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# Empowerment of Muslim Women in India: A Study of Socio-Economic and Political Disparities

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## KEYWORDS

Empowerment  
India  
Muslim women  
Gender  
Personal autonomy  
Work participation

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the empowerment of Muslim women in India, vis-à-vis their male counterparts as well as women belonging to other major five religious communities, namely Hindus, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain. The study is based on secondary sources of data primarily obtained from National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4), All India Census Report, 2011 and Statistical reports, Election Commission of India. Based on these data sets, various indicators of women empowerment- participation in household decision making, freedom of movement outside the home, political participation and access to education and meaningful employment are used to measure the different dimensions of empowerment. The findings of the study indicate that the Muslim Women in India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy lower status than that of men and women belonging to other communities, no matter how empowerment is measured, be it in terms of the indicators of the evidence, sources or setting for empowerment. The study reveals that in terms of educational attainment and access to employment, the gender gap is highest in Muslim amongst all major communities in India. The information regarding women's household decision making power and freedom of movement also shows that Muslim Women are the least empowered and one of the disadvantaged sections of the society in two ways, one being as a woman and two as a member of the minority community which is both educationally and economically backward and religiously orthodox. The study concludes that an improvement in educational level would directly influence Muslim Women's socio-economic and political status, but achievements towards this end depend largely on the attitude of the people towards gender equality.

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## 1. Introduction

Women empowerment is a critical development concern around the world, especially in developing nations. The term 'empowerment; denotes the process of increasing the assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and transform those into desired actions and outcomes (Chakrabarti & Biswas, 2008). Women empowerment can be treated as a process by which women can enjoy greater control over material and intellectual resources that will enable themselves to have greater autonomy over household decision-making and economic resources. It has been widely recognized that development goals cannot be realized unless gender inequalities are

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removed and women are empowered to choose and decide about their own welfare, the welfare of their families, and the communities in which they reside. Women's empowerment is very crucial for safeguarding not only their personal and household welfare, but also the well-being of the entire society as women are recognized to be the primary guardians responsible for altering the quality and quantity of human resources available in a country and to promote sustainable development in the coming generations (UNFPA, 2005).

In the last six and half decades, Women in India have made significant advances, entering every field of education and taking on the challenges of various professions. However, despite the constitutional provisions and women-specific legislative measures which provide various opportunities for enhancing their socio-economic and cultural status, masses of the women still remained disempowered due to gender-role discrimination, social stereotypes, and stigma. The low status of women has been a matter of concern for many years and the Government of India has implemented various policies and programmes to improve their status. There are also significant differences in women-specific status across regions, caste, class, communities, and religions.

Muslims are the largest minority community in India, constituting 14.22 percent of the total population (census, 2011) and the share of the Muslim women is 6.93 percent (83.97 million), which is larger than female population of many Islamic nations. Nevertheless, Sachar Committee Report (2006), which was constituted by the Government of India to look into the social, educational and economic status of Muslims in India, found that Muslims are inadequately empowered to access the benefits of development and the fundamental rights guaranteed in the constitution. The community has experienced the slow pace of progress and remained socio-economically most backward. Muslim women in India are often regarded as a 'minority within a minority' and one of the marginalized groups at least for three reasons: one being as women, two as a member of a minority community, which is both educationally and economically backward and religiously orthodox, and third as individuals in poverty. The structural disabilities on Muslim women are evident in the spheres of education, economic, social and political life, which results in their social exclusion (Brenner, 1996). Muslim women enjoy low personal autonomy, less influence on household decision making and political empowerment. They are suffering from both internal and external oppression. In many instances, Muslim men practice what they themselves believe to be Islamic and oppress their women and refuse to entertain any thought of change. About sixty percent of the Muslim women are married before the legal age of 18; over 50% are illiterate and over 70% report that they need permission from their husbands for virtually every activity related to their personal, social, familial or health concerns (Hasan & Menon, 2004). Many do not even realize that they have rights, or that their own religion

accords them rights. They are not connected to other women in an empowering framework. The isolation of the Muslim community, along with its attitude to education, has affected the ability of Muslim Women in India to be represented in mainstream public life.

The issues related to various aspects of women's empowerment are well-documented in literature in both developed and developing countries including India (Kabeer, 2001; Malhotra et. al. 2002; Manson and Smith, 2003; Kishor and Gupta, 2004; Gupta and Yesudian, 2006). However, very few attempts have been made to study the empowerment of Muslim women in India as cultural norms of status and seclusion are often emphasized in explaining Muslim women's lower visibility in politics, economic leadership, and high-status occupations.

Against this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to investigate the empowerment of Muslim women in India, relative to their male counterparts and women belonging to other major religious communities- Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain.

The remaining part of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the database and methodology used in this study while section 3 analyses the status of Muslim women in India in terms of educational attainment, access to employment, participation in decision making, freedom of movement and political participation. Finally, conclusion and suggestions emanated from the present study are presented in section 4.

## **2. Data Sources and Methodology**

The study is based on secondary sources of data primarily obtained from National Family Health Survey-IV (NFHS-4), conducted in 2015-16, by the Ministry of the Health and Family Welfare, Government of India; Census of India, 2011, and Election Commission's Statistics, India.

Women's empowerment is a concept, a latent variable that cannot be measured directly and has to be assessed through proxies or indicators. Additionally, it is a multidimensional process and a single factor cannot reflect the underlying conditions of a woman's life (Beegle *et al.*, 2001 and Pitt *et al.*, 2006). Within this framework, this paper derived and analyzed different indicators of women's empowerment consistent with the existing literature, in the context of the Muslim Women in India. In this paper, various indicators of women empowerment pertaining to Muslim women in India are analyzed using simple statistical tools like percentages, ratio analysis etc.

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

### *Status of the Muslim Women in India in Terms of Different Empowerment Indicators*

As mentioned above, the empowerment process is difficult to measure quantitatively. Most of the authors have used education, work participation and political representation as indicators to measure women's empowerment, by which women are expected to develop decision-

making authority, greater freedom of movement, autonomy and attitudinal changes in favour of gender equality.

This paper uses Muslim women's access to education, work participation and political representation as potential sources of empowerment, while their household decision making and freedom of movement outside the home as obtained from the NFHS-III are used as evidence of empowerment. These indicators are further compared with the women of other religious communities so as to analyze the relative laggardness of Muslim Women.

### 3.1. Educational Attainment

Educationally, Muslims constitute one of the most backward communities in the country and the educational levels of Muslim women are further skewed towards the bottom. The Government of India in its Education Policy 1986 stated that Muslims (particularly Muslim women) and Neo-Buddhists were the most educationally backward communities at All-India level. Furthermore, according to the report submitted by the committee of Governors 'On the Welfare of Minorities (1997)', "Muslims are educationally backward with hardly 15 percent literacy. Female literacy among minorities is even more dismal". The Report further states that the progress and well-being of the Muslim community are closely linked up with the literacy of the Muslim women and hence this aspect of education needs special attention both from the leaders of the community and the Government. The relative educational attainments of Muslim females are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Education Level by Religious Community and Sex for Population 7 and Above (%)

Religion	Literate			Metric/Secondary			Pre-University			Graduate and Above		
	P	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F
Hindu	63.60	70.77	55.97	9.00	10.61	7.28	6.62	7.77	5.39	5.98	7.24	4.64
Muslim	57.28	62.40	51.89	6.33	7.16	5.45	4.44	4.95	1.90	2.76	3.41	2.07
Christian	74.34	76.77	71.97	10.08	10.72	9.45	10.32	10.24	10.39	8.85	8.98	8.72
Sikh	67.51	71.32	63.29	14.78	16.64	12.71	8.25	8.89	7.55	6.40	6.10	6.73
Buddhist	71.83	77.87	65.58	10.93	12.29	9.51	8.61	10.02	7.15	6.18	7.51	4.80
Jain	86.43	87.86	84.93	15.48	16.13	14.81	14.05	15.15	12.90	25.65	27.66	23.55
Others	50.34	59.38	41.38	5.12	6.55	3.70	3.26	4.16	2.36	2.16	2.75	1.56

Source: Census, 2011

Notes: P, M and F stand for persons, male and female respectively.

Table 1 indicates that women literacy is the lowest in the Muslim community. The women literacy rate is highest (84.93%) among Jain followed by Christian, Buddhist and Hindu and last Muslim in this order. This initial disadvantage is widened further across subsequent levels of educational attainment namely, matriculation, Pre-university and graduate and above. In the matriculation and high school level, the lowest percentages are once more found to be those of Muslim females. Only 5.45 percent Muslim women acquire secondary/High School education, as compared to 7.25 percent Hindu Women, 9.4 percent Christian Women, 12.71 percent Sikh women, 9.51 percent Buddhist women and 14.81 percent Jain women who come under this category.

In higher education, the differences between Muslim females and their counterparts in other religious communities stand out even more sharply. Merely 1.90 percent Muslim women reach up to pre-university level, whereas the corresponding figures for Hindu women (5.39%), Christian Women (10.39%), Sikh Women (7.55%), Buddhist women (7.15%) and Jain Women (12.90%) are relatively high. The proportion of Muslim women attained graduate and above, is also very negligible absolutely as well as compared to the females belonging to other religious communities.

This evidence reflects the relative educational backwardness of the Muslim community in general and Muslim women in particular. The lower educational attainment of Muslim women can be attributed to a number of factors including low economic status, restricted and often apathetic attitude of the community and parents; 'purdah' tradition, encouragement of religious and prohibition of secular education, post-puberty early marriage, retaining daughters for household duties. Some of the studies indicate that lack of schools, colleges and other educational institutes in the areas where there is a higher concentration of the Muslim population, deterred modern education among Muslim women.

### **3.2. *Work Participation and Employment***

Many official and individual studies reveal that work participation rate is lower for Muslim than any other socio-religious community and this is more so in the case of Muslim women and their lowest figure for work participation is observed in urban areas. The Sachar Committee report (2006) shows that in general, the mean per capita expenditure (MPCE) is the lowest for Muslims than for any other socio-religious categories at the national level except SCs and STs and the incidence of poverty (head-count) is also higher for Muslims than any other socio-religious categories of people (except SCs and STs). Similarly, the report of the National Commission of Women on the status of Muslim women (Hameed, 2000) indicates that the extent of unemployment and lack of wage-earning capacity among Muslims is much higher as compared to others. This pathetic condition of Muslims is often linked to their employment patterns and poor working conditions. This is also due to the reason that fewer Muslim women are gainfully employed vis-à-vis women of other socio-religious categories.

Percentage distribution of workers (Principal and Subsidiary) by activity status for different socio-religious categories (16-64 years) at All-India level is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Percentage Distribution of Workers (Principal and Subsidiary) by Activity Status for Different Socio-Religious Categories , 16-64 years (for the year 2009-10)

Socio-Religious Categories	Rural Females			Urban Females		
	Self-employed	Regular	Casual	Self-employed	Regular	Casual
Hindu-UC	72.35	7.23	20.42	36.86	56.91	6.24
Hindu-OBC	57.76	3.72	38.53	44.76	31.46	23.78
Hindu-SC	37.81	5.00	57.19	31.94	36.61	31.45
Hindu-ST	50.38	2.09	47.52	25.31	34.49	40.20
Muslim-OBC	66.69	3.03	30.28	67.41	17.16	15.43
Muslim-General	62.19	4.80	33.01	53.96	26.88	19.16
Muslim-All	64.11	4.08	31.81	58.90	22.63	18.47
Other Minorities	60.47	9.34	30.20	33.65	52.37	13.98
All Persons	55.06	4.58	40.36	40.48	40.13	19.40

*Source: Basant, Rakesh (2012); Notes: UC- Upper Castes, OBC- Other Backward Classes, SC - Scheduled Castes, ST - Scheduled Tribes*

Table 2 shows that in rural areas, Muslim and Hindu-UC women workers are concentrated in self-employed activities and the participation of Muslim women in regular jobs is much less than many other socio-religious categories. Most significantly, Muslim women's representation in regular jobs is less than 'Other Minorities'. Likewise, Figures for Muslim women's employment as regular workers in urban areas indicate their marginal presence in salaried jobs while a significantly higher share of Muslim women workers vis-à-vis other socio-religious categories can be observed in self-employment. These figures are consistent with many previous studies which show that share of Muslims in regular jobs, especially in the Government, public sector and large private sector is very low. The work participation rate among different religious communities by sex is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Work Participation Rate among Different Religious Communities by Sex

Religion	Males	Females
Hindu	53.91	27.35
Muslim	49.51	14.77
Christian	52.90	31.16
Sikh	55.43	15.16
Buddhist	53.39	32.54
Jain	57.71	12.27
Others	53.22	43.82

*Source: Census, 2011*

Table 3 indicates that female work participation rate is lowest among Muslims and Jains. As per the data available from Census, 2011, WPR for Muslim women is only 14.77 percent, whereas the

corresponding figures for Buddhist women and Christian women are relatively very high- 32.54 percent and 31.16 percent respectively and the same for Hindu Women stands out 27.35 percent.

The reasons for low participation rate of Muslim women in labour market are varied and debatable. However, low levels of education are often interlaced with Muslim women's low employment levels. Traditional barriers to women's mobility as well as childcare and other household responsibilities may play a big role in keeping Muslim women within the confines of their homes, thereby obstructing to take part into the labour market. Some previous studies reveal that women of high and well-to-do families are secluded by *Purdah* (veil), which isolated Muslim women from the outer world and restricted them from making significant economic contributions.

### 3.3. Participation in Decision Making

The ability of women to make decisions that affect the circumstances of their own lives is an essential aspect of empowerment. To investigate the Muslim Women's decision making power, pertaining to their personal life and household matters, we mainly use the data as available in NFHS-4. In order to assess women's decision-making autonomy, NFHS-4, collected information from currently married women on their participation in three different types of decisions: their own health care, making large household purchases, and visiting their family or relatives. Women were asked who usually makes decisions: 'mainly you, mainly your husband, you and your husband jointly or someone else?'

The present study only focuses on how religion specific characteristics affect women's participation in decision-making and the information thus obtained are provided in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Women's Participation in Decision-Making by Religious Background

Religion	Percentage of currently married women age 15-49 who usually make specific decisions alone or jointly with their husband				
	Own Health Care	Making Major Household Purchases	Visit to Family or Relatives	% who participate in all three decisions	% who participate none of the three decisions
I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Hindu	74.3	73.2	74.6	63.0	16.2
Muslim	72.8	72.1	71.7	60.4	17.7
Christian	81.2	82.3	82.8	71.0	9.2
Sikh	82	73.1	79.3	67.4	11.7
Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist	83.3	78.9	86.6	72.9	9.3
Jain	82.0	83.2	82.7	71.1	8.9
Others	87.0	79.9	83.5	75.5	8.2

Source: National Family Health Survey-4, 2015-16



Table 4 shows that participation in decision making does vary by religion. Participation is highest among Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist women and lowest among Muslim Women, compared with women of other religions. Only 60.4 percent Muslim women participate alone or jointly in all three decisions- own health care, making major household purchases, and visit to family or relatives, whereas the corresponding figures for Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist Women (72.9 percent), Jain Women (71.1 percent) and Christian Women ( 71.0 percent) are very high. Furthermore, 17.7 percent Muslim women do not participate any of these decisions (as against 8.9 percent Jain women, 9.2 percent Christian women, 9.3 percent Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist women, 11.7 percent Sikh women and 16.2 percent Hindu women). These figures clearly indicate that Muslim women have the lowest decisions making ability as compared to women of other religious communities.

### 3.4. Freedom of Movement

Freedom of movement outside the home or women's mobility is another important aspect of women's autonomy and empowerment. This is particularly true in a patriarchal country like India, where a large section of the women follows the tradition of *Purdah* due to religious obligation or any other reasons. Accordingly, in NFHS-4 survey, women were asked if they were usually allowed to go three different places, namely the market, the health facility, and to places outside village or community- alone, only with someone else or not at all. The percentage distribution of women by their type of access to these places according to different religious communities is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Women's Freedom of Movement by Religious Background

Religion	Percentage of women age 15-49 who are allowed to go alone to specific places, and who are not allowed to go at all (alone or with someone else) to all of the specific places				
	The Market	The Health Facility	Places Outside Village/Community	All Three Places	% not allowed to any of the three places
I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Hindu	55.4	50.9	49.1	41.6	6.1
Muslim	44.4	41.1	39.1	32.0	7.7
Christian	59.6	52.4	49.9	42.4	4.6
Sikh	58.9	56.3	52.7	48.4	4.5
Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist	72.7	74.1	63.1	58.3	3.5
Jain	77.3	72.5	60.6	56.3	1.9
Others	62.6	63.9	64.1	51.2	1.7

Source: National Family Health Survey-4, 2015-16

It is evident from Table 5 that Muslim women (32.0 percent) followed by Hindu women (41.6 percent) have the least freedom of movement, while Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist women (58.3 percent) followed by Jain women (56.3 percent) have the highest freedom of movement. Muslim women's low

freedom of movement vis-à-vis women of other religions is also indicated by the fact that as high as 7.7 percent Muslim women are not allowed to go any of the three specific places namely, the market, the health facility and places outside village/community. Religion, therefore, plays a major role in restricting women's freedom of movement.

### 3.5. Political Participation

In independent India, women have acquired the voting rights along with men, and with suffrage the right to contest elections from the village-level to the Federal Parliament. Indian women have thus been not only exercising their franchise but also contesting elections since the first 'Lok Sabha' election held in 1952. Nevertheless, the representation of women, even after granting 33 percent reservation, has been very low at the Grass-Root level (Panchayati Raj), State level (State Legislative Assembly) and national level (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha). Their representation in the country's parliament has yet to cross the 15 percent mark. In India, women are found to be weaker sex as much politically, as they are biologically, socially and economically.

**Table 6.** Representation of Muslim Women in the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha only) from 1<sup>st</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> General Lok Sabha Elections

Election Year	Total No. of Seats	Total No. of Women Members	% of Women Members	Total No. of Muslim Women Members
1952	489	24	4.91	0
1957	494	24	4.86	02
1962	494	36	7.29	02
1967	520	32	6.15	0
1971	521	27	5.18	0
1977	544	21	3.86	03
1980	544	32	5.88	02
1984	544	45	8.27	03
1989	529	28	5.29	0
1991	509	42	8.25	01
1996	541	41	7.58	02
1998	545	44	8.07	0
1999	543	52	9.58	01
2004	543	52	9.58	02
2009	543	60	11.05	03
2014	543	62	11.41	02

Source: Election Commissioner's Statistics, India

The Muslim women are not the exception. The representation of Muslim women in Indian politics, since independence, has been disproportionately low, as compared to their share in the Indian population. Many earlier studies reveal that although the electoral participation of Muslim women has increased over the years, their participation in legislatures and government remained relatively very

low. The participation of Muslim women in '*Lok Sabha*' General Elections since independence is reported in Table 6.

Table 6 shows that the representation of Muslim women in Lok Sabha is very dismal, their memberships never went beyond the mark of three in any of the sixteen Lok Sabha Elections. There were five occasions when no single Muslim woman was elected.

#### **4. Summary, Conclusions and Suggestions**

After the completion of six and half decades of independence, Muslim women in India face considerable challenges as citizens of India and as members of India's largest minority community. To investigate the socio-economic status of Muslim women in Indian society in a comparative perspective and the distance they have covered in terms of empowerment, this paper uses Muslim women's access to education, work participation and political representation as their potential sources of empowerment, while their household decision making and freedom of movement outside their home or community are used as evidence of empowerment. These indicators are further compared with the women belonging to other major religious communities in India so as to analyze the relative laggardness of Muslim women.

The findings of the study indicate that Muslim women are among the educationally disfranchised, economically vulnerable, socially isolated and politically marginalized in the country. It is observed that women literacy is the lowest in the Muslim community among all major religious communities in India. This initial disadvantage is widened further in subsequent levels of educational attainment- matriculation, pre-university and graduate and above. The female work participation rate is also found to be very low in the Muslim community as compared to the women belonging to two other minority communities in India- Buddhist and Christian. The study, therefore, evidently reveals that Muslim women in India suffer from deprivation on almost every front.

The poor status of Muslim women in both Indian society and polity is a serious matter of concern. Therefore, positive actions are needed from the Government, Muslim elites and Muslim women activists for the upliftment of the present status of Muslim women. An improvement in their present-day status will not only contribute to the progress and modernization of the community but also the development and modernization of the entire nation.

In the light of the above analysis, certain suggestions have been put forward for the upliftment of the Muslim women over Indian Society. First, it is crucial for member of Muslim community, especially Muslim women to understand the plight they are facing and to debate among themselves the reasons and solutions for their poor socio-economic status, as well as the need for legal reform and greater political participation, and the possibilities of overcoming patriarchal structures within their own community. Second, State agencies should actively formulate and develop policies geared

towards improving the socio-economic status of Muslim in general and Muslim women, in particular, to ensure their full participation in public life as Indian citizens. Third, given the poor educational and socio-economic status of Muslim in general, the central and the state governments should ensure the implementation of primary and secondary education programmes for Muslims, particularly for Muslim women.

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