

Muslim Women in Higher Education in India and Pakistan: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to do a literature review of Muslim women, in India and Pakistan, who attain higher education and who have to leave studies due to various reasons apart from religious affiliations. The aim of this paper is to affirm that religious affiliations need to be handled by the policy makers because in some places it is found that when religious affiliations were handled well they did not prove to be the major hindrance in the educational attainment of Muslim women as in recent times women have shown this in both India and Pakistan. There are many countries where Muslim women do not have to overcome parochial outlooks to obtain educational freedom.

When Malala Yousufzai expressed her desire for education, she got shot. People and organizations responded by coming forward and provided her unflinching support, the rest as they say, is history. A certain community still exists that dominates women; embedding the daily life of girls with sacrifices, duties, responsibilities, marriage, dress code, and gender disparities which are not allowing them to aspire for more than these rigid expectations. Not only is the issue one of oppression of women, but the bigger issue is the growing realization amongst women of their rights which has the potential to release them from the societal domination that has curbed their freedom of thought for centuries. Access to education is a telling indicator of women's status in a given society (Verma, 2006). Debated is that Islam gives equal educational rights to men and women equally. Within Muslim communities in India, one of the largest democracies in the world, women still struggle for basic rights being expected to think in a certain way, however we see that there are women from the same community who are in fact thriving in another civil and democratic world that allows them freedom of thought.

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“What we’re seeing now in America is what has been sort of a quiet or informal empowerment of women,” said Shireen Zaman, executive director of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a nonprofit research institute founded after the 2001 attacks to provide research on American Muslims. “In many of our home countries, socially or politically it would’ve been harder for Muslim women to take a leadership role. It’s actually quite empowering to be Muslim in America (Knowlton, 2010).

In India, Muslim women are not a homogeneous community. Muslim women are differentiated across class, culture, and community. India exists today at many levels and what determines the access and success of female education is the overall social and economic development of a region and the rural urban divide in every region. Within all communities within all social groups and among women themselves a diversity of community characteristics can be seen. Minority-majority status does not really determine equitable access to education. Analysis of relative regional development and underdevelopment is crucial for understanding continued inequalities of gender, caste and class. Poverty and patriarchy constrain women more (Nayar, 2007). According to an Anthropological Survey of India, over 350 regional or ethno-linguistic groups exist in India. A majority of Muslims in India are Sunnis living mostly in the northern part of India. About 10-15% of Indian Muslims are Shias. The wide variety of customary practices demonstrate that many Muslims in India do not strictly adhere to Sharia (Muslim Law) indicating that they preserve Muslim identity in conformance with the dominant culture (Kazi, 1999).

In Pakistan, of 96.4% Muslim Population, Sunnis are 85-90% and Shias are 10-15% (Index Mundi: Pakistan Demographic Profile 2013). According to several studies, the quality of life in Pakistan, including education, is deteriorating. The main factors inhibiting female education are poverty, the lack of empowerment and the generally lower social status of women, particularly in the rural areas. Increasing population has also been attributed as a reason for decreased education for girls, with preference being given to boys’ education (Zia & Butt, Pakistan: NGO Alternative Report on CEDAW, 2012).

Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), in India, pointed out the most tragic thing is that Muslim women have accepted this happily, internalizing the kinds of roles their men want them to live with. They are told that this is what they are created for and that for this they should be happy (Ali, 2009). Due to their lower level of aspirations they have been marginalized and this has created a significant lag in educational attainment. A minority of Indian Muslim women have indeed shown grit and courage to reach high levels in various strata of society. Unfortunately, there is not enough data and documentation available to

highlight their ambitions and aspirations. The Sachar Committee Report, 2006, published by the Government of India notes, “In this dismal scenario there is one big ray of hope, while the education system appears to have given up on Muslim girls, the girls themselves have not given up on education. There is a strong desire and enthusiasm for education among Muslim women and girls across the board (Parween, 2013).”

Religion, which is also defined by geographic area and culture, produces impacts demonstrating the fact that the various faiths and to some extent, cultural beliefs are significant factors in this regard. For example, Indian Muslim women are also impacted by the heterogeneity of India where more than 350 languages are spoken. Muslims, in India, are divided into various ethno-linguistic groups. The Muslim population speaks Urdu as their mother tongue and various other Muslim groups speak regional language such as Bengali, Assamese, Malayalam, and Gujarati. As Amartya Sen commented on some parts of the clashes of civilization in his lecture at Edinburgh.

It is a mistake to assume that a person's religion defines him or her reasonably adequately. But every human being's identities have many different components, related to nationality, language, location, class, occupation, history, religion, political beliefs, and so on. A Bangladeshi Muslim is not only a Muslim, but also a Bengali and possibly quite proud of the richness of the Bengali literature and other cultural achievements. Similarly, the history of the Arab world with which an Arab child today can potentially relate is not only the achievements of Islam (important as they are), but also the great secular accomplishments in mathematics, science and literature which are part and parcel of Arab history. Even today when a scientist in, say, the Imperial College uses an "algorithm," he or she unconsciously celebrates the innovativeness of the ninth-century Arab mathematician, Al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the term algorithm is derived (the term "algebra" comes from his book, "Al Jabr wa-al-Muqabilah") (Sen, 2003).

It is interesting to see how the two communities that share the same legacy separated due to political reasons have taken different directions and the reasons for lack of educational attainment of their women are impacted by many factors, religion being one of the components. There were some instances where social organizations and the government took control of these situations and produced desirable results.

So we will examine the historical background of India and Pakistan and its effects on Muslim women's overall educational attainment, looking also at how internal home experiences shape women's aspirations for higher studies and lifelong learning. We will then endeavor to look at unique women within this society who share the same history and religious affiliations and yet who nevertheless are working toward a future that will mold their

destiny, finally examining what their differences or similarities are from the norm of the discrete society in question.

Muslim Women in Colonial India

Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915 and emerged as a spiritual and political leader who coordinated and led a successful national struggle for independence against British imperial rule on the strength of non-violent movement. He transformed the Indian nationalist movement, and led three great popular movements that led to independence from British rule - the Non-Cooperation Movement, 1920-22, in conjunction with the Khilafat Movement for the restoration of the Caliphate in Turkey after the First World War; the Civil Disobedience Movement, 1930-31; and the Quit India Movement of 1942 (Zachariah, 2011). During the movement the *All India Muslim Women's League* took birth and became a sub-committee of *All India Muslim League* with Begum Modh Ali as President and Begum Hafizud-in as secretary. The league's aim was to enhance political consciousness among Muslim women. Sharifah Hamid Ali was appointed to the women's sub-committee of the National Planning Committee which took the responsibility of reviewing the social, economic, and legal status of women suggesting measures to make equality of status and opportunity in free India (Forbes G. H., 1999). The history of India's struggle for freedom is filled with Muslim women activists who took an active part in the freedom movement. Most of these women had gone overseas for their higher education and believed in equal opportunity for women from all walks of life. In the movement led by Gandhi these women inspired other women to come out in large numbers to attend meetings and take part in the movement. Muslim women defied the traditional roles and emerged with a personal awareness of their rights. Muslims, along with other communities, raised the issue of Muslim women's education at the all-male Muslim Educational Congress in 1896. In the following years Muslim women lobbied for women's education and their entry into politics. During this period many schools were established to educate Indian Muslim women. In 1906, Sheikh Abdullah and his wife Wahid Jahan Begum started a girls' school at Aligarh in 1914. Purdanasheen Madarsa which means a school where girls are secluded and remain in purdah (veil). Many such schools were established at other places. Women attended co-educational classes in burqas (veils) and at Aligarh male teachers taught from behind a curtain. In the early twentieth century, the levels of education among Muslim women differed based on their socio-economic location and local needs. Some reports published by colonial authorities indicated that Muslims were against Western education and that Muslim women were not allowed to educate themselves. However, regional reviews revealed that different levels of

Western education existed due to socio-economic status even though the levels of participation of Muslim women were not significantly lower than that of their Indian counterparts.

In the late 19th century, 0.96 percent Hindu girls and 0.86 percent Muslim girls were attending recognized schools. In 1901-02, there were 44,695 female secondary students in British India that included 27 out of every 100,000 Hindu girls and four out of every 100,000 Muslim girls. Yet, in the United Provinces there were only four Hindu girls attending secondary public school compared to 28 Muslim girls. Enrollment figures for Muslim girls in 1902 placed them ahead of Hindu girls in the provinces of Bombay, Madras and the United Provinces, while they lagged behind in Bengal and Punjab. The educational status of Muslim women grew due to government initiatives and efforts within Muslim communities. In 1922-27, in spite of lower Muslim enrollment than the average of all other communities, the girls scholars showed an increase in Bihar and the Central Provinces of Orissa. The *Memorandum of Progress in Education in British India 1916-26* observed that,

The percentages for the Mohammedan community were more favorable than the percentages for all communities together, and even figures for Mohammedan girls alone did not fall below the figures for all classes for female pupils. Even at the collegiate and secondary stages, the proportion of Mohammedans has been well maintained’.

In the early twentieth century, a women’s movement emerged to further female education, raising the marriage age of women, and the removal of purdah (veil). The status of women in colonial India was no different than of the women from other communities. The differences were due to caste, class, and region rather than religion. Purdah (veil) existed across all communities. The Begum of Bhopal, one of the proponents of women’s education, in 1929, while presiding over the session of the All India Women’s Conference, publicly removed her veil. A resolution against veil was passed at the same meeting. In 1930, the Muslim Educational Conference observed that the practice of *purdah* was decreasing, attributing the decline to economic reasons; and personalities like the Nizam of Hyderabad and Mohammed Ali Jinnah took public positions against *purdah* (Kazi, 1999).

In 1947, when India attained freedom, unfortunately, the partition of countries happened. The two being separated with one nation having a Hindu majority and another having a Muslim majority were created after riots in which about one million civilians died (Bates, 2011). India and Pakistan share this same legacy and history. In few months of separation, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan. More than ten million people crossed the

western border. Estimates of the dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted. There was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion) (Butalia, 1998). When a majority of Muslims of India parted ways to build a new nation based on faith the women in both countries shared more or less same fate. Still today, Muslims are oppressed in India and Pakistan reasons being cited mostly are that their religion doesn't allow them to come forward and be equal. So, a country within which historically women have taken an active part during the Gandhi freedom movement, seems today to have lost direction and after more than 60 years of independence. These women to this day still lack empowerment and aspirations.

Educational Attainment Post Partition: Indian Muslim Women

In India, when a girl child is born not only to Muslim parents but also to Hindu parents in some regions, she comes loaded with aspirations from the parents and society about what responsibilities she will have to take once she grows up, what kind of job would be suitable for her so her family is not neglected, she is told time and again that she has to make adjustments with her husband and his family so she should choose a profession that doesn't require absence from family because that is her prime responsibility. The groom is still found by the parents and divorce has a stigma attached to it. When the world is talking about liberal education and freedom of thought, in many regions of India every step is still governed and monitored by the society, religious leaders, and the parents. If Freedom of thought begins at all, it is curbed at its inception and a boundary is drawn. Women are excluded from the mainstream and decision making about women is still taken by men and the society.

The position of women in higher education cannot be treated in isolation from the general status of women in society and from the general aims of economic and social development. Daud Sharifa Khanum, who founded a women's empowerment group called *Steps* in rural Tamil Nadu State in 1991, wrote eloquently of the dissatisfaction many Muslim women felt: "Many women said that they were very unhappy with the way women were treated by community organizations such as the jamaats, the federations attached to mosques. Women's lives were discussed; problems were addressed, without the women being present (Roy, 2012)."

The state of higher education of Muslim women, in Independent India, gives rise for concern. Statistics with the Sachar Panel show that only five percent of women manage to

attain to higher education. The status of enrollment of Muslims to the country's top medical and engineering colleges is in a sorry state. And the panel says a lot needs to be done to provide the Muslims with quality higher education. In medical colleges, four per cent of women take up medicine at the undergraduate level and just 1.5 per cent at the postgraduate level. The route to higher education for Indian Muslim women is hindered by the factors like basic education, transportation, societal and parental pressure, and religious issues (Qureshi, 2010). In India, freedom and access to education has shown effect only in urban areas with upper class Muslim families. On average, Christians are ahead of every other religious group in terms of overall enrollment in higher education as well as at the graduate level. Muslims in contrast lag behind the most and women are even farther behind. Also, fewer of them are in graduate programs. For example, Christian women have three times as high enrollment in overall higher education as compared to Muslim women and Muslims have the lowest GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) among all religious groups in India. Besides lower economic status in general, there are two important reasons cited for this observation. Firstly, Muslim women are usually not encouraged or allowed to go for higher education. Secondly, *madrassas* teach mostly Islamic faith and do not provide secular education (Higher Education In India: Issues Related to Expansion, Inclusiveness, Quality, and Finance, 2008). This is not completely true. There are many Muslim women who aspire to get into schools and become socially mobile but the policy makers and policy implementers have not been able to reach every village and city. Public schools in India are not performing and there is dearth of colleges and quality education. Lack of transport and non-availability of colleges in their areas as the reason for discontinuing studies was cited according to a household survey conducted in 2,000 houses in one of the areas in the old City of Hyderabad, in India. This was cited by seven out of ten girls who had passed their high school exam as the reason for not studying beyond high school.(The Times of India: City: Hyderabad, 2011). Some NGOs, such as Lok Jumbish, have done phenomenal work in this area but NGOs cannot reach every city due to a lack of resources and financial constraints. Moreover, Indian government's restriction on foreign funding will restrict NGOs to spread their wings (Freedom House, 2013). To travel the road to higher education Muslim women need to have at least access to schools and transportation.

Early marriage is another critical issue faced by Muslim girls. Kerala, a state in South India, has a highest literacy rate of Muslim women. In a study conducted in Kerala, 1981, it was found that out of 158 women who were illiterate 46 percent were married below 15 years, 51 percent between 15 and 19 years and in only about 3 percent of those who were married between the age of 21 and 24 (Menon, 1981). It has been widely debated these days that Islam

preaches equality of education for men and women. But recently one of Kerala's most influential Sunni leaders said that education of women, according to Islam, does not provide them greater freedom, especially in relation to men. In an interview given to the Malayalam weekly Mathrubhumi, Kanthapuram AP Aboobacker Musaliyar has said that modern times require that Muslim women are educated; however, some fundamental rules cannot be changed.

"...Islam has not changed its decrees regarding the life of women. Muslim women should not work in a place where only a woman and a man are present. They should work only in a place where there are enough number of women and trustworthy men. Ninety per cent of jobs do not require men and women to mingle. These rules cannot be changed." Musaliyar further said Muslims in Kerala did not support the move by the government to fix the minimum age of marriage of women of the community at 18, and they were exploring ways to get the government to reverse its order (Philip, 2013)."

However, a survey conducted by the Muslim Education Society (MES) among Muslim students of its educational institutions in Kozhikode and Malappuram districts, in Kerala, revealed that young Muslim men and women are against lowering the marriage age. According to the MES, nearly 99 per cent of the students said 'no' to the attempts to lower marriage age. Of the 5,139 Muslim girls who took part in the survey from 16 institutions, all except 67 maintained that the marriage age should be at least 18 years. All the girl students belonging to Muslim community at MES Raja School, Pavangad; MES Raja School, Chathamangalam; B Arch College, Kakkodi; MES Women's College, Nadakkavu, and MES Arts and Science College, Chathamangalam, were against the move of the religious outfits. "Out of 432 students of MES Arts and Science College, Villiapally, 31 did not object to lowering the age limit," MES district president C T Zakir Hussain said (The Indian Express, 2013). The changes that have taken place in the last decades demonstrate that regarding marriage the Muslim leaders haven't changed but the younger generation going to college have realized the drawbacks of child marriage.

Restrictions that they face in the society is yet one more reason for illiteracy among Muslim women. Families follow traditions in the society and restrict girls from educating themselves in the form of societal and religious pressure. A lot of people have a notion that education is not permitted for the Muslim women. But contrary to this, Islam emphasizes and encourages seekers of knowledge and does not discriminate between men and women. The Prophet stated that "whosoever follows a path to seek knowledge shall walk the path of paradise". Despite such importance to education given by the religion, many families restrict women from studying, ironically citing religious prohibitions, clearly showing their lack of knowledge about their own faith. It is also the responsibility of the religious leaders to educate

the community the importance of women's education. It is important to understand that education brings with it knowledge and ability to reason and it would in no way interfere in any religious belief or practice. It would only strengthen it (The Times of India: City: Hyderabad, 2011).

In spite of all of these barriers there are Muslim women who have against all odds succeeded in life. Clad in burqa, mother of two, teacher in school – outwardly Yasmin Sajid Shaikh, 29-year-old, is the state's first Muslim woman Deputy Superintendent of Police. Yasmin, who hails from a conservative Muslim family, attributes her success entirely to her family and husband. Yasmeen is ranked 13th in the merit list of women who have cleared the GPSC exams. The journey from burqa to khakhi is a matter of pride for her family (Patel, 2010). There are many such stories and the common threads that I found, during my research, in these stories was the support from their family implying educational aspirations of the family could overcome the various hurdles discussed above. Most importantly they understood what the true interpretation of the teachings of Islam is.

It turns out that in the states of Tamilnadu, Kerala, Andhra, and Karnataka Muslims are more literate than Hindus, and way ahead of the SC/ST (scheduled caste/scheduled tribe) groups. Consider Tamilnadu, Muslims have a 82.9% literacy rate compared to 72% for the Hindus and a paltry 62% for SC/ST (Reality Check India, 2014). Kerala is a state of highest literacy in India and Muslim women have done better than the rest of the states in India. The Kerala model of women empowerment in India clearly demonstrates that the progressive social movements, government policies, and a historically conducive climate can contribute significantly to the success of Muslim women in other parts of India as well.

These measures have to take place at an early stage and government and NGOs can play an important role. In Rajasthan, India, traditionally, Muslim girls were allowed only Din-e-Taleem (religious education) offered at the mosque and denied Duniya-ki-Taleem (general education). The Imam's dilemma was compounded by the fact that his villagers, in the state's Bharatpur district, firmly believed that the Hindi-medium education offered in local government schools was unsuitable for Muslim girls because the language was associated with Hindus. Finally, *Lok Jumbish* (People's Movement), a leading non-government organization (NGO) specializing in education, stepped in with a simple but workable solution. It offered Urdu (associated with Islam) as a medium of education. At the Kaman block of Bharatpur district where the Meos Muslim form 70 per cent of the 150,000 people and where *Lok Jumbish* concentrates its activities, the impact has been truly dramatic. *Lok Jumbish*

quickly emerged as the ideal mix between non-governmental organizations, local community, government and international donors and by 1998 had established 1,500 non-formal centers with 20,000 girls and 10,000 boys enrolled across Rajasthan (Raj, 2000). In India, educational institutions need to develop trust, as *Lok Jumbish* did, between two communities that can work together for Muslim women education.

Educational Attainment: Pakistani Muslim Women

The status of education in Pakistan is alarming. According to UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) Global Monitoring Report 2009, Pakistan is one of very few countries that failed to achieve even a single education goal. According to UNESCO's Gender Parity Index, there are an estimated 82 girls for every 100 boys at primary schools in Pakistan. The good news is that the proportion of girls in school has been rising – there were 52 girls for every 100 boys in 1990, and 33 for every 100 boys in 1970. However, according to a UNESCO report, Pakistan is ranked in the bottom 10 of new country rankings for the education of poor women. Only six African countries are worse than Pakistan. The reality of the matter is that 62% of girls in Pakistan, aged between 7 and 15 have never been to school compared to 30% in India. Pakistan also ranked in the bottom 10 countries as per the amount of time women spend in school in their lifetime. It further stated that girls, between the ages of 17 and 22, on an average spend one year in school compared to 2.9 years in India. Almost two-thirds of Pakistan's poor girls have never been to school (Tribune:Pakistan, 2012). But data on gender parity in Taliban-afflicted areas of the country are not available. A 2008 study funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency put the adult literacy rate in Pakistan at 52%, with 35% of women and 65% of men literate. Globally, women now outnumber men in higher education – there are 108 women studying at this level for every 100 men. This trend is visible in Pakistani universities in urban areas but not in rural areas, where several stereotypes hinder women's access (Khan, 2013).

The National Education Policy 2009 makes the religious content in the curriculum compulsory. This has implications for women, particularly those from minority communities. The curriculum taught in madrassas (religious schools) goes even further in emphasizing women's subordinate role in the family and teaching them to be submissive wives and good mothers. This kind of education for women is disempowering and discourages them from attaining their full potential as equal human beings and citizens. The issue of stereotypes being reinforced through curriculum was also raised by the CEDAW Committee (Zia & Butt, Pakistan NGO Alternative Report on CEDAW, 2012).

A study conducted by *Shirkat Gah*, a non-governmental organization, revealed that approximately half of Pakistani women are married before 18 years of age and 9% of girls bear children between 15-19 years. The infant and mortality rate, in Pakistan, is the highest compared to other South Asian countries and it was mainly due to child marriage custom prevalent in the society. It further stated that about 74% of women are deprived of taking part in formal economy (The Express Tribune: Sindh, 2013).

Pakistan is also struggling with issues of terrorism. Some parts of Pakistan, especially areas on the border of Afghanistan, are risky for women to go to university. Fourteen female students were killed and 20 were seriously injured in a bomb attack on a university bus inside the campus of Sardar Bahadur Khan (SBK) Women University. One of the students, Zara Ahmed, was a student of Islamic studies. All-female higher education institutions were established in areas where co-education was considered 'un-Islamic'. The attack on the campus of a university shows that terrorists want to ban education for girls, whether they study in co-ed or in female-only campuses," Ruksana Jabeen, vice-chancellor of SBK Women University, told University World News (Khan, University World News, 2013).

The objective of Educational policies for women in Pakistan is to increase access to Education and reduce gender gap. However, many policies until late 1990 did not take steps to remove the stereotype of Pakistani women as homemakers, primary school teachers, nurses, and secretaries. The National Education Policy in 1998 – 2010 recommended to build more women's universities with campuses in all provinces. Women face other issues in accessing and completing higher education such as (1) gender disparity in primary and secondary education; (2) poverty; (3) early marriage; (4) physical distance to universities; (5) limited participation of women in the field of science and technology; (5) societal pressure in reinforcing women as mothers and housewives. Women representation in leadership positions is low due to male dominated outlook (Mansoor, 2012).

A case study to understand the importance of education for Pakistani society was done and the sample consisted of ten women from local female university; a vice chancellor, four deans, one head of department each randomly selected from faculties of Natural Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Humanities, Islamic and Oriental Learning and two from Social Sciences (as this faculty comprised 17 departments, much larger than the other three). The data was collected through a semi-structured interview schedule. Participants confirmed that women have to face socio-cultural hurdles to acquire education. Pakistani women are struggling for their rights. Participants identified poverty, dowry, social norms and early marriages as barriers. For most of the participants, societal attitudes towards female higher

education are mixed; some people are in favor of female education which is depicted in a participant's personal experience (Noureen & Awan, 2011). Thus, Pakistan consists of regions where Islamic interpretation of the religious books are not against women education and although societal norms like in India do not encourage women to have high aspirations some women have attained freedom to educate themselves. Things are changing for the better but if concrete steps are not taken by the government and NGOs to spread awareness about women's education and correct Islamic interpretation, the progress in the next few decades will be abysmally slow.

Conclusion

Theories of justice were successful within a single nation but did not do very well in the global perspective and across the spectrum of different institutions – the role of international corporations, multi-national agencies (Nussbaum, 2006). However, looking at the history of India and Pakistan the evolution of two nations regarding the affairs of Muslim women creates an environment for injustice for both nations that are equally at risk due to issues of health care and basic human requirements. Inequality looks similar on many horizons. Muslim women, in both countries, live in fear and domination although Islamic feminism has a very old history in India. In India and Pakistan, traditional religion is defining women's lives in many ways. The comparison of the literature of educational attainment of Muslim women in India and Pakistan clearly shows that the issues like early marriage, transportation, access to basic education, all girls college, societal pressure and religious issues are prevalent in both countries. It is evident from the literature available for India and Pakistan that religion is one of the components of failure of enrollment of Muslim women in the higher education however, many case studies have shown that women have defied those beliefs and have gone ahead for educational attainment. In the high literacy state of Kerala, India, government policies for empowering the girl child have shown positive results and although religious leaders opposed many reforms, Muslim girls have attained literacy demonstrating that religious beliefs can be tackled if the government and society play a pivotal role to enhance the lives of the oppressed. Lok Jumbish with state government's support improved the number of Muslim girls attending schools significantly. Thus, if government and NGOs come together, like Lok Jumbish did, they can achieve quality of education and improve the number of Muslim girls attending schools.

Pakistan, is still entangled in religious beliefs and the overall situation of women has very slow improvement in some places and none at all at others. Pakistan, has bigger issues to

tackle for example, the path of terrorism adopted by some Muslim leaders to curb the education of the girl child. *Amidst the Barricades: Pakistani women as managers in higher education*, a study by Bushra Ghaus of Rawalpindi's Fatima Jinnah Women University, finds that Pakistan has not only to control the Taliban phenomenon but also needs fundamental changes in the overall societal approach towards women's education (Khan, 2013).

Pakistani government has taken steps to open universities only for girls but Indian government has failed to do that. During my research it was evident that religion is not the main issue for the higher education of Muslim women in India but Pakistan needs to take a few concrete steps to find a quintessential middle path between religion and academic freedom of women. Although in India some Muslim leaders have opposed girl's education in the name of religion and God also demanding to lower the minimum age of marriage, however, society by and large is recognizing the importance of financial independence and education of Muslim women and many Muslim women have occupied prestigious positions in the government and private sector. The Pakistani women achievers and Indian women achievers who have come out of their social bindings to attain higher education have only one thing to say – they got the support of their families to go ahead in life. So Muslim women need a support system and a society that empowers them to aspire for high aspirations.

Martha Nussbaum in a conversation with Harry Kreisler said religion can be a source of energy for women. All religions are sexist and how far we maintain concession to religious beliefs needs careful attention. There is a need of reform of curriculum for women and that should include - ability to examine your own beliefs (Socratic), learning about other countries, and cultivation of imagination using drama and literature (Nussbaum, *Women's Rights, Religious Freedom, and Liberal Education*, with Martha C. Nussbaum (Conversations with History) , 2006). Education can open the path toward freedom and peace in the world. As Malala said:

I do not even hate the Talib who shot me. Even if there is a gun in my hand and he stands in front of me. I would not shoot him. This is the compassion that I have learnt from Muhammad-the prophet of mercy, Jesus christ and Lord Buddha. This is the legacy of change that I have inherited from Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This is the philosophy of non-violence that I have learnt from Gandhi Jee, Bacha Khan and Mother Teresa. And this is the forgiveness that I have learnt from my mother and father. This is what my soul is telling me, be peaceful and love everyone.

This is an important point to be considered in the case of India and Pakistan. This can happen only if policy makers take a concrete step in educational reform. Both the countries are still entangled in rigid ideas, gender biased curriculum, religious beliefs, rote learning, and

power dynamics. Liberal education, in India and Pakistan, is an issue that has been neglected for more than 60 years. The curriculum is still colonized and unless, as Nussbaum said, the curriculum involves questioning our beliefs in an environment that fosters critical thinking we will continue struggling with the number of women enrolling for higher education. I agree with feminist epistemologists that knowledge has a social character. One cannot assess any theory of knowledge unless one considers the factors that led to its emergence and its continuation (Tanesini, 1999). An education based on the idea of an inclusive global citizenship and on the possibilities of the compassionate imagination has the potential to transcend divisions created by distance, cultural difference, and mistrust. Developing this ideal further and thinking about how to modify it in the light of our times is one of the most exciting and urgent tasks we can undertake as educators and citizens (Nussbaum, 2004).

Furthermore, to increase enrollment in higher education the preparation has to start early. In primary and secondary schools the curriculum reform and liberal education needs to be introduced. NGOs and women's organizations can play an active role to liberate women and encourage them to question their own beliefs. The road ahead in India and Pakistan seems rough though. Muslim women need to be exposed to the resources required for employment and expectations of employers.

In India and Pakistan, women, especially Muslim women need inspiration from their family and society to acquire education and security. It is important to differentiate between the status of women in Islam and the present status of women in the Muslim world. It is also important to appreciate the vast diversity of the Muslim world, with its varying levels of adherence to Islamic injunctions, with regard to the status of Muslim women. In a world-wide population of 1.5 billion Muslims, the status of women varies from culture to culture and often within the same culture. Thus the stereotypical image of the oppressed Muslim woman with limited or no access to education is just that, a stereotype based on gross misinformation. Therefore, it is important to understand that the status of Muslim women need not be viewed through the prism of the aspirations of Western women. The aberrations in the present status of Muslim women are a result of not following the teachings of Islam, rather than conforming to them. Therefore, improving the status of women in the Muslim world requires more and not less adherence to Islamic injunctions (Why Islam?, 2014).

H.G. Wells noted,

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe. If we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world

outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure (Wells, 1922)

It is high time educators in both countries draw a blueprint of education keeping the social factors in mind and thus provide access to those who are willing learners and awareness to those who leave education due to misleading statements of a few religious leaders.

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