

Empowerment of Muslim Women in India: Efforts from Government to Governance

Dr. Nafisa Alli,

Lecturer in Political Science, K.B.D.A.V College, Nirakarpur

Abstract

Women are the integral and indispensable part of the society. Without empowerment of women there can be no empowerment of the society. However the question of women's empowerment remains central to the discourse of social justice, democratic development, and inclusive governance in India. Muslim women in particular, occupy a complex socio-political position shaped by the intersections of gender, religion, class, and community identity. Despite Constitutional guarantees of equality and several welfare measures introduced by the Indian state, many Muslim women continue to experience marginalization in education, employment, decision-making, and political participation. This paper examines the empowerment of Muslim women in India through the framework of "from government to governance," tracing the transition from state-driven welfare interventions to broader participatory and right based approaches of inclusion. The findings indicate that while government schemes and legal reforms have created important pathways for advancement, the empowerment of Muslim women remains uneven due to continuing barriers of patriarchy, poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to opportunities. At the same time, governance-based approaches rooted in participation, representation, and institutional accountability has increasingly strengthened women's agency and leadership. The paper argues that sustainable empowerment of Muslim women requires moving beyond welfare-oriented policy towards inclusive governance that recognizes women as active participants in shaping social transformation, gender justice, and democratic development in India.

Keywords: Muslim women, India, Empowerment, Constitution, Government Initiatives, Governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."- B.R. Ambedkar.

This statement by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar remains deeply relevant to understanding the condition of women in contemporary India. India's determination for women's empowerment has its roots in the nation's lengthy history of independence movements and social reform movements. (Krishnaraj, 2012, pp. 325-333) Visionaries like Savitribai Phule, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy set the stage for later generations of feminists and social reformers by opposing repressive traditions and promoting women's rights. (Rather, 2020) Gender equality and nondiscrimination were incorporated into the Indian Constitution by its framers after independence, recognizing women as equal citizens with fundamental rights and freedoms. (Article 14 in Constitution of India, n.d.) However, empowerment is not limited to economic independence; it also includes access to education, health, mobility, dignity, participation in decision-making, and equal opportunities in social, political, and public life. In India, women's empowerment has become an important subject within development studies, public policy, and gender discourse. Since Independence, the Indian state has introduced several Constitutional safeguards, legal reforms, welfare programs, and educational initiatives to improve the status of women. (Constitution of India, 1950) Yet the benefits of development have not been equally distributed across all communities. Muslim women in India face a distinct set of challenges linked to both gender discrimination and minority disadvantage. (Sanyal, 2011, pp. 41-48) Their condition must therefore be understood not only through the lens of women's issues but also through broader questions of social justice, citizenship, identity, and inclusion. Many scholars have argued that Muslim women often remain

excluded from mainstream development processes due to unequal access to education, low workforce participation, economic dependency, weak political representation, and limited decision-making power within both public and private spaces. (Sanu, 2018)

The Sachar Committee report (2006) remains a landmark in understanding the socio-economic condition of Muslims in India. In particular, the report highlighted that Muslims lag behind many other communities across several development indicators, with special attention to the specific situation of Muslim women. Specifically, it noted that Muslim women face low literacy rates, limited access to higher education, concentration in informal and low-paid work, and inadequate representation in public employment and institutions. Building on these points, the report further argued that the disadvantages faced by Muslim women are both community-based and gender-specific, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position within the development framework.

Findings from the Census of India offer further insight. According to the 2011 Census, Muslims comprise 172.2 million people, or 14.2 percent of India's total population, making them the largest religious minority. The overall literacy rate among Muslims was 68.5 percent. This is 4.48 percentage points below the national average of 72.98 percent. Within the Muslim population, women had a literacy rate of 51.89 percent, compared to 64.6 percent for all Indian women. This educational disparity has serious implications. Education is widely recognized as a pillar of empowerment. Limited educational access constrains employment, income, legal awareness, health, mobility, and participation in governance. It also diminishes women's influence at home and in their communities. (Ghosh et al., 2015, pp. 445-460) Thus, educational inequality among Muslim women signals broader social and democratic disparities. (Sanu, 2018) Data from the National Sample Survey Office further highlights persistent employment gaps. Many Muslim women are engaged in unpaid domestic labor, home-based production, petty self-employment, or informal work with low wages and minimal economic security. Entry into salaried jobs and the organized sector is comparatively rare, resulting in economic dependence and restricted financial autonomy. (Khatoon, 2024, pp. 457-473) Consequently, despite over seven decades of independence, Muslim women remain among the most disadvantaged, least literate, economically vulnerable, and politically marginalized groups in Indian society. (Sanu, 2018).

Mahatma Gandhi observed, "To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman." This shows that women's inequality is socially constructed and not innate. Empowerment of Muslim women should not be seen only as state welfare. It must be evaluated through governance—where communities, local institutions, civil society, policy, and the women themselves engage in development. The move from "government" to "governance" marks a shift from top-down welfare to participatory, rights-based strategies. (Rani & Jain, 2025) This study examines how policy, governance, community, and women's agency together drive empowerment, inclusion, equality, and change for Muslim women in India.

The significance of women's empowerment in India transcends policy goals, aligning with broader societal aspirations for inclusive development and social justice. Empowered women act as catalysts for progress within their families, communities, and the nation. By enhancing women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, India not only realizes the full potential of half its population but also builds the basis for sustainable, equitable growth. (Vignitha et al., 2024) Nonetheless, the path toward women's empowerment in India is challenging, as deep-seated patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, economic inequality, and institutional barriers persist. By understanding the nuances of women's empowerment efforts in India, this study aims to inform and advance efforts toward a just, inclusive, and gender-equal society.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The present paper has the following objectives.

- a. To examine the socio-economic status of Muslim women in India.
- b. To analyse the role of government policies and welfare programmes in promoting the empowerment of Muslim women in India.

- c. To assess the transition from government-led initiatives to governance-based participatory approaches in enhancing the agency, inclusion, and decision-making power of Muslim women.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a purely descriptive and analytical methodology to understand the socio-economic realities of Muslim women in India. The study draws on secondary data specifically from the Census of India 2011, National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) reports, and the Sachar Committee Report (2006).

4. EMPOWERING MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIA: CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

Women's empowerment can be defined as the process that enables women to make their own decisions and to have fair laws and rights free of gender bias. No doubt, the empowerment of women is the nation's empowerment and is fundamental to the country's progress. However, women's empowerment, in general and Muslim women in particular, has become an important concern in the 21st century. However The Constitution of India conveys a powerful mandate for equality and rights of women as citizens in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights and Duties and Government of India has also initiated various policies and legislations for women empowerment considering as development of capacities, powers and skills to make a person more confident, more self-reliant and able to take self decisions from the time of independence but unable to reach towards the proper destination.

India is the largest democracy in the world. It also has one of the most significant minorities. A true democracy ensures not only individual rights but also the rights of minorities as a community. Our Constitution has laid down Articles 25-28 on the rights of religious, cultural, and linguistic minorities, thereby making India a genuinely democratic and pluralistic nation. The Constitution of India provides fundamental rights and essential responsibilities to the citizens of India. Every person in this country has the right to equal rights and duties. The Indian Constitution is committed to the equality of citizens and to the State's responsibility to preserve, protect, and ensure the rights of minorities in matters of language, religion, and culture. The Constitution of India guarantees equality of all Indian women, including Muslim women. These are

4.1.The Right to Equality: Article 14

Article 14 of the Indian Constitution ensures equal protection before the law and equal protection under the law within the territory of India. This is a very important provision that provides equal legal protection to women against any crime based on gender. This provision also paves the way for the introduction of various laws and acts to protect and enforce women's legal rights in India. In the Indian Constitution, Article 14 states the two phrases equality before the law and equal protection of the law for the entire population. Irrespective of race, color, creed, religion, or nationality, equality before the law is promised.

4.2.Prohibition of Discrimination under Article 15

Article 15(1) of the Indian Constitution states that the state shall not discriminate against its citizens on the grounds of caste, sex, race, religion, place of birth, or descent. Article 15 (3) says that in some areas, women and children do need special privileges, and therefore the state, for their welfare, can make laws.

4.3.Matters of Public Employment: Article 16 of the Indian Constitution

Article 16 guarantees equal opportunity in matters of public employment, as Article 16 (1) declares that “there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state”.

4.4. Right to Education

Article 21: A Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. The Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2002, inserted Article 21-A into the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education for all children in the age group of 6 to 14 years as a fundamental right, in such a manner as the state may, by law, determine. The RTE Act, 2009, which represents the consequential legislation envisaged under Article 21-A, means that every child has a right to full-time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school that satisfies certain essential norms and standards. The RTE Act came into effect on 1 April 2010, upholding the right of children to free and compulsory education till completion of elementary education in a neighborhood school in the 6 to 14 age group.

4.5. **Article 25 of the Constitution** of India states that all persons, whether men or women, of any caste or creed, are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice, and propagate any religion, subject to public order, morality, and the health of the community.

4.6. **Equal pay for Equal work (Article 39 (d))**. This article deals with the principle that equal pay for equal work shall be promoted under the Indian Constitution. That all the citizens, irrespective of their sex, whether men or women, shall equally have the right to adequate means of livelihood, Article 39 (a) of the Indian Constitution.

5. EMPOWERMENT OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIA: GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

since independence, the government of india has made various efforts to empower muslim women. at different times, issues related to muslim women's empowerment have been prioritized. from the fifth five-year plan onward, there was a shift from a welfare-oriented to a development-oriented approach. (women and india's five-year plans: evolution of welfare and empowerment strategies, 2024) the national commission for women was established in 1990 by an act of parliament to safeguard women's rights. the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution provided women the opportunity to participate in politics. in 2001, the government declared the year of women's empowerment to enhance their status. to achieve this goal, the government introduced various programs, identified strategies, established institutions, and enacted legal provisions. despite all these efforts, women in india still lag behind men. (women's empowerment in india: state-wise insights from the national family health survey 5, 2023) however, the government of india has continued to take steps to empower muslim women, aiming to promote their social, educational, economic, and political upliftment through multiple interventions. schemes such as pradhan mantri awas yojana (urban & rural), the national social assistance program, samagra shiksha, the national overseas scholarship, babu jagjivan ram chhatrawas yojna, and swacch vidyalaya mission aim to make schools more girl-friendly, especially for vulnerable groups, and to provide adequate facilities to meet their needs. (samagra shiksha scheme to improve the access, infrastructure and quality of education, 2021)

further, the national education policy (nep), 2020, prioritizes gender equity and envisions ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students, with a special emphasis on socially and economically disadvantaged groups (sedgs), among which Muslim women are a significant focus. (national education policy 2020, 2020) to enhance the employability of female workers, including Muslim women, the government is providing training through a network of women industrial training institutes, national vocational training institutes, and regional vocational training institutes. (National skill training institute (w) | Indore, n.d.) to ensure women's economic independence, especially among Muslim communities, the government has also launched the skill India mission. (Women get a special focus under skill India mission, 2019) the national skill development policy focuses on inclusive skill development, with the objective of increasing women's participation, including that of Muslim women, for better economic productivity. (national policy on skill development, 2009) there are schemes like pradhan mantri mudra yojana, stand up India, and the prime minister's employment generation program (pmegp) that help women, including Muslim women, set up their own enterprises. (69% of the total 44.46 crore loans sanctioned under pradhan

mantri mudra yojana, have been sanctioned to women, 2023) further, the initiatives taken by the ministry of women and child development (mwcd) for the empowerment of Muslim women and girls in the country include the following schemes:

5.1. **beti bachao beti padhao scheme:** launched on January 22, 2015, this scheme aims to ensure the survival, protection, and education of the girl child. by increasing awareness and addressing gender-based discrimination, the scheme has improved enrollment rates for girls in schools and contributed to a reduction in female foeticide. (india, 2026) it seeks to protect and empower muslim girls by enhancing their access to education and enabling their participation in society.

5.2. **one stop center scheme:** launched on April 1, 2015, it intends to provide 24-hour immediate and emergency response to women affected by the violence, both in private and public spaces. women helpline (whl) has been established in every state and union territory to provide integrated support and assistance to women across the country through a single uniform number. these centers will be integrated with 181, along with other existing helplines.

5.3. **women helpline scheme:** effective since April 1, 2015, this scheme provides a uniform 24-hour toll-free helpline (181) for immediate emergency response, support, and referral services to women affected by violence nationwide. the helpline facilitates prompt assistance for women, including muslim women, in distress or danger.

5.4. **ujjawala (April 1, 2016):** this comprehensive scheme focuses on preventing trafficking and ensuring the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of victims of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. by supporting projects across states through various government and voluntary agencies, the scheme improves access to rehabilitation and enhances the prospects of victims, including muslim women, to reintegrate into society.

5.6. **Working women hostel scheme:** the government of india introduced this scheme in 1972-73 as a grant-in-aid for constructing or expanding buildings to provide hostel facilities for working women. these hostels are in cities, smaller towns, and rural areas where women have employment opportunities. the scheme has been revised to increase the availability of safe, conveniently located accommodation for women who must live away from their families for work. the revised scheme was launched on April 6, 2017.

5.7. **swadhar greh** (a scheme for women in difficult circumstances): *this* scheme targets women in need of institutional support for rehabilitation. it focuses on women in difficult circumstances, helping them live with dignity. the scheme provides shelter, food, clothing, health care, and economic and social security to aggrieved women.

5.8. **nari shakti puraskar:** it is the “annual award given by the ministry of women and child development (government of india) to individual women or to institutions that work towards the cause of women's empowerment”. it is represented by the president of india on international women's day at rashtrapati bhavan in new delhi.

5.9. **mahila police volunteers:** *mahila police volunteers serve as community liaisons with police and support women in distress. by facilitating reporting and follow-up, they help muslim women access justice and safety in their communities.*

5.10. **mahila shakti kendras (msk):** these kendras are meant to empower rural women through community participation. they create an environment for women to realize their full potential. the centers provide an interface for rural women to access government entitlements. they also empower women through training and capacity-building.

5.11. **nirbhaya fund:** this fund supports projects to enhance women's safety and security. by financing initiatives for infrastructure and support services, muslim women benefit from improved protection in public spaces.

apart from the above schemes, the government has also set up other programs, such as the support to training and employment program for women (step). this scheme aims to help poor women in remote areas who cannot leave their native places for skill training. it supports their journey toward self-employment. the government of india has planned to train 500 million individuals by 2020. (india, 2009).

6. CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES TO MUSLIM WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Women's empowerment in India faces several challenges and obstacles that hinder their progress towards equality and full participation in society.

6.1.Patriarchal Social Structure

Patriarchal structures directly obstruct the empowerment of Muslim women. Deeply entrenched norms enforce subordinate family and community roles for women, limiting access to education, employment, leadership, and decision-making. Women are systematically expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over public, social, or political involvement.

Traditional gender norms prevent Muslim women from participating in politics and community leadership, reinforcing restrictive roles. These patriarchal attitudes suppress their autonomy, mobility, and self-development, impeding their social, economic, and political empowerment. Dismantling such barriers is critical to achieving gender equality for Muslim women in contemporary India.

6.2.Limited access to education

Limited access to education is a major barrier to the empowerment of Muslim women in India. Education directly enhances awareness, develops crucial skills, and drives socio-economic advancement. Yet, poverty, gender discrimination, insufficient educational infrastructure, early marriage, and conservative attitudes persistently restrict educational attainment for Muslim women. These obstacles must be addressed decisively.

Low levels of education sharply undermine women's employment prospects, economic independence, political participation, and decision-making power. Lack of educational opportunity explicitly prevents awareness of legal rights, government schemes, and routes for social mobility. Educational deprivation entrenches marginalization and directly blocks the empowerment of Muslim women. Equitable, quality education is non-negotiable for advancing their social, economic, and political status.

6.3.Social Norms and Cultural Barriers

Social norms and cultural barriers are key obstacles to Muslim women's empowerment. Traditional gender roles and conservative attitudes directly restrict women's access to education, employment, mobility, and public participation. These expectations to prioritize domestic responsibilities perpetuate gender inequality and severely limit women's autonomy. Consequently, these social and cultural barriers fundamentally impede the advancement of Muslim women and prevent them from realizing their full potential in society.

6.4.Limited political representation

A major barrier to the empowerment of Muslim women in India is limited political representation. Although the constitution guarantees equality and democratic participation, Muslim women remain consistently underrepresented in political institutions and decision-making bodies. Gender discrimination, limited political awareness, inadequate resources, and socio-cultural restrictions not only block their participation in political processes but also reduce their ability to influence policies and advocate for their community. Consequently, the lack of meaningful participation unequivocally hinders their social and political empowerment.

7. SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The empowerment of Muslim women in India has emerged as a significant policy concern, with various government initiatives aimed at improving their access to education, employment, healthcare, financial inclusion, and legal rights. Programs such as scholarships for minority students,

skill development schemes, entrepreneurship support, and legislative reforms have enhanced opportunities for Muslim women. However, despite these efforts, their overall socio-economic and political status continues to lag behind national averages. Persistent challenges, including poverty, limited educational attainment, patriarchal social structures, inadequate political representation, and cultural barriers, often restrict the effective realization of these initiatives. The study indicates that while the transition from government intervention to effective governance has created new avenues for empowerment, the outcomes remain uneven due to implementation gaps and structural inequalities. Therefore, achieving meaningful empowerment requires not only well-designed policies but also stronger institutional mechanisms, community participation, awareness generation, and continuous monitoring to ensure that the benefits of development reach Muslim women in an inclusive and equitable manner.

REFERENCES

- ❖ Sanu, M. S. (2018). Empowerment of muslim women in India: A study of socio-economic and political disparities.
- ❖ Cherayi, S., & Jose, J. P. (2016). Empowerment and social inclusion of Muslim women: Towards a new conceptual model. *Journal of rural studies*, 45, 243-251.
- ❖ Kundu, S. K., & Chakraborty, A. (2012). An empirical analysis of women empowerment within Muslim community in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, India. *Research on Humanities and social Sciences*, 2(6), 1-11.
- ❖ Waheed, A., Sayeed, A., & Mujtaba, S. I. (2014). Empowerment of Muslim women in India: A sociological analysis. *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology*, 11(2), 41.
- ❖ Jamal, M. A., Raihana, A. K. A., & Sultana, H. Y. (2016). Empowerment of Muslim women through microfinance and self help groups: A case study of Chennai City. *Asian Business Review*, 6(2), 117-124.
- ❖ Pal, L. C. (2025). Empowerment of the Muslim Woman in India: Issues and Strategies. *Weser Books*.
- ❖ Ruhela, S. P. (Ed.). (1998). *Empowerment of the Indian Muslim women*. MD Publications Pvt. Ltd..
- ❖ Bukhari, S. M. H., & Asim, M. (2013). Women empowerment in a Muslim society: A Practical Observation. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business*, 5(1), 768-778.
- ❖ Kazi, S. (1999). *Muslim women in India* (Vol. 92). Minority Rights Group.
- ❖ Kader, B. F. (2022). *Promoting Women's Rights in Islam: The Role of Female Madrasah Teachers in the Economic and Social Empowerment of Indian Muslim Girls* (Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (South Africa)).

Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.