



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Education

MUSLIM WOMEN IN WESTBENGAL

KEY WORDS: Muslim women, West Bengal, Minority community.

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ABSTRACT

Muslims, as a community traditionally have lower literacy rate especially if we consider girl's enrolment. But now the rate of girl's enrolment is in improving condition within the largest minority community, i.e. Muslim, in West Bengal. In this paper, an attempt has been taken to present an empirical analysis through years, basing upon the primary survey data provided by Association Snap and Guidance Guild(Kolkata -2016), Census of India 2011 and National Family Health Survey(NFHS-2006) data; to draw an objective picture of the Muslim women in West Bengal. It is observed that, unlike the national trend, the male-female and rural-urban gaps for the current enrolled children in elementary education are lower among Muslims of West Bengal. The survey data show that overall enrolment ratio for Muslim children of age 6-14 is 85.5 percent and girls are marginally ahead of boys(86.4 vis-à-vis 84.6). About 15 percent Muslim children age 6-14 years are found to be out of school. While 9.1 percent were never enrolled, 5.4 percent dropped out. Financial problems emerged as the major factor for not being able to go to school(42.5 percent boys and 40.4 percent girls). The distance to school, lack of infrastructural facility in school and lack of motivation as the factors behind dropping out of school of the girls, as they did not see any future benefits from education. According to census of India 2011 and primary survey, for the Muslims in the child sex ratio is found to be 955, compared to the adult sex ratio of 938 which an appreciable demographic phenomenon. The rapid rate of progress amongst Muslim women in terms of literacy is probably a trendsetter for many in the future and highlights the potential of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Before primary level girl's dropout(31.4) rate is higher than the boys(28.8) where as boy's drop out(49.6)share is higher than girl's(43.8)after the primary level. Muslim women's participation in higher education and in the skilled work force is disproportionately small. Muslim parental aspiration for children's education, an observable degree of the common social prejudice that make investments in a daughter's higher education seem less worthy than the investment in a son's. Only 8.9 percent of the Muslim women in the working age were found to be working. Overall work participation rate among Muslim women is low in West Bengal. Only the two districts in which we find female work participation rates to be high compared to others are Malda and Murshidabad. In Murshidabad around half of the female workers are engaged in bidi-rolling, and in Malda, almost 70percent of them are so engaged. Muslim women 66.5 percent had married below 18 years. According to NFHS 3data, it is found that Muslim have a higher preference(74.2 percent)for at least one daughter than Hindus(68.7 percent). There certainly exists systematic patriarchal oppression of Muslim women in West Bengal, the picture is not one of deprivation alone. Despite the handicaps of poverty, social conservatism, and resource deprivation, the Muslim women of West Bengal have been doing better in some respects than their immediate predecessors. Here in West Bengal only 0.6 percent Muslim women are found to be divorced, and 0.7 percent separated, bringing the total number of such women to 1.3 percent. Compared to the findings of the 2011 census, which finds divorced, separated and deserted women account for 9.6 percent in West Bengal. Efforts should be made young women to become financially independent, or at least capable to some degree, before insisting on their marriage. The policy of 'female empowerment' has been one of the most popular measures recently undertaken by states to help women to overcome traditional forms of oppressions. In order to improve the overall conditions of the Muslim women, efforts have to be made to improve their socio-econo-educational-cultural overall status as well.

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important economic empowerment tool for the girl child. It was not until the Jomtien Conference(1990) that international community fully realized that Universal Primary Education can be achieved until the issue of girls education will be stressed upon(NUEPA-2010-12). If the girl enrollment increases the literacy rate and society will also develop.

The Muslims of West Bengal hitherto remains unexplored for this we have very insufficient and little awareness about their society in general and the situation of Muslim women in particular in comparison to the women in other(IOSR Journal,2012). Muslims have been found most educationally backward community at national level and for which the Government of India acknowledged them National Educationally Backward Minority in 1993(IOSR Journal2012). Despite the fact that overall progress of any nation or state is not possible without considering its women irrespective of their caste, color and creed as they represent about half of the population. The Muslim women of West Bengal are lagged behind the mainstream on all human development indicators; they are still remained socially, economically and educationally towards the back when change is the assortment of today(IOSR Journal,2012).An enrollment of Muslim girls increases year by year, but drops out in upper primary level is one of the reason of their backwardness.

The pre-dominantly rural and socio-economically backward status of the Muslim women of West Bengal has led to their being almost invisible in urban public domain-educational institutions, public services, media, cultural platforms and other podiums of importance. It is observed that socio-economic handicaps of Muslims Women almost a taboo for their all-round development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

In this paper an attempt has been made to draw an objective picture of the Muslim women in West Bengal through demographic profile, educational, economical, health and gender dimension areas have been considered.

METHODOLOGY OF THE DISCUSSION

Analytical research methodology has been adopted in presenting this paper. The individual experiences have been analyzed thoroughly to get every aspect related to the given issue. This is such an issue about which we get a lot of experiences in our surrounding society. Both the primary and secondary sources of data have also been used for empirical analysis through years in presenting the paper. For present analysis materials have been collected from newspapers, websites, journals, research paper, books, census report and government reports.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Muslims constitute 27 percent of total population in West Bengal.

HOUSEHOLD SIZE

The data on household size of Muslim population is 4.8, which is smaller than the average household size for the general population in India 4.9; but it is larger than the house hold size of general population in West Bengal 4.5(Census of India, 2011 and Primary survey, 2012).

SEX RATIO

The adverse sex ratio for women is generally ascribed to unequal access of girl child to nutrition and health care, along with the recent trend of sex-selective abortion. The sex ratio for Muslims in West Bengal was found to be 945, which is very close to the figures for both West Bengal and India however just published by religion wise census data show Muslim sex ratio as 951 and that is higher than all of West Bengal. Between the rural and urban areas, the sex ratio is found to be slightly better in urban areas 948 than in the rural areas 944. The child sex ratio to indicate the extent of discrimination against the girl child. For the Muslims in West Bengal, the child sex ratio is found to be 955, compared to the adult sex ratio of 938 which is an appreciable demographic phenomena (Census of India, 2011 and Primary survey, 2012).

GENDER GAP IN LITERACY

Over the past decade, the gender gap in literacy has been reduced considerably, with the 2011 census putting the figures at 16.2 percent for the nation, and 11.1 percent for West Bengal. Amongst Muslims in the state, however, the gap is even lower at 7.8 percent according to the census, and 4.8 percent according to the primary survey. This difference, in addition to the achieved rates of male and female literacy(71.8 and 67.0 percent in primary survey respectively) defies generally accepted ideas about the religious orthodoxy of Muslim families. It also serves to underline a recent surge of determination within the community to educate its girls.

But recently the rapid rate of progress amongst Muslim women in terms of literacy is probably a trendsetter for many in the future, and highlights the potential of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

Women in rural areas find higher literacy gap(5.2 percentage point) than their urban counterparts(3.2 percentage point).Amongst women, the 2011 census noted a difference of 2.2 percent between general and Muslim women, but the primary survey found equal female literacy to general female literacy of census, 2011. Therefore, Muslim women's comparative success in literacy in rural areas needs to be recognized as a phenomenon to learn form not only within the community, but also in greater public life in general.(Census of India, 2011 and Primary survey 2013).

The most fortuitous findings has been the rise in female literacy in the last decade, outpacing the pace of progress of male literacy, and the consequent closing of the gender gap in literacy, especially in rural areas. The present gender gap in literacy among Muslims is fairly low, compared to recent history, at 4.8 percentage points. Given that a woman's education is not only important for her own intellectual and social well-being, but also strongly benefits the well-being of her family and the educational outcomes of any children in her care, this improvement in female literacy is likely to positively affect the future of the entire community.

It is observed that female students attend school in greater numbers than males at an younger age in both rural(male,6.6 and female,7) and urban(male,8.6 and female, 10). But from the higher secondary level, the number of female students starts sliding(rural- male,3.9 and female,2.4; urban-male,5.5 and female,4.7), and continues at higher degree levels(Census of India, 2011 and Primary survey 2013). Muslim women, staying away from higher education, due to political and social environment of perceived discrimination against Muslims women, the community believe that their children will not get Government or higher private sector jobs even if they are equal to or better than others in

competition.

DROPOUT

Before primary level girl's dropout(31.4) rate is higher than the boys(28.8) where as boy's drop out(49.6)share is higher than girl's(43.8)after the primary level. The monetary problems has emerged as a major factor for not sending schools for girls 40.4 percent. Distance is the cause for discontinuation for 18.0 percent of girls. The lack of supportive infrastructures is the reason for 10.4 percent of girl's dropout of school. Children needed to find remunerative work to support their family, and their share in this context is 8.7 percent girls. Another 3.8 percent of girls dropped out to receive family or community bound traditional artisan training. Most interesting and disheartening-however were the 5 percent of girls who believes they had discontinued their education due to lack of motivation; they did not see any positive consequence of further education.

Muslim women's participation in higher education and in the skilled work force is disproportionately small. Muslim parental aspiration for children's education, an observable degree of the common social prejudice that make investments in a daughter's higher education seem less worthy than the investment in a son's. It is observed that higher rate of enrollment for girls in the 6-17 age group is a positive phenomenon when seen in the context of both India's persistent gender gap in education but the wide gender gap within the Muslim community's own older people. The lack in educational attainments of girls in the higher levels including post-graduation should be examined as well, and attempts should be made to at least encourage families to keep their daughters in school till the higher secondary level. If these steps are taken in a concrete manner, then we believe the disproportionately low number of college and university students from the Muslim girls will be addressed to a certain extent automatically, and in the near future, greater numbers of them will become part of the salaried/ professional workforce, as per the stated integrationist desire of the democratic republic.

WORK OPPORTUNITIES

Overall work participation rate among Muslim women is low in West Bengal. Only 8.9 percent of the Muslim women in the working age were found to be working. In rural West Bengal female participation varies from 2.8 to 21.5. The coefficient of variation for female work participation rates across districts is 0.64. The high variability of female work participation across districts calls for a closer look at the nature of work opportunities for women in different districts. Only the two districts in which we find female work participation rates to be high compared to others are Malda and Murshidabad. In Murshidabad around half of the female workers are engaged in bidi-rolling and embroidery work , and in Malda, almost 70percent of them are so engaged.

PUBLIC HEALTH INDICATORS

As Muslim women of West Bengal are, by and large, a rurally-located poor community, it would be better if we try to understand their health related issues with their economic vulnerability. There is a proven relationship between poverty and poor health. The poor in every society experience much higher levels of crisis at higher rates due to poor health than do their economically better-off peers. Those that are disadvantaged always grappled with many problems due to poor income, and have frequently been relegated to the dark and invisible corners of the society with multifarious, interlinked difficulties marring their everyday lives. Poor living condition, hazardous working atmosphere, food that is low in nutrition, and an almost complete lack of job security both makes them more vulnerable to poor health, and unable to cushion its blows with easy access to health care, either curative or preventive. In general, the child and maternal mortality figures, which can act as proxy indicators to health performance of the community.

WOMEN AGE AT MARRIAGE

It will be pertinent here to look into the pattern of Muslim women's marriage with their ages. Among married women in the age group 15-49 years, there are more than 50 percent women

50.2 percent who were married before they attained the legal age of 18 years. Most of the remaining married women were married 47.9 in between 18 to 25 years of their ages. So, one can say that underage marriage is prevalent among the Muslim women in West Bengal (Primary survey 2013).

Muslim women 66.5 percent had married below 18 years. According to NFHS 3 data, it is found that Muslim have a higher preference (74.2 percent) for at least one daughter than Hindus (68.7 percent).

The age at marriage for Muslim women appear to be climbing, efforts should also be made to push it past the obligatory 18 year mark, and allow young women to become financially independent, or at least capable to some degree, before insisting on their marriage. As studies have repeatedly shown, educated and financially capable women positively affect the health performance not just of themselves, but of their whole families.

GENDER DIMENSION

There certainly exists systematic patriarchal oppression of Muslim women in West Bengal, the picture is not one of deprivation alone. Despite the handicaps of poverty, social conservatism, and resource deprivation, the Muslim women of West Bengal have been doing better in some respects than their immediate predecessors.

PARENTAL EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATION

Parental aspiration for children's education up to high school is about 18 percent for the boys and 26 percent for girls in West Bengal. Aspiration for completing high school is 33.3 percent for boys, and 40.1 percent for girls. These numbers imply that the perceived 'restrictions' on girls acquiring an education might possibly be an outcome of poor socio-economic condition of the families. Parents become hesitant to invest further in their girls education.

EMPLOYMENT

Women's participation in the labour forces of West Bengal is low in general, but strikingly so amongst Muslims. Though the Muslim women are empowering themselves in terms of literacy at a rapid rate, the conversion of degrees and diplomas into jobs, particularly in engineering or the sciences. Even the service sector, with its high volume of employees, boasts very few Muslim women. West Bengal has 24.3 and 20.3 percent overall female workers in rural and urban areas respectively. Amongst Muslims, the number is almost one-third, with the numbers being 8.8 percent for rural areas and 8.6 percent for urban. The most important ramification of this in terms of Muslim women is that they are financially dependent on the males of their families.

Table-1.0 Showing Female workers in Different Occupational Groups in West Bengal

	Gr.1	Gr.2	Gr.3	Gr.4	Gr.5	Gr.6	Gr.7	Gr.8	Gr.9
Rural	3.9	37.5	37.4	0.0	3.3	13.0	3.3	1.7	0.0
Urban	2.1	41.6	20.3	1.1	3.1	9.0	15.4	7.4	0.0
Total	3.8	39.3	33.9	0.2	3.3	12.3	4.9	2.4	0.0

Source: Primary Survey, 2013. *percentage is calculated from total women worker.

- Note: Group-1: Agriculture Labourers.
- Group-2: Daily Worker, Construction Worker, Servant/Maiden servant, Cooley, Sweeper, Beggar/Rag Picker.
- Group-3: Shopkeeper, Hawker/Vendor, Security Guard, Bidi Worker, Others.
- Group-4: Driver/Conductor, Transport Labourer/ Khalasi, Rickshaw/Van Puller.
- Group-5: Cultivators.
- Group-6: Tailor/ Garment Worker, Jori/Smith Worker, Car Mechanic, Electrician/ Assembler, Plumber/Painter/Welder, Butcher.
- Group-7: Primary School Teacher, High School Teacher, College/University Teacher, Scheme Worker, Government

Employee, Public Sector Employee, Private Company Employee. Group-8: Small Business, Large Business.

Group-9: Doctors, Engineers, Advocates etc.

Table 1.0 presents a comprehensive picture on the types of jobs of Muslim women are engaged in. By classifying the jobs in different groups, it becomes evident that low paying physical labour is the main source of income for them. As high a population share as 77 percent of employed Muslim women are engaged in such work (Group 1, 2 and 3). Individually, Group 2 (39.3 percent) and Group 3 (39.3 percent) have the higher shares, whereas 3.8 percent are engaged as agricultural labourers in some remote areas of Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Purulia, Paschim Medinipur and South 24 Parganas. Bid-binding recruits 37.38 percent of workers in rural areas, whereas traditionally 'male' jobs like those in transportation shows between very little to no participation of women. The few women that we did find involved in some aspect of the transportation business (1.1 percent) was in the urban areas of Murshidabad and Howrah only. Participation in skilled category is not just low at 12.3 percent, it is also very localized and limited to stretches of Hooghly, South 24 Parganas and Howrah. It's not surprising that participation in salaried jobs is at around five percent, given that overall, only 8.8 percent of the labour force among Muslims is female.

MARITAL STATUS

Here in West Bengal only 0.6 percent Muslim women are found to be divorced, and 0.7 percent separated, bringing the total number of such women to 1.3 percent. Compared to the findings of the 2011 census, which finds divorced, separated and deserted women account for 9.6 percent in West Bengal.

CONCLUSION

There are community-specific problems; financial constraints, low standards of living, parental objection and low returns on educational make education less attractive to Muslim girls. In order to improve the educational status of the Muslim minorities, efforts have to be made to improve their socio-economic status as well. Muslim girls the last to be school and adversity, the first to be pulled out of school. This condition essays their vulnerability and no say in decision making. It is surprised that in West Bengal drop out rate is high among Muslim girls at different level.

The pre-dominantly rural and socio-economically backward status of the Muslim women of West Bengal has led to their being almost invisible in urban public life. It is observed that socio-economic handicaps of Muslims Women almost a taboo for their all-round development.

The policy of 'female empowerment' has been one of the most popular measures recently undertaken by states to help women to overcome traditional forms of oppressions. In order to improve the overall conditions of the Muslim women, efforts have to be made to improve their socio-economic-educational-cultural overall status as well.

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