



Research Paper

Marginalization and Empowerment: A Study of the Socio-Economic Status of Muslim Women in India

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ABSTRACT

The socio-economic status of Muslim women in India remains a critical issue within the broader discourse of gender justice, minority rights, and inclusive development. This paper investigates the empowerment of Muslim women in India compared to both Muslim men and to women from the five major religious communities: Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains. This study examines the socio-economic condition of Muslim women in India through the interconnected frameworks of marginalization and empowerment. The findings indicate that, regardless of the criteria or indicators used, Muslim women consistently have lower levels of empowerment across dimensions such as household decision-making, freedom of movement, political participation, educational attainment, and employment access. The gender gap in education and employment is greatest among Muslims in comparison to other major communities evaluated. Data also show that, in measures of autonomy and decision-making, Muslim women lag behind both their male counterparts and women from other communities, illustrating a compounded disadvantage due to both gender and minority status.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Empowerment, Marginalization, Socio-Economic Status

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I. Introduction

A nation's development depends on its population, both men and women. Women comprise half the world's population, so their progress is tightly linked to global development. Empowerment is not just welfare or support; it is a transformative process enabling women to gain control over resources, access opportunities, make decisions, and shape their own lives. Empowerment moves women from dependency to autonomy and boosts participation in social, economic, and institutional spheres. Education and economic empowerment are fundamental to socio-economic development and nation-building. Furthermore, scholars across traditions note that education is more than knowledge; it is a transformative process that builds awareness, critical thinking, skills, and human capability.

B.R Ambedkar viewed education as a tool of liberation and social change, while Mahatma Gandhi linked education with self-reliance, dignity, and human development. The Ministry of Women and Child Development envisions women's empowerment as enabling women to live with dignity and contribute as equal partners in development. Empowerment strengthens women's capacity for independent decision-making and promotes their inclusion in social, economic, and public life. The importance of empowerment becomes particularly significant in the context of Muslim women in India, whose socioeconomic realities are shaped by the intersection of gender, community identity, and economic disadvantage. According to the 2011 Census of India, Muslim women's literacy remained comparatively lower, despite a notable improvement over previous decades. The Sachar Committee report, 2006, highlighted that Muslim women experience multiple forms of marginalization in education, employment, and access to public opportunities. Findings from NSSO reports similarly indicate lower workforce participation and concentration of Muslim women in informal and low-paid sectors.

In India, Muslims are the largest minority. Since Independence, Muslim women have been among the most disadvantaged, least literate, economically vulnerable, and politically marginalized. Persistent social evils and gender bias continue to hinder their progress. Thus, urgent and sustained efforts are necessary to ensure equality, education, and job opportunities for Muslim women.

Globally, women's empowerment is a crucial development issue, especially in developing countries. Chakrabarti and Biswas (2008) define empowerment as the provision of additional resources and skills to individuals or groups. This allows them to make intentional decisions and act on those decisions. Women's empowerment enables them to control both intellectual and material resources. It also increases their autonomy over finances and household decisions (Mookerjee & Ojha, 2025). Eliminating gender inequality and empowering women to decide on their welfare, families, and communities is vital for achieving development goals (Arora et al., 2024, pp. 280-289). Women are seen as the primary guardians of changes in the quantity and quality of human resources and as promoters of sustainable development for future generations. (Gender and Social Protection in the Developing World: Beyond Mothers and Safety Nets, 2010) Their empowerment protects not only their personal and household welfare but also impacts society as a whole (Anand et al., 2025) (UNFPA, 2005). Over the past 7.5 decades, women in India have made significant advances. They have entered every field of education and taken on various professional challenges. (Sasikala et al., 2025).

II. The present paper has the following Objectives

- a. To assess the current socio-economic status of Muslim women in India in comparison to Muslim men and women from other religious communities.
- b. To analyze the main factors contributing to the marginalization and empowerment of Muslim women within Indian society.

III. Methodology

This paper adopts a purely descriptive and analytical methodology to understand the socio-economic realities of Muslim women in India. The study draws on secondary data specifically from the Census of India 2011, National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) reports, and the Sachar Committee Report (2006).

IV. Socio-Economic Status of Muslim Women in India

Woman has been considered through ages, as the prime mover of family and the society alike. The term 'status' refers to the position of woman as a person in the social structure, defined by her designated rights and obligations. Each 'status-position' is explained in terms of a pattern of behavior expected of the incumbent. The role and status assigned to women in the society has always been yardstick to assess the level of progress of civilizations. However, in this article traces the status of Muslim women in India in terms of their educational, economic, and political roles (Sharma, S 2016).

4.1 Education

Education is the basic and fundamental requirements of citizens of a country in the universal declarations of human rights. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "To educate one man, you educate one person, but to educate a woman, you educate a whole civilization". It means education not only empower the women but empower the whole society. The human civilization has changed from agricultural society to cybernetic age but the position of woman has not so much changed because of educational deprivation. However education is the only mechanism that enhances the process of social, economic, and cultural development of communities. Among all the religious communities, Muslims are the least educated section of Indian society. The backwardness among Muslim in comparison with non-Muslims in India has become a matter of concerns at present. There are several reasons for backwardness of Muslims in India such as large family size, lack of link between madrasa education and modern education, economic poverty, negative attitude towards girl's education.

Table 1

Literacy rate among religious communities in percentage (%)

Religious Community	Female	Male	Total
Hindus	55.98	70.78	63.38
Muslims	51.9	62.41	57.15
Christians	71.97	76.78	74.37
Buddhists	65.6	77.87	71.73
Jains	84.93	87.86	86.39
Sikhs	63.29	71.32	67.30
Others	41.38	59.38	50.38

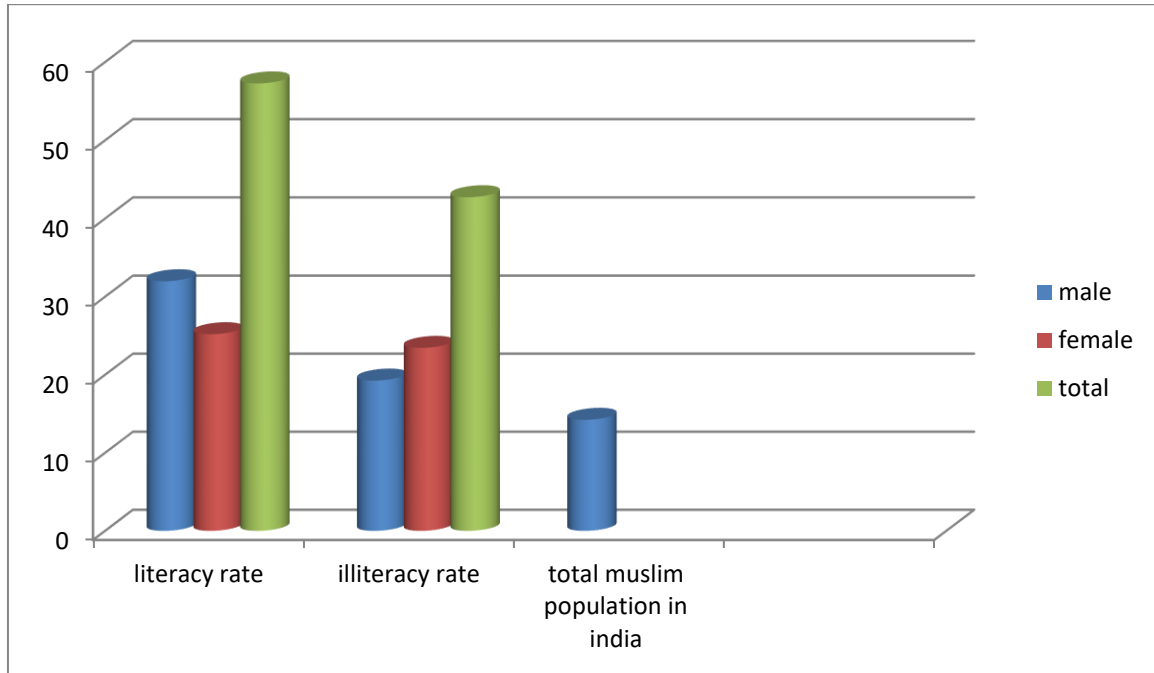
Source: 2011 census

Table-1 shows the literacy rates among female and male of various religious communities. However, the literacy rate of India in 2011 is 74.0 percent(%) and literacy rate among male and female are 82.1% & 65.5%. female literacy rates are various religious constitutes the 2011 census like Hindus (55.98%), Muslims(51.9, %) and Christians (71.97%), Jains (84.93%), Buddhists (65.6%), Sikhs (63.29%), and Others (41.3%). Here it is clearly visible that the literacy rate of Muslim Females is only 51.9 percentages far below

from other female literacy rate. In these religious group female literacy rate of jains are above the national average where Muslims female literacy is very low. This literacy rate of Muslim women is lower than others, also far below of national average (65.5%).

Chart- 1

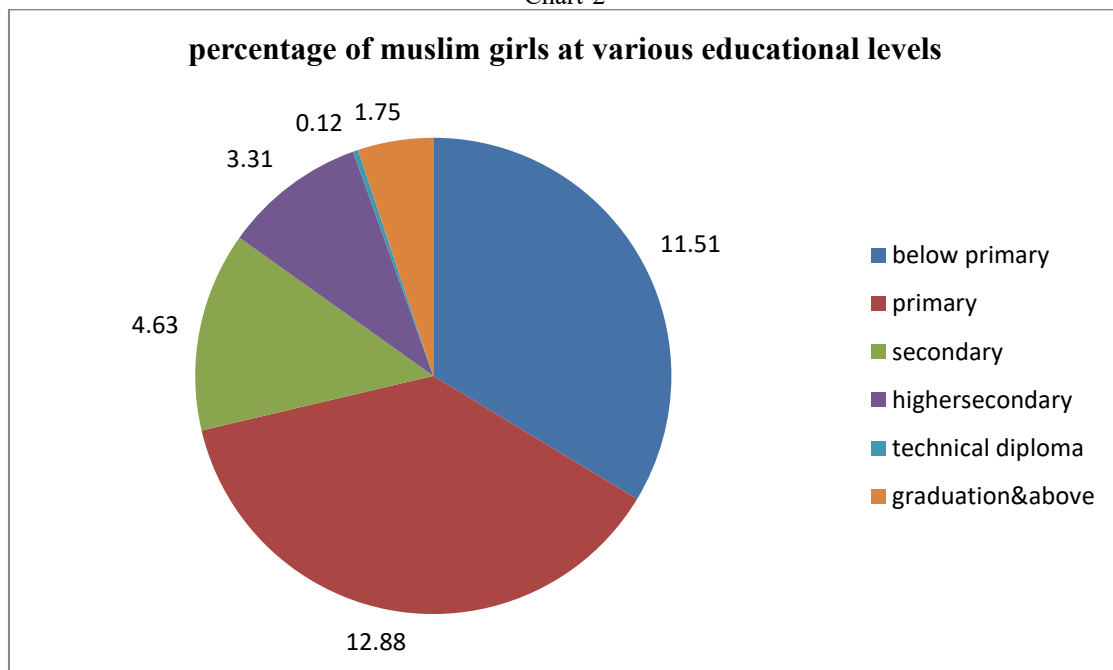
Present educational status of Muslim Women in India



Source: Government of India Census 2011

As per the Government of India census report of 2011, the above chart-1 shows the total Muslim population is 14.13% (17.22 crore). In this diagram identify the total literacy and illiteracy rate of Muslims is 57.27% & 42.72% respectively. In comparison among male and female literacy is 31.98 % & 25.29 %. And illiteracy rate among male and female is 19.26% & 23.45%. According to census reports Muslim women are not only backward than other religion also they are marginalized from male counterparts in this community.

Chart-2



SOURCE: GOI Census 2011

The above pie-chart highlights the literacy percentage of Muslim girls in the various educational fields in India. The data included in this pie chart is of below primary to higher education. The percentage of girls in below primary is 11.51%, primary 12.88, secondary and higher secondary is 4.63 % & 3.31. They are far below in the educational level of technical diploma and graduation and above like 0.12 % & 1.75. In this pie-chart, we identify Muslim females are very poor at the higher education.

4.2 Employment and Economic Status

After the seven decades of Independence, Muslims are economically impoverished in Indian society. Like a secular, sound democratic country, India gives equal opportunities and equal status to all religions/communities. As a researcher, I found that according to the census data 2011, among the religious minorities, the work participation rates (WPR) ranged highest in Buddhists (43.1%) and lowest in Muslims (32.5 %). The development of a country depends on every individual in this state. But India likes a multi-religious country. Its growth depends on whole religious communities' development. Unfortunately, I mentioned here that the country's development remained economically unproductive. Only Buddhists and Christians (41.9%) displayed WPR above the national average of 39.7 per cent, whereas the Sikhs and Jains and the Muslim performance were below the national average.

Dr Razia Patel gives a picture of the overall status of Muslim women in the country. According to Patel Muslim, women have the lowest labour force participation rate among all communities' studies. Muslim women lag in almost all socio-economic indicators of development. And also, they are economically and educationally marginalized, have low social status, and experience domestic abuse and 'communal violence spurred by identity politics. Patel said 'the report states that Dalit, Muslim, Adivasi, elderly and differently abled women have low levels of educational attainment. While Adivasi and Dalit women have a relatively large workforce share, Muslim women have the lowest participation rates.

Employment opportunities for Muslim women in the rural areas, though quite a few, are both agricultural and non-agricultural. They have a limited scope if they are employed in fields or make farm products meant for sale. But if modern methods are used, they are likely to come up. Animal farming, forestry, and fisheries need improvement. The non-agricultural tasks for these women include housing, marketing, processing, storage, and growth of small scale industries like handloom and other handicrafts. They can also be engaged in labour-saving occupations like tea, coffee, rubber and coconut plantation, carpet weaving, bidi-making or making matches, and food processing activities. For instance, most illiterate Muslim women are employed in the 'chicken' industry. As they remain secluded, they have to depend upon intermediaries associated with production and marketing and act as money lenders.

According to the 2011 census, 149.8 million women are working in India. Even though most women contribute financially somehow, much of it goes undocumented. Only 25 % of women are working, less than half per cent are seeking work, and the total women labour force is a mere %, and there has been a steady decline in the last decade. Only 15.5 % of urban women are in the workforce compared to 30 % in India's rural areas, Muslim women represent fewer than 10% of the workforce. Only 102 women in the labour force were Muslims, out of every 1000, according to the 66th round of the National Sample Survey Organization (2009-10).

Muslim women are overwhelmingly self-employed (engaged in home-based work). Sewing, embroidery, zari work, beedi rolling chikan work, readymade garments, and agarbatti rolling are occupations in which Muslim women workers are concentrated. Their work conditions are characterized by low income, poor work conditions, lack of social security benefits like health insurance, and the absence of bargaining power. The home-based industry has virtually collapsed in several states, leaving poor Muslim spiralling downwards to penury. The distinct pattern of Muslim women's employment in home-based work is partly due to informal employment discrimination. It is due to the vicious cycle of poverty, and lack of education and technical skills, leading to low-skilled, low-income work and back again to poverty. Muslim women cannot bargain for better work conditions because much of the work they do is sub-contracted. This restriction of mobility (based on social and cultural factors) restricts their employment opportunities and wages. They do not have independent access to credit facilities, opportunities for skill up-gradation, or access to the market. There is active discrimination in giving Muslim women credit facilities; it was pointed out. Muslim women have minimal participation in Government micro-finance programmes such as Self Help Groups (SHGs), Watershed Programmes and Panchayati Raj (Sachar 2006).

Table-2
Work participation Rate among different religious Communities

	Male	Female	Male- female Gap
Hindu	53.9	27.3	26.6
Muslim	49.5	14.8	34.7
Christian	52.9	31.2	21.7
Sikhs	55.4	15.2	40.3

Buddhists	53.4	32.5	20.8
Jains	57.7	12.3	45.4

Source: 2011 Census

The table shows work participation rate among different religious communities. The gap is prominent in all the religions between females & males. In Hindu population the male & female % is 53.9 & 27.3 respectively. In Muslim's the gap is between male & female, the % is 49.5 & 14.8 respectively. The gap is highest in jains religion i.e. 45.4 whereas the highest work participation is from the male jains. In females the work participation is highest in Buddhist religion i.e. 32.5. Overall the work participation % is low in Muslim male & female. Probably the underlying factors are education & infrastructure which has restored the Muslim religion at bottom.

Table 3

Percentage distribution of workers by activity status for different socio-religious categories, 16-64 years

Socio-Religious categories	Rural Females			Urban Females		
	Self-employed	Regular	causal	Self-employed	regular	Causal
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
SC	37.81	5.00	57.19	31.94	36.61	31.45
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	9.37	36.20	33.65	52.37	13.98
All Persons	55.06	4.58	40.36	40.48	40.13	19.40

Source: Basant, Rakesh (2012)

Table -3.8 shows employment in various spheres like self-employed, regular and causal of rural and urban females among different religious communities. Further, the religious communities had divided into sub-categories. However, the above table shows that Muslim and Hindu-UC women workers have concentrated on self-employed activities in rural areas. Muslim women's participation in regular jobs is much less than in many other socio-religious categories. Muslim women's representation in regular employment is less than 'Other Minorities'. Muslim women's work as regular workers in urban areas indicates their marginal presence in salaried jobs. A significantly higher rates of Muslim women workers vis-à-vis other socio-religious categories have been observed in self-employment. Many previous studies show that the percentage of Muslim women in regular public and large private sectors is meagre.

V. Causes and Dimensions of Marginalization and Empowerment among Muslim women in India

Muslim women in India experience marginalization through interconnected social, economic, and educational inequalities. Their backwardness is shaped by gender discrimination, poverty, low literacy, limited employment opportunities and restricted access to decision-making. The Sachar Committee highlighted that Muslim women remain among the most socio-economically vulnerable groups in India, with low-literacy rate, reduce workforce participation, and inadequate access to public institutions compared with many other social groups. Findings from the 2011 Census further reflect significant gaps in female literacy, employment opportunities, and access to healthcare among Muslim women, particularly in rural areas. Social exclusion, lack of mobility, and economic insecurity continue to shape the lived realities of Muslim women in India.

At the same time, empowerment has become a significant pathway for improving the status of Muslim women. Through education, access to resources, and economic participation, women gain autonomy, self-confidence, and greater involvement in decision making. Economic empowerment further strengthens women's capacity to contribute to household income, improve family well-being, and participate in community development. Empowerment not only improves the socio-economic condition of Muslim women but also contributes to broader goals of gender equality, social justice, and national development.

VI. Summary and Analysis

More than seven decades after Independence, Muslim women in India continue to face significant socio-economic and political challenges both as women and as members of the country's largest religious minority community. This study examined their status through key indicators such as access to education, workforce participation, political representation, household decision-making, and mobility, while also comparing these indicators with those of women from other major religious communities in India. The findings reveal that Muslim women remain among the most disadvantaged groups, with lower literacy levels, limited participation in employment, weak political representation, and restricted social mobility, reflecting multiple and overlapping forms of marginalization. Their socio-economic condition therefore demands urgent policy and social attention, as improving their status is essential not only for their empowerment but also for broader social justice, inclusive development, and national progress. The study suggests the need for greater awareness within the Muslim community regarding structural barriers faced by women, alongside stronger dialogue on education, legal reform, economic participation, and gender equality. It also highlights the responsibility of the state to implement targeted and inclusive policies ensuring equal access to education, employment, healthcare, financial inclusion, and public participation, with special emphasis on Muslim girls' education. In conclusion, despite constitutional safeguards and welfare initiatives, inequalities in literacy, employment, and representation continue to shape the lives of Muslim women in India, making collective efforts by government, civil society, community leaders, and women's groups essential to achieving meaningful empowerment, gender equality, and inclusive development.

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