

Understanding the Challenges of Women Empowerment in Indian Muslim Societies



Economics

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment is the key route for the development of any society in all areas including health, education, asset ownership, skills, political participation etc. Muslim women in India are indeed the potential catalyst for development. Their emancipation may be a crucial step in the balanced development of the community. Women in India face many challenges within their families, communities and religion. This paper discusses the challenges of Indian Muslim women regarding their empowerment through participation in workforce, access to education and involvement in political power.

Introduction

Women empowerment is the key element in development process of third world countries. The Women are facing aggressive shape of challenges that forces the millions of people in the swap of inequality and disproportions (Oxfam, 1995). The basic principle of women empowerment is equality. If we think of an even development of our country equality in every sphere of life is the ultimatum where women empowerment is a must in which our policy makers have to concentrate. From this view point it is very important to study the nature of women in India. In this study there will be a try to find out some challenges of Muslim women empowerment in India. The central purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of Muslim women empowerment. In this context, the study has a broader field to search the challenges of Muslim women empowerment in Indian perspective.

Literature Review

WBPRR highlights that woman empowerment is an important policy goal for improving not just the well-being of women themselves but also for its positive impact on the family (King and Mason, 2001). Giriappa (1997) opines that the female headed households are effective in taking decision in respect of work mobility, etc. Bharathamma (2005) finds that women's perception lack of education, over burdened with dual responsibilities, lack of proper training, family restriction from mobility and lack of sufficient finance is the root constraints of poor women empowerment.

Sharma (2002) says that the greatest problems discerned by the Muslim women are that women lack proper knowledge of their faith, and that this is why Muslim men sometimes mistreat their women. Khan and Mann (2008) suggest revolutionary changes in female education that will support gender awareness and self esteem among women. Ashraf and Ahmad (2012) opines that empowerment of Muslim women is hindered due to traditional, social culture among their religions.

Primary Challenges Faced by Muslim Women in India

Muslim Girls and women are lagging behind their male counterparts and as compared to other religious minorities except those listed under "Others" in the Census 2001. The three primary challenges faced by Muslim women are:

1: Lack of Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment is considered to be a key driver of sustainable economic development. An enquiry into women's work has been essential for assessing women's empowerment (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). WPR (Work Participation Rate) may be used as the proxy measure of economic empowerment of women. For religious minorities, Buddhists have the highest WPR; Christians are next. The lowest WPR is recorded for the

Muslim population. The WPR for Hindus is marginally higher than the WPR for 'all religions' (Census, 2001).

Table 1: WPR in Different Communities

Communities /Castes	Male	Female
All Communities	51.7	25.6
Hindus	52.4	27.5
Muslims	47.5	14.1
Christians	50.7	28.7
Sikhs	53.3	20.2
Buddhists	49.2	31.7
Jains	55.2	9.2
Other Religions	52.5	44.2

Source: Census 2001

Male WPR is highest among Jains, but their female WPR is lowest. For Muslims, although male WPR is not bad, but female WPR is negligible. Among the minorities, female WPR are highest among Buddhists and Christians, followed by Sikhs, Muslims and Jains. The gap between the female WPRs of different minority communities is very sharp and the gap between male WPRs of the different minority communities is not so much.

The WPR among Muslim women is only about 25 per cent on an average. In rural areas, whereas about 70 per cent of the Hindu women take part in the workforce in case of Muslim women only about 29 per cent perform so. The Hindu women from upper castes in rural areas even have a higher participation rate resembling 43 per cent. The WPRs for Muslim women in urban areas are even as lower as it stands for 18 per cent, most probably, for the reason that works opportunities inside the household for women are very limited which may be rather higher in rural areas with ownership, however limited, of land making partaking of Muslim women in these areas rather higher (SCR, 2006, p: 90).

2: Lack of Education

According to the 1991 Census, there were over 48 million Muslim women in India; in 2001 the number rose to 62.5 million. The literacy rate among Muslims in 2001 was far below the national average. Education contributes to economic growth. Education is a crucial social factor that initiates the process of social, economic and cultural development of communities'. Muslims lag behind in education which is largely responsible for most of the problems faced by the community. Muslims are the other religious community returning lower than the national average literacy rate at 59.1 %. The relative position of various religious

Table 2: Female Literacy Rates in Various Communities

Communities/ Castes	Total	Rural	Urban
India	53.7	46.1	72.9
Hindus	53.2	45.7	73.9
Muslims	50.1	42.7	63.2
Christians	76.2	69.7	86.3
Sikhs	63.1	57.2	79.2
Buddhists	61.7	54.6	72.9
Jains	90.6	80.3	93.6
Other Religions	33.2	29.5	66.5

Source: Census 2001

communities with regard to educational level is similar. In 2001, literacy rate of Muslim women was 50.1% compared to 53.7% for all communities and 53.2% for Hindu females. For Muslim male, the literacy rate was 67.6%, much lower in comparison to 75.3% for all communities and 76.2% for Hindu males. The literacy rates are much higher amongst other minorities, Jains lead, followed by Christians, Sikhs and even Buddhists in rural areas. Literacy rate is higher among the urban residents in comparison to the rural residents in all the religious communities.

If women of the community are educated, things would change as women are the axis of Indian families. Muslim women could be empowered through education as one woman can reform the whole family. Moreover, this would help her in protection of her rights and controlling crimes against women. The right to education, especially at the primary level is mandated by the Constitution, yet over six decades after Independence less than 50% of Muslim women in India are literate. Compare this with other women from other minorities: 76% literacy among Christians, 64% among Sikhs, 62% among Buddhists and a whopping 90% among Jain women (Shinde and John, 2012). There is also a common belief that Muslim parents feel that education is not important for girls and that it may instill a wrong set of values. Even if girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age to marry them off. This leads to a higher drop-out rate among Muslim girls. Our interactions indicate that the problem may lie in non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of girl's hostels, absence of female teachers and availability of scholarships as they move up the education ladder (SCR,2006, p: 85).

3: Lack of Political Empowerment

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Representation of Muslims in Indian Politics, ever since the Indian Independence, has been disproportionately low, ranging between 6 – 8%, as compared to their share in the Indian population which is estimated to be around 14%, but believed to be even higher.

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. In modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of the President, Prime minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition. As of 2011, the President of India, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha are all women. Through Panchayat Raj institutions, over a mil-

lion women have actively entered political life in India. As per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women. Although the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen considerably, women are still under-represented in governance and decision making positions. Indian women still have an abysmal representation in Indian Parliament.

Despite the tall promises made by political parties, the presence of women in the Lok Sabha has remained a dismal 3.5 per cent to 9.02 per cent of its total strength since it came into being. The number of women in the Lok Sabha has remained between 19 and 49 ever since the first general elections (1952), with the sixth Lok Sabha are having the lowest number of 19 women and the 13th Lower House having the highest at 49 members. In 15th Lok Sabha elections, there are 13 more women MPs than the last House and 10 more than the previous best of 49 in the 13th Lok Sabha.

Of 549 women Lok Sabha members only 18 were Muslims. In six Lok Sabhas (1st, 4th, 5th, 9th, 10th and 12th), there was no Muslim woman MP. Their number never crossed three. In the present Lok Sabha, there are three Muslim woman members. None of them have won election on their own. Malda MP Mausam Benazir Noor is the niece of former union minister A B A Ghani Khan Choudhury, Kairana MP Tabassum Begum is the widow of powerful Muslim BSP MP Munawar Rana and Sitapur MP Qaiser Jahan is the wife of Sitapur's sitting BSP MLA J. Ansari. Former Muslim women MPs too had similar profile. This shows that Muslim women need to belong to successful political families to win

Table 3: Female Participation in Lok Sabha

Lok- Sabha	Total seats	Number of Women contestants	No. of Women Members elected	% to the total seats	% of total number of women contestants
1952	489	-	-	-	-
1957	494	45	22	4.45	48.89
1962	494	66	31	6.27	46.97
1967	520	67	29	5.57	43.28
1971	518	86	21	4.05	24.41
1977	542	70	19	3.50	27.14
1980	542	143	28	5.16	19.58
1984	542	162	42	7.74	25.93
1989	543	198	29	5.34	14.64
1991	543	326	37	7.10	11.35
1996	543	599	40	7.36	6.68
1998	543	274	43	7.91	15.69
1999	543	284	49	9.02	17.25
2004	543	355	45	8.29	12.67
2009	543	556	59	10.82	10.61

Source: Electoral Data

elections. Since there are very few successful Muslim politicians in India, the chances of Muslims women getting elected even from the reserved seats are very less. Political participation rates, as measured by women in parliament, are very much negligible which disempowers Muslim women, denies or inhibits their voice and vote, and robs them of their place and status at home and in the community.

Other than these three primary challenges, the Muslim women also face lot of other challenges. Embedded in many Muslim societies are egregious social issues – patriarchy, misogyny, rampant domestic violence, minimal human rights for women, preference for sons over daughters, female genital mutilation – among others. Women are often the most affected by these cultural constraints and this directly translates into less opportunity and hence less empowerment for women in most Muslim societies. Muslim women also face the challenge of correcting and building understanding and perspective in the society. They also face the challenges of family planning. Indian Muslims are much more resistant to modern contraceptive measures compared to Hindus and as a consequence, the decline in fertility rate among Hindu women is much higher compared to that of Muslim women. The reason for the lower willingness to adopt family planning can be explained by the religious restrictions which ordain no use of family planning by individuals following Islam. The early marriage and concurrence with this religious decree can be rooted with the lower level of education attained by Muslims, especially by Muslim women (Kurtz, 2010).

Conclusion

Indian Muslim women face lot of challenges, viz, lack of economic empowerment, lack of education and lack of political empowerment. They also face other challenges putting forth from patriarchy, misogyny, rampant domestic violence, minimal human rights for women, preference for sons over daughters, female genital mutilation, lack of family planning and cultural constraints. The community's educational and economic backwardness makes it necessary for policy makers to take urgent steps to alleviate their miserable condition. The exclusion of women, especially, calls for a thorough analysis, leading to understanding their wants, followed by multi-dimensional and multi-prolonged action to ensure equality as guaranteed by the Constitution of India, and to reach to the ultimate goal of even development.

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