
Theoretical Perspectives on Muslim Women's Educational Engagement

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted dimensions of Muslim women's involvement in education in Kerala, focusing on historical, social, and contemporary challenges and advancements. Drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives, it investigates educational backwardness, dropout rates, barriers to higher education, and the interplay between formal and religious schooling. Historical analyses reveal systemic marginalisation rooted in patriarchal norms and socio-economic disadvantages. However, emerging research highlights education's transformative role in enhancing Muslim women's social mobility, empowerment, and agency. Despite recent progress, disparities in higher education persist due to structural and cultural barriers. The findings underscore the necessity of targeted interventions to bridge these gaps and leverage education as a tool for societal integration and gender equity.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Education, Kerala, Marginalisation, Social Mobility.

Introduction

In today's world, Muslim women's involvement in education is critical. Numerous studies on Muslim women's participation in education have been conducted from various perspectives and subject areas. This study seeks to provide theoretical perspectives on Muslim women's involvement and engagement in education. It examines Muslim women's interactions from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Many of them are specific to Muslim women, while others address Muslim concerns in Kerala as a whole and highlight issues with Muslim women's education. Most of them concentrate on contemporary issues in education, with very few talking about the history of Muslim women's education. Taking into account the challenges associated with Muslim women's education in general, these works cover a wide range of subjects, such as their educational backwardness, educational status, barriers to education, dropout rates, education and social mobility or empowerment, and problems related to higher education, among others.

Literature Review

In his book *A History of Education of Muslim Women in Kerala from 1904-1964*, Jaseem (2003) offers a thorough account of the educational history of Muslim women in Kerala, spanning six decades beginning at the turn of the 20th century. Although not many publications specifically address the history of Muslim women's education, as was previously mentioned, many deal with the history of Muslims in Kerala in general and offer insight into this topic. Generally speaking, they all talk about Muslim women's lack of education and the challenges they faced when trying to get an education. 2013 saw the publication of Jaseem's thesis as the book *Educational Empowerment of Muslim Women in Kerala: a Historical Perspective*.

Muslim women continue to confront numerous obstacles in their pursuit of education since it is neither supported nor encouraged, forcing them to stay confined to the home and perform household duties. Some of the works in this context concentrate on Muslim women's socioeconomic disadvantages, battles to obtain education, and other issues. Indukumari's² 1976 work, *Education and Social Status of Muslim Women in Kerala* is among the first in this area. This study examines Muslim women's educational status, emphasising the need for

empowerment. The book *Status of Muslim Women in India: A Case Study of Kerala, India*, published in 1981, contained her previously mentioned thesis. Additionally, she completed one more work on Muslim Women in Kerala titled *Educational Backwardness of Muslim Women in Kerala: Survey in 1978*. The study's goal is to find out how education can help Muslim women in Kerala advance in society. Muslim women's status has improved as a result of education, but it has not yet attained the anticipated level. Social, structural, and institutional elements of the community appear to impede the achievement of the desired results. Nonetheless, although Muslim women have historically been regarded as inferior, education has the potential to significantly improve women's social status. Education was able to provide women with a far higher status than traditional society did in economic, political, and cultural activities, as well as marriage and family matters.

The marginalised and backward situation of Muslim women is the main focus of P M Shahala's writings on the subject of their education. In this context, her 2019 study, *Education of Muslim Women in the Slums of Kannur, Kerala*, is significant. According to the report, Muslim girls living in slums have a difficult time achieving their educational objectives, and for many, education is a secondary necessity. The failure of their educational attainment can be attributed to several factors. According to the report, these include poverty, unemployment, the value placed on education, superstitions, ignorance about obtaining education, etc. Shahala's³ other work in this regard is "Educational Status of Muslim Women in Matriarchal Families of North Malabar(2018)." The study examines Muslim women's educational attainment in North Malabar with a focus on Muslim women from matriarchal households. The study tries to determine the causes of Muslim women's educational backwardness by evaluating their current educational conditions. According to the study, although school education has improved, higher education attainment is still insufficient.

In his *Analysis of the Outwardly Developed-Inwardly Backward Paradox concerning the educational position of Muslims in Kerala, India*, Haneefa⁴ (2019) also attempts to paint a similar picture, concentrating on the backward social status of Muslim women's education in Kerala. According to the study, Muslims in Kerala are paradoxically being kept back even as they seem to be progressing. They perform satisfactorily in primary school but fall behind in further education when compared to other Muslims in India. Kerala Muslims are the state's least educated group, despite their political and economic advantages. In Kerala's development model, Muslim women are the most excluded due to triple discrimination—based on geography, gender, and religion—and need extra state assistance to overcome their educational obstacles.

In his book *Kerala Muslim Women Education: Present and Future*, Muhammad Rashad⁵ (n.d.) attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of Muslim women's education in Kerala. By examining the function of educational institutions and initiatives, this study aims to comprehend the status of Muslim women in Kerala in the field of education. It also seeks to investigate why Muslim women continue to be influenced by a society that is dominated by men, although non-Muslim women, like Christians, have gained more power. It also talks about programs for women's empowerment and urges the government to pay more attention to these problems and find answers to their difficulties.

For Muslim women, achieving social mobility and empowerment is one of the most significant benefits of education. Additionally, it raises their social status. Dominic⁶ (2011) examines education as a means of social change for Muslim women from a historical standpoint in *Women's Education as a Tool of Social Transformation: A Historical Study Based on Kerala Society*. This essay aims to uncover the trends that influenced the historical development of the idea of women's social transformation. It also looks at women's circumstances before the 19th century and how education helped them change their social status. By examining its main philosophies and how they were propagated by institutional organizations, the study offers a theoretical framework with an emphasis on social transformation.

Anvar⁷ (2019), in his *Impact of Education on Socio-Economic Empowerment of Muslim Women in Kerala: A Study with Special Reference to Malappuram District*, also investigates the connection between socioeconomic empowerment and education for Muslim women in Malappuram District. His research addresses the subjects of Muslim women's social, political, and economic empowerment alike. According to the study, Muslim women's educational attainment has increased as a result of Gulf migration and the ensuing economic growth.

Although Mohammed⁸ (2007) does not specifically address the issues surrounding Muslim women's education in his book *Educational Empowerment of Kerala Muslims: A Socio-historical Perspective*, it does address these issues because any study on Muslim education in Kerala cannot avoid discussing issues on women. The history of Muslim education in Kerala, the influence of British policies on Muslim education, the function of community

organisations, and Muslim women's empowerment are all included in the study.

Similarly, Edannur⁹ et al. (2014) discuss the social mobility problems of Muslim women in their study, *Intergenerational Social Mobility among Muslim Minority in the Kerala State of India: Formal and Religious Education*. Here, they attempt to address it within the framework of both religious and formal schooling. The crucial issue here is that religious education plays a significant part in Muslims' social lives as well. This study looks at the gender, occupation, and educational attainment of Muslims in Kerala for two generations. It also looks at how younger generations' formal education and religious education relate to one another. The results show that there is high occupational continuity and substantial upward educational mobility among Kerala's Muslim population. The younger generation's educational and career chances are significantly shaped by their family history.

Higher education is the specific emphasis of certain publications on Muslim women's education. In *Higher Education and Muslim Women in Kerala*, Beevi¹⁰ (2021) attempts to provide a broad overview of higher education among Muslim women in Kerala. The results point to the necessity of specialised interventions to address the issues Muslim women encounter in the field of education and employment.

The relationship between gender and higher education in the context of Muslim women is examined by Ramsheena¹¹ (2018) in her study, *Gender and Higher Education: Mapping the Experiences of Muslim Women in Kerala*. This work is significant since it is one of the few that examines the connection between Muslim women's gender identification and higher education. The study examines, from the viewpoint of Muslim women, community reforms and migration to Gulf nations within the framework of the Kerala Model of Development. Additionally, it looks at Muslim women's higher education, documents their goals and experiences, and explores parents' attitudes toward women's education, employment, and public activities.

In this regard, Gafarkhan's¹² (2016) *Modern Higher Education and the Perception of Muslim Women in Kerala* is noteworthy since it attempts to investigate how higher education affects Muslim women, concentrating on how their perceptions alter as a result of obtaining higher education. The goal of the study is to comprehend how higher education affects young women's ability to speak up for their rights and transform their lives despite social, cultural, and religious obstacles to education. Their feminist consciousness in a patriarchal environment served as the inspiration for the research's feminist viewpoint concepts. The study also looks at how Muslim women are perceived and their common sense, how they are perceived to exercise their agency and power, and how they fight and reclaim their stories.

In her study on the disparities in higher education for Muslim girls in Kerala, Sowmya¹³ (2024) attempts to address the issues that Muslim females encounter in higher education. According to the report, Muslim girls in Kerala experience discrimination and inequity in the field of higher education. Muslims feel more unjust treatment than members of other religious groups, particularly when it comes to work and education. Despite recent improvements, Muslim educational enrolment is still somewhat low, with specific deficiencies in higher education. However, the inequalities for Muslims narrow considerably when pupils move from school to higher education. It is imperative to concentrate on eligibility and fortify the connections between secondary and postsecondary education, particularly in light of the high rates of middle school dropout. Household resources and location play a major role in influencing educational participation, even when prejudice and restricted access to schools are considerations. Furthermore, despite the substantial returns on investment, there is evidence that the community may not completely appreciate the advantages of education.

Another significant issue with Muslim women's higher education is brought to light by Ramla's¹⁴ (2022) *An Analysis of the Higher Education Status and Problem of Dropout among the Muslims in Kerala*. She claims that Muslim women experience dropout problems even at the higher education level for several reasons, including early marriage and other problems. The state education department has noted a dramatic rise in Dalit student dropout rates, even though Kerala has achieved 100% primary schooling. Education experts blame this increase on inadequate government coordination and poorly executed programs. The border districts of Wayanad, Idukki, and Kollam have the highest dropout rates.

Led By Foundation¹⁵ (2022) in its study *A Study on the Capability of Muslim Women of Kerala to Pursue Higher Education Abroad* provides a new perspective on Muslim women in Kerala discovering new goals and desires. The study investigates Kerala's Muslim women's interest in going to international universities for PhD studies. Additionally, it examines the elements that affect their capacity to apply for admission to these institutions. Kerala's Muslim women have the drive and aspiration to seek doctoral and graduate degrees overseas.

The situation of Muslim women in Kerala is better than in other states, according to Jibin & Naseema's¹⁶ (2017) study, *Muslim Women in Malabar: Transition in Education (1990-2017)*. One noteworthy finding is that, across all districts in Kerala's Malabar area, the literacy rate for Muslim women is greater than that of Muslim men. A recent development in the Malabar region's educational empowerment is the growing interest of Muslim girls in engineering and medical programs.

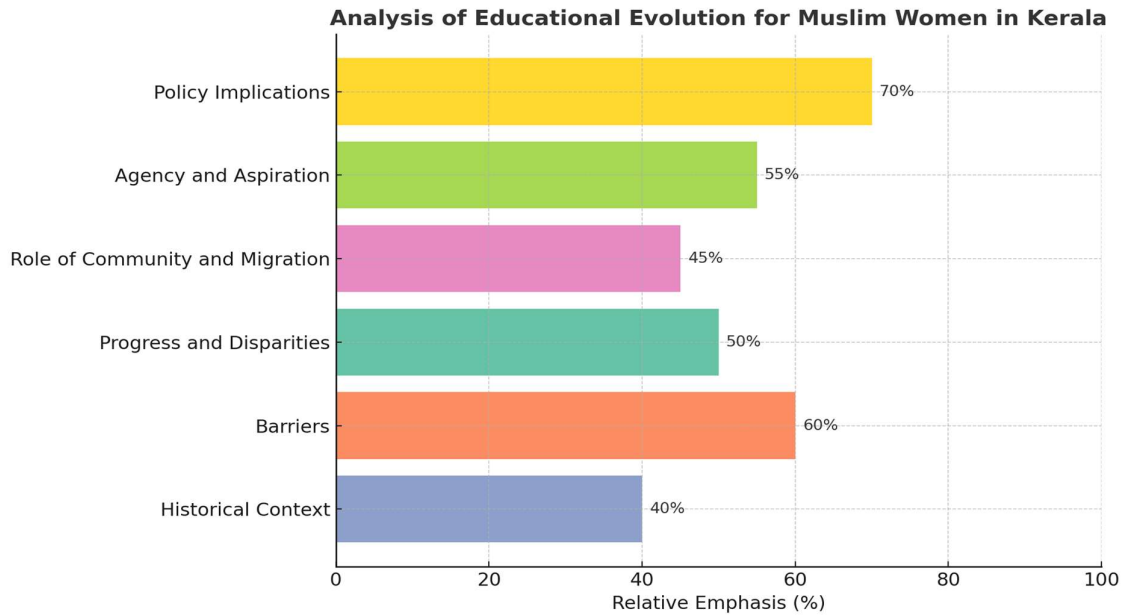
An overview of the growth of educational institutions run by Muslim organisations in Kerala and Gujarat can be found in Haneefa's¹⁷ (2017) paper, *Communities and Social Capital: A Paper of the Educational Development of the Muslims in Kerala and Gujarat*. The study demonstrates how community organisations can achieve their shared objectives through the efficient use of networks and resources. According to the study, these organisations were founded by the community because the state and other educational institutions do not include the marginalised Muslim population. The community can confront the discrimination they encounter with the aid of organisations established under religious banners. However, the study warns that institutions established by caste and community organizations may lead to polarisation and segregation, as students may not have the opportunity to interact with peers from different backgrounds.

The literature collectively highlights the historical and ongoing challenges faced by Muslim women in Kerala in accessing education. It underscores how traditional social structures, patriarchal norms, and economic disadvantages have historically confined Muslim women to domestic roles, hindering their educational advancement. Despite some progress, many studies indicate that the lack of institutional support and societal encouragement continues to impede their participation in education, particularly at higher levels. The persistence of these barriers is often attributed to factors such as poverty, early marriage, and cultural restrictions, which perpetuate cycles of educational and economic marginalisation.

At the same time, the studies reveal the transformative potential of education for Muslim women in Kerala, showing how it has enabled social mobility and improved their status in various spheres, including economic and cultural domains. Researchers have explored the role of educational institutions, community reforms, and Gulf migration in creating opportunities for Muslim women. While the state's literacy rate is commendable, the disparities in higher education and employment between Muslim women and their non-Muslim counterparts are evident. Education is increasingly viewed not just as a means of empowerment but as a crucial tool for societal integration and addressing gender-based discrimination.

Emerging research also delves into how Muslim women are challenging traditional norms through education, fostering a sense of agency and feminist consciousness. Studies emphasise the interplay between religious and formal education, suggesting that education systems must balance cultural sensitivities with progressive policies. Efforts to pursue international education and enrol in professional programs indicate a growing aspiration among Muslim women to break stereotypes and redefine their societal roles. However, these advances remain uneven, necessitating targeted interventions to bridge gaps in educational access, dropout rates, and participation in higher education.

Results



Here is a graphical representation of the key aspects related to the education of Muslim women in Kerala. The horizontal bar chart visually balances the relative emphasis on each dimension, highlighting areas like policy implications and barriers as significant focal points.

Historical Context: Education for Muslim women in Kerala has evolved from systemic marginalisation to gradual empowerment. Early studies identified deficiencies stemming from cultural restrictions and socio-economic disadvantages.

Barriers: Key obstacles include poverty, early marriage, lack of societal support, and limited institutional interventions. Dropout rates remain high, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged regions.

Progress and Disparities: While literacy and primary education rates have improved, access to higher education and professional courses remains uneven. Muslim women in Kerala lag behind their non-Muslim counterparts in educational attainment and employment outcomes.

Role of Community and Migration: Community organisations and Gulf-driven economic changes have played a pivotal role in creating opportunities. However, their influence is uneven, often confined to specific regions or demographics.

Agency and Aspiration: Emerging trends indicate growing feminist consciousness among Muslim women. Aspirations for professional and international education reflect their desire to challenge traditional roles and achieve greater social integration.

Policy Implications: Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies that balance cultural sensibilities with progressive reforms, focusing on enhancing access to higher education, addressing dropout rates, and supporting educational aspirations through scholarships and mentorship programs.

1.1. Conclusion

The collective body of research reveals a nuanced picture of Muslim women's educational experiences in Kerala. While systemic barriers such as patriarchal constraints, poverty, and cultural norms have historically hindered their participation, education has proven to be a powerful force for social and economic mobility. The integration of Gulf-driven economic changes, community-driven reforms, and increasing aspirations for higher and international education has enabled a shift in perceptions and opportunities for Muslim women. However, significant disparities remain, particularly in access to and completion of higher education. These findings call for strategic, culturally sensitive interventions by policymakers and educators to address persistent inequalities and empower Muslim women to fully realize their potential in academic and professional spheres.

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