educational institutions (Khan et al., 2024). Enforcement of early marriage not only disrupts education but also creates compelling responsibilities making it difficult for women to come back and pursue education (Markussen & Røed, 2023). Cultural restrictions prohibiting hostel stays also acts as a hindrance. As some Muslim families show reluctance to send their daughters to co-educational institutions or allow them to stay in hostels, their access to higher education becomes limited (Daouli et al., 2010). This impacts more in regions where there is limited travel means to reach educational institutions.

Significant amount of research has been carried on, on cultural and socio-economic barriers being faced by Muslim women. State of the art research is confined to primary education and basic literacy. But research specifically focussed on professional education is lacking. This research gap needs to be addressed, since professional education plays a vital role in breaking the cycle of poverty and achieving long-term socio-economic prosperity (Infante-Amate et al., 2024).

This study aims to address this gap that prevents Muslim women from pursuing professional education, by examining the cultural and socio-economic barriers. This research is aimed at doing a case study-based approach, that might help understand the challenges faced by Muslim women and also the causes for the same in different socio-cultural and economic contexts. The findings of this study would not only contribute to the existing state of art but also provide policy recommendations for improving professional education among Muslim women

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data Collection Methods

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and socio-economic barriers Muslim women face in pursuing professional education, the research adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Reliability and triangulation are possible with these methods (Prateek & Arya, 2021). To gather quantitative data about Muslim women across different socio-economic backgrounds, surveys were done. Questions on cultural and religious constraints, education, financial barriers and family dynamics were included in the survey, to identify correlations and patterns related to access to education, influence of factors such as social norms, parental education and family income (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2024). Interviews were conducted to collect answers for the survey questions. Answers to these questions gave an outlook on struggles of Muslim women in education. Questions influencing their educational choices such as Hijab/Purdah system, cultural practices such as early marriages and societal expectations were asked. Experiences on community support related to female education and government policies were also asked (Wang et al., 2022).

Muslim women between the age groups of 18 and 35, from semi-urban and urban areas, constituted the sample population. This age group was selected as they were more related to higher education and its challenges. Classification of income levels was as follows: low-income level (family income below Rs. 20,000 per month), middle-income level (Rs. 20,000–50,000), and upper-income level (above Rs. 50,000). The majority of respondents were from low- and middle-income level families (Daoud & Johansson, 2024; Sosu & Pimenta, 2023). Respondents ranged from those with primary education to those pursuing higher education degrees. Approximately 60% of the respondents were yet to complete secondary education, while 30% were pursuing undergraduate programs. The rest 10% were either pursuing or had completed professional degrees, such as engineering, law or medicine (Daoud & Johansson, 2024). Availability of educational institutions and cultural restrictions was influenced by geographical location. Respondents were from regions where access to education, was limited due to conservative social norms and infrastructure education India (Hota, 2023).

2.3 Statistical Tools Used for Analysis

Inferential and descriptive statistics were used to identify the cultural and socio-economic factors affecting Muslim women's education. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, median and mean, were used to denote the educational

attainment and demographic data of respondents (Azim & Hasan, 2014). The results were presented in graphs to provide a visual representation of the trends. Correlations between professional education and socio-economic status were obtained through these tests (Bhaumik & Chakrabarty, 2009a). Also, to predict the impact of cultural and socio-economic factors on the likelihood of women pursuing higher education, regression analysis was done and this gave insights into the barriers for education (Bhuwani et al., 2024a). Thematic analysis using themes such as cultural pressures, financial constraints and family expectations was performed. The thematic analysis allowed for an understanding on how economic limitations intertwine with socio-cultural factors and restrict educational opportunities for Muslim women (Bhaumik & Chakrabarty, 2009b).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of investigations carried out through questionnaire and interviews are presented in this section.

Educational attainment of respondents in detail is presented in Figure 1. Those completing undergraduate level education are a significant majority this year, as is the decline in those going on to postgraduate study. There are a number of factors, some having to do with resources and others based on societal or cultural concerns. (Kumari & Shekhar, 2023) also finds and (Tiwari et al., 2023) suggest that early marriage or immediate employment as mothers not sending the girls to schools due to cultural norm especially in rural areas is one of factors which has impact on higher educational attainment.

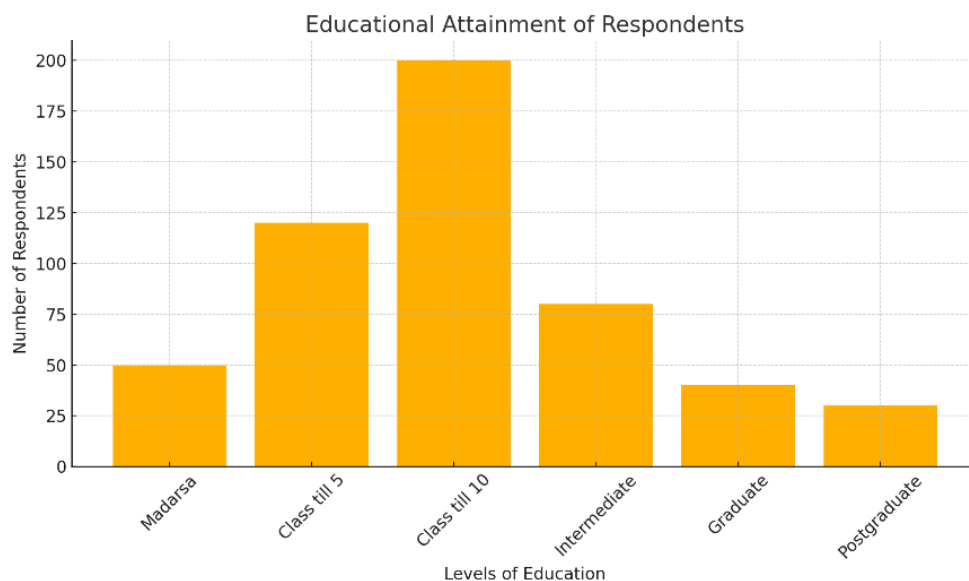


Figure 1 Educational attainment of respondents

This is essentially a feast or humans-ability-to-register-basic-tender-love-and-respective kind of situation, fuelled mainly by the fact that we're still living in a world where women are held at greater status within their traditional roles inside of our homes. As a result, in particularly after women graduate from the undergraduate-level, women feel increasingly more pressure to drop out of school. It is not just this area where such attitudinal gender-based expectation can be seen there are many rural areas in India that still discourage female educational aspirations (Emran & Shilpi, 2015). Such cultural barriers compounded by the informal sector of the economy that is limited to women, including their own professions, which in turn only helps strengthen traditional roles and structures of male economic domination over women have a profound effect on limiting professional opportunities for woman trying to better their lot.

In contrast, rural respondents have very limited access to such resources that leads to an initial barrier in their educational progression. In rural areas however, the lack of schools combined with the distance to educational institutions works as a strong deterrent (Balachandran & Desai, 2024) especially for girls. Tripathi, (2024) also emphasizes that with no public transport available and unsafe conditions for traveling, rural families have to refuse sending their daughters long distances from home space for education which leads the girls to drop out after this level of secondary schooling.

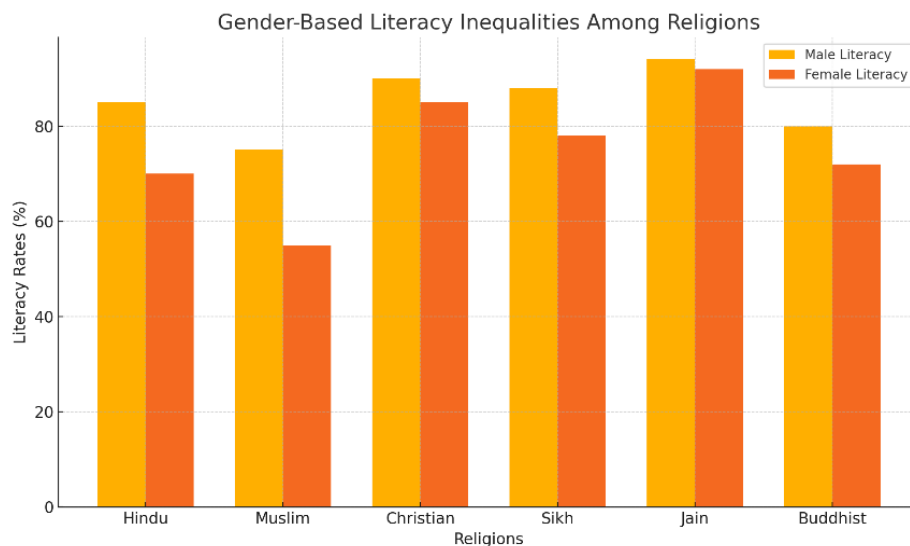


Figure 2 Gender based literary inequalities among various religions

The gender-based literacy rates, are shown in Figure 2. This figure exhibits a significant gap between males and females among all religious communities. Muslim community shows the largest disparity. Female literacy is significantly behind male literacy in almost every religious group. Socio-cultural barriers are evident by this. (Nandi et al., 2023b) observed results similar to this. This lower literacy rates among Muslim women can be attributed to factors such as community pressures, restricted mobility and conservative family practises which place greater emphasis only on male education.

In rural environment, gendered barriers are over emphasised and rather than education, traditional gender roles often dictate terms that women focus on domestic duties (Bhuwania et al., 2024b). Cultural norms prioritize the education of male children over female children. Across India, the pattern of gender inequality is prevalent in many rural communities. These cause educational disadvantage for women (Maity et al., 2022).

Challenges faced by particularly Muslim women, among the Muslim community, can be observed from this figure. Compared with literacy rates in other religious communities such as Hindus, Christians, and Jains, Muslim women have the lowest literacy rate (51.9%). This gap is also reflected in the findings of Azim & Hasan, (2014), who observed that barriers related to religious conservatism and rigid community expectations are prevalent more among Muslim women in rural areas.

Rigid community expectations which prioritize religious education over formal schooling result in limited educational opportunities. Bhaumik & Chakrabarty, (2009b) observes that many families believe that formal education is not necessary for girls, since their primary roles will be within the household. Further, as there is preference for religious schooling compared with formal education, Muslim women's access to higher education and professional opportunities, get significantly reduced. Azim & Hasan, (2014) suggests that for bridging this gap community-specific interventions are essential, which could balance religious education with conventional education.

Thus, income differences is a major contributor between rural and urban educational opportunities. (Sosu & Pimenta, 2023) observes that long-term investments in education is prioritised in urban families and they view it as a means of socio-economic mobility. Contrary to this, particularly when faced with immediate economic pressures, such as the need for additional household income or labour, rural families view education as a luxury. This results, in rural students, particularly girls, dropping from school early and less likely to pursue higher education.

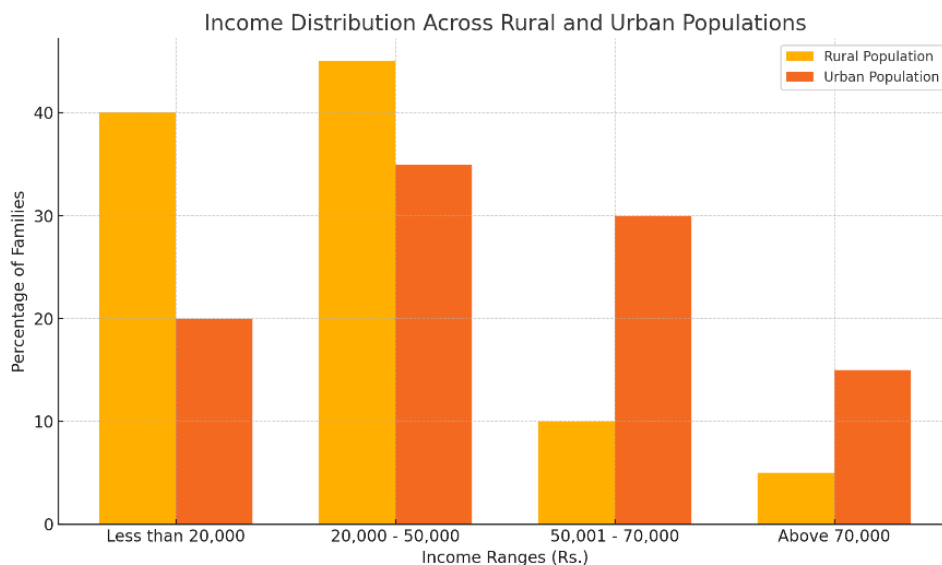


Figure 3: Income distribution across rural and urban populations

Income distribution across rural and urban populations is shown in Figure 3. This shows that urban families have higher-income levels, which correlates to better access to good quality education. In rural areas, households have lower-income levels. This gives them fewer educational opportunities. These financial differences directly impact attainment of educational attainment, particularly for women.

Table 1 Correlation Between Family Income and Educational Attainment of Muslim Women Respondents

Monthly Income (Rs.)	Primary Education (%)	Secondary Education (%)	Undergraduate (%)	Graduate and Above (%)
Less than 10,000	30	25	15	5
10,000 - 20,000	35	40	30	15
20,001 - 30,000	20	25	35	25
Above 30,000	15	10	20	55

Table 1 specifies the link between family income and the educational attainment of Muslim women. The data show that women from lower-income families, particularly those earning less than Rs. 10,000, are less likely to pursue higher education, with only 5% reaching graduate levels. Contrary to this, 55% of women from families earning more than Rs. 30,000 have completed graduate education or higher. This suggests that higher monthly income facilitates access to higher education. Economic challenges restrict educational opportunities for women from poorer families, emphasising the importance of economic aid and government scholarships in promoting professional education among women.

(Nakajima et al., 2018) observes that higher dropout rates among girls is linked with lower-income levels in rural areas. Girls' education is given less priority when faced with more immediate economic concerns, such as household labour resulting in early marriage. Thus, economic and cultural barriers affect education.

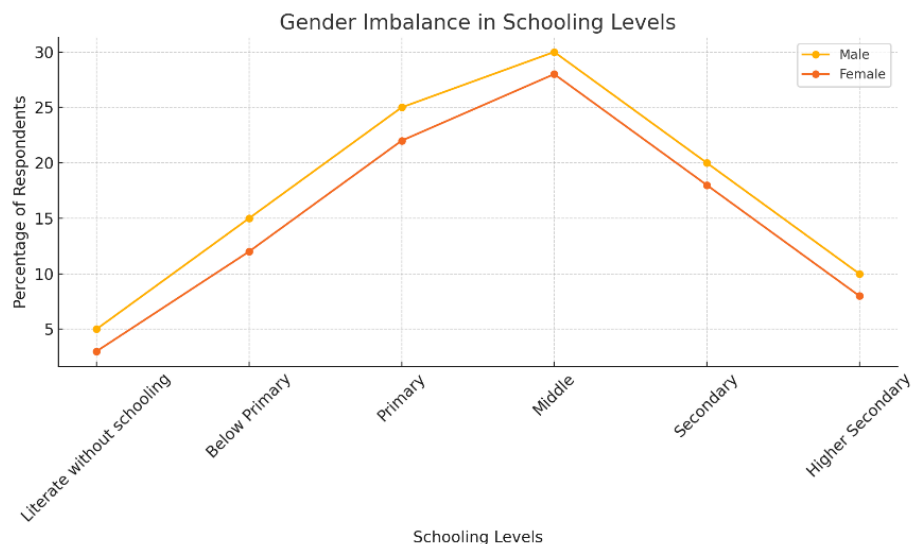


Figure 4: Gender imbalance in schooling levels

Gender imbalance in schooling levels, is depicted in Figure 4. It can be observed that males outnumber females at all levels of education. Society expects males to prioritize education and career-building, while females are expected to focus on household responsibilities, more so in rural areas. Deshpande & Kabeer, (2024) notes that this bias, perpetuates educational inequality through generations. Cultural practises still, emphasise male education and thus continue to undermine efforts to improve education in girls.

Bhuwania et al., (2024a) insists that an attitude shift for educating girls community can be brought about through community-based education programs. Such programs create chances to pursue education and thus build careers where both boys and girls can have equal opportunities.

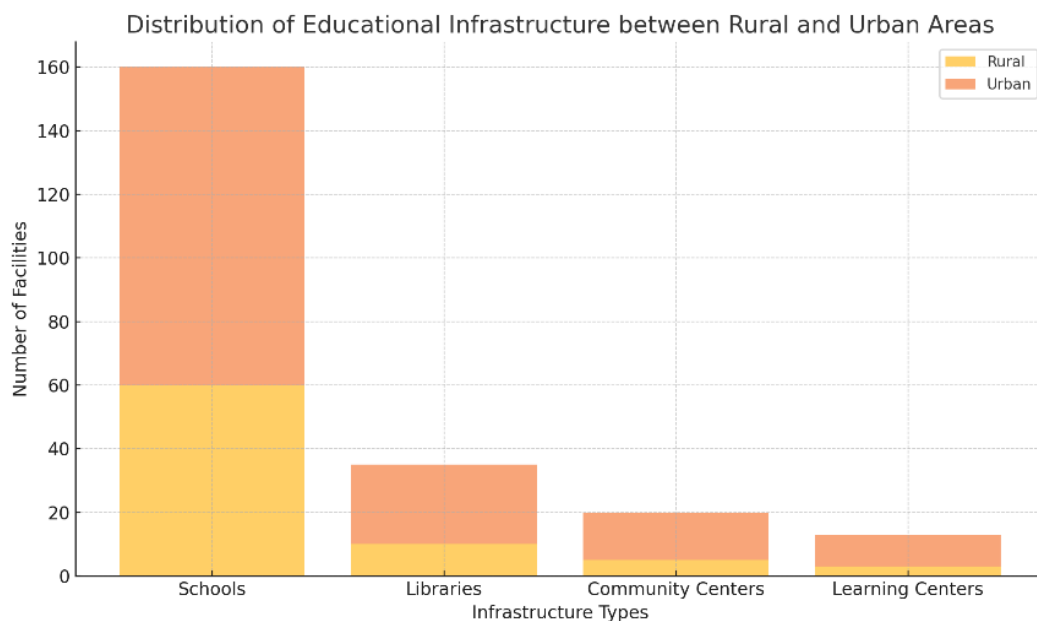


Figure 5: Differences between rural and urban areas

Differences between rural and urban areas in terms of educational infrastructure is shown in Figure 5. while Rural areas lack even the basic educational facilities, whereas Urban areas have better access to laboratories schools and libraries. Quality of education varies with this infrastructural gap which again impacts education.

Hota, (2023) observed that lack of sanitation facilities and inferior infrastructure facilities in rural schools, results in higher dropout rates especially among girls. Therefore, development of infrastructure is essential for promoting educational equity, in rural areas. Seebacher, (2023) insists that construction of new schools and enhancement of existing facilities can create a

conducive learning environment for all students. Thus, by providing safer and more accessible infrastructure facilities, dropout rates can be decreased, especially among girl students.

4. CONCLUSIONS:

This research focusses on the unique challenges faced by Muslim women face in pursuing professional education, which are strongly influenced by cultural expectations, socio-economic factors, and religious practices. Early marriages, financial hardships, limited parental education and the emphasis on household duties over their studies are found to be the factors that hinder higher professional education among Muslim women. Insufficient support from government and also process hurdles to avail government scholarships limit government support from reaching Muslim women to attain professional education. So too does restrictions on hostel stays and long travel. To resolve these issues, a holistic approach including changes in government support policies, better infrastructural facilities and community involvement are required. Through these measures, Muslim women can be broken open from the grip of poverty cycles and thus they can be empowered to attain higher professional education

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