



The Gap Between Higher Education and Empowerment Among Marginalised Muslim Women in Rural Birbhum of West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT: *Education and empowerment are linked with each other for the development of the country. In the case of Muslim women, the difference in education and participation in economic, social, and political engagements are still significantly low than the general women population of the state as well as the country. Thus, the study aims to understand the education and empowerment status and factors causing a major gap between the higher education and empowerment among marginalized Muslim women of rural Birbhum, West Bengal and tries to suggest measures for uplifting the situation. The study is based on a multistage sampling method that covers 120 populations of Muslim women (15-35 years) from rural Birbhum. The data shows that the higher education status is remarkably poor among Muslim women in the study area. Consequently, they are lagging to achieve equal status and development in society by empowering themselves till now. High drop-out rates after secondary education and low enrolment in higher education are affected by multiple factors, such as child marriage, cultural beliefs, economic challenges, less interest, parent's awareness, and restrictions in society. Hence, special attention by government and NGOs is needed to bridge the gap between higher education and empowerment among them.*

KEYWORDS: *Empowerment, Higher Education, Muslim Women, Rural Birbhum, Secondary Education, West Bengal.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of empowerment suggests the official authority and power of a person which he or she can exercise in order to get opportunities that are otherwise unavailable to them. Along with that, empowerment further helps to face the challenges in physical, emotional, social, and economic factors, sets a goal, and decreases the disparity in society by exercising the fullest rights and resources. Empowerment provides a set of knowledge, self-actualization, decision-making capabilities, freedom, and certain personal beliefs in life, which shape personality as well as help to enhance the overall development in life [1]. Empowerment for women not only helps them to exercise their goals but also improves their knowledge, dignity, and confidence both in their families and community [2]–[6]. The development of women in any country can only be possible when they have economic empowerment through financial access, equal participation in decision-making, power division through social empowerment, and access to express their needs through political empowerment. Therefore, it required self-confidence, self-actualization, and power to make choices that only can be possible by employing higher education.

Education is the prime indicator to achieve social, economic as well as physical empowerment of a person. In India, although women are consisting half of the total population still they consider a secondary part of the society. Therefore, empowerment is the key factor for women population in order to establish equal status and in this case, education is closely interlinked with it to achieve overall development in life irrespective of any gender, caste, or religion in society. In the case of Muslims, India is third in Muslim population concentration in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan, and around overall 6.9% women are Muslim in India [7]. Still, they are considered the minority groups and significantly far behind in terms of development and empowerment than the other population of the country. The major setback of Muslim women's development starts with the low literacy rate (51.9%) which is below the national average (65.46%) and any other religion for that matter of the country [7]. Therefore, the empowerment of Muslim women is still stagnant as they are continued to be the victim of social, religious, and cultural beliefs of society.

Besides, the gender disparity and deep-rooted traditional differences further restricted Muslim women to participate equally in education as well as outside the workforce for their financial needs. Even in the case of West Bengal, the situation of Muslim women is quite the same as in the other parts of the country. With constant efforts of both state and central government the literacy rate of women has improved a lot in the state, i.e. 70.54% but still the literacy rate of Muslim community is lowest (57.18%) among the marginalised groups (SC 69.4% and ST 57.92%) [7]–[9]. Not only that, the clear difference between male-female literacy rates (male 64.61% and female 47.75%) shows the disparity in education due to gender differences in the Muslim community. Hence, the development and empowerment of Muslim women in the state vary more hugely than the general population. Even the rural-urban literacy difference between Muslim women (urban 59.23% and rural 47.87% [7] further created a prominent gap among the Muslim women as well in exercising their status, power, and knowledge both in the family and work sector. Thus, the major section of the Muslim population works in unorganized sectors as labor, painter, or small businesses man. Due to the unskilled knowledge and poor educational status, the situation of Muslim women, in that case, remained unchanged. The extreme restriction in life, purdah system, child marriage, and less importance in education are still restricting the educational growth and development of Muslim women followed by their empowerment in rural areas. Hence, the participation of Muslim women in the outside workforce, decision-making, and political participation of them in society is still extremely low.

But if we look back at the Islam or Mughal era, then the participation and involvement of Muslim women in education and other societal engagements were so prominent but since the British era, the oppression, violence, and restrictions of Muslim women became a part of their life which has a clear reflection in their education as well as empowerment status. Hence, the government of India has implemented a lot of fellowship programs such as Pre and post-matric scholarships, Sarba Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), Minority fellowship, Maulana Azad National Fellowship and the government of West Bengal provided Kanyashree, Sikshashree, Muslim colleges and schools with special seat reservations for Muslims to develop the educational status of women both in rural and urban areas. Although, in urban areas, the empowerment of Muslim women through education shows a gradual positive impact but in case of rural areas, the situation remains unchanged. Therefore, it can be said that education and empowerment are directly linked with each other for the development of the community. In the case of Muslim

women, the difference in education and their participation in economic, social, and political engagements are still significantly low than the general women population of the state as well as the country. Besides, the constant literacy gap between rural-urban females and gender differences, restrictions further impact their empowerment despite several state and central government policies.

Not only that the dropout rate and less engagement in higher education are still very low in the overall Muslim rural women population. The lack of un-skilled knowledge, higher education, and confidence further restrict them to participate in socio-economic and political engagements to exercise their authority, societal role, and rights in the community. As a result, the developmental status of Muslim women remains constantly poor and their marginalization remains very much more visible than other religions or castes in the state. Hence, under such a backdrop, the present study seeks to understand the factors that are causing a major gap between their higher education and the empowerment of marginalized Muslim women of rural Birbhum, West Bengal by understanding their educational and empowerment status in the study area. Along with that, the study also tries to analyze the causing factors to suggest measures to bridge the gap between higher education and the empowerment of marginalized rural Muslim women in the district.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muslims are the country's largest minority community (14.22%) and 6.93% are women among them [7]. Still unfortunately the higher educational status and empowerment of them are significantly low in the country. As a result, it became difficult for them to exercise their constitutional rights as well as equal development in society. Sachar Committee report [10], shows that the progress of Muslim development is very low and the women are significantly less empowered than the other groups of the women in the country. Hence, it is creating a gap between women's development in the same country. Along with that, the rate of educational engagement both in urban and rural areas by the Muslim women are poor than the other women population (Hindu, Christian, Jain, Sikh, and other). This further shows the poor economic empowerment of Muslim women in society. These eventually make them socially excluded communities and minor among minority groups in terms of education, empowerment, development, and growth. Even exclusion is very much prominent in the family as they are considered the sole follower of male decisions, and religious beliefs and a secondary part of the society.

Muslim women also have very less influence on family decisions, personal decisions, and political empowerment. The huge rate of child marriage below the legal age further made it difficult for the girls to continue their higher education and empower themselves by utilizing economic and social independence. Hence, the development and empowerment rate of Muslim women is still stagnant [8], [11–13]. The low level of knowledge also restricts the opportunities for Muslim women to get a job and secure a position in a higher rank which is the main factor for the less engagement of Muslim women in job sectors than the other castes and religions in the country. The economic engagement rate of Muslim women is even low in urban areas and Muslims in general work mostly in unorganized and low-paid jobs. Therefore, education is the key factor to ensure the quality of jobs, and human resources to develop personal growth, and new ideas, and improvement of a community [14]. In the case of Muslims, the level of attainment and proper academic education are also low than other religious groups in the country. The situation of Muslim women is quite similar in the state of West Bengal as well,

the low level of education, and socio-economic participation further make them oppressed and excluded.

Table 1: Educational Level of different religious groups

Religion	Literate (%)		Secondary (%)		Higher Secondary (%)		Graduation (%)	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Hindu	70.77	55.97	10.61	7.28	7.77	5.39	7.24	4.64
Muslim	62.40	51.89	7.16	5.45	4.95	1.90	3.41	2.07
Christian	76.77	71.97	10.72	9.45	10.24	10.39	8.98	8.72
Sikh	71.32	63.29	16.64	12.71	8.89	7.55	6.10	6.73
Budhist	77.87	65.58	12.29	9.51	10.02	7.15	7.51	4.80
Jain	87.85	84.93	16.13	14.81	15.15	12.90	27.66	23.55
Others	59.38	41.38	6.55	3.70	4.16	2.35	2.75	1.56

Source: Census of India, 2011 [7]

Around 60% of Muslim women in the rural part of the state are housewives and unable to decisions for themselves as they still rely upon their husband's or fathers' decisions to fulfill their needs [15]. Besides, the less awareness, ignorance, and purdah system made the situation more complicated for the Muslim women in the rural belts of West Bengal. Along with that, the high rate of child marriage, early pregnancy, and oppression further restricted them both educationally and eventually, affected their social and economic growth in a significant manner [16]. The parents of Muslim girls also consider that extreme exposure to the outer world and co-education can hamper their character, personality, and values in life. As a result, the restriction became a part and parcel of Muslim women's life in most the parts of state [17]. Besides, the poor education of parents and their attitudes towards women's education, gender disparity, and socioeconomic disparities are the major reason for the backwardness of the Muslim women in the state as well as a country [18].

Even, the disparity in education continues due to the limited number of the madrasa, girls' schools, and colleges nearby the community. Hence, the level of higher education, school or college attainment, technology, and skill educational training and employment became highly challenging for the women [19]. The dependency of Muslim women on their fathers or husbands is also very much visible in every part of the state. Due to the extreme dependency, rural Muslim women have very less knowledge about their rights, politics, and constitutional amendments for their development. Moreover, due to their poor decision-making capabilities, they often rely upon the decision of their family members regarding the government elections to their reproductive health. Hence, the oppression, marginalization, and disparity in empowerment and development of rural Muslim women became visibly low [18]. Therefore,

it is obvious that, education is the key component for the marginalized Muslim women to secure their growth and development in the society. The self-confidence and participation in their family decisions can be the primary step for their social empowerment followed by the economic and political empowerment by means of freedom, academic knowledge and engagements with the rest of the population in this country.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study analyses the factors that are creating a gap between the higher education and empowerment of the marginalized Muslim women in the rural areas of Birbhum. Based on the responses from the Muslim women, the study further tries to understand the educational and development status of respondents in the study area.

Objectives:

- To understand the education and empowerment status of marginalized Muslim women in the rural Birbhum.
- To analyze the factors that are creating a gap between higher education and empowerment of marginalized Muslim women in the rural Birbhum.
- To suggest measures to bridge the gap between higher education and empowerment of marginalized Muslim women in the rural Birbhum.

Study Area:

The district Birbhum is situated in the western part of the state of West Bengal and it is one of the major administrative units of the state. The district Birbhum has been selected for the study which is located between the latitude of 23° 32' 30"N to 24° 35' 0" N and longitude of 87° 5' 25" and 88° 1' 40" E and it comes under the Burdwan division. The district is spread around 4,545 sq. Km.

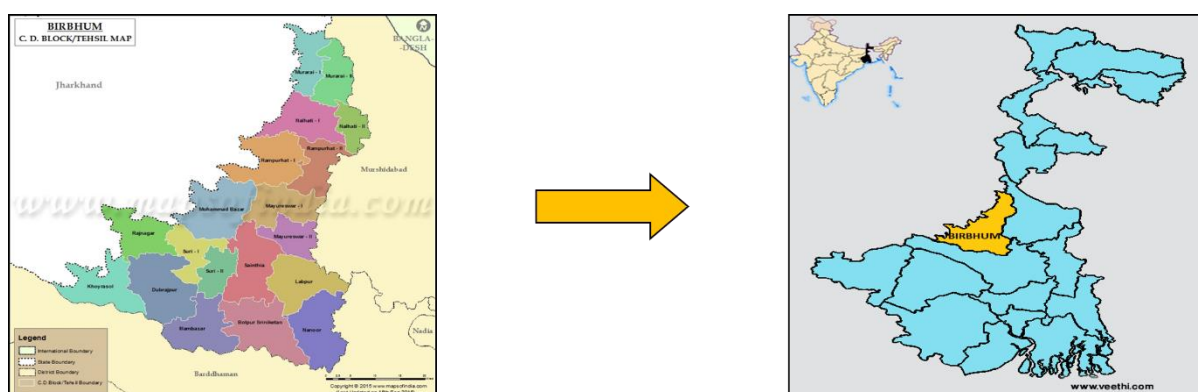


Figure 1: Map showing Birbhum in West Bengal

Birbhum has three sub-divisions and 19 blocks as shown in figure 1. Though the major population consists of Hindus (62.29%) around 37.06% population are Muslim in this district [7].

Research design and sampling:

The study is based on a multi-stage sampling method where the district is divided on basis of its three sub-division, i.e. Suri Sadar, Bolpur, and Rampurhat division. Among them, four blocks (Suri II, Bolpur-Sriniketn block, Mayureswar I and II respectively) and 4 villages Purandarpur, Lohagarh, Bajitpur and Basudevpur have been selected from these blocks respectively for the present study. To conduct the study, the sample of 120 respondents from 4

villages of the district were selected within 15 to 35 years, age groups. The villages and respondents have been selected on basis of the Muslim population, educational facilities, and resource availability that fulfills the requirement of the present study. Along with that mixed-method technique has been applied in the present study where the data is analyzed in both quantitative and qualitative forms. While analyzing the data, the researcher was unbiased and consent was taken from the respondents during the time of data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educational status of Muslim women in the study area:

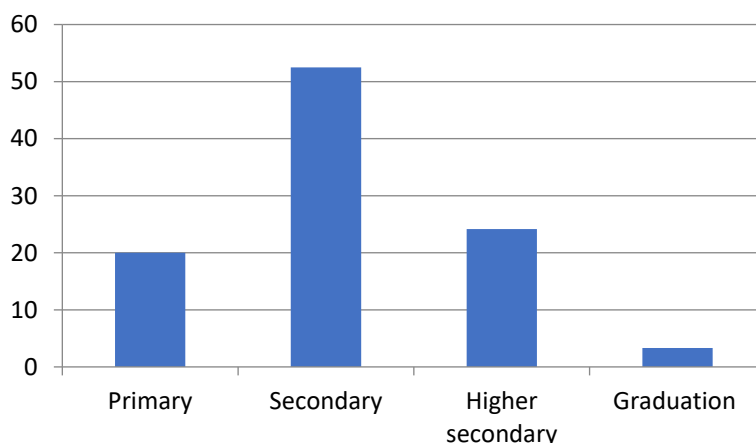


Figure 2: Educational status of respondents

The educational growth of Muslim women is very much stagnant in the rural belts of the district. The significant gap between secondary and higher secondary education is the prime example of the educational disparity between Muslim women and the other groups in the community. After reviewing the previous studies, it can be said that the literacy rate of Muslim women has increased visibly as all respondents are very much literate in the study area. But still, the attainment in school and enrolment in higher education by Muslim women is remarkably low. Figure 2, suggests that a huge gap has taken place between secondary and higher secondary education as 52.5% of total respondents completed their secondary education but only 24.16% among them have appeared in higher secondary education. The level of education further deteriorated in higher education as only 3.33% of Muslim women have completed their graduation in the study area. Hence, the tendency to drop out after secondary education is very much visible in the study area among the Muslim women in this case. Along with that, it is also prominent that women around the age group of 15 to 26 at least completed their secondary education but women above 26 could not continue their education after the primary or upper primary levels in schools.

As, a result, though a positive educational growth is prominent to develop the school attainment of the Muslim women up to the secondary level, similarly the extreme decadal rate in higher education is affecting the educational status of the Muslim women in the study area. Due to the absence of madrasa schools, government schools are the main mode of education, and around 52.5% are either studying or completed their education in girl's schools, and 47.5% from the co-education schools or colleges. Apart from the academic knowledge, the involvement of Muslim women in the skill education program is also very negligible. Most women believe in cultural skills and methods to develop their competencies. Besides, the purpose of skill education is unknown by both the respondents and their family members. Rather, they prefer to learn things from the homely methods and use them as per their needs and hobbies where

the need and skill of economic benefits are not considered by them. Among these women, only those who are (Figure 3) involved in any business or jobs expressed that skill education is very much needed for the women in their community for their economic development.

Empowerment status of Muslim women in the study area:

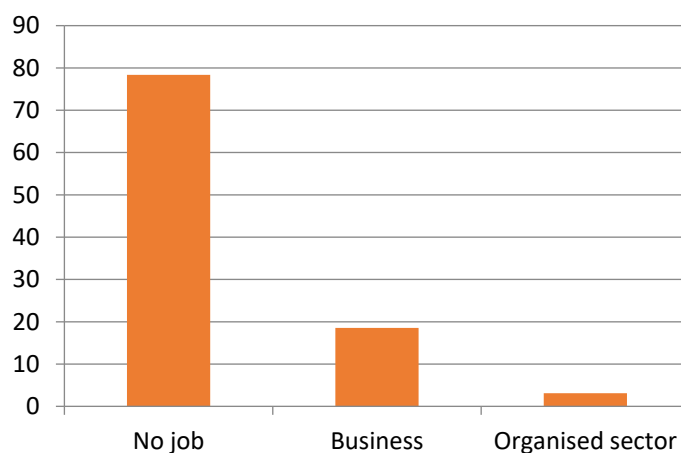


Figure 3: Economic engagements by respondents

As per the definition, the status of empowerment includes the physical, economic, social, and political involvement and empowerment of a person in society. Therefore, while discussing the empowerment of the Muslim women, their physical, social, economic, and political roles and engagements depicted their status in society. But like the previous studies and reviews, it is prominent that the empowerment status of Muslim women in the rural areas of Birbhum is still very low. In the case of economic factors, the engagement of women in any workplace is very poor for the major part of the women population. Among the age group of 18-35 years, around 78.35% of women are either housewives or students, hence they are not involved in any kind of economical engagements and only 18.55% of women are doing business (handicraft, garments, bags) and 3.09% are engaged in the job (Anganwadi helper, maintenance worker and clerk in government office) (Figure 3).

Moreover, it is visible that women at least with secondary education have an interest and confidence in economic independence. Even in the case of physical empowerment very few women have a clear understanding and decision-making capabilities in their families. Around 72 out of 120 respondents expressed that though they participate and show their input in family decisions ultimately, they have to follow the decisions of their fathers, husbands, or in-laws as they are the earning members of the family and they are bound to follow that decision. In the case of maternal and reproductive health, around 31.66% of women understand the need to discuss and take decisions by themselves, whereas 38.33% of women expressed that due to their less knowledge, resources unavailability, and financial dependency on their fathers or husbands, they have to rely upon their family members or husbands about their pregnancy and health issues (Figure 4). Moreover, the knowledge in banking, documentation, and mobility is also extremely limited for Muslim women. Though around 66 out of 120 respondents have accounts in the bank the paperwork and the procedures are done by their family members due to their low confidence, poor understanding, and an ability to do the paperwork properly.

Besides, social engagement and political knowledge are also limited among them. Only 22 out of 120 respondents have ever participated in any social engagements or expressed their views on the development and only 47 out of 87 respondents have voted as per their own choice. It is very much visible that those who showed their political or social views in their community have at least completed their higher secondary education and rests have either no knowledge

or they are lacking the self-confidence to share their decisions for a larger need. Not only that, unfortunately, women with low education could not give a concrete idea or they are completely ignorant to empower themselves in any kind of economical, physical, social, and political matters.

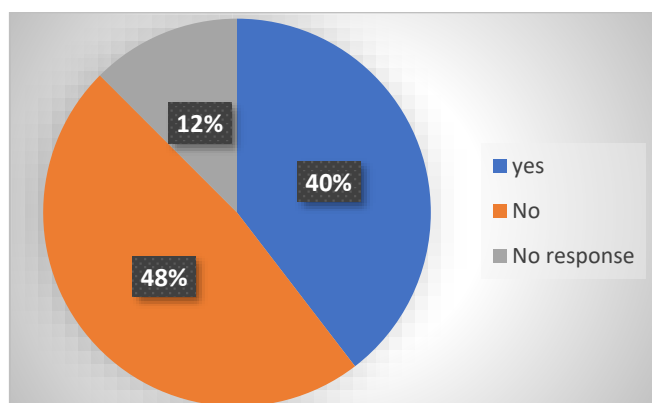


Figure 4: Decisions taken by respondents about health

Factors creating the gap between higher education and empowerment of Muslim women

The educational status and empowerment status in the study area shows that with higher education most women understand the need for their empowerment in society. In every case, women with high education comparatively have a better interest to express their decisions and exercise their rights than the women with low education. But still, the rate of higher education is limited and it is directly affecting the empowerment status of women in the study area still now. Along with that, the following factors are attached to it which is creating hindrances in the way of their freedom, exercising right, and empowerment through education.

Child Marriage

The practice of child marriage among the rural girls irrespective of any religion and caste group is still a big problem for the women in the rural area. In the case of Muslims, the practice of child marriage is very much prominent still now in the rural belts of Birbhum, West Bengal. Out of 97 married respondents, 69 (71.13%) respondents got married below the legal age (18 years) of marriage which shows the significant practice of child marriage in the rural area. Due to the high rate of child marriage, education is the first thing that is being compromised and neglected by the families as well as the women. The attainment rate (17.39%) after the marriage is remarkably low due to the pressure of families and domestic work. Even though the respondents in the age group of 15-18 years have completed the secondary or higher secondary education but due to the restrictions, distance from schools, and working sectors, they could not complete and enroll in the higher education. In this regard, the women further showed their concern in the economic engagements and participation in any kind of decision-making. Furthermore, when the basic educational needs are compromised after marriage then empowerment became a serious matter of concern for them. Along with that, the less knowledge in family planning, reproductive health issues, and extreme workload after the marriage eventually make them exhausted to consider the importance of education and empowerment in their lives. As a result, the basic education and requirement for any kind of social, economic, and political engagements remain far from their lives.

Socio-cultural Beliefs

Every caste, community, and religion come with a set of beliefs and norms. In the case of the Muslim community, women are bound to follow the set of rules and restrictions like the other community. In the study area, though the extreme purdah system is not prominent the

restrictions and beliefs are still very much intact in the woman's life. In this regard, almost all respondents expressed that their mobility was restricted due to the major safety issues and the unwillingness of their parents in most of their lives. In the case of the families, the domestic workers are given much priority from the very beginning of their lives than the education and empowerment of the Muslim women. In every case, the respondents have witnessed that their mothers are the sole followers of their family and father's decision; hence, they are bound to follow that rule in their lives as well. Even after the marriage, it is obvious for a woman to take care of their family and children rather than giving importance to their education. Besides that, more exposure to the outer world for education or jobs with men also raises questions about their character, purity, and personality. The 27.5% of respondents who have completed their higher education and graduation also expressed that they had to face a lot of restrictions, and challenges both from family and society as they are getting old to get married and spending time preparing for jobs which are considered as a complete wastage of time before marriage. Even in case of medical needs and treatments, the Muslim women in the study area have to consult their husbands or fathers to take decisions. Moreover, education only became a temporary need, where it is too challenging for them to go against the rules and restrictions in families as well as society and continue their higher education and exercise their rights to make them empowered in the society.

Co-education

The extreme exposure to the outer world is still a matter of concern for the Muslim families the women. As a result, spending too much time outside the house with strangers is a prime factor for the parents to restrict their daughters to continue their education after a certain period. Due to the less availability of the madrasas in the community, the majority of the families enrolled their daughters in a girl's school. But, in higher education co-education became a major challenging factor for the parents to let their daughters spend much time with boys. Along with that, the anxiety of parents increases with the probability of extreme exposure to different castes and boys and they further suspect that it will affect their daughter's personality, choices, and obedience in life. Generally, parents are the ones who choose grooms for their daughters in the family but the fear of a new relationship or marriage by a women's own choice is a matter of concern for the parents. Hence, the parents are always so anxious about the probable outcome of co-education and its impact of it as this can further increase the complication for their daughter's marriage and this will raise questions about their character in society. Thus, the co-education and scope of higher education became limited and due to this, eventually, the economic empowerment and social, and political decision-making by the women became restricted in their community and lives for their growth and development.

Socio-economic challenges

Along with the beliefs and restrictions on education and empowerment, socio-economic challenges play a major factor in the continuation of education in the rural Muslim families and also empowerment of them as a whole. In the study area, the major parts of the families of respondents are struggling financially to reach their basic needs. The family income of 67 out of 120 respondents (55.83%) comes from agriculture followed by daily labor and business (small shops of groceries, and vegetables) (Figure 4). Hence the source of money is limited in the families of respondents. Besides, the number of children and family responsibilities further make it difficult for the parents to spend money equally for the education of the respondents.

Not only that, the respondents expressed that, the educational attainment and empowerment are much better among the younger children than the elder ones. As the drop-out rate, societal and family pressure in marriage and responsibilities are much higher for elder women in the

family. Thus, the time for education is limited and restrictions are strict by the parents in this regard.



Figure 4: Source of income in respondent's family

It is also visible that, parents with stable monthly income showed interest in the need for education and development of Muslim women in the study area. 63 out of 120 families are joint families; hence such families face difficulties to spend daily expenses, tuition fees, and basic study materials for their daughters in higher education and save the money for the marriage of their daughters. Though the current scholarship and governmental facilities have improved the situation a bit less awareness and knowledge regarding such fellowships and the procedure to apply are highly complicated for the parents to decrease the socio-economic challenges in the higher education and empowerment of the respondents.

Gender disparity

Gender difference is a clear picture in the families of respondents in the study area. It is visible that boys are more likely to attend school than girls in the families. But the respondents (from 28-35 years) expressed that the attainment rate and education of women also have increased in school due to current scholarships and governmental facilities. Though, the level of education is still comparatively low among women than men. Not only this, the resource availability, nutrition, encouragement, and freedom of mobility are higher among men than women from childhood in a family. In this regard, the parents showed their concern about the need to have a job for the boys to have economic empowerment in the future and to ensure that empowerment and education are inevitable. Even for the marriage, boys need to have a job whereas, for women, it is not mandatory to have economic empowerment before marriage. As a result, parents prefer to save the money for their daughter's marriage than spend it on their education and empowerment. Besides, due to the poor economic condition, boys are mostly engaged in jobs along with their education after a point of time and they have no restrictions on their mobility, whereas for the women their exposure and mobility are very much restricted from the very childhood. Along with that, though legally women have full property rights in the family in reality, their decisions are hardly considered in this matter, and eventually, the decisions are done by the boys in every family. Thus, a clear gender disparity is very much prominent in the families of respondents in the higher education and empowerment.

Education of parents

Parents play a significant role in the education and empowerment of Muslim women in their families. To develop the status of the women in a society, the role of parents and their decision played a vital role in the respondent's life. But unfortunately, the concept of education and the need for empowerment is extremely poor among the parents. The study result shows that the highest education of the fathers (65.8%) is up to the upper primary level whereas 51.6% of mothers were drop out before class VIII. It is also prominent that mothers have very less

decisions in the education of their daughters. Hence the awareness and encouragement of the parents in higher education remain extremely low for the marginalized rural Muslim women. Along with that, parents also consider that higher education and empowerment can not change life drastically as irrespective of having low education, they are living a normal life. Although it is fascinating to see that very few girls in their community have completed graduation or working independently, they are extremely fearful and anxious to face the consequences of societal pressure and the ongoing system in the community. Besides, due to the poor educational knowledge parents hardly can guide their children in education. Hence, the interest and encouragement in education and empowerment remain a secondary need to the parents in the Muslim families of rural Birbhum.

Issues in job sectors

Safety and exposure in the working sector are the major concerns both for the respondents and their parents. Working in job sectors required time, engagement, and resources that are not available in the community of the respondents. Hence, they need to travel far from the community to work in any job sector. Thus, it increases the risk of harassment and safety issues in a new environment outside the home. In this regard, both the parents and respondents expressed their fear, anxiety, and uncertainty to pursue such a job outside the community. In addition to that, the constant cases of extreme pressure, physical and sexual violence issues, and less payment in job sectors further restricted the women to come out of their comfort zones to consider the scope of economic empowerment. Besides, the less academic knowledge, skills, and training also increase the cases of unpaid or low-paid jobs, hence the economic development of the respondents in the study area remains stagnant.

Skilled knowledge

The poor educational status in the study area (Figure 2) shows the limited academic knowledge of the respondents. Thus, the physical, social, political, and economic decision-making is also very poor among the respondents. Besides, the exposure to the skill-based education and pieces of training is also very limited in the study area and the respondents feel uncertain and conscious to take any training with other women and men due to their less academic knowledge rather than questions about their competencies. Not only that, they mostly prefer business or work that can be done from their houses and nearby area with complete family support and a comfortable atmosphere in this case. Apart from that, it is also visible that, the 21 respondents who are doing business or working in the organized sectors at least completed the higher education as a result it is easier for them to adapt to the new techniques and express their difficulties in the working sector. But for the rest of the respondents, skill education is only possible when they are extremely comfortable with the work otherwise, they lose their interest eventually to learn new things and work towards the economic engagements. Therefore, it is visible that less exposure to education, new atmosphere, and people, gradually makes them shy and self-conscious to learn new things for their empowerment.

CONCLUSION

As per the African proverb, “if you educate a man, you educate a person. But if you educate a woman, you have educated a whole nation”. Thus, it is obvious that education not only helps to empower women but it also helps to develop and empower a nation. Here, by analyzing the data on marginalized Muslim women of rural Birbhum, it is very much prominent that their higher education status is remarkably poor among them. As a result, they eventually are lagging to achieve equal status and development in the society by empowering themselves till now. The high drop-out rate after secondary education and extremely low enrolment in higher

education is affected by the multiple factors in the society, such as child marriage, socio-cultural beliefs, socio-economic challenges in the family, less interest, parent's awareness, and restrictions. Hence, like the previous studies, the marginalized rural Muslim women in the study area are still in a disadvantageous position economically, socially, politically, and physically. Though very few respondents with higher education found a way for their economical engagement the engagement in political and social decision-making is still very low. Therefore, to develop such a situation, the need for socio-economic development and awareness of parents are very much needed by government and non-government organizations in the community.

More strict legal actions should be taken from the local police against child marriage and need-based skill education programs for both boys and girls need to be arranged separately to increase the interest and skills among Muslim women. Moreover, it is important to aware the parents of the need for education through regular parent-teacher meetings in school, community-level development programs, and camps by both government and non-government level initiatives in the rural belts of Birbhum. Along with that, participation in debates, programs, and courses of life skill education need to be initiated to increase the self-confidence, self-assessments, and critical thinking of the Muslim girls from the very beginning of the school to bridge the gap between their education and empowerment in the study area. Finally, the community-based time-to-time assessments by the government are very much needed to ensure the overall development of the marginalized Muslim women in the rural Birbhum, so that they can exercise their rights, status, and decisions utilizing knowledge to empower themselves in their lives.

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