



Cultural Constraints faced by Muslim Women in Accessing Higher Education: A study of Kupwara

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Abstract: *A nation's social, economic, cultural, and political development is largely attributed to its higher education system. It considerably influences the values of a country. It raises one's economic standing in society and fosters personal development. Notwithstanding differences in caste, religion, or ethnicity, men and women are equally vital to a nation's development. When considering the overall number of institutions and enrolment, India's higher education system leads the global field. Although around 36.6 billion students are attending higher education, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) which stands at just 25.8%—is still incredibly low (2017-18). The existing study aimed to investigate various cultural constraints that Muslim women in Kupwara encounter when attempting to further their education. The paper also attempted to provide some suitable solutions to address these problems. Thirty Muslim women from five government degree colleges in the Kupwara district make up the study's sample. The sample was chosen using a simple random sampling method. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data collected from the sample. The research findings indicated that Muslim women in district Kupwara encounter various barriers in their pursuit of higher education, including inadequate parental education, unfavourable societal perceptions, disparaging remarks etc.*

Keywords: *Muslim Women, Higher Education, constraints, kupwara.*

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to empowering someone, a higher education is crucial. It is a secret behind the social, cultural, economic, and political development of a country. It develops a person's abilities, broadens his knowledge, and gets him ready for a career that can advance his family's and the nation's growth. For everyone, regardless of gender, caste, religion, or creed, it is extremely important. It helps in landing a prominent job, which not only helps someone grow as a person but also enhances their financial situation. Higher education is not only about earning a degree or getting a good job but it improves skills, and develops critical thinking abilities that help a person to solve day-to-day life problems. It helps a person to understand his obligations, which promotes the growth of the family, society, and country. When considering the overall number of institutions and enrolment, India's higher education system leads the global field. Although around 36.6 billion students are attending higher education, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) which stands at just 25.8%—is still incredibly low (2017-18).

Equality between educated men and women is essential for a country's social, economic, cultural, and political advancement and each has the equal right to pursue higher education to reach their full potential. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Give me an educated mother I promise you the birth of a civilized nation". Women play a key role in moulding the family and society (Chingtham and Guite). For the overall development of a nation. it is fundamental to give women every opportunity to attain knowledge and education, it is her right bestowed by the Almighty (Abbasi,2009). However, Indian women continue to face numerous obstacles in

obtaining an education in general and higher education in particular in the twenty-first century, with Muslim women facing even more difficulties. Unlike women from other religious groups, Muslim women face double challenges due to their gender and belonging to one of the second-largest weaker sections in society. Hence, they fall behind in almost every aspect of life. Muslim women were labeled as being less educated by several committees and commissions, including the Gopal Krishna committee in 1983. Regrettably, this label has stuck around even in the twenty-first century. There's no denying that the Indian government established numerous commissions and committees to investigate the causes of Muslim women's low educational attainment. While many of their recommendations have been acted upon, the situation has not improved. The gross enrolment ratio of Muslims in general and Muslim women, in particular, is still low in higher education even though the government of India is working very hard to improve their education at all levels (MHRD,2013).

Women's Education in Kashmir

Kashmir, which has a complicated socio-political environment, is situated in the northern region of the Indian subcontinent. In addition to its great geopolitical importance, it is distinguished by its distinctive cultural diversity and historical heritage. Every aspect of Kashmir, including education, has been impacted by the protracted political conflict. It is critical to comprehend women's educational experiences from pre-modern to modern times to address various educational barriers and comprehend the current state of women's education in Kashmir.

Women's educational status was extremely depressing before independence. Women were prohibited from pursuing higher

education. They experienced inequality, discrimination, and oppression. While they were within the four walls of the house, they were only to do housework. Even though women were capable of and passionate about learning, people did not think that women's education was important or worth paying any attention to. Women's education in this state persisted for a long period until missionaries began to pay attention to women's education and made an effort to educate every woman. In 1893–1895, the Christian missionary society founded the first girls' school in Kashmir. People initially disapproved of this school and prohibited their daughters from enrolling there because of their strict beliefs. They feared that the education of girls would corrupt them and that the missionary school would introduce Western ideas into their minds. Nevertheless, missionaries persisted in their efforts to influence people, eventually guiding them toward women's education despite this criticism. The state council took no action to start women's education because of the Kashmiri people's propensity for it. It was restricted to private education. Their provision of funds for the establishment of two girls' schools in Srinagar did not occur until 1904. The Women's Welfare Trust, established in 1926, was instrumental in advancing women's education in Kashmir. The establishment of the first women's college in 1950 on Maulana Azad Road in Srinagar brought about a significant revolution in women's education in the region by expanding access to higher education. Nawa Kadal Srinagar saw the establishment of another women's college in 1961. Dr. Mahalakshmi correctly stated at the All-India Conference that "Missionaries have done more for women's education than the government itself."

After independence, Kashmir saw several federal, state, and local interventions and initiatives aimed at advancing women's education. Some commissions and committees were established to collect information regarding the different impediments that women come across in pursuing an education and to propose insightful recommendations and ideas for overcoming those obstacles. In addition, several initiatives were launched to promote women's education and improve the educational standing of women in Kashmir, like *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*, Kashmir Education Initiative, Girls Education Task Force, and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. As per the census 2011, women's literacy rate in Kashmir has undoubtedly improved (56.43%), but it remains lower than their male counterparts (76.75%) and women from other states. The information shows that there is still more work to be done to enhance the educational status of women in Kashmir

The current paper aims to investigate the various cultural constraints that Muslim women in Jammu and Kashmir's Kupwara district encounter while pursuing higher education. Kupwara is one of the most remote and distant places in Kashmir, situated in the northwest of Kashmir valley. Women's access to higher education is made more difficult by the region's difficult geography and diverse population. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the various cultural constraints that prevent Muslim women of Kupwara from pursuing higher education and offer possible ways to address these constraints.

Review of related literature

The issues Muslim girls face when selecting professional courses were the subject of an investigation by Zamir and Ilyas (2022). The researchers discovered that poverty, lack of parental guidance and

counselling, and gender discrimination are the main obstacles preventing Muslim girls from pursuing higher education, in addition to other educational difficulties. Another barrier to the education of Muslim girls is the imposition of multiple social boundaries.

Muslim girls believe that insecurity, social and learning issues, parents who lack literacy, lack of female teachers and separate schools, and money issues are not barriers to pursuing higher education, according to a study by Shah et al. (2022). Nonetheless, they firmly feel that obstacles to their higher education are gender discrimination, poor hostel facilities, excessive workloads, inappropriate teaching techniques, and the absence of laboratory facilities.

A study conducted in Jammu and Kashmir's district of Bandipora, Ashraf and Kumar (2021) discovered that Muslim girls face numerous barriers to pursuing higher education, including their parents' low educational attainment, preference for boys' education, and joint family structure.

Bhat (2020) conducted a study on the challenges faced by Muslim women in higher education in the district of Kulgam, Jammu and Kashmir. The study brings to light that the main obstacles Muslim women face in obtaining higher education are the negative attitudes of society and parents toward girls' education, low parental education levels, poverty, gender discrimination, misinterpretation of religious literature, observance of *purdah*, and prolonged political conflict.

Examining the obstacles rural girls encounter when attempting to pursue higher education Selvan (2017) notes that girls who want to pursue higher education encounter many socioeconomic, cultural, religious, and political barriers. The study emphasizes how discrimination against girls in the home, in society, and in educational institutions limits their opportunities to pursue higher education. Moreover, some factors, including poverty, scarcity of appropriate educational institutions, a dearth of hostels for rural girls, the *purdah* tradition, early child marriage, and societal attitudes that discourage girls' education, prevent girls from pursuing higher education. The study also discovered that parents' and girls' unawareness of the value of higher education is a factor that halt girls from attending college.

A study by Jahan and Ahmed (2016) sought to ascertain the causes of Indian Muslims' low educational attainment. The study concluded that the Muslim population in India is educationally behind because of several factors, including low socioeconomic status, a lack of awareness of the value of education, poor Muslim leadership, schools located in remote areas, a lack of girls' schools, and insecurity.

Theoretical framework

Barriers to Muslim women's education are not the result of a single factor; rather, they are the result of a combination of social, economic, cultural, political, religious, and geographic factors. As a result, the current study uses Kimberle Crenshaw's 1989 intersectionality theory, which offers a solid framework for examining the different obstacles that Muslim women in Jammu and Kashmir's Kupwara district encounter when seeking higher education. Understanding the various identities that a person possesses—religion, caste, race, and gender, for example—and how these collective identities shape their lives are the goals of

intersectionality theory. According to the intersectionality theory, Muslim women's issues should be viewed from the perspective of multiple identities rather than just one. According to the theory, discrimination based on the aforementioned identities and oppressions, such as racism, classism, and sexism, presents challenges for Muslim women in addition to gender-based ones. This study attempts to illustrate the cultural barriers Muslim women in Kupwara have to overcome to pursue higher education by using this framework.

Methodology

Research design

The current study attempts to undertake a thorough investigation into different cultural constraints that Muslim women encounter when attempting to further their education. Thus, in the current study, a descriptive survey design has been employed to portray the different cultural constraints faced by Muslim women in getting an education. Descriptive Research Design allows a researcher to use a systematic and structured approach to inquire about a particular problem. It enables the researcher to gain insights into real-world phenomena and pave the way to identify and investigate further areas.

Sample

The sample for the study consists of 30 college-going Muslim women. The sample was selected from five government degree colleges in the Kupwara district. A simple random technique was employed in selecting the sample from five-degree colleges.

Methods of Data Collection

The data from the respondents has been collected through a self-designed semi-structured interview schedule.

Data Analyses Techniques

For the current study, only qualitative data was gathered from respondents. Therefore, a theme-based approach (Braun and Clarke,2006) was utilized to evaluate and decipher the data that had been gathered. This gave significance to the data and facilitated the researcher to produce and recognize relevant codes, themes, and patterns in reaching out the conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

To find out the various constraints, it has been revealed that not one, but many, including socioeconomic, cultural, political, and familial factors restrict Muslim women's access to education. These results contradict the traditional statements that used a single lens to investigate a single problem and overlooked other factors. After analysing and interpreting the data four major themes emerge as crucial in understanding these constraints. These themes are given below to provide a detailed overview of these constraints.

Impact of parental education level

The educational attainment of parents has a noteworthy impact on the education of their offspring. The excellent educational backgrounds of parents point their children in the right educational direction. Their education has a positive impact on their children's education and professional development (Michael Beenstock,2005). The study's findings indicate that parents with little or no education impair their children's education, especially of daughters'. They believe that girls' education is a waste of money because they are unaware of how important it is. Rather than their daughters, the focus is on their son's education. They assume that a

college education fails to enhance their daughters' social status or economic opportunities, so they dissuade and demotivate their daughters from going to college. The parents have come to this conclusion on the grounds of their observations of the socioeconomic standing of highly educated men and women in their community. It makes clear that the incapacity of education to empower women hinders the education of Muslim women in and of itself. This finding is also supported by (Bhat,2020) ;(Purewala & Hashmi,2006);(Nassar & Srinivasan,2023), and (Noorjahan,2022)

Lack of educational resources at home

Academic goals can be attained with the help of efficient home-based learning resources. These resources make it easier for students to meet their academic objectives. Following the findings of the study, the scantiness of educational resources at home prevents Muslim women from pursuing higher education or presents them with several challenges. The study conducted by Paul and Das (2020) also supports the finding.

Lack of a conducive home environment

Home environment greatly influences one's education. It has an impact on academic performance and total accomplishment. In conformity with the data, Muslim women who pursue education face many challenges because of the lack of a healthy home environment. The participants disclosed that their home environment is stressful on account of their parents' unhealthy relationship and their older siblings' unemployment, which keeps them from focusing on their studies.

Lack of hope in education

This theme sheds light on the importance that participants believe education has in landing a job. It illustrates how much participants believe education has improved their socioeconomic circumstances. The results show that participants do not think education is a good way to advance their socio-economic standing. They contend that the dearth of employment opportunities has diminished the appeal of pursuing further education (Ahmad,2016).

Socio-economic and cultural barriers

The study revealed that other significant obstacles preventing Muslim women from pursuing higher education include unfavourable societal attitudes, disparaging remarks about women's education, unstable financial situations, unhealthy parent-child dynamics, harassment fears, and gender-based discrimination. In addition, the research shows that Muslim women who aspire to pursue higher education face considerable challenges because of the prolonged political turmoil in Kashmir, additional to demographic concerns in Kupwara, and inadequate public transportation. Importantly, only one respondent feels that religious norms are impeding her ability to succeed academically; the other respondents do not think that religious norms affect their ability to succeed academically in any way which is also verified by (McClendon et al., 2018); (Malik, 2023). This implies that the primary obstacles to Muslim women's education are social, cultural, and political issues rather than religious ones.

Conclusion

The present study aims to expose the cultural barriers that impede Muslim women from pursuing higher education. Based on the study, there are a variety of complex factors that hinder Muslim

Women from pursuing higher education, including low parental education levels, the inadequacy of educational resources, unfavourable home environments, a lack of hope for education, and other socioeconomic and cultural factors, etc. The study also reveals that religious conventions have no bearing on Muslim women's ability to pursue higher education. All of the participants believed that their religion does not demoralize them in any way, but rather encourages them to pursue ever-higher levels of education. The study concludes that all of the aforementioned problems must be resolved quickly to guarantee Muslim women have easy access to higher education. Understanding the difficulties Muslim women in Kupwara face in the classroom is also crucial to removing all of the obstacles that taken together keep them from pursuing higher education.

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