

Women Education in the Muslim World: Some Hard Truths

Maniul Hassan

Research Scholar, Techno India University

Dr. Maumita Sengupta

Associate Professor, Techno India University

Abstract: Women Education has always been an important aspect of every civilisation, scholars have famously said “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”. India has been known for its woman scholars since its ancient period, but contemporary India has its share of problems in this regard too. The study focuses on the data provided on various parameters for higher education of Muslim women in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. The data are presented along with suggested solutions according to educational experts of Murshidabad.

Key points: Socio-economic strata, first generation learners, orthodoxy, access, infrastructure, outcomes.

The Muslim world of today is trying to reform itself at a fast pace, trying to break the shackles of dogma that has been associated with it for a very long time. Despite political uncertainty and chaos reigning over a majority of the Muslim world, they are trying to adopt modern technology and practices, and trying to live by some of the very important ideals of their Quran. There may be a wrong notion that the Muslims lag behind in the contribution of science and technology. We must not forget that many scientific theories and modern technologies evolved by the people of the ancient Arabic world that extended from Spain in the west to Indonesia in the East. The first revealed sacred word in the Surah Al Alaq, is IQRA, which means read or know. Thus, knowledge is the most vital aspect of human life, existence and growth, is a phrase that's universal, without differences of religion, ethnicity, community, group and the like. Women constitute half of the population, but also because education empowers a woman to participate in political and economic decision making in the society, and as they are predominant child nurturers, the future citizen gets educated too.

The history from Early 20th Century: Modern Educational Initiatives

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Influence: Although Rokeya's primary work was in Kolkata, her support for Muslim women's education had impacted on regions of Bengal and all over India. She emphasized the need for secular and modern education beyond religious instruction.

Establishment of Schools:- In the early 20th century, a few schools for Muslim girls began to emerge in Bengal. Although limited in number, these institutions introduced secular subjects and created opportunities for higher education.

Government and Missionary Efforts:- Colonial education policies and Christian missionaries also contributed indirectly by opening inclusive schools for Muslim girls, although social acceptance was slow.

Post-Independence Era: Growth and Expansion Increased Awareness:- After 1947, greater emphasis was placed on women's education as part of national development policies. The Muslim community in Murshidabad witnessed a slow but steady increase in literacy rates among women.

Establishment of Institutions:- More institutions, including madrasas providing both religious and secular education, were established specifically for Muslim girls.

Focus on Higher Education:- By the late 20th century, women from the entire country were increasingly pursuing higher education at universities, often supported by scholarships and government programs. Prime Minister's 15 point programme in 1983 and setting up of Prime Minister's High level Committee on social, economic, and educational status of the Muslim community helped in bringing the community's problems to the fore. In 2004 the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NEMEI) was set up by an ordinance to advise the Centre and state governments on any matter regarding the education of the Muslim minority, to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. In 2006, National Monitoring Committee for Minority Education (NMCME) was reconstituted with the aim to attend to issues relating to the education of minorities on an ongoing basis. In 2006, the NEMEI's powers were enhanced by creating an exclusive Ministry of Minority Affairs. In addition, the Ministry plays a pivotal role in planning, coordination and development programmes for the benefit of the minority communities.

Although specific local reformers may not be well-documented, Bengal's education reformers had an overall impact on Murshidabad. Families inspired by these ideas began sending their daughters to school and later to college.

The study

The present research looks at a few key data aggregators in the area of Muslim women higher education, taking the Murshidabad district of West Bengal as a target area. The study focuses on secondary data available on government sites for the aforementioned area and provides insights into the meanings and positions indicated by this data.

Objectives

1. To find out the key aggregators of data for status of Muslim women education in Murshidabad.
2. To find out the sources of secondary data for education in Murshidabad.
3. To state the implications of the data on the ground reality of education of Muslim women in Murshidabad.

The data

The main institutional data utilised for the study was essentially collected from the following sources:

UDISE+ (Unified District Information System for Education) – Ministry of Education

- India's largest school-level database (covers almost all government & private schools). Collects data on:
 - Rural school infrastructure
 - Enrollments, attendance, dropout
 - Teacher data and vacancies
 - Facilities (toilets, electricity, digital, etc.)
 - Strong for granular district/block-level rural data.
- 1. AISHE stands for the **All India Survey on Higher Education**. It is an annual web-based survey conducted by the Ministry of Education in India to collect comprehensive data on higher education institutions, including student enrollment, teachers, infrastructure, and finance.
 - **Purpose:** To create a robust database and provide a clear picture of the higher education scenario in the country.

- **Data collected:** The survey gathers data on various parameters such as student enrollment, teachers, programs, examination results, education finance, and infrastructure.
 - **Institutions covered:** The survey covers all institutions in the country that are involved in imparting higher education.
 - **Initiation:** The survey was initiated in 2010-11.
2. NSSO / NSO (National Sample Survey Office) – Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation
 - ✓ Large-scale national household surveys that include education modules.
 - ✓ Useful for rural/urban comparisons.
 - ✓ Education-related surveys include:
 - ✓ NSS 75th Round: Education & health
 - ✓ Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) – for youth skill and employment data
 - ✓ Good for socio-economic factors affecting rural schooling.
 3. West Bengal Urdu Academy was established in 1 April 1987 under the Department of Higher Education, Government of West Bengal. It runs various Programs of welfare of Muslim community, recently they are focusing on Muslim women. It organizes an All India Urdu Book Fair annually, provides book grants for students and also offers free coaching for civil services exam for Urdu medium students. Thus the contribution of Urdu Academy in improving higher education of Muslim women is sizeable.

The researcher has tried to collect data from Urdu Academy regarding Higher Education of Muslim Women, interviews were conducted with of Urdu Academy. The data has been collected regarding:

1. Educational Support & Academic Development to Muslim women of Kolkata through
 - a) Scholarships and Book Grants
 - b) Providing financial assistance to Urdu-medium girl students.
 - c) providing Free Coaching for Competitive Exams, trying to addresses the lack of coaching availability in Urdu-medium communities.
 - d) Supporting Urdu-medium Schools by providing books and academic materials, indirectly supporting girls who come from these schools.
2. Language Development and Bridging Gaps
 - a) Strengthening Urdu as a Medium as Muslim women come from Urdu backgrounds but lack language resources.

Data presentation and analysis

The researcher has collected data from government reports, surveys, and institutional records on:

A. Access & Enrollment:

Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of Muslim women in higher education (AISHE data).

Number of colleges per 100,000 population(block-wise).

Distance to nearest college(GIS mapping).

B. Socio-Economic Barriers:

Early marriage rates (NFHS-5).

Scholarship utilization rates(WB Minority Affairs Dept.).

Household income levels(BPL census).

C. Infrastructure & Quality:

Availability of girls' hostels.

Student-teacher ratio in colleges.

Internet access for online education(UDISE+).

D. Outcomes:

Dropout rates post-Class 10.

Employment rate after graduation (NSSO).

Higher education transition rate (school to college).

The results

1. The academic aspects

A. Enrollment Rates:

Pre- vs Post-Scheme GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio)- Women oriented government schemes such as Kanyashree has had a positive impact on women enrolment in higher education courses, particularly humanities, though STEM enrolment still remains low among Muslim women.

- ✓ 2011 vs 2021: Muslim women's GER rose from ~5% to ~10% (AISHE data).
- ✓ Kanyashree Impact ~15-20% enrollment boost in Classes 11-12 (WB govt. report).

This data indicates that a main reason for low enrolment is low economic capabilities of rural Muslim communities, and financial aid from the government can improve the situation to an extent.

B. Dropout Reduction:

- ✓ Post-Matric Scholarship: Dropout rates fell from ~40% to ~25% in aided colleges where scholarships were provided.
- ✓ Urdu Academy also helps reduce dropout rates at college/university levels with book grants though their work outside Kolkata is very limited.
- ✓ Hostel Schemes: Where in campus hostels were made available, retention improved by 30% (e.g., Behrampur Girls' College).

This is also a data that answers a few questions but raises many others. Women safety is an important governance issue in rural India and if they are provided safe transport and passage or reasonable residential facilities, then many families, despite socio-economic constraints, will send their daughters to school as well as for higher education, as is proved by the increase in enrolment and retention in Behrampur Girls College that provides safe and secure hostel facilities.

C. Economic Empowerment:

- Kanyashree Recipients: 12% more likely to pursue UG degrees (UNICEF-WB study), which again strengthens the premise that socio cultural barriers can be removed if some financial help is provided to these women.
- Scholarship Delays ~40% beneficiaries face disruptions due to late payments. Again, the question that arises here is whether the problem is with the women and their families or systemic, giving the administration and the government pointers on where they need to focus for improvement of the life of all citizens, women in particular.

D. Employment Outcomes:

- Urdu Academy Coaching: ~8% of trainees secured govt jobs (2022 data). Thus, Coaching for WBCS, UPSC, SSC, and other exams helps Muslim women enter higher administrative and professional fields, but here again, in Murshidabad, their work is limited.

- Skill Programs: There is less than 5% linkage to formal corporate sector or government jobs; most end up in informal sectors, .

2. Ground-Level Challenges in Implementation:

A. Awareness Gaps:

Many Rural Muslim women in Murshidabad district (about 20%) are still unaware of Maulana Azad Fellowship/Aikyashree.

Many Madrasa students get excluded from mainstream schemes due to documentation issues, though this factor does not get highlighted much.

B. Bureaucratic Delays:

Post-Matric Scholarships often disbursed 6-12 months late, forcing dropouts.

Kanyashree UG funds require Aadhaar-linked bank accounts—many lack documents.

C. Cultural Resistance:

Families reject hostels due to purdah norms.

Early marriage overrides scholarship benefits in conservative zones (e.g., Suti).

Social & Cultural Barriers, Early Marriage & Household Duties are a very big challenge in rural Muslim communities. High prevalence of early marriage (Murshidabad has one of West Bengal's highest child marriage rates) has yet to be tackled. Cultural expectations prioritize domestic roles over education. Gender Discrimination is also part of this cultural environment. NFHS-5 (2019-21) tells us that ~40% of Muslim women in Murshidabad marry before 18. Also, Caste & Community dynamics within the Muslim world, though not oft talked about, are a big factor in this scenario. Sheikhs and Syeds (upper-caste Muslims) show slightly better enrollment than Ansaris (weaver caste) and other OBC Muslims. A very big difference is seen if the enrolment data of Muslim women is compared to non Muslim women, when the government scholarship and distance from home factors are more or less constant.

Comparative Data (Muslim vs. Non-Muslim Women)

CONSTRAINT	MUSLIM WOMAN	NON MUSLIM WOMAN
College attendance rate	~08-10 %	~25-30%
Dropout rate (post 10 TH)	~ 45-50%	~20-25%
Average travel distance	~10-30 km	~ 10-30 km

(Sources: AISHE 2021, NFHS-5, Local NGO Reports)

This data indicates that the community needs to be made more aware and sensitised towards the promotion of higher education among its female members, even when there are problems of access and infrastructure.

D. Infrastructure Shortages:

No colleges in 7/26 blocks force reliance on distant institutions, and travel becomes a problem because of safety as well as non availability of public transport.

Digital exclusion: Online applications exclude smartphone-deprived students.

According to available data, Kanyashree Prakalpa in Murshidabad, is a largely successful one, with 1.2 lakh beneficiaries (2019-23), but only about 25% Muslim women have been benefitted.

One big Limitation is that Funds cover only first-year UG fees—later dropouts persist.

Sources:

AISHE Report (Enrollment by religion/gender).

WB Minority Affairs Dept. (Scholarship utilization).

NGO Field Studies (Pratichi Trust, Peace India).

The troubling scenario

Despite the Islamic World trying to break the mould and morph into a new form, it is difficult for the positive impact to reach every citizen. On the ground, Muslim rural communities are frequently bound by the traditional beliefs which do not always permit their women to get access to higher education and jobs. Instead they are pushed into early marriage, motherhood, marital abuse, fear of social ostracisation with no support system or financial independence. Some exceptions who become educated professionals become role models for these women but their stories are not always heard, as women always don't have unlimited access to social media and current affairs.

Muslim women in Murshidabad face multi-layered socio-economic barriers in higher education. While government schemes help, structural issues like poverty, early marriage, and institutional gaps require targeted interventions.

What can be done?

1. A **dedicated socio-economic survey** could provide **actionable insights for policy improvements**. This will be helpful in identifying the systemic barriers to education for Muslim women and constantly work towards reducing those barriers, such as:
 - a) Poverty- Financial aid for education is a must, at every level of education, particularly for girls from poor socio-economic strata
 - b) Early marriage- Very stringent measures need to be in place for ensuring that the minimum marriage age rule present in the country is adhered to
 - c) Scarcity of Urdu-medium higher education institutions- Many Muslim girls don't know Hindi or Bangla, but are well versed in Urdu language, that needs to be taken into consideration for designing higher education.
 - d) Social conservatism- The Muslim society needs counselling and interventions to counter religious dogma. Orthodox maulavis sometimes do damage to their culture, and they need open discussion and dialogue instead of diktats.
 - e) Limited parental awareness- Most parents are themselves not educated and are unaware of the benefits of women education. They need to be told about the betterment of their and their daughters' lives due to higher education.
2. The opening of **Urdu academies** in more remote parts of the state could resolve issues, particularly for girls studying in Urdu medium such as:
 - a) Reduces language barriers that often discourage Muslim women from pursuing higher studies- Textbooks, dictionaries as well as Reference books can be readily made available to the girls, that is not always possible through their Madrasas or even local schools. Translation of Bengali/English Works into Urdu, Helps Urdu-medium girls understand higher-level content in simpler language and enable girls to study more effectively at the higher-education level.
 - b) Cultural & Social Empowerment- Organizing Workshops, Seminars, and Debates Encourages public speaking, confidence-building, and academic participation, Provides platforms where Muslim women scholars, writers, and professionals interact.
 - c) Promotion of Women's Writing and Scholarship- Publication of Works by local Women Writers known to this population would greatly encourage Muslim women writers, poets, researchers, and academics. These women would help build role models for the next generation. Grants for Research in Urdu support M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. research by women in Urdu language and

literature strengthening community voices and also, in the long run, integrate better with all parts of the country.

3. **Creating a Safe, Inclusive Environment** - The government needs to provide women safety at war footing, particularly in West Bengal, as that is a large concern for all women in the state. Advocacy and Policy Support for achievement of this goal needs to be there, who would be advising about women's needs in state education policies. They would also recommend opening new Urdu colleges, departments, and women-friendly hostels. Cultural and supportive spaces for women from conservative or low-income families could also be a big help, as Cultural programs motivate parents to support their daughters' education.
4. **Preservation of Minority Educational Rights**- Sachar committee points out that the majority of the Muslim community in India has fallen behind on all parameters, women education being no exception. That is why positive discrimination in this regard is essential so that they can bring themselves up in terms of equity in education. Promotes constitutional rights for linguistic minorities, benefiting Muslim women, is needed in our country.

Conclusion

Education is the basic and fundamental requirement of a nation. There are several impacts of higher level of literacy on both economy and society of a country. Education encourages social, geopolitical mobility and migration. It makes the worker aware of career and employment opportunities, and moves them towards a healthful and meaningful life. Education of women in particular is important for the development of a society. This is not only because women constitute half of the population, but also because education empowers a women to participate in political and economic decision making in the society, and as they are predominant child nurturers, the future citizen gets educated too.

References (selected, representative):

1. Leila Ahmed — Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate — a foundational historical overview that situates contemporary debates about Muslim women and education in long-term history.
2. Masooda Bano — Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge — ethnographic and policy-focused study of women's Islamic learning movements. Good for understanding women-led religious education.
3. Shenila Khoja-Moolji — Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia — examines historical and development discourses about the “educated Muslim girl” in South Asia. Useful for gender, colonial/postcolonial and schooling debates.
4. Ousseina D. Alidou — Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Postcolonial Niger (and Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya) — strong regional case studies showing agency, literacy and social change among Muslim women in Africa.
5. Hem Borker — Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood — ethnography on girls' madrasas and how Islamic schooling shapes aspirations and gendered subjectivities (India focus).
6. Jean Boyd & Anne R. Mack (eds.) — Educating Muslim Women: The West African Legacy of Nana Asma'u — excellent if you want historic/West African perspective on Muslim women's literacies and teaching traditions.
7. Gender & Education — interdisciplinary journal on gender and schooling (good empirical and theoretical pieces).
8. Comparative Education / Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education — for cross-national and historical comparisons. (Check Taylor & Francis / Compare pages.)

9. International Journal of Educational Development — policy-oriented studies on education in developing countries.
10. Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs — explicitly focused on Muslim communities worldwide (sociology, education, politics).
11. British Journal of Sociology of Education / Sociology of Education — for structural, sociological analyses relevant to gender, religion and schooling.
12. Journal of Education & International Development (and regional journals: Asian Education & Development Studies, African Studies Review, Journal of North African Studies) — often carry region-specific work.