# Factors in the Path of Academic Progress: A Systematic Review on Muslim Women's Education

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**Abstract**

This paper is a systematic review of the literature, based on peer-reviewed findings on Muslim women's educational status, with particular attention to the factors impeding the academic growth. Methodologically, a balanced approach (both qualitative and quantitative) was adopted to review the academic progress of Muslim women. After a thorough review of 28 peer-reviewed journals, only 10 articles were remained. PRISMA guidelines were followed for appraisal of the articles. Synthesis of the articles exploring the factors, published from 2008 to 2023, suggest that socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-religious factors have great impact on Muslim women's education. However, impact of the factors has been reduced at school level in recent years but prevalent at higher education. Our review concludes that most of the studies focus on factors and problems but hardly any explication is developed how to minimize the impact. Comparative analysis of educational status of Muslims with respect to other Muslim majority countries can be done in future to understand how education impact on Muslims towards reducing gender gap.

**Keywords:** *Muslim Women, Education, Factors, academic progress, Systematic review*

## Introduction

Literacy rate of Muslim female is only 51.9%, which is lowest in compared to other religious communities of India (Government of India, 2011). The commitment to achieve gender equality (SDG 5) and ensure quality education to all (SDG 4) is reiterated in Sustainable Development Goal. But India is far behind to achieve the target SDG 5 compared to other SDGs. In India, the graph of performance score of SDG 4 declined by one point from 2019 to 2020 (*NITI Aayog Releases SDG India Index and Dashboard 2020–21*). However, the world

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will also fail to attain the goal, if additional support is not ensured in near future (Patterson, 2015).

In a land of diversity, Muslims constitutes 14 per cent of the population (Government of India, 2011). Low academic participation of Muslims in general (57 percent literate) and Muslim women in particular (51 percent literate) deliberately draws the attention of the nation and of many researchers. Conducted researches on educational backwardness of Muslim were eye opener for the policy makers and for the implementers. Accordingly, provisions and interventions were made to ensure educational upliftment of the largest minority of India. In 2006, Sachar Committee was formed and it came with its report by highlighting the major issues of Muslims' academic backwardness. However, the studies brought into light the educational condition of Muslim women in India that is more vulnerable than its male counterpart (Hossain, 2013). In this study, to be reported, various factors from different studies of India that affect the educational attainment of Muslim women at different level of education. This study will help to provide critical synthesis of the literature and updated assessment of recent research that explicitly focus on finding different factors that affect the educational attainment of Muslim girls.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

This study aims to provide a systematic review of the study that explores Muslim women's education in India.  The questions that guided the review are-

1.  What are the factors have been categorized by research studies that led to low academic progress of women in India with their other religious counterpart in India?

2.  What role played by the government to improve Muslim women's education in India?

This review is relevant to analyze the research gap on Muslim women's education, associated with existing factors impeding their development and empowerment.

**Methodology**

Literature review is an essential feature of academic research. Structured literature review (SLR) is a systematic method of defining; exploring and organizing a body of work to structure a study to analyze by systemically synthesizing the existing research work for further comprehension and it defines its boundaries by demarcating what to be included and excluded (Bisogno et al., 2018). Inclusion and exclusion criteria of systematic literature review of this study are ascertained by its content, time period and methodology of the study. By following the principles of Tranfield et al. (2003), the study followed three stages. At the first stage, the researcher specifies the goal and objective of the study by delineating the subject area. On the

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next stage, researcher reviews the literature methodologically by maintaining inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, the researcher analyzes and disseminates the result (Makarem & Wang, 2019).

## Searching for Empirical Literature

For reviewing, three relevant bodies of literature were identified: Muslim women, Education, Issues and challenges. Specifically we were in search of article that focused on three bodies of knowledge. Google scholar and semantic scholar, two search engines were used to find relevant literature of our interest area. We searched renowned databases like Scopus, Directory of Open Access Journal (DOAJ), JSTOR for its multidisciplinary nature.  We used variations of different keywords, including "Muslim", "female", "women", "girl", "education", "academic", "achievement", "participation", "issues", "challenges", "problem", "attainment", "minority", "marginalized", "barrier", "India", "factors", "gender","backward", "Discrimination", "impediment", "obstacles", "level", "status" or "empowerment" to identify appropriate publication. Initially 62 publications were recorded, organized and analyzed to check our suitability criteria. Duplicate articles were removed and finally 28 articles were selected for the study. We intent to include research related to Muslim women's educational barrier and opportunities and through the exploration we recognized that the research on issues and opportunities on Muslim women is widely dispersed in India; henceforth, few works likely to present in the beyond the mentioned outline of our search.

## Screening The Literature

To answer two research questions, 28 selected articles were deliberately screened on the basis of formulated six inclusion criteria which help to identify the relevant research articles. Careful selections of the articles lead to build a comprehensive database of articles in research field.

## Inclusion Criteria-

1. For this study articles published in English were only selected.
2. The article included the studies which were peer-reviewed due to its authoritative indicators of the quality of the field (Aykol et al., 2012).
3. The articles focused on Muslim women written in Indian context are taken for the study as this study focus on Muslim women of India.
4. To update on the latest research on Muslim women's education in India, time frame from 2008 to 2023 was chosen. It reflects our attempt to produce a database on current scenario of Muslim women's educational attainment.
5. Qualitative and quantitative both studies; both approaches were included for the study.
6. The study included all the levels of education system.

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**Exclusion Criteria-**

Remaining 28 articles were reviewed further on the basis of following exclusion criteria-

1. Association of other issues of Muslim women, other than education were excluded from the study. By applying the exclusion criteria, 11 articles were eliminated.
2. The problem and concern of Indian Muslim is the centre of the study. Therefore, presence of other countries in the study becomes complex for analyzing.   6 articles were withdrawn due to this exclusion criterion.
3. Ineligible articles, reviews or commentaries were removed from the study.

 A total of 18 articles were eliminated after applying all three exclusion criteria. Finally, 10 articles remained for the review.
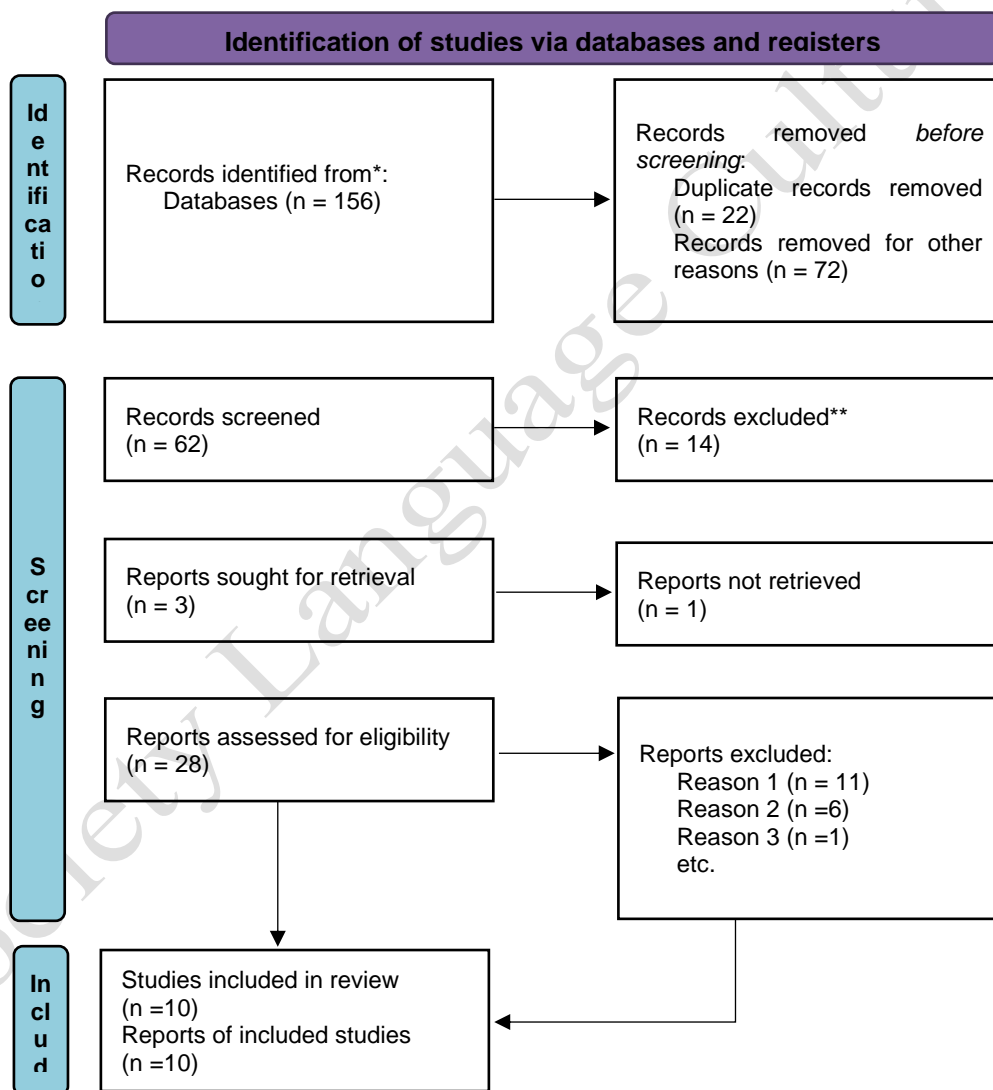
**Identification of studies via databases and registers**

**Identificatio**

Records identified from*:
Databases (n = 156)

Records removed *before screening*:
    Duplicate records removed (n = 22)
    Records removed for other reasons (n = 72)

**Screening**

Records screened
(n = 62)

Records excluded**
(n = 14)

Reports sought for retrieval
(n = 3)

Reports not retrieved
(n = 1)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n = 28)

Reports excluded:
    Reason 1 (n = 11)
    Reason 2 (n =6)
    Reason 3 (n =1)
    etc.

**Included**

Studies included in review
(n =10)
Reports of included studies
(n =10)

Fig. 1: PRISMA Flow diagram of Systematic Literature Review

**Data Management And Analysis**
Appraisal procedure and data extraction followed PRISMA guidelines. In Fig. 1, search and appraisal is shown in PRISMA flowchart.  Relevant information was extracted from articles to

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obtain data. All the ten papers were retrieved from Google Scholar. Summary details are given in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of retrieved data

| Author (s) and Date | Location (s) | Method | Key Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Narula. M 2014 | India | Qualitative Case Study | (a) The adverse socio-cultural and economic factors and it varies region or area wise. (b) Parents' negative attitude and low aspiration of Muslim women. |
| Islam. S & Siddiqui. L 2016 | India | Quantitative Survey | (a) Muslim female drop-out in upper-primary and matric classes due to marriage, poverty and work. (b) Economic condition is responsible for high drop-out of Muslim girls. |
| Sahala 2018 | India | Quantitative Survey | Major findings are- (a) Marriage, unemployment of parents, lack of educational institutions and job opportunities, gender disparity, superstitions and baseless customs impact Muslim girls' education. |
| Sengupta. R & Rooj. D, 2018 | India | Quantitative Secondary data | (a) Socio-economic and demographic factors. (b) Influence of geographical location, number of heads, household head's gender and educational status. |
| Unissa. I. 2018 | India | Mixed Method | (a) Social discrimination and social suppression. (b) Economical and infrastructural challenges. |
| Fatima. N 2020 | India | Qualitative | (a) Gender biasness, patriarchal mindset, radical perspective, community differences. (b) Policy failures are one of the major factors. |
| Saha. S | India | Quantitative Primary and Secondary data | (a) Economic condition of household, marriage and religious superstitious. |
| Khatun. R & Bhuyan. D 2022 | India | Quantitative Secondary data | (a) Poverty is one of the causes. (b) Social constraints. |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hossain. I 2013 | India | Mixed Method Primary and secondary data Relevant published literature | (a) Marriage and stereotype preconceived notion.<br>(b) Non-availability of school within reach, absence of girls' hostel and female teachers, lack of available scholarship for Muslim female. |
| Malik. A, 2023 | India | Mixed Method Secondary data and interview schedule | (a) Socio-cultural and religious factors.<br>(b) Poor socio-economic status. |

**Data Synthesis**

Out of 10 articles, 5 articles were quantitative in nature and rest had qualitative and mixed approach. Two quantitative studies relied on survey method; rest three were based on primary and secondary data. Few studies employed statistical methods to establish meaningful information from the primary data of the research study.

We performed a thematic analysis to develop categories from the data.  Ten articles were read extensively to find the words or phrases for; each article was open coded to derive a meaningful theme. The coding was followed to ensure strictness of analysis (Nolan & Garavan, 2015). Two authors assessed each included study simultaneously and on the basis of agreement and disagreement, themes were emerged from the codes (Lame, 2019). The process of grouping categories into themes was to ensure to get answer of the research question of Systematic literature review.

| Codes |
|---|
| Reservation, prevent, perform, measures, policy, proactive, protection, purpose, reduce, declare, support, practice, action, |

| Theme |
|---|
| **Government role, initiative and** |

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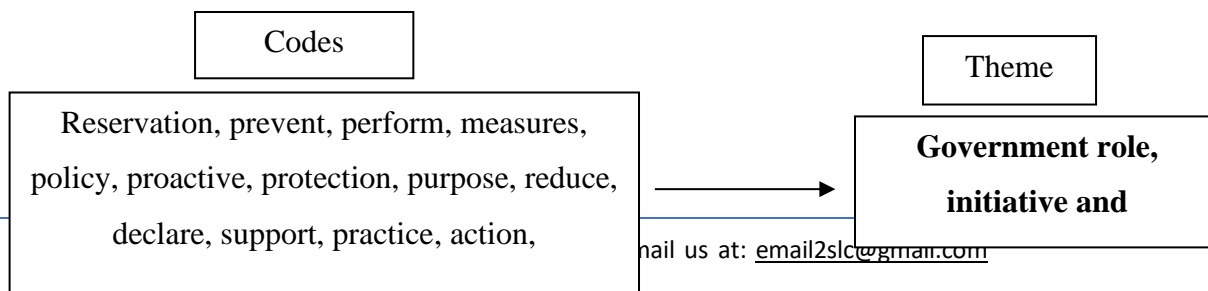A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

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Fig. 2: Visualization and example of emerging theme from codes

## Results

### Government Role, Initiative And Implementation

Government initiatives like National Policy on Education (NPE) promoted gender equality by implying education for all and the National Knowledge Commission (2005) emphasized ensuring enabling conditions for minorities to make a healthy school environment, both attempts seemed towards the educational development of Muslims in general without any gender discrimination (Fatima, 2020). Besides the advising body, National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI), the National Monitoring Committee on Minority Education, an expert committee was formed for the Modernization of Madrasa (An Islamic institution to provide education of religious knowledge as well as secular and modern knowledge) (Fatima, 2020).

Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan (SSA) and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), initiatives of Government ensured certain percentage of Minority share; both actions were towards educational development for all (Fatima, 2020). In addition, the announcement of the establishment of 20 percent of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (Central Government girls' schools) in minority-concentrated areas underlines the government's commitment to educating Muslim girls (Fatima, 2020). However, inter-state variation in educational development suggests that a uniform approach might not be successful in developing Muslim communities (Narula, 2014). The educational development of the Mulsim minority is much better in Maharashtra than Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh (Narula, 2014). Centrally sponsored schemes and program for minorities do not work uniformly in every part of India. Due to inefficient state schemes, state schools, concentrated in Muslim-majority areas are unable to meet national educational development goals (Fatima, 2020).

### Economic Status And Educational Opportunities

Out of ten articles, six articles explicitly mentioned economic factors responsible for poor academic backwardness of Muslims women (Khatun & Bhuyan, 2022; Narula, 2014; Malik, 2023; Sengupta & Rooj, 2018; Hossain, 2013). Empirical study on effect of household income on attendance of Muslim women in school shows that household income plays important role

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in determination of gender gap in Muslim education participation (Sengupta and Rooj, 2018). More explicitly it describes of male preference for educational opportunities with higher income status. On the contrary, the findings reveal that in low income status attendance in educational institutions decreases more for the male than female.

Another study throws light on socio-economic condition and educational status of Muslim women (Hossain, 2013). Muslim women's low participation in formal economy is highlighted but the factors behind is not pin-pointed due to low exploration and research on Muslim women. Though, low academic status in considered as one of the cause behind it. Poverty and unemployment are the major challenges for Muslim women's educational prospects, highlighted in the study of Unissa (2018). The secondary data of United Nations Development Programme and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative's global Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2018, shows that one in three Muslims is multi-dimensionally poor (Malik, 2023) and due to financial uncertainty Muslim females are mostly deprived from higher education.

## Social Constraints

### Early Marriage And Drop-Out

The association between the education of Muslim women and early marriage is highlighted in many studies (Malik 2023, Unissa 2018, Saha 2020). The result of a case study conducted in a district of West Bengal shows that Muslim women lag in achieving literacy due to early marriage (Saha 2020). Early marriages of girls lead to high drop-out at the school level. As an effect, girls lose interest in education (Fatima, 2020). The quantitative result on finding factors of Muslim female drop-out shows that large percentage (69.43 per cent) of Muslim girls drop-out due to marriage and rest discontinue due to poverty and work (Islam and Siddiqiui, 2016). In a survey at North Malabar, it was found that the majority of Muslim girls continue their education till higher secondary level but most of them discontinue their education after that and the reason is related to marriage (P. M. , 2018). The literacy rate of Kerala is the highest among the states of India and the higher education picture of Muslim girls of Malabar (Kerala) signifies that marriage is one of the major blocks in the path of academic progress of Muslim girls (Narula, 2014). When it comes to increasing the preparedness of Muslims in educational pursuits and the size of their educated population, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are leading the way (Narula 2014) but in terms of higher education, marriage exists as a roadblock to educational

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attainment and lead to drop-out; though not at the school level but at the college level (Narula 2014).

**Gender Biasness, Modern Education And Cultural Orthodoxy**

Gender disparity is clearly indicated as a reason of educational backwardness of Muslim community (Narula 2014). While girls are sent to government, local bodies and private aided schools but boys are sent to better perceived private unaided school (Narula 2014). The findings of a case study, shows that Muslim girls' enrolment in private schools is significantly low in compared to government schools and Madrasas. When poverty is not the reason, parents prefer private unaided school for daughters not for ensuring better result but for the security and protection for girls (Malik 2023). Government institutions which offer separate shift for boys and girls are more preferable for parents for their daughters' education (Malik 2023).

Out of ten, seven articles mention the influence of cultural factors on Muslim women education (Malik 2023). In Muslim community, more cultural preference for a domestic role for women delimits women's role in participation of formal education (Malik 2023). Not only in determining the role of women, cultural ethos largely impact in taking advantages of government policies and facilities, as a result, it slows down educational progress of Muslim women (Narula 2014).

**Discussion**

The systematic Literature Review overviewed the present state of Muslim women's education and factors influencing the current status of them. Regional factor is one of the determinants of gender disparity in educational participation of Muslim students. Attendance of students from urban region is less than rural region and gender-wise attendance decreases more in male than female due to higher employment opportunities in urban areas (Sengupta and Rooj 2018). Females are more literate than male not because of more preference given to females, it is due to lack of employability of Muslim females (Fatima 2020). Parents do not see the value of educating daughter who would get married and remain a housewife (Fatima 2020). Education of females is continued till the time suitable partner for marriage is found. Thus, female literacy rate of Muslims comes higher than males but remain lower than other religious communities. Findings of the study of Hossain (2013), shows contradictory statistic of Muslim women in West Bengal (India), where education of Muslim women is lower than men and poor economic condition is considered as major reason behind it.

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Low economic household is responsible for low attendance of Muslims at educational institutions in India (Sengupta & Rooj 2018). Malik (2023), in her study, through the interview of the privileged Muslim parents shows that many Muslim girls unable to attain higher education because of socio-cultural issues and economy plays no role in that context. As a result, in higher education and in professional courses enrolment of Muslim women remain low (Malik 2023). However, lack of policy implementation is one of the factors behind educational marginalization of Muslim women in higher education and there is no decentralized scheme from Muslim concentrated areas (Fatima 2020).

**Future Research**
This SLR made few attempts to explore the factors influencing academic progress of Muslim women. At first, this study explored factors influence academic progress of Muslim women. Factors influence on higher education and career opportunity can be studied in depth in future research.

Another limitation of the study is the geographical factors, as we have considered studies taken place in Indian context. Future research is needed in world respect and cross-country comparative analysis is required to look into the potential impact of demographic differences on academic achievement of Muslim women. In addition, cross-country study help to open a scope for adopting proper strategy for the development of the nation by realizing the strength and weakness of own and other countries.

Added to this, one more limitation of the study is publication bias as we included only peer-reviewed journal published only in English. Therefore, we might have missed out significant information regarding Muslim women education published in other languages or in non-referred publication like, books, book chapter, theses, magazines, online sources, dissertations, monographs etc. In future research, inclusion of all publication including referred and non-referred journals published in multiple languages will make a strong study on this field.

**Conclusion**
This review emphasized on the factors lying in the path of educational development of Muslim women in India. There are many unexplored aspects of Muslim women's education and many states have not yet insight into the fact of underdevelopment of Muslims in general and Muslim women in specific. This study recognizes the study on Muslim women's education to identify the factors. In doing that, it has been expressed that very less work has been done on Muslim women educational progress, improvement or development. Challenges and development of Muslim women of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Uttarpradesh has been covered through various studies but in general, insufficient studies exist in this domain which is the need of the

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hour for the progress of the nation from policy formulation and implementation.

Out of ten studies, most of the studies point out on socio-cultural and socio-religious factors for the backwardness of Muslim women in academics (Malik, 2023; Fatima, 2020, Hossain, 2013; Narula, 2014; Khatun and Bhuyan, 2022). Added with this, economic factor is also identified to act as a barrier in the path of academic progress of Muslim women (Sengupta & Rooj, 2018; Islam & Siddiqui, 2016; Saha, 2020). Government initiative towards the development of Muslims' education has been mentioned in the study of Fatima and the suggestion for the advancement of Madrasa education system and government's support and collaboration is pointed out in her study which is significant for the upliftment of the community. Poor implementation and lack of region specific scheme and policy is the drawback which has been identified in the study of Fatima (2020). By suggesting implementation strategy and future research, this review may benefit researchers, educationists and government practitioners to bring equity in educational sector and for the progress of the nation as a whole.

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