

Empowering Muslim Women: Work Participation of Muslim Women in India

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Abstract: The work participation rate of women in India has increased with the liberalization of economy and emergence of new sectors of employment. Muslims are the largest minority group in India and so, Muslim women constitutes a large number of women population. This paper will study the impact of economic development of the country on Muslim women and their participation in the women labor force. It will further look into the hurdles in her way to achieve economic empowerment and the government and civil society attempt to pave the way for empowerment of Muslim women.

Keywords: *Muslim Women, Work Participation, Liberalization, Globalization, Empowerment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to 1991 census, there were around 48 million Muslim women in India. The number rose to 62.5 million in 2001. In 2011, Muslim women constitute around 66,814,106 of total women population (Census of India). This important section of population has been remained ignored in the talks of women empowerment. Muslim women are seen as helpless creatures facing oppression and religious restrictions by their men and the ulemas. Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, illiterate section with little economic empowerment and less political representation. The portrayal of Muslim society as patriarchic and male dominated in which women is restricted to their home and domestic work indicates less presence of Muslim women in total women labor force.

With changes in India society and family structure and the opening up of economy, a change in the nature of Muslim society and their view towards women has been hoped. The new wave of demand for women empowerment and feminist movements in India has been seen as a change factor in women situation. Women questions and issues have received a lot of attention in national policies, planning and programs with an aim of advancement of women in all fields. All these developments have created a new understanding a demand for empowerment by the Muslim women also. However, little has been achieved in real terms. The secular structure of India interferes little in the affairs of the religious minorities and Muslim Personal Law Board governs and dictates the affairs of Muslim women.

According to Islam, men and women are equal and are entitled equal rights. The constitution of India also guarantees equal rights to all, irrespective of gender difference. However, in Muslim society, purdah is considered as essential for women and is seen as a symbol of dignity. Lower literacy rate, early marriage, purdah system, other social

and religious stigmas restricts Muslim women to enter in social sphere and actively participate in the economic activities to achieve economic and social empowerment. The present paper would discuss the position of women in Muslim society of India. This paper will look into the changes which the liberalization of economy and globalization has brought in the lives of Muslim women. It will look into the participation of Muslim women in the economic activities and the labor force of India. This paper will further discuss the hurdles in the way of economic empowerment of Muslim women and suggest the measures to come up from these hindrances.

Liberalization, Globalization and Indian Muslim Women: The process of globalization and liberalization has affected the women in every society worldwide. Women struggled for their rights and freedom and this movement spread with the formation of women organizations, conferences and women movements throughout the world. In India too, women stood up for their fundamental rights and equality. All this has brought a change in the perspective and understanding of Muslim women also.

The feminist scholars of today now understand that there exist contradictions between the ideals of Islam and the social and religious practices dictated by the religious leaders. Islam is based on the idea of freedom and equality to both, men and women. Thus, the inequality and injustice exist in the construction of social norms by the patriarchal forces. The emerging voice of Muslim women challenges this inequality and demand justice. They want a change in the Islamic laws dictated by the religious patriarchs.

With much emphasis on women education, the middle class Muslim families has realized the importance of education of girls. Women themselves are taking initiatives to get access to education. Thus an educated class of Muslim women is emerging now who are aware of their rights and oppose the oppressive religious practices. A group of Muslim women denied the nikah-nama and developed their own nikah-nama. The Muslim Personal Law Board refused to accept it and made some marginal changes in the old practice of nikah-nama. Further, the progressive Indian Muslim women have formed their own Muslim Women Personal Law Board to deal with the issues related to Muslim women (Engineer, 2007).

The liberal economy, consumerist culture of present society and need for more earning has further helped to encourage Muslim women to come out from their traditional domestic affairs and participate in the economic activities to support the needs of her family. Also, the young generation of today gives more importance to secular values over the religious and cultural identity (Tabassum Khan, 2009). The young Muslim women, by coming into contact with the global world, aspire to choose their careers and come out to work.

With increasing emphasis on human rights in today's world many NGOs have come to realize the plight of Muslim women in India and have started giving valuable assistance to empower them. Some Muslim organizations are engaged in providing education and vocational skills to Muslim women. There has not been any drastic change in the status of Indian Muslim women, but we cannot deny that some important changes can be seen.

Work Participation of Muslim Women in India: According to 2001 census, the work par-

ticipation rate of Muslims in India is 31.3 percent. In this total workforce, 33,886,213 are males and 9,409,880 are females (Census of India, 2001). The work participation rate of Muslim women is lower compared to the total work participation rate of women in India in both, rural and urban areas. Overall 44 percent of women in India participate in the workforce whereas the participation rate of Muslim women is only 21.7 percent. The work participation of Muslim women is much lower than the upper caste Hindu women.

The majority of Muslim women are unemployed. The average work participation for Muslim women is 14.1 percent which is lower than the Hindu women, that is 18 percent and much lower than scheduled caste and OBC women that is 37 percent and 22 percent respectively (11th Five Year Plan Report; Hasan & Menon, 2001). Among those reported as employed, the large proportion is of wage workers and self-employed women. The work participation of urban women is lower than the rural women that is 12.9 percent and 26 percent respectively.

The participation of Muslim women in home based economic activities is high. Of the total Muslim women population of 66,814,106, the number of Muslim women recorded as house wife is 57,404,226 or 85.9 percent, and only 14.1 percent of Muslim women are workers. Thus the rural and urban areas are 17.5 percent and 7.7 percent respectively (Sarikhani, 2008). The Sachar Committee Report shows that a large proportion of the working Muslim women population is self employed and are engaged in home based work like sewing, embroidery, agarbatti rolling beedi rolling and other such works. Around 73 percent of Muslim women are self employed compared to 55 percent of Hindu women (11th Five Year Plan, 188). This pattern of home based employment of Muslim women is due to the discrimination in formal employment, lack of education and poverty. The poor working condition of Muslim women, low income and lack of economic security make them unable to bargain for their betterment.

Muslim has very low participation in the formal sector of economy and regular jobs. The difference between the participation of men and women further differs. The share of Muslim men and women in large private sector jobs is further very low compared to other socio-religious communities. Participation of Muslim women in women owned enterprises is quite high. This shows the dominance of religious and cultural barriers in working with men. This social and cultural restriction on women mobility in Muslim society restricts her employment opportunity. Muslim women have minimal participation in Government micro-finance programmes like Self Help Groups, Watershed programmes and Panchayati Raj (Sachar Committee Report, 2006).

Due to the prevalence of poverty and illiteracy among the Muslim minority, the majority of employed Muslim men and women are engaged in the inferior jobs in both, public and private sectors. The data show that Muslim women constitute 4.0 percent as compared to 3.2 percent Hindu OBCs who are not having fixed place of their economic activity, while majority of Muslims engaged in economic activity inside their own dwelling which constitute 66.8 percent as compared to 52.1 percent Hindu OBC's. Muslim females constitute only 6.5 percent as compared 12.4 percent Hindu OBC's as for as their own enterprise is concerned. More Muslim women are engaged (constituting 6.9 percent) in employee's dwelling as compared to Hindu OBCs (constituting 5.4 percent)

(Government Report, 2006).

With the development of Indian economy the participation of women has increased in the total labor force. This change is also seen among the Muslim women whose probability to work was 10 percent lower chance of working which has come down to 6 percent in 2007/08 (Bhalla and Kaur, 2011).

Hurdles in the Way of Economic Empowerment of Muslim Women:

- **Illiteracy:** Illiteracy plays as a major barrier to the empowerment of Muslim women and their participation in the labor force. Muslim women and girls level of literacy is lower than the SC/ST women also. Their enrollment at secondary and higher levels further declines. The drop-out rate of Muslim girls is higher. The low level of education, inaccessibility to the modern secular education and absence of skill development programmes contributes to the deprivation of Muslim women.
- **Marriage:** Early marriage is also very common among the Muslims. It creates problems in acquiring education for women. After marriage, Muslim women are not allowed to move out alone. As a result, they cannot continue their education and other economic activities after marriage. Divorce is commonly practiced and Muslim husbands have the unilateral power to divorce. Polygamy is still prevalent among the Muslims.
- **Purdah:** Islam came to India in a particular form, especially with purdah. Purdah was considered synonymous to high status and respectability. Its enforcement became so pervasive that any woman found without a veil was ruled as shameless and outside of decent society (Upreti, 2000). This system of purdah have isolated Muslim women from the outer world and confined them to their house. This system leads to immobility of Muslim women and lower down her chances of employment in the new and emerging sectors of economy.
- **Lack of Awareness:** The low level of education, purdah, early marriage, absence from political sphere, and the other religious and cultural barriers causes lack of awareness of Muslim women about their rights. Their aloofness from the outer world keep them follow the traditional and prejudiced social practices. The low literacy rate among Muslim women and the religious education they are given left them unaware about the programmes and policies which could be helpful to them.
- **Cultural and Religious Prejudices:** the most important cause of deprivation of Muslim women is the religious dictated by the ulemas who aim to keep the patriarchic values alive and discriminate against women. The cultural and religious prejudices make the women captive in their homes and disallow them to enjoy their right to equality, freedom and the right to work. Muslim Personal

Law Board, the supreme governing authority on the religious affairs of Muslims further restricts any effort to change these prejudices structures.

- **Low Political Participation:** The political participation of Muslim women is very low at both, local and national level. This is because of the barriers women faces at social level. This causes the lack of legislation on the issues related to them and ignores the need for important changes. Muslim Personal Law Board dictates the law making processes related to Muslims and continues to oppose any progressive change benefitting women on the name of religion and culture.
- **Lack of Constitutional Mechanism:** In India, Muslim women lack the legal incentives to improve their condition. Indian constitution is based on the vales of equality, secularism, socialism and democracy. Nonetheless, when it comes to the issue of Muslim women, these values get subsided to the religious and cultural dictates of Personal Law Board and ulemas who opposes the empowerment of women and their right to equality and freedom.

2. CONCLUSION

The empowerment of Muslim women is one of the important challenges which needed immediate attention. After six decades of Indian independence, Muslim women are still the most deprived and marginalized section of population. The greatest problem is that the development measures do not reach to this section of population due to the social, cultural and religious barriers against any attempt to change. Indian government, media and judiciary has remained the silent spectator of the deployment of Muslim women.

However, due to the waves of modernization, feminist movements for the rights of women, increasing importance of education, awareness among Muslim women, liberalization of economy and change in social and family structure, a change in the condition of Muslim women can be seen. Now, to tackle the problem faced by Muslim women, some important initiative is needed to be taken by the government and civil society.

The first important measure towards the empowerment of Muslim women is education. Government, in close cooperation with the women organization and Muslim women activists should promote the education among Muslim girls. Initiative should be taken to lower down the drop-out rate among Muslim girls. Special skill development programmes should be started to impart skills among Muslim women. There is also a need to take measures to decrease the wide-scale poverty among Muslims. Initiative should also be taken to increase the political participation of Muslim women at local and national level so that they could participate in the law making and decision making processes to take care of their problems. The most important of all is that cultural and religious prejudices are needed to be taken care of and constitutional changes should be made to ensure equal rights to Muslim women.

3. REFERENCES

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