

Educational Rights and Status of Muslim Women as Provided in Islam

Afreen Jawed¹, Dr. Gaurav Sikka²

¹Research Scholar, Patliputra University, Patna 20

²Assistant Professor, Patliputra University, Patna 20

ABSTRACT

Education is considered a universal human right, crucial for individual success and economic prosperity in developing nations and worldwide. In Islam, education is viewed as integral to religious freedom and a right equally afforded to all believers. Globally, education is recognized as a fundamental entitlement for both genders.

Islamic teachings emphasize the imperative nature of acquiring knowledge and education. This duty is incumbent upon every Muslim, regardless of gender. However, significant disparities persist between Quranic teachings and their practical implementation, particularly concerning the education of girls and women.

In Muslim-majority countries, literacy and educational attainment rates for girls and women rank among the lowest worldwide. Centuries of patriarchal and traditional values have placed heavy burdens on women in these communities. Despite progress in women's education rights in Muslim-majority states and globally, true equality remains elusive. Islamic teachings explicitly condemn gender discrimination, yet many Muslim-majority countries are among the lowest ranked in global gender equality indices.

Women must recognize and understand their right to education and be sufficiently encouraged and empowered to pursue it. Education plays a crucial role in addressing discrimination against women in Islamic societies and is essential for fostering equality in a modern and progressive society.

Keywords: Education, Gender, Muslim, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right that is indispensable for the exercise of all other human rights. It fosters personal freedom and contributes significantly to development. Educating females serves as a potent instrument capable of lifting nations out of poverty and driving economic growth and social advancement. Empowered through education, women can overcome their circumstances and self-doubt, gaining greater autonomy in their lives. In Muslim communities, girls and women must receive education that stimulates critical thinking and fosters new perspectives on people and events.

Islamic law and international treaties establish legal obligations concerning the right to education. These laws and agreements aim to promote and enhance the right of every individual to access high-quality education, free from discrimination or exclusion. Islamic governments and communities have a responsibility under the Qur'an and international treaties to fulfill these obligations, ensuring equitable access to quality education and implementing effective strategies for its provision and oversight.

Education for women brings numerous advantages. Providing girls and women with education helps break the cycle of poverty: educated women are less likely to marry early and more likely to send their children to school. When all children have access to quality education rooted in human rights and gender equality, it creates a ripple effect of opportunity that influences future generations. Closing the gender gap in education enhances overall gender equality, which is crucial both in principle and for ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all individuals regardless of gender. Despite progress in some Muslim-majority communities, many still lag in gender equality in education, presenting opportunities for improvement. Muslim communities, both men and women, should promote the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and the Quran to encourage the education of girls and women. By doing so, communities can prosper collectively. Acquiring knowledge is essential for individuals to have a foundational understanding and to act according to religious principles. Islam places a significant emphasis on education and knowledge, advocating for both men's and women's pursuit and application of knowledge. Therefore, knowledge is a fundamental pillar supporting the structure of Islam.

Islam and Education for Muslim Women

Acquiring knowledge is a duty for every Muslim, regardless of gender. Islamic scholars unanimously agree that the first word revealed in the Qur'an was "Iqra," meaning "proclaim" or "Read." Knowledge is integral to the Islamic faith, and the Qur'an emphasizes that the pursuit of education and acquisition of knowledge are obligations for both men and women. For instance, Qur'an verse 35:28 states, "Those who fear Allah among His servants are those who know." The Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad also emphasize the importance of seeking knowledge.

For every Muslim, seeking knowledge is a duty, as stated in Hadith: "Seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, Man or woman," and "One who treads a path in search of knowledge has his path to Paradise made easy by God..." Additionally, Qur'an verses 39:9 and 7:52 affirm the importance of knowledge: "...Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endued with understanding that receive admonition." Similarly, Qur'an verse 16:89 emphasizes the value of knowledge: "For We had certainly sent unto them a Book, Based on knowledge, Which We explained In detail – a guide And a mercy To all who believe."

Together, the Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Prophet promote education and the acquisition of knowledge for all Muslims, without distinction based on gender. There is no indication in these teachings that women are inferior or unequal in regard to education and acquiring knowledge. The Islamic faith grants women the right to pursue education and underscores its value for both genders. However, this principle is not always reflected in the current state of women's education and literacy rates in many Muslim-majority communities.

Female Education in the Quran

The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of acquiring and sharing knowledge unequivocally. In its first revelation, Allah commands: "Read in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Generous, who taught through the pen; taught man what he did not know" (Quran 96:1-5). This verse underscores that acquiring knowledge is a universal responsibility for all humans, regardless of their gender, age, or race. Therefore, attributing the pursuit of education to any particular gender is unfair and unwarranted.

In another verse, Allah distinguishes between those who are knowledgeable and those who are not: “Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?” (Quran 39:9). This verse makes no distinction based on gender; it applies universally to all people who seek knowledge and those who do not.

In another instance, Allah addresses men but intends the entirety of humanity. Allah states: “(This is) a Book (the Quran) which we have sent down to you, full of blessings that they may ponder over its Verses, and that men of understanding may remember.” (Quran 38:29) It’s important to note that in this verse, the pronoun used is masculine, addressing humanity as a whole, a convention seen in various other parts of the Quran where Allah addresses both men and women using the masculine form. This is why women are also obligated to practice fundamental aspects of Islam such as prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, and almsgiving, even though these obligations are often expressed in masculine terms.

The essence of this verse is to encourage people to ponder, reflect, and comprehend, using their intellect to understand deeply. There is no need for differentiation between men and women in this context. The Quran does not restrict the meaning of the verse; rather, it broadens its applicability to encompass all people of understanding, without specifying any particular community other than the attribute of understanding that is accessible to all, including women.

Female Education in Hadith

In addition to these Quranic teachings, there are numerous instances where Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) emphasized the importance of knowledge without favoring men over women. In a hadith, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: “Seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim.” (Sunan Ibn Majah, 224). This tradition indicates that acquiring knowledge is not merely a right but a duty incumbent upon all Muslims, regardless of gender. Importantly, the hadith does not use gender-specific pronouns.

Similarly, on another occasion, the Prophet ﷺ explained how Allah facilitates the path of those who seek knowledge, stating: “If anyone travels on a path in search of knowledge, Allah will make easy for them the path to Paradise.” (Al-Jami al-Sahih, 4, 2074, 2699). This hadith underscores the superiority of those who seek knowledge over those who do not, irrespective of whether they are men or women.

In another instance, the Prophet separately emphasized the education of girls and the reward for teaching them. Abu Musa Al-Ash’ari narrated in al-Jami al-Sahih that the Prophet said, “He who has a slave-girl and teaches her good manners and improves her education, and then manumits and marries her, will receive a double reward; and any slave who observes Allah’s right and his master’s right will receive a double reward.” (Al-Jami’ al-Sahih, 46:723)

It’s important to note that this Hadith was conveyed during a time when slavery was permissible in early Islam. Therefore, it underscores the significance placed on educating girls from the very beginnings of Islam in the 7th century. This principle was consistently reinforced as Islam expanded. Many such traditions encourage the pursuit of knowledge universally, without prioritizing any specific gender or community, but emphasizing the obligation for all humankind who fall under the category of Muslims. The viewpoint expressed in the Qur’an and Hadith regarding the education of women is the authentic position of Islam. Islam and its traditions do not prohibit women from seeking knowledge; rather, it is individuals who deviate from the true teachings, restricting women from pursuing education. Throughout history, there have been numerous examples where women were recognized as scholars and educators.

Female Scholars in Islam

Consider A'isha al-Siddiqah (may Allah be pleased with her), the youngest wife of the Prophet, who was a Hadith narrator. She became a prominent figure in Islamic knowledge after Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) having reported approximately 2,210 traditions—an achievement that requires extensive knowledge.

On another occasion, 'A'isha bint Talha (may Allah be pleased with her), who served A'isha al-Siddiqah, described how people from every city would come to A'isha al-Siddiqah to ask questions. As A'isha bint Talha served A'isha al-Siddiqah, people would also present gifts and letters through her. A'isha bint Talha would then convey these questions to A'isha al-Siddiqah and provide answers on her behalf. This account underscores the importance of universal access to education, as A'isha al-Siddiqah's servant was literate and involved in scholarly exchanges.

In addition to these, there are numerous distinguished female Muslim scholars whose accomplishments often stand in the shadow of their male counterparts. For instance, Nafisa Bint Al-Hassan, who taught two of the most eminent scholars in history, Abu Abdullah Muhammad Idris Al-Shafi'I and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal; Umm Al-Darda Al-Soghra, who lectured both men and women in the Mosque of Damascus; Shuhdah al-Baghdadiyyah, renowned as Fakhr an-Nisa (Pride of Womankind) and known as "The Writer of Baghdad"; Fatima al-Samarqandi, a prominent Hanafi jurist and hadith scientist in Syria; and Fatima Al-Fudayliyya, teacher of notable students such as Sheikh Omar Al-Hanafi and Sheikh Muhammad Salih. In the contemporary world, there are numerous examples of female scholars emerging from various parts of the world and diverse backgrounds.

Female Education in Muslim Countries

In Islam, there is no gender-based preference when it comes to accessing education. However, there exists a growing misconception among people of other religions that Islam prohibits Muslim girls from receiving an education. In certain Muslim-majority countries like Nigeria, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Yemen, women face patriarchal norms and varying degrees of restrictions on economic participation, which hinder their status in terms of acquiring and sharing knowledge within society.

Conversely, the approaches taken by other countries such as Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, and Libya have confounded the global community by significantly reducing gender disparities in education and promoting gender equality in primary school enrollment. There has been notable progress in achieving parity between girls and boys in countries like Indonesia, where the proportion of girls enrolled in schools has increased. A similar trend is observed in Bangladesh, where girls outnumber boys in both primary and secondary school enrollments.

The uncertainty arises from the fact that some countries endorse women's pursuit of education while others do not. This disparity does not stem from differing principles but from varying practices in implementing them. This raises the question of what the Islamic perspective truly is regarding education for women, and whether Islam marginalizes women in terms of acquiring and sharing knowledge. To find answers, it is essential to delve into Islamic traditions and principles based on the Islamic viewpoint.

The Current State of Women's Education in Muslim-Majority Countries

In Muslim-majority countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, there exists a noticeable gender disparity in literacy and education rates. The high levels of illiteracy among women in these states directly contribute to their lower educational attainment. Data from the CIA World Factbook

highlights the stark contrast in literacy rates between men and women in several Muslim-majority countries:

Afghanistan: male 52%, female 24.2%

Egypt: male 82.2%, female 65.4%

Iran: male 91.2%, female 82.5%

Iraq: male 85.7%, female 73.7%

Pakistan: male 69.5%, female 45.8%

Saudi Arabia: male 97%, female 91.1%

Yemen: male 85.1%, female 55%

Malaysia: male 96.2%, female 93.2%

Tunisia: male 89.6%, female 74.2%

Indonesia: male 96.3%, female 91.5%

The data clearly illustrates that in these countries, there is a significant gender gap in literacy rates. This disparity in literacy rates directly translates into differences in educational opportunities between men and women. Therefore, where there is a gender gap in literacy rates, there is also a corresponding gap in educational attainment rates.

According to a UNESCO report, Afghanistan had only 72 girls enrolled for every 100 boys in primary education. The regional gender parity index for primary enrollment in the Arab States was 0.93 in 2012, indicating progress but not yet achieving parity. Many countries in the Arab States have shown significant improvement in reducing gender disparities in primary education, despite starting from a position of severe disadvantage for girls. For instance, Afghanistan, which ranked lowest in 1999, increased its estimated primary gross enrolment ratio for girls from less than 4% in 1999 to 87% in 2012, raising its gender parity index from 0.08 to 0.72. Countries like Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal also made notable progress during the periods of 1999-2012 and 1990-1999. Comoros, Morocco, and Pakistan have built on progress since the 1990s towards achieving gender parity, as highlighted in the UNESCO report, which ranks Muslim-majority communities among the lowest in terms of gender equality.

Furthermore, the Muslim world's performance in the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) was even worse compared to previous years, with 17 of the bottom 20 countries having Muslim-majority populations. The report measures disparities between men and women across 145 countries in four key areas: political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival.

According to the World Bank, approximately half of the world's out-of-school females reside in 10 countries: Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, Philippines, Bangladesh, Niger, Yemen, and Burkina Faso. Among these, seven of the ten countries with the highest number of out-of-school females are Muslim-majority states. The World Bank also identified the ten countries with the largest gender disparities in primary enrolment rates, including Afghanistan, Chad, Yemen, Pakistan, Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, and Guinea, of which seven are Muslim-majority states.

These statistical findings from international reports underscore that gender inequality in education and literacy rates is a significant issue in Muslim-majority communities, as well as a global concern for girls' and women's education worldwide.

International Law on Educational Equality for Women

Gender discrimination and inequality in education are prevalent issues in Muslim-majority communities.

The importance of education has been underscored by several international agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Program of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, recognized that women's literacy is crucial for empowering their participation in societal decision-making and enhancing family well-being. Additionally, the United Nations has outlined the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), emphasizing education's pivotal role in fostering democratic societies and laying the groundwork for sustainable economic development.

In particular, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) defines discrimination against women as "...any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made based on sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field."

By ratifying the Convention, states commit to implementing a series of measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, including adherence to Article 10, which mandates equal opportunities in education for female students and promotes co-education. The Convention also ensures equal access to sports, scholarships, and grants, and requires efforts to reduce dropout rates among female students. States that have ratified CEDAW are obligated to take proactive steps to end discrimination against women. This includes integrating the principle of gender equality into their legal systems, abolishing discriminatory laws, and enacting new legislation if necessary to prohibit discrimination. They are also required to ensure that individuals, organizations, or companies do not engage in discrimination against women.

Out of 194 countries, 187 have ratified CEDAW. Nearly all Muslim-majority states, except Iran, Somalia, and Sudan, have signed or ratified this international treaty. This means that 44 out of 47 Muslim-majority states are parties to CEDAW and are bound to comply with its provisions, particularly Article 10.

According to the World Bank, girls currently make up 48 percent of global primary school enrolment, while boys account for 52 percent. Despite a decrease in this gender gap over recent decades, girls still comprise 55 percent of all out-of-school children. This means that, on average, for every 100 boys out of school, there are 122 girls.

This issue is not confined solely to Muslim-majority communities; educational inequality is a global problem addressed by numerous international treaties. Worldwide, female enrolment at the primary level has increased from 87 percent in 1990 to 94 percent in 2004. In many countries, more boys than girls are enrolled in school. However, progress is slow and particularly challenging in Muslim-majority communities, as highlighted by the aforementioned statistics. The right to education is a universal human right. Gender inequality in education is a global issue but is notably prevalent in Muslim-majority states.

Current Issues – Modern Oppression in Women's Education

The education of girls and women in Muslim-majority communities has seen improvements in literacy and enrollment rates, yet significant societal barriers persist, hindering their access to education. Terrorist groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Boko Haram in Nigeria, have notably impeded girls' education in these regions.

In the Middle East, girls and young women face particularly severe challenges in pursuing education. Afghanistan stands out as one of the most difficult places globally for women, with high illiteracy rates and limited access to schooling beyond primary levels. Similarly, Pakistan exhibits low education rates among women, with significant disparities in female employment opportunities.

During the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, girls' schools were destroyed, and female students faced violent reprisals, including acid attacks. Women were banned from formal education, prompting clandestine efforts by educators to continue teaching girls in defiance of Taliban decrees. The Taliban's attempted assassination of Malala Yousafzai in 2012, a Pakistani advocate for girls' education, sparked international condemnation and scrutiny of Pakistan's education system for women.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Taliban justified their actions by citing their interpretation of Islam, claiming that educating girls goes against their beliefs. This justification was used to support their violent tactics, which included bombing schools for girls and attacking girls who attended school with acid. Political movements like the Taliban have severely restricted Muslim women's access to education in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Boko Haram is an Islamic militant group based in Nigeria. Their goal is to establish an Islamic state through insurgency. They enforce an extreme interpretation of Islam that forbids Muslims from participating in Western political and social activities, including women's education. In 2014, Boko Haram gained global attention when they abducted over 200 schoolgirls from Chibok, Nigeria. They later pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in March 2015 and renamed themselves the Islamic State in West Africa.

From the shooting of Malala Yousafzai by the Taliban to the abduction of over 200 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, these incidents highlight extreme measures taken by Islamic extremists to resist what they perceive as the Westernization of Middle Eastern culture. These examples underscore the real and life-threatening challenges girls and women face when they seek to exercise their right to education.

Empowerment Strategy for Women

The importance of women's education as a catalyst for economic growth is widely recognized, as investing in education serves to alleviate poverty and foster development. Governments globally prioritize human capital investment through educational provisions. The 2006 World Bank Gender Action Plan underscored education as pivotal for achieving gender equality and economic advancement. It highlighted that female education significantly contributes to economic growth and poverty alleviation. Beyond economic gains, investing in women's education yields substantial social benefits. Therefore, prioritizing primary schooling investments, particularly for women, is imperative.

In Muslim-majority societies, there is a pressing need to educate both men and women, emphasizing women's rights to education. Societal encouragement for women to exercise their educational rights is crucial, especially considering historical gender disparities. Addressing educational and overall equality for women hinges on education and empowerment, requiring collaborative efforts from men and women alike. Legislation mandating basic education for girls and women is essential, but it must be accompanied by supportive and informed approaches to enable genuine life choices.

Educating society about the benefits of empowering women, including improved family and community health and productivity, is crucial for future generations. Central to this effort is educating boys and men about the rights of girls and women and equipping them to support their daughters, wives, and mothers in pursuing their educational rights effectively.

Educational reform in Muslim communities should ensure equal access to education for women, expanding beyond traditional roles and encompassing active participation in social, economic, and community spheres. Many women face barriers to education due to a lack of economic and social support. Literacy among women not only enhances their independence by broadening access to diverse gender

roles but also empowers them to understand and assert their rights, fostering their active and productive engagement in society. Improving literacy and educational attainment rates for women in Muslim-majority countries is crucial for advancing women's rights and promoting their societal and household roles.

Achieving gender equality necessitates investing in the education of both girls and boys while maintaining a balanced approach. Although efforts to enhance girls' education have shown significant progress in some regions, concerns arise about potential declines in male enrollment. Programs aimed at empowering Muslim women through education can effectively prepare them for leadership roles and contribute to their overall well-being, linking empowerment with economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions beyond the educational realm.

Empowerment of girls and women in education signifies ensuring dignity and integrating rights and well-being into a cohesive framework. It involves leveraging educational settings as platforms for empowerment and cultivating the qualities and awareness associated with education and empowerment throughout broader societal contexts.

Muslim societies can implement policies and initiatives aimed at increasing the enrollment of women and girls in education. These efforts should focus on empowering women through addressing societal norms, institutional practices, and equitable distribution of educational resources. Beyond classrooms, ongoing reinforcement of girls' values at home is crucial. Training and supporting educational staff to recognize and mitigate the impact of gender roles and stereotypes on students is essential. Families also need education on the rights and benefits of women's education to foster supportive environments. Providing a safe and nurturing educational environment that boosts girls' confidence and academic achievements is pivotal in breaking the cycle of discrimination.

A more challenging proposal involves revisiting the Qur'an to reassess its value system. This reevaluation could lead to fresh perspectives and norms. The Qur'an, as the word of Allah, should serve as the primary source for interpreting women's rights. Exploring its core teachings alongside other Islamic sources like hadith and shari'ah is crucial. Advocates for gender reform argue that historical patriarchal systems, rather than the Qur'an itself, led to the decline in women's status. Reaffirming the Qur'an's centrality in determining women's roles requires careful reevaluation and reflection to accurately reflect the Prophet's teachings and his stance on women's rights.

Conclusion

According to the sacred and holy book of the Qur'an, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and numerous international laws and treaties, Muslim girls and women are entitled to equal access to education. However, in many Muslim-majority communities, there exists a significant gap between this theoretical right and its practical implementation. The disparity in literacy and education between men and women in these communities is well-documented. While progress towards gender equality in education has been made, it remains slow.

Muslim women have historically faced oppression and discrimination, yet education and empowerment, particularly targeted towards women in Muslim-majority communities, are crucial for societal success and growth. Education is not only a fundamental human right that leads to empowerment and awareness but also plays a pivotal role in economic and political stability. True empowerment for women includes the ability to make informed choices, which education facilitates. Without awareness of their rights to education, the cycle of marginalization continues.

The education of girls and women is vital for the development of Muslim-majority communities globally. Education is a powerful tool for empowerment, especially for girls and women, as it opens doors to opportunities and positively impacts families. Both men and women must be educated about women's rights and the importance of encouragement to ensure equal access to education.

Muslim authorities must address historical discrimination and oppression to empower Muslim girls and women through education, enabling them to contribute fully to society.

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