

# Higher Education and Muslim Women in Kerala

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## *Abstract*

A Muslim woman of a rural, tribal, feudal or urban background or she can also be, "a highly qualified and self-confident professional, or a self effacing peasant; she can lead a confined life, cut off from all decision making and information - in either an urban ghetto of respectability or in the wide expanse of nomadic regions; and occasionally she may even be a central figure of an authority in government or business circles". That this is exclusively and directly connected to Islam is not true, but the fact is that Islam not only allows women the opportunities for education and contribution to society, but encourages this and supports it fully. Prevalence of women at all levels of education and in different fields of employment and aspects of public life, women now seek to achieve the highest leadership roles in all sectors and as well as in higher education sector and to participate on the various positions and in the decision-making process in public and private sectors. However, women who strive to assume the leadership positions are facing multiple challenges and many times give up because they become overwhelmed in dealing with multiple barriers. Education enables them to adapt themselves to progress in order to meet the demands of a growing society. It is actually a refulgent light, which illuminates the mind and expels the darkness of ignorance, illiteracy, prejudices, superstitions and uncouthness. Further it is a tool of uplift, growth, development, expansion, extension, dilation and augmentation and a systematic intellectual and moral training and instruction. Women also provided a great deal of evidence that challenged culturalist readings of their employment hopes and statuses. It was conceptualized that greatest obstacles and barriers that they would face in the labour market would be general experience of racism and Islamophobia shaping perceptions of them as job applicants, and gendered and racialised expectations of what constitutes 'ideal' employees and what constitutes 'problematic' Muslim women workers. Significantly, it has to be highlighted the familial support for them in relation to career aspirations. Even those who did not report strong familial support demonstrated themselves to be strong, clear-headed respondents with sufficient agency of their own to decide on their own employment outcomes, negotiating with spouses and parents to fulfill their own ambitions.

***Key words: higher education, Caring Responsibilities, Parental Encouragement, Labour market***

## **Introduction**

Education is a heavenly gift, a boon and a blessing bestowed upon human beings, which enables them to adapt themselves to progress in order to meet the demands of a growing society. It is actually a refulgent light, which illuminates the mind and expels the darkness of ignorance,

illiteracy, prejudices, superstitions and uncouthness. Further it is a tool of uplift, growth, development, expansion, extension, dilation and augmentation and a systematic intellectual and moral training and instruction. It also inculcates discipline of the mind and character to produce and enhance sterling traits like self-restraint as well as habits of obedience. It sharpens wisdom, widens the realm of knowledge and wakens dormant abilities and mental powers. From the earliest times of man's existence he must have been concerned with the preparation of young to face the problems of living in a world that were called challenging and demanding. Present study highlights how Muslim women, through their participation in university, challenge dominant stereotyped assumptions prevalent in both the literature and institutions, about the lives of Muslim women and their families. It documents how their participation not only acts to demystify university life, but in focusing on Muslim women as academic achievers, shows how Muslim women can act as role models for other women. It also documents a number of areas of concern around careers advice and recruitment into higher education and the ways racist stereotypes of Muslim women impact on their daily lives.

### **Statement of the problem**

Even though there are socio cultural disabilities, Muslim women entering into higher Education through a variety of routes. As several other studies are also highlighting, the presence of Muslim women in higher education and the diverse routes they follow in order to enter university, contradicts problematic discourses that suggest that Muslim women's educational choices are limited due to cultural or religious reasons. Present study on “*Higher Education and Muslim Women in Kerala*” tries to analyse the expectations of female Muslim women students along with the constraints they are facing in between their educational and religious life. Efforts become ambiguous as majority of them are not considered as labour force.

### **Scope of study**

Present study on “*Higher Education and Muslim Women in Kerala*” comes under Islamic studies as it traces out the cultural life of Islam as an ethnic group. The study can be concluded only by using the perspectives of Women studies. By comparing the findings of Dr David Tyrer, Liverpool John Moores University Fauzia Ahmad, University of Bristol study on MUSLIM

WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES AND PROSPECTS in 2006 researcher tries to describe the status of educated Muslim women in Kerala.

### **Objectives**

1. Review the study on MUSLIM WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES AND PROSPECTS in 2006 by Dr David Tyrer, Liverpool John Moores University Fauzia Ahmad, University of Bristol
2. Make a comparison with the findings of MUSLIM WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES AND PROSPECTS in 2006 by Dr David Tyrer, Liverpool John Moores University Fauzia Ahmad, University of Bristol with the status of Educated Muslim Women in Kerala

### **Sampling**

For the present study researcher identifies 100 Muslim women those who have enrolled for Bachelors degree courses in Mahathma Gandhi University

## **Result and discussion**

### **Routes into Higher Education**

*Muslim women students in this study entered Higher Education through a variety of routes. A large number resided in areas of high Asian and Muslim concentration that were socially deprived across all social indicators and attended comprehensive schools. Schools and colleges in these areas on the whole, lacked resources to prepare students for university or make them aware of educational opportunities. A few women in the study had not entered university through the 'A' level route, but had pursued vocational routes through studying for BTEC Diplomas for instance. Muslim women as a whole in the study were also likely to attend local post-1992 'new' universities.*

Respondents for the present study were selected from university students of Kerala, majority of them belong to coastal areas of Ernakulam District. More than 90% of them belong to socially and economically backward families. Educational facilities in Kerala are comparatively advanced than other states in India; any student with good academic records who

aspire to get admission can get admission in higher secondary courses. University education also seems accessible to students with good academic score. Another possibility is that the reservation policy for socially backward communities in India, Muslim women is the major beneficiaries of educational reservation for other backward communities in Kerala. Another possibility for higher studies for Muslim Women in Kerala is the educational institutions run by Muslim Management. Lot of aided colleges and self financing institutes are run by trusts and Management of Muslim organizations, where fee concession and community quota is reserved for students from Muslim community, some of the institutions allocate seats for Muslim female applicants.

### **Expectations from schools and colleges**

*Students from schools in deprived areas spoke of their experiences of university in terms of 'difficult transitions' and described how they felt unprepared by their schools for the independent study required at degree level. They also felt a 'lack of support' from some university lecturers who did not appreciate how their socioeconomic circumstances impacted on their experience of higher education.*

Majority of 93% respondents are of the opinion that, they are getting better support from teachers and educational institutions. Student friendly circumstance in schools colleges and higher education sector enhances the ambitions of girls especially from Muslim communities. 7% of students are not comfortable with the circumstances in campus may be because of their poor economic condition, they are not able to submit the required assignments and class works. Among them 3 students were not able to continue their studies as they felt some sort of harassment.

### **Caring Responsibilities**

*A few women had additional caring responsibilities that they learnt to work around while studying for a degree, or as one respondent put it, 'learn how to juggle and lead a dual life'. For some married respondents this represented care for young children and could act to temporarily delay entry into higher education. Other women spoke of having to care for elderly or ill parents. In these circumstances, women's choices around university location and mode of study were influenced by the extra care demands on their time. It is significant to note that care responsibilities, marriage, and the presence of young children did not prevent Muslim women*

*from taking up degree courses. As Ahmad et al (2003) show in their London-based study, many women with child care responsibilities waited until their children were old enough to be cared for in crèches or left their children in the care of close relatives while they attended university.*

There are cases, families and husbands were keen to support their higher education aspirations; their marriage and motherhood are not a constraint for them to accomplish their educational dreams. At the same time studies show that, motherhood penalties limit the desires of Muslim women as they have to get married in early youth hood. Here 74% of respondents are not married and remaining 26 are facing some sort of problems as they are married as well as having children.

### **The role of family in Muslim women's higher education**

*Some existing discourses of South Asian and Muslim family structures situate them as inherently oppressive and as presenting barriers to women's participation in higher education and the labour market. These rely on discourses of 'degradation and despair' and tend to present racialized and pathological accounts of ethnic minority families, especially 'arranged marriages' (for a detailed critique see Ahmad, 2006a). However, echoing some other studies, the empirical data gathered here demonstrates how many Muslim women cited their families as key sources of encouragement and motivation towards higher education study and in thinking about future careers.*

Most of the respondents said in identifying their family and school teachers as being important sources of advice. Apart from teachers, family also plays an important role in supporting Muslim women. Data shows, married girls need more support from family than unmarried students. In such cases, both families envisage their aspirations on the respondents by providing essential support to respondents. A negligible (5%) number of respondents have completed their schooling in orphanages / shelter homes run by trusts as their mothers have gone abroad for job. After completing their 10<sup>th</sup> they left orphanages and completed higher secondary as day scholars.

## **Parental encouragement**

*The research found that Muslim women spoke of their parents as often sharing in their educational and career aspirations. Women cited several reasons for entering higher education; these ranged from personal interest, career aspirations, financial stability, personal independence, and greater respect and choices when thinking about marriage. Although for some there may have been disagreements over the choice of subject studied at degree level and the university (not prestigious enough, or disagreements over location), the core aim of degree attainment was shared by many women and their parents. This represents one of the report's key findings and is supported by other research on Muslim women where educational aspirations were shared by parents who promoted a 'family expectation' to achieve academically.*

Like the role of family in Muslim women's education, parental encouragement also has an important role. Parental encouragement and the educational status as well as employment status of parents are related. Majority of respondents (68%) have less educated parents and the aspiration the parents inspired them to enroll into graduation. Most of them are consider education as their means for occupying better job.

## **Role Models and Peer Groups**

*Role models frequently cited were sisters or female relatives who had graduated and were in professional employment, and teachers and lecturers. Peer groups and localities were also found to be influential. Schools and colleges in areas which were described as 'relatively impoverished' were less likely to prepare young people for higher education entry. In areas such as Bradford and Manchester where a number of respondents received their schooling, many women highlighted how little support they received from their schools or FE colleges with their degree aspirations and how few students considered university as a viable option. Amongst familial networks, where a 'culture of academic achievement' was not already in existence, the entry by one or two women into university could act to encourage and motivate other young women and their parents into considering higher education.*

Some of the respondents cited their family members as role models when thinking about educational and personal success as they are providing complex mixture of expectation, support,

motivation, and pressure from her family to do certain things. Some of them have identified eminent personalities as their role model.

### **Marriage Choices and Employment Prospects**

*During the research interviews, students were asked whether they thought marriage would impinge on their employment choices and prospects. The majority responded by stressing their right to choose whether to work or not after marriage. Shagufta's attitude to formal employment echoes several other women in this study and earlier studies on South Asian women and employment (Dale, et al, 2002; Ahmad et al, 2003). In viewing work in the formal economy as a choice, Shagufta highlights instead, the value and meaning her education carries.*

Only a minor number of respondents said their primary desire to exercise their right not to work and to use her education instead for the benefit of her future family. Social and economic backwardness of respondent's family coerce them to get qualified for jobs. Religious practices of Islam also endow with early marriage and insignificant number of respondents was able to continue their education after marriage or having children. It is not only the economic conditions of the family force the family to fix their marriage at an early age, but also the common customary practices of Muslims compel them to take decision on the marriage of their daughters. Here in present study nearly 20% of respondent families have decided to send their daughters for marriage only after completing their studies.

### **Experiences of higher education**

*Respondents' experiences of universities were extremely diverse, although there was a shared emphasis on the complex interplay between the role of institutionalised factors in shaping their experiences, and their own agency in seeking to resist this and make something of university life for themselves. With their wide range of courses of study, and their differing backgrounds and preferences, respondents presented a picture of their lives at university as a complex interplay of factors, balancing and negotiating their positions and responsibilities as students, daughters, friends, classmates.*

Respondents' experience of university structured their access to space provisions, networks and opportunities. 12% of the respondents were making use of libraries for the first time. Some of



them were excited with their sessions of seminars and class work. Most of them were happy as they are free to wear their dress as the institutions were democratic in its nature.

### **Meeting Muslim women students needs**

*The importance of meeting Muslim women students' needs should not be reduced merely to providing prayer rooms or halal food, although these are very important provisions (see below). Not all Muslim women practice their faith in the same ways or to the same extent; whereas to one person access to a prayer facility may be particularly important, this may not be a concern to another person who may choose to pray elsewhere or, indeed, not pray at all. The most important factor to take into account when meeting the needs of Muslim women students is that there is no singular way of understanding or categorizing Muslim women students and their needs. Muslim women students should be understood based on the needs that they express rather than being assumed to present with the same range of needs as other Muslim women.*

Prayer rooms were their major concern and during Ramadan they may also be required to break their fasts at specified points in the day and in many cases say a short prayer at the same time. There are instances of request that lecturers permit them some flexibility to ensure that they are able to meet these responsibilities as well as permission rearrange assessments scheduled to clash with Eid and to miss lectures falling on these dates. 19% of respondent had to face some difficulties in submitting assignments on time. 7% of respondents from aided colleges also felt some inconvenience in getting permission to submit their assignments after the events.

### **Muslim women's identities and higher education**

*Muslim women respondents rejected notions of an essential, authentic primordial ethnic identity which they should adhere to and instead, stressed the dynamic, contingent and fluctuating nature of their identities. While they acknowledged their formal ethnicities, or the ethnic identity that was 'expected of them' through the hegemonic workings of 'race' such as university ethnic monitoring forms, women were also clear that parental or ancestral heritage did not determine who they were. Instead, they asserted their own agency in defining their identities in their own terms and subsequently displaced these in favour of a notion of 'Muslim' identities, which were highly subjective and felt to be more inclusive of other aspects to their identities.*



No respondents were hesitant to reveal their identities. More than 80% of the respondents were availing scholarships for OBC students and 91% of them are wearing Purdah /hijab/ veil. Only 5% of respondents have enrolled into their graduation on general merit, rest of them is admitted in reservation category. All these factors shows, the identity of Muslim women is not an obstacle in higher education in Kerala.

### **Muslim women's personal and career hopes**

*Muslim women reported a diverse range of career hopes and aspirations that disrupted the popular stereotypes of Muslim women as being relegated to the domestic sphere, and the stereotypes of South Asians as generally preferring to work in particular fields such as medicine, accountancy and law. Certainly, among our respondents were aspiring doctors, dentists and accountants, although not in sufficient proportion as to dominate our sample or serve as a useful basis for characterizing their career aspirations.*

For the present study researcher selected respondents from five different graduate level Institutions, such as, Poly techniques, engineering college, other bachelors degree colleges among the huge array of different preferred career fields. Majority of the respondents are very focused in their career aims, even in technical, social work, policy making fields. Two of them are interested to join in Indian Civil Services. Some of them are interested to initiate START UP programmes with the help of govt. of Kerala.

### **Muslim women and labour market employability**

*Muslim women student's attitudes towards finding work were extremely positive, demonstrating that they had a very clear awareness of the resources available to them in seeking work. They were also generally extremely clear about the type of job search behaviour likely to bring them the greatest success in their chosen career field. Women also provided a great deal of evidence that challenged culturalist readings of their employment hopes and statuses.*

Participation of women in work force can be measured as labour market employability. Paid work, unpaid work and actively looking for work comes under employability or labour market. Significant number of respondents, 68% expecting better job after the completion of their course; women those who are engaged in unpaid work as well as unemployed are also come

in the category. So it can be concluded that, by completing their graduation they are able to get better job so employability is determined by their education itself.

### **Barriers to Muslim women graduates seeking employment**

*Respondents were able to identify a range of barriers to Muslim women entering the graduate labour market. Respondents highlighted the particular issues that they would face as women. This theme was reiterated by a number of respondents, who pointed to the difficulties of balancing a career with a family life and highlighted the extent to which as women they would be affected by this. Noting that work-life balance issues posed particular challenges to medicine, one medical student further added that her experience as a medical student had prepared her for the ways in which gender might structure her labour market opportunities following qualification.*

Respondents are of the opinion that, religious and customary practices are the main hindrance in seeking employment. By getting married at the early ages they are not able to join for a job as they wish. Along with government sector jobs, private sector and overseas jobs seems acceptable to people of any religious groups. Familial bondage and mother hood responsibilities part of social system only create seeking employment.

### **Experiences of university careers services**

*A number of women reported finding formal careers services helpful but felt that careers advisors did not fully understand the specific barriers facing Muslim women graduates in the labour market, or the needs of Muslim women accessing careers services.*

There are instances of response highlighted having access to good quality university careers services as a positive factor organized by their Institutes, the respondents were selected from final year of their graduation and they are also expecting the same. And they are applicable mainly for professional courses and 50% respondents were belongs to arts and science courses.

### **Conclusion**

The findings support the importance of specialist interventions, highlighting the importance of careers services having staff with specific training in and understanding of the specific barriers facing Muslim women in education and the labour market, and in specific fields

of employment. Women's views about careers advice and support varied, but a consistent theme was that despite a willingness to acknowledge good quality support from well trained careers staff, respondents were also critical of the levels of understanding that they felt careers staff had of the barriers facing Muslim women and of their needs. A considerable number of respondents also acknowledged the importance of accessing careers services while simultaneously noting that it is important not to overstate their significance. This was particularly so for students and graduates with very specific careers aspirations and who felt that the more generic approach of the careers services they had accessed was not necessarily useful.

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