

Barriers to Access and Retention in Higher Education among Muslim Women: A Study of Murshidabad District.

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Abstract

Higher education plays a crucial role in the social, economic, and cultural empowerment of women. However, Muslim women in India continue to remain underrepresented in higher education, especially in educationally backward districts like Murshidabad in West Bengal. The present study aims to examine the major social, economic, political, and cultural barriers that affect access to and retention in higher education among Muslim women in Murshidabad district. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. Data were collected from Muslim women students through a self-constructed questionnaire. The findings reveal that poverty, early marriage, lack of parental awareness, inadequate institutional support, and socio-cultural restrictions significantly hinder enrolment and completion of higher education. The study suggests that targeted policy interventions, awareness programs, and improved educational support systems are essential to enhance higher education participation among Muslim women.

Keywords: Higher Education, Muslim Women, Access, Retention, Barriers, Murshidabad

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a powerful instrument for individual development and social transformation. Higher education, in particular, enhances critical thinking, employment opportunities, and decision-making capacity. In India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and various educational schemes, Muslim women continue to lag behind other social groups in higher education participation.

Murshidabad district of West Bengal has a high concentration of Muslim population and is characterized by socio-economic backwardness, low literacy rates, and limited access to quality educational institutions. Muslim women in this district face multiple disadvantages due to poverty, gender discrimination, traditional norms, and limited awareness about the value of higher education. Understanding the barriers to access and retention in higher education is essential for framing effective educational policies and interventions.

2. Need and Significance of the Study

The participation of Muslim women in higher education remains a major concern in India. While several studies have focused on general female education, limited research specifically addresses the combined issues of access and retention in higher education among Muslim women at the district level.

This study is significant because:

It highlights district-specific barriers faced by Muslim women in Murshidabad.

It provides empirical data to policymakers and educational planners.

It helps institutions and NGOs design targeted support programs.

It contributes to academic literature on gender, minority education, and social inequality.

3. Review of Related Literature

Girija (2014) : Conducted a study on "Education status of Muslim Women in Karnataka". The objectives were –

Try to find out the education status of Muslim women in Karnataka.to suggest how to increase enrolment of Muslim girl students in primary and secondary schools.

Narula (2014) :Conducted a study on “Educational development of Muslim minority with special Reference to Muslim concentrated areas of india”. In spite of being the largest minority, Muslim were lagging behind in education in comparison with other religions minorities, literacy which was a 1st step to education lowest of the muslim minority.

Sharma (20015) : conducted a study on “Education status of Muslim women in india”. An attempt was made to analyse the educational status of women, muslims in particular, in the country. This paper pointed out the literacy sate of Muslim women at the national and state level.

Bhat (2016) : Conducted a study on “Educational status of women in J & K with special reference to rural areas”. The objectives were to study the government schemes for empowering women education in rural areas of J & K. The challenges for empowering women education in rural areas of J & K were discussed in detail.

Previous studies indicate that Muslim women’s participation in higher education is influenced by socio-economic status, parental education, cultural practices, and availability of institutions. Studies by Sachar Committee (2006) and subsequent research revealed that Muslim women suffer from educational deprivation due to poverty, early marriage, safety concerns, and lack of hostels and scholarships.

Research also shows that retention in higher education is affected by financial stress, domestic responsibilities, and absence of academic support. However, region-specific studies focusing on Murshidabad district remain limited, which justifies the present investigation.

4. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

To study the status of access to higher education among Muslim women in Murshidabad district.

To identify the social barriers affecting enrolment in higher education.

To examine the economic barriers influencing retention and completion of higher education.

To analyze the role of cultural and political factors in higher education participation.

To suggest measures for improving access and retention in higher education among Muslim women.

5. Research Questions

What are the major barriers to access to higher education among Muslim women in Murshidabad?

What factors affect retention and completion of higher education?

How do socio-economic and cultural factors influence educational participation?

6. Research Design and Methodology

The present study adopted a descriptive survey research design.

6.1 Sample

The sample consisted of Muslim women pursuing or having discontinued higher education from selected rural and urban areas of Murshidabad district. The sample was selected using purposive sampling technique.

6.2 Tool Used

A self-constructed questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire included items related to social, economic, political, and cultural barriers.

6.3 Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through door-to-door survey and personal interaction with respondents.

6.4 Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using simple statistical techniques such as percentages and frequency distribution.

7. Findings of the Study

The major findings of the study are as follows:

A large number of respondents reported financial constraints as the main barrier to higher education.

Early marriage and household responsibilities significantly affect retention.

Lack of parental awareness and support reduces enrolment.

Distance from colleges and inadequate transportation facilities discourage continuation.

Cultural norms and safety concerns restrict mobility of Muslim women.

Many respondents were unaware of available scholarships and government schemes.

8. Discussion

The findings indicate that barriers to higher education among Muslim women are multidimensional. Economic hardship remains the most dominant factor, while social and cultural restrictions further limit educational opportunities. The absence of institutional support systems such as hostels, mentoring, and counseling negatively affects retention. Political and administrative gaps in implementing welfare schemes also contribute to educational discontinuation.

9. Suggestions

Based on the findings, the following measures are suggested:

Expansion of scholarships and financial assistance for Muslim women.

Awareness programs for parents and communities about the importance of higher education.

Establishment of more higher educational institutions in rural areas.

Provision of hostels and safe transportation facilities.

Academic counseling and mentoring support for female students.

Effective implementation and monitoring of government schemes.

10. Conclusion

Higher education is a key factor in empowering Muslim women socially and economically. The present study concludes that Muslim women in Murshidabad district face significant barriers to access and retention in higher education due to socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from government, educational institutions, and society. Ensuring equal access to higher education will not only improve the status of Muslim women but also contribute to inclusive national development.

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