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Statistical Profile of Muslim Women in India: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Muslim women in India exemplify resilience and drive for change. Despite structural challenges such as poverty, limited access to opportunities, and social conservatism, they persist in carving out spaces for empowerment and progress. Their journey underscores the importance of inclusive policies, gender-sensitive education, and supportive systems that can promote equality and dignity for all. By addressing these issues, Muslim women can play a more significant role in shaping the future of Indian society. In this paper an attempt is made to study the demographic, social, economic, cultural profile of Muslim women in India.

INTRODUCTION

Muslim women in India constitute a significant section of the population and play a vital role in the country's socio-cultural fabric. They are part of a diverse community spread across regions, languages, and traditions, yet they share certain common experiences shaped by religion, culture, and socio-economic conditions. Historically, Muslim women have contributed to various fields such as education, literature, politics, and social reform, though patriarchal norms and limited opportunities often overshadowed their roles.

In recent decades, the status of Muslim women in India has become a subject of much discussion and reform. Educational attainment has been one of the major challenges for many, as literacy levels among Muslim women have often been lower compared to the national average. However, gradual progress is evident, with more girls now attending schools and pursuing higher education. Government programs, non-governmental initiatives, and community-driven efforts have played an important part in promoting awareness about the value of education for girls.

Another significant area of concern has been the question of personal laws and rights. The issue of triple talaq, for instance, brought the challenges of gender justice within the community into the national spotlight. With the abolition of instant triple talaq in 2019, Muslim women gained legal protection that strengthened their position within family structures. Activism by Muslim women themselves has been central to such changes, as many have organized and voiced their demands for equality and justice within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

Economically, many Muslim women are engaged in small-scale industries, handicrafts, self-help groups, and informal labor. Participation in self-help groups and microfinance initiatives has empowered several women by giving them financial independence and decision-making capacity. While urban Muslim women are increasingly entering professional sectors, rural women still face barriers of poverty, limited mobility, and lack of access to resources.

Culturally, Muslim women balance tradition and modernity in their daily lives. Practices like wearing the hijab or burqa continue to be personal and sometimes contested choices, reflecting both faith and identity. At the same time, young Muslim women are asserting their aspirations by pursuing higher education, technology, and entrepreneurship. The presence of Muslim women leaders in politics, arts, sports, and academia also indicates a slow but steady transformation in social attitudes.

India is home to a diverse population that includes one of the world's largest Muslim communities. As per the 2011 Census, Muslims constitute approximately 14.2% of the Indian population, making Islam the second-largest religion in the country. Within this community, Muslim women form a substantial segment, numbering over 80 million in 2011 and likely exceeding 100 million today. Yet, despite their demographic significance, Muslim women in India often remain on the margins of economic, educational, and political discourse.

Understanding the status of Muslim women is essential not just for their empowerment but also for the inclusive development of India as a whole. Their socio-economic advancement is critical for addressing poverty, inequality, and social exclusion in India's broader democratic framework.

1. Demographic Profile Of Muslim Women In India

Muslims comprise a pan-Indian community, present in every state and union territory of India, although their concentration varies significantly by region. According to the 2011 Census, there were 172.2 million Muslims in India, of whom roughly 48.1% were female, accounting for approximately 82.9 million Muslim women. While the community is religiously and culturally diverse, a shared identity often defines their socio-political challenges, especially for women.

In terms of geographic distribution, Muslim women are more densely concentrated in states like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Maharashtra, Kerala, and Assam. Uttar Pradesh alone accounts for nearly one-fifth of India's Muslim population. Urban areas also host a substantial portion of Muslim women, although rural regions continue to hold the majority.

Muslim Population and Sex Ratio in India

Table 1 presents the age-group-wise and gender wise Muslim population and sex ratio in India.

Table 1: Age Group Wise and Gender Wise Muslim Population and Sex Ratio in India

S. No	Age-group	Persons	Males	Females	Sex ratio
1	0-6	28299593	14564936	13734657	943
2	7	4180910	2146498	2034412	948
3	8	4622894	2385864	2237030	938
4	9	3810375	1967431	1842944	937
5	10	5104357	2666536	2437821	914
6	11	3903671	2025768	1877903	927
7	12	4593591	2393575	2200016	919
8	13	3804839	1937389	1867450	964
9	14	4044984	2061413	1983571	962
10	15	4073113	2108628	1964485	932
11	16	3987195	2056576	1930619	939
12	17	3280141	1710628	1569513	918
13	18	4577625	2401371	2176254	906
14	19	3183540	1623470	1560070	961
15	20-24	16640317	8546075	8094242	947
16	25-29	13927787	7006039	6921748	988
17	30-34	11540455	5789206	5751249	993
18	35-59	36951173	18990982	17960191	946
19	60+	11054723	5542401	5512322	995
20	Age not stated	663875	349159	314716	901
Total		**172245158**	**88273945**	**83971213**	**951**

Source: Registrar General -Census of India.

Table 1 shows that the total Muslim population in India, according to the 2011 census, is 172,245,158. Out of this total, 88273945 are men, while 83971213 are women. The proportion of Muslim women within the overall Muslim population ranges from 49.86% in the 60+ age group to 47.54% in the 18-year age group. The largest population of Muslims is found in the 35-59 age group, which includes the highest numbers of both men and women. This is followed by the 0-6 years age group. The age group with the least representation of Muslims is the "not stated" category. The share of the Muslim population in India's total population is 14.23 per cent.

The share of the Muslim population in India's total population is 14.23 per cent. The share of the male Muslim population in India's total male population is 14.16 per cent, and the share of the Muslim female population in India's total population is 14.29 per cent. The sex ratio of the Muslim population is 951 females for every 1,000 males. The highest and lowest sex ratios of 995 and 901 are registered in the age group of 60+ years and the unspecified age groups, respectively.

Gender Wise Head of Household

The details regarding the head of household for the total population and the Muslim population, by sex and household size (Census, 2011), are presented in Table 2.22.

Table 2: Head of Household for Total Population and Muslim Population by sex and Household size (Census, 2011)

House-hold size	Total households with		Muslim households with		Muslim%	
	Male head	**Female head**	**Male head**	**Female head**	Male head	Female head
1	4368569	5936636	362275	524663	8.29	8.84
2	19194500	4989714	1729540	504110	9.01	10.10
3-6	151206392	17385760	16982934	2234755	11.23	12.85
7-10	35477795	3647957	6728774	710141	18.97	19.47
11+	5828387	822571	1255117	197261	21.53	23.98
Total	216075643	32782638	27058640	4170930	12.52	12.72
Mean household size	5.0	3.9	5.6	4.7		

Source: Registrar General -Census of India.

Table 2illustrates the distribution of household sizes among total households and Muslim households, categorised by male and female heads. It reveals that Muslim households are generally larger, with average sizes of 5.6 for male-headed households and 4.7 for female-headed households. In comparison, the overall averages are 5.0 and 3.9, respectively. Muslim representation in smaller households (with 1–2 members) is relatively low, ranging from 8.29% to 10.10%. However, this percentage increases significantly in larger households, reaching between 21.53% and 23.98% in households with 11 or more members. This trend indicates a higher prevalence of extended or joint family structures among Muslims. Moreover, female-headed Muslim households exhibit a slightly higher representation across most household size categories, suggesting that distinct demographic or social characteristics influence household formation.

Fertility trends among Muslim women have long been a subject of debate and misrepresentation. However, recent data from the NFHS-5 (2019–21) indicate a significant decline in the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) among Muslim women, from 3.6 in NFHS-1 (1992–93) to 2.3 in NFHS-5. This figure, although still higher than the Hindu average (1.9), illustrates a convergence toward the national average of 2.0, debunking the myth of unchecked population growth within the community.

2. Education And Literacy

Education is a key indicator of socio-economic development. In the case of Muslim women, it serves as both a reflection of past exclusion and a path to future empowerment. Historically, Muslim women have suffered from low literacy rates, limited access to formal education, and significant dropout rates. However, gradual progress is evident in the most recent data sets.

According to the Census 2011, the literacy rate among Muslim women was 51.9%, significantly lower than the national female literacy rate of 65.5%. This gap of over 13 percentage points reflects the compounded disadvantages of gender and minority status. The literacy rate among Muslim men was 67.6%, indicating a gender gap of nearly 16 percentage points within the community.

Data from NFHS-5 (2019–21) shows some improvement. Among women aged 15–49:

I. Approximately 33% of Muslim women had completed 10 or more years of schooling, compared to 42% among Hindu women.
II. About 27% of Muslim women in the same age group had received no schooling at all, compared to 19% among Hindu women.

These figures suggest that while the situation is improving, significant gaps persist.

The challenges to educational attainment among Muslim women are multifaceted:

- ☞ Economic hardship is a significant barrier, especially in families with multiple children and limited resources.
- ☞ Gender norms within the community and conservative interpretations of religious teachings may discourage education beyond puberty, especially in co-educational settings.
- ☞ Infrastructure deficits, such as the absence of girls' schools, female teachers, and safe transport, further hinder educational progress.
- ☞ Parental perceptions also play a role; many parents prioritize early marriage over continued schooling for girls.

Despite these barriers, there are hopeful signs. Enrollment rates among Muslim girls have increased at both the primary and secondary levels. Government schemes, such as the Maulana Azad National Fellowship and the Begum Hazrat Mahal Scholarship, as well as state-level programs, have encouraged school attendance. Civil society initiatives have also played a pivotal role in promoting awareness and offering after-school support in Muslim-majority neighbourhoods.

Digital education has opened new avenues for learning. The proliferation of smartphones and online resources has enabled many Muslim girls to access educational content outside traditional classrooms, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, digital divides in terms of access and digital literacy remain significant obstacles.

Furthermore, higher education remains a distant goal for many. Muslim women are underrepresented in universities, professional colleges, and technical institutions. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–21, the gross enrollment ratio (GER) of Muslim women in higher education was significantly lower than that of other religious groups. This lack of representation in higher education has a direct impact on their employment prospects and social mobility.

Efforts to enhance educational outcomes must therefore be intersectional, targeting both poverty alleviation and gender empowerment. Policy interventions should focus on scholarships, residential schools, community sensitization, and capacity-building for teachers. Without a targeted strategy, the existing educational gap risks becoming a permanent feature of Indian society.

3. Employment and Economic Participation

Economic participation is a critical dimension of women's empowerment, yet Muslim women in India remain starkly underrepresented in the labour force. Multiple surveys, including the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), highlight the persistent marginalization of Muslim women in both formal and informal sectors.

According to the PLFS 2022, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) among Muslim women was:

1) Urban Muslim women: ~11%
2) Rural Muslim women: ~16%

In contrast, Hindu women exhibited higher participation rates, approximately 25% in urban areas and 35% in rural areas. The gap indicates a systemic issue that affects millions of Muslim women and directly contributes to economic inequality.

Self-employment is another viable option, but it remains underdeveloped due to limited access to credit, inadequate training, and restricted market exposure. In contrast to women from Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes who benefit from targeted schemes, Muslim women often find themselves excluded from mainstream financial inclusion initiatives. Although government programs such as Stand-Up India and MUDRA loans exist, their reach among Muslim women remains minimal due to bureaucratic hurdles and lack of awareness.

4. Health, Fertility, and Nutrition

Health is both a human right and a development imperative. For Muslim women in India, access to healthcare services remains unequal, though there has been a gradual improvement in several indicators. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) provides a mixed picture of health outcomes.

The age-wise marital status distribution of the Muslim community in India reveals important patterns about marriage practices, demographic trends, and gender differences. This data encompasses nearly 172 million people, with a nearly even distribution between males and females, and classifies marital status into five categories: never married, currently married, widowed, separated, and divorced. The age-wise marital status of the Muslim community in India is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Age-Wise Marital Status among the Muslim Community in India: An Analysis

Age-group	Total			Marital status														
				Never married			Currently Married			Widowed			Separated			Divorced		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
0-9	40913772	21064729	19849043	40913772	21064729	19849043	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10-14	21451442	11084681	10366761	21013133	10926371	10086762	413349	148200	265149	13276	4638	8638	9372	4528	4844	2312	944	1368
15-	1910	9900	9200	1681	9464	7353	2234	4227	1812	262	757	186	144	49	954	834	13	701

19	1614	673	941	7624	119	505	946	42	204	43	2	71	58	14	4	3	26	7
20-24	16640317	8546075	8094242	8376400	5961008	2415392	8141787	2558050	5583737	56611	13881	42730	35548	8347	27201	29971	4789	25182
25-29	13927787	7006039	6921748	2788546	2151246	637300	10950039	4813679	6136360	97073	21748	75325	49613	11289	38324	42516	8077	34439
30-34	11540455	5789206	5751249	806727	591158	215569	10490435	5148410	5342025	148903	29303	119600	52244	11675	40569	42146	8660	33486
35-39	10873884	5466174	5407710	305946	203520	102426	10234041	5203156	5030885	238497	38618	199879	54857	12227	42630	40543	8653	31890
40-44	8890392	4636016	4254376	156230	97621	58609	8307311	4467925	3839386	345961	52465	293496	47633	10674	36959	33257	7331	25926
45-49	7291929	3775434	3516495	88816	52670	36146	6707552	3644370	3063182	435256	64761	370495	37222	8380	28842	23083	5253	17830
50-54	5579972	2976560	2603412	64562	37031	27531	4918514	2842934	2075580	553246	85990	467256	27081	6625	20456	16569	3980	12589
55-59	4314996	2136798	2178198	46601	25604	20997	3697444	2017643	1679801	543583	86546	457037	17474	4493	12981	9894	2512	7382
60-64	4190178	2136960	2053218	78942	41033	37909	3180459	1938604	1241855	905774	150256	755518	16268	4698	11570	8735	2369	6366
65-69	2801836	1394984	1406852	77628	40766	36862	1943109	1212184	730925	766638	137449	629189	9542	3223	6319	4919	1362	3557
70-74	1981615	1014200	967415	39931	21026	18905	1176710	833371	343339	755441	156100	599341	6240	2660	3580	3293	1043	2250
75-79	878766	429447	449319	18329	9405	8924	491508	333193	158315	364986	85202	279784	2615	1248	1367	1328	399	929
80+	1202328	566810	635518	99153	56864	42289	543043	364540	178503	554813	143123	411690	3410	1687	1723	1909	596	1313
Age not stated	663875	349159	314716	389390	226661	162729	251654	116862	134792	20879	4943	15936	1161	452	709	791	241	550
Total	**17224515 8**	**8827 3945**	**8397 1213**	**9208 1730**	**5097 0832**	**4111 0898**	**7368 1901**	**3606 5863**	**3761 6038**	**582 718 0**	**108 259 5**	**474 458 5**	**384 738**	**97 12 0**	**287 618**	**269 609**	**57 53 5**	**212 074**

Source: Registrar General -Census of India.

According to Table 3 in the 0–9 age group, all individuals are reported as never married, which aligns with legal and social norms prohibiting child marriage at this age. However, in the 10–14 group, there is a small but noticeable number—over 400,000 persons—classified as currently married. The majority of these are females, suggesting that child marriage, though illegal, remains a social reality for girls in this community.

The prevalence of marriage increases in the 15–19 and 20–24 age brackets. In the 15–19 group, over 2.2 million individuals are currently married, with females accounting for the majority. This indicates that marriage among girls often occurs in their mid-to-late teens. In the 20–24 age category, more than 8 million individuals are married, comprising nearly 5.6 million females and around 2.5 million males. This period marks a significant transition to adulthood, with marriage being a dominant milestone, especially for women.

Between the ages of 25 and 34, marriage becomes nearly universal. The 25–29 age group has over 10.9 million currently married persons, while the 30–34 age group has over 10.4 million. During this phase, the number of never-married individuals declines sharply. Gender differences narrow somewhat, but females continue to marry slightly earlier than males. These age groups represent the traditional peak period for marriage formation in the community.

In the 35–39 and 40–44 age groups, most people remain married, though the proportion who are widowed, separated, or divorced begins to rise. For example, in the 40–44 age band, there are over 345,000 widowed individuals, most of whom are women. By 50–54 years, the number of widowed persons exceeds 550,000, showing how mortality and marital dissolution increase with age. Separation and divorce remain relatively low but increase slightly in these middle-aged groups.

Marriage rates decline steadily in older age groups. From 55 onwards, the number of currently married people drops significantly—from around 3.7 million in the 55–59 group to just over 1.1 million in the 70–74 group. Widowhood becomes increasingly prominent in these age bands. For example, the 60–64 group has over 900,000 widowed individuals, with females forming the larger share. This pattern reflects longer female life expectancy and the fact that men often marry younger women.

Separation and divorce remain small proportions of the total marital status in older age groups, though their absolute numbers grow slightly with age. Even in the oldest cohorts (80+), the number of divorced or separated people is small compared to those who are widowed.

Across all age groups, approximately 92 million people are recorded as never having been married, with males outnumbering females. Meanwhile, over 73 million are currently married, with nearly equal numbers of men and women. Widowhood affects around 5.8 million people, with women representing the vast majority. Separation and divorce are relatively rare overall, with fewer than 700,000 people combined in these categories.

The data highlights important social patterns: marriage is nearly universal in young adulthood, child marriage remains an issue (particularly for girls), and widowhood is a significant reality for older women. The low rates of separation and divorce may reflect cultural or legal barriers to formal marital dissolution.

The age-wise marital status profile of the Muslim community in India offers valuable insights into family structures and social norms. Early marriage, especially among females, persists despite legal prohibitions, while marriage remains the central social institution throughout most of adulthood. Widowhood emerges as the dominant status in later life, particularly among women, underscoring the need for social support systems for elderly widows. Overall, the data provide a crucial foundation for understanding the demographic and social realities that shape this community's life course.

Fertility Trends

Historically, fertility among Muslim women has been higher than the national average, but recent decades have seen a significant decline. As of NFHS-5:

a) Total Fertility Rate (TFR) among Muslim women: 2.3
b) TFR among Hindu women: 1.9
c) National average TFR: 2.0

This decline suggests the growing adoption of family planning practices and shifting aspirations among younger Muslim women. Urbanization, education, and economic pressures have contributed to this demographic transition.

Contraceptive Use and Family Planning

Muslim women show lower uptake of modern contraceptive methods compared to Hindu women:

- Muslim women (15–49 years) using any method: ~50%
- Hindu women: ~66%

Fear of side effects, religious conservatism, and lack of counselling are among the reasons cited for this discrepancy. However, it is essential to note that Islam allows contraception, and many religious scholars have supported family planning when practised responsibly.

Government programs, including ASHA workers and Janani Suraksha Yojana, have made efforts to reach out to women in underserved communities, but outreach among Muslims is inconsistent. Studies have found that Muslim-majority areas often have fewer health sub-centres and poor infrastructure.

Maternal and Child Health

Muslim women face challenges in accessing quality maternal care, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. According to NFHS-5:

- About 78% of Muslim women delivered their last child in a health facility, compared to 88% of Hindu women.
- Only 21% of Muslim women received four or more antenatal care visits, versus 33% of Hindu women.

The disparity in maternal healthcare access increases the risk of complications during childbirth, stillbirths, and neonatal mortality. The situation is particularly dire in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam, where health infrastructure is generally underdeveloped.

Infant mortality rate (IMR) and under-five mortality among Muslim children, however, are not significantly higher than the national average, and in some states, they are lower. This paradox—lower child mortality despite lower maternal health access—is an area of ongoing research.

Nutrition and Anaemia
Malnutrition and anaemia are widespread among Muslim women, particularly in lower-income groups. NFHS-5 data reveals:

- Anaemia among Muslim women (15–49): ~55%
- Malnutrition (BMI < 18.5): Around 20%

These figures mirror national patterns but are exacerbated by poverty, food insecurity, and limited awareness of nutrition. Women's health in this context is deeply tied to household food allocation norms, which often prioritize men and children over women.

In urban Muslim ghettos, where processed and low-quality food is typical due to affordability, lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and hypertension are also on the rise. However, these women often lack access to regular health checkups, insurance, or preventive care services.

Access to Healthcare Facilities
One of the biggest challenges Muslim women faces is physical and financial access to quality health services. Many live in segregated neighbourhoods, especially in urban India, where government facilities are few and far between. These localities often fall off the radar of public health campaigns and outreach efforts.

Lack of female doctors, cultural hesitations about being examined by male doctors, and poor awareness of reproductive rights further reduce health-seeking behaviour. Language barriers and discrimination at health centers also discourage Muslim women from returning for follow-up care.

Mental Health
Mental health among Muslim women remains an underexplored but deeply relevant issue. Domestic violence, economic insecurity, and social marginalization contribute to high stress levels. However, mental health remains taboo in many sections of the community, and few women seek professional help. There is a growing need for community-based mental health programs, especially in urban poor localities.

5. Marriage, Family, and Social Norms
Marriage is one of the most significant institutions in the lives of Indian women, and for Muslim women, it carries both religious and socio-cultural weight. While Islamic law provides for rights within marriage, including the right to property, divorce, and consent, social practices often diverge from these ideals.

Age at Marriage
According to NFHS-5 (2019–21):

- Around 28% of Muslim women aged 20–24 were married before the legal age of 18.
- This is slightly higher than the national average of 23%, and significantly higher than the Scheduled Tribe and Christian averages.

Early marriage limits educational and economic opportunities for women, and often results in early childbearing, with associated health risks. The practice is more common in rural areas and among lower-income families.

Efforts to delay marriage are underway through various programs such as Beti *Bachao, Beti Padhao*, but community-specific messaging and religiously sensitive approaches are necessary to make a significant impact.

Marriage Practices and Family Structure
Most Muslim marriages in India are arranged, and endogamy (marriage within the community) is almost universally practised. Marriage customs vary widely across regions and sects—Shia and Sunni communities, for example, may have distinct ceremonial practices.

Polygamy, while legal under Muslim Personal Law, is rare in practice. According to the 2011–12 National Family Health Survey, the rate of polygamy among Muslims was less than 2%, similar to other religious communities. This challenges popular stereotypes that portray Muslim society as uniquely prone to polygamous unions.

The typical family structure is patrilocal, meaning that women typically move into their husband's household after marriage. Joint families are ordinary, particularly in rural areas. In urban settings, there is a growing trend toward nuclear families, especially among middle-class Muslims.

Domestic Responsibilities and Gender Roles
Muslim women often shoulder the primary burden of unpaid domestic labour, including child care, elder care, cooking, and household chores. This restricts their ability to participate in paid work or pursue education.

While Islam allows women to work, cultural expectations and gender norms within many Muslim families reinforce the belief that a woman's primary role is as a homemaker. These norms are slowly changing among younger, educated populations, particularly in urban India.

Dowry and Divorce
Though dowry is prohibited under Indian law and discouraged in Islam, it remains a prevalent social practice in many Muslim communities. The economic burden of dowry often leads to debt and resentment, and in some cases, domestic violence.

Divorce, particularly the practice of triple talaq, has been a subject of national debate. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, criminalized instant triple talaq (talaq-e-biddat), marking a significant legal reform. While some celebrated the law as a protective measure, critics have argued it could lead to the criminalisation of Muslim men rather than support reconciliation or the welfare of women.

However, many Muslim women still face challenges in accessing just and fair divorce proceedings, particularly in the absence of awareness about their legal rights or access to legal aid.

6. Political Participation
Political participation is one of the most potent tools of empowerment. For Muslim women, however, representation in formal political institutions remains minimal, both at the national and local levels.

Voter Turnout
Data from the Election Commission of India indicate that Muslim women have a relatively high voter turnout, particularly in states such as West Bengal, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh. In some cases, turnout among Muslim women exceeds that of Muslim men, indicating strong interest and engagement in electoral democracy. However, high voter turnout does not translate into political representation.

Elected Representatives
Muslim women are grossly underrepresented in legislatures:

- In the 17th Lok Sabha (2019–24), out of 78 women elected, only two were Muslim.
- In state assemblies, their numbers are equally dismal. For example, in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, no Muslim woman was elected to any of the 403 seats.

There are multiple barriers to political entry for Muslim women:

1. Patriarchy within political parties and communities discourages female candidates.
2. Lack of resources and social networks hinders campaign visibility.
3. Communal polarization makes Muslim candidates—especially women—easy targets for political opponents.
4. Many Muslim women are pushed into symbolic roles in party structures with little actual decision-making power.

Grassroots Participation
The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandate reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, have opened up new avenues for participation. In many districts, Muslim women have emerged as Sarpanches and Ward Councillors, especially where gender and minority reservations intersect.

This has created a cadre of local-level leaders who are learning governance, public speaking, and advocacy skills. However, many face the challenge of being "proxy candidates," with husbands or male relatives making decisions on their behalf.

Activism and Advocacy
Outside formal politics, Muslim women have shown robust participation in civil society movements, such as:

- The anti-CAA protests led by Muslim women in Shaheen Bagh and other cities.
- Community-level initiatives for women's education and rights.
- Legal campaigns for reforms in personal laws.

These movements have redefined Muslim women's political identity, challenging both patriarchal and communal stereotypes. The image of veiled women speaking at rallies, leading protests, and writing petitions has created a new public consciousness.

However, this activism often invites state surveillance, harassment, or even arrest, as seen during crackdowns on anti-CAA protestors. A tension remains between their visibility and vulnerability in public life.

7. Legal Rights and Access to Justice

Muslim women in India operate within a plural legal framework, where Muslim Personal Law governs family matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody. This system, while providing certain rights, is often poorly implemented or misunderstood, leaving many women without absolute legal protection.

Personal Law Rights

Under Muslim Personal Law, women are entitled to:

- ❖ Mehr (a mandatory gift from husband at the time of marriage)
- ❖ Khula (a woman's right to initiate divorce)
- ❖ Inheritance rights (usually half the share of a male heir)
- ❖ Custody rights for minor children under certain conditions

While these provisions exist in theory, customary practices and lack of legal awareness undermine their implementation.

Triple Talaq and Legal Reforms

As mentioned earlier, the 2019 ban on instant triple talaq was a landmark moment. However, many scholars and activists argue that more comprehensive reforms are needed:

- ➢ A codified Muslim Personal Law, akin to the Hindu Code Bill, would help ensure consistency and transparency.
- ➢ Strengthening the role of Shariah courts, also known as Darul Qazas, with trained female scholars and mediators, could provide more equitable dispute resolution.

Access to Legal Aid

Muslim women face numerous challenges in seeking justice:

a) Language barriers in courts (especially for Urdu-speaking women)
b) Limited access to legal aid in their neighbourhoods
c) Intimidation by in-laws or community elders
d) Fear of backlash within the community

Government schemes, such as the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), offer free legal assistance; however, their reach in Muslim-dominated areas remains insufficient.

Property and Economic Rights

In practice, very few Muslim women claim their inheritance rights. Cultural pressure and family dynamics often prevent women from asserting legal claims over property. This exclusion severely impacts their economic security, especially in cases of widowhood, divorce, or domestic violence.

Empowering Muslim women legally requires:

1) Community-based legal literacy campaigns.
2) Integration of women lawyers and paralegals in local justice systems.
3) Reforms in court procedures to be more gender- and minority-sensitive.

Protection from Violence

Muslim women, like women from other communities, are vulnerable to domestic violence, sexual harassment, and public hostility. However, communal biases may compound their trauma:

a) Cases involving Muslim women may be under-reported due to fear of police bias.
b) Communal riots and violence often target Muslim women, as seen in past episodes in Gujarat (2002) and Delhi (2020).

There is a pressing need for sensitive policing, minority-friendly shelters, and inclusive gender policies to address the specific vulnerabilities of Muslim women.

8. Emerging Trends and the Way Forward

Despite long-standing challenges, Muslim women in India are exhibiting signs of transformation, driven by education, technology, legal reform, and grassroots activism. These emerging trends present both hope and direction for more inclusive development.

CONCLUSION

Muslim women in India play a significant role in the country's social and cultural landscape, facing both challenges and opportunities in education, personal rights, and economic participation. While historically restricted by patriarchy and low literacy levels, recent progress has been seen through rising educational attainment, legal reforms like the abolition of instant triple talaq, and growing involvement in self-help groups and professional fields—manybalance tradition with modern aspirations, asserting their identity while striving for empowerment. Despite persisting barriers

such as poverty and limited access to resources, Muslim women continue to demonstrate resilience and play an increasingly significant role in India's development.

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