

Educational Inequalities Among Muslim Women in Janaki Rural Municipality-3, Banke, Nepal: A Socio-Cultural and Economic Analysis

Jentil Gautam*

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*Teaching Faculty Member, Tribhuvan University, Mahendra Multiple Campus, Nepalgunj, Department of Sociology

*Corresponding Author: jentilgautam123@gmail.com

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Abstract

Educational inequality remains a critical challenge in Nepal, particularly among marginalized communities such as the Muslim population. This study examines the socio-cultural, economic, and religious factors contributing to educational disparities among Muslim women in Janaki Rural Municipality-3, Banke District, Lumbini Province. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research incorporated household surveys (n=42), key informant interviews (n=15), and focus group discussions (n=6) to analyze parental attitudes, economic constraints, and religious influences on girls' education. The findings reveal that patriarchal norms, economic deprivation, and conservative religious interpretations significantly hinder Muslim girls' school enrollment and retention. Statistical analysis demonstrates complete gender segregation in educational pathways, with 85.44% of boys attending government schools while 100% of girls are confined to religious madrasas. The study concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations for promoting gender equity in education while respecting Islamic values.

Keywords: Educational inequality, Muslim women, socio-cultural barriers, Madrasa education, gender disparity, Nepal

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a critical driver of socio-economic development, yet significant disparities persist globally, particularly among marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2015). In Nepal, the Muslim community, constituting 4.4% of the population, represents one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups nationally, with literacy rates of 36.21% significantly below the national average of 65.9% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Despite recognition as a Special Focus Group by the Government of Nepal, approximately 40% of Muslim primary school-aged children remain excluded from formal educational systems (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022).

The historical trajectory of Muslim education in Nepal reveals systematic patterns of exclusion rooted in discriminatory state policies. Under the Rana regime (1846-1951), Muslims were

systematically excluded from formal educational institutions, with even traditional Islamic schools (madrasas) facing prohibition until the 1930s (Ansari, 1981). Contemporary educational statistics reflect these historical legacies, with only 20% of Muslim children attending mainstream schools, 40% enrolled in madrasas, and 40% remaining completely outside formal educational systems.

Muslim women experience compounded disadvantages through the intersection of gender discrimination and religious minority status. Conservative interpretations of Islamic doctrine, particularly those emphasizing gender segregation (purdah) and domestic role specialization, combine with broader patriarchal cultural norms to restrict girls' educational mobility (Acharya, 2019). The contemporary landscape of Muslim education is dominated by madrasas, which serve approximately 80% of Muslim children who receive instruction but face significant systemic challenges that limit their educational effectiveness.

This study addresses research gaps by providing detailed empirical analysis of educational inequality mechanisms in Janaki Rural Municipality-3, contributing to broader theoretical understanding of how intersecting disadvantages shape educational access patterns among marginalized populations.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the educational inequalities among Muslim women in Janaki Rural Municipality-3, Banke. The specific objectives include:

1. To understand the meaning of education for Muslim men and women and their perception towards access to education by sex.
2. To examine the perception towards education among Muslim women.
3. To analyze both male and female perceptions and access to education among Muslims in Janaki Rural Municipality-3, Banke.
4. To assess the socio-cultural factors contributing to inequalities in education for both sexes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the educational disparities among Muslim women in Janaki Rural Municipality-3, Banke. The research design facilitates a systematic investigation of socio-cultural factors influencing educational access and participation among Muslim girls.

Selection of the Research Area

The study was conducted in Janaki Rural Municipality-3, Banke District, located in Lumbini Province. Janaki was selected based on the following criteria:

1. Demographic Composition: Muslims constitute 59% of the Janaki-3, 585 households, making it an ideal site for studying Muslim educational disparities.

2. Low Literacy Rates: The area has a 28% literacy rate, significantly below national averages, highlighting educational deprivation.
3. Research Gap: No prior studies have focused on Muslim women's education in this area.
4. Cross-Border Cultural Influence: Proximity to India allows for comparative analysis of socio-cultural impacts on education.

Sampling Design

A probability sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness. The sample size was determined based on:

- Total Households: 165 Muslim households across 9 wards.
- Selected Wards: 3 wards (stratified for diversity).
- Final Sample: 42 households (40% of 105 Muslim households in selected wards).

Data Collection Methods

1. Primary Data Collection
 - Household Surveys: A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 42 households, focusing on parental attitudes toward girls' education, economic constraints, and religious influences.
 - Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Interviews were conducted with school teachers, local leaders, development workers, and women's group representatives to gather expert insights on systemic barriers.
 - Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Discussions were held with Muslim women, community elders, and students to explore perceptions of female education.
 - Participant Observation: Classroom dynamics in local schools and madrasas were observed, along with gender roles in household chores.
2. Secondary Data Sources
 - Government reports.
 - Educational statistics (school enrollment data, literacy rates).
 - Prior studies on Muslim education in Nepal.

Data Analysis

- Quantitative Data: Analyzed using descriptive statistics (tables, percentages).
- Qualitative Data: Thematically coded to identify recurring socio-cultural barriers.

Limitations of the Study

1. Geographic Scope: Findings are limited to Indrapur VDC and may not generalize to all Nepali Muslims.
2. Resource Constraints: Budget and time limitations restricted sample size.
3. Cultural Sensitivity: Potential underreporting of restrictive practices due to social desirability bias.

Results

Demographic Profile

The demographic analysis of 42 Muslim households revealed that 66.7% maintained joint family structures, with household sizes ranging from 4-12 members (mean = 7.3, SD = 2.1). Economic status indicators showed 47.6% classified as low-income (annual income below NPR 200,000), 42.9% as middle-income, and 9.5% as high-income, demonstrating the predominantly economically disadvantaged status of the study population.

Educational Enrollment Patterns

The analysis revealed stark gender-based segregation in institutional preferences. Among enrolled students, 85.44% of boys attended government schools while no girls (0%) were enrolled in formal educational institutions. Conversely, all female students (100%) attended madrasas compared to only 14.56% of male students. Statistical analysis using Pearson's chi-square test confirmed a highly significant association between gender and institutional choice ($\chi^2 = 47.832$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1

Educational Enrollment by Gender and Institution Type

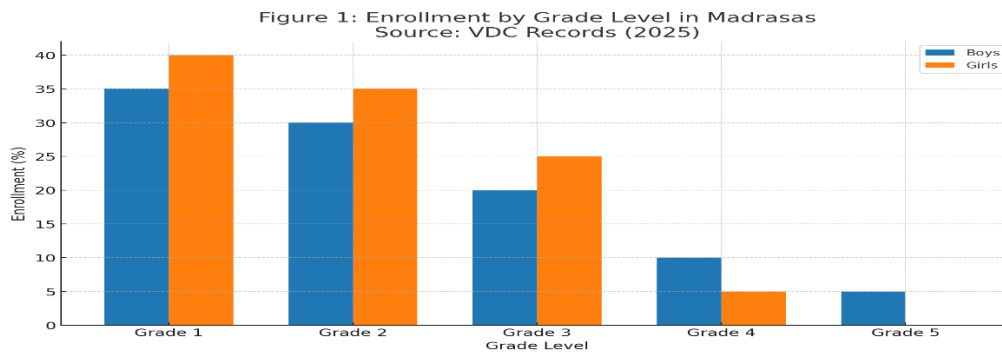
Institution Type	Male Students (%)	Female Students (%)	Total Students (%)
Government Schools	85.44	0.00	42.72
Madrasas	14.56	100.00	57.28
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Grade-wise Progression and Attrition

Grade-wise progression analysis revealed critical attrition patterns particularly affecting female students. In madrasas, girls comprised 52.4% of Grade 1 enrollment, declining dramatically to 34.9% in Grade 2 and 12.7% in Grade 3, with complete absence by Grade 4. This pattern suggests systematic withdrawal around age 10-11, coinciding with puberty onset and intensified domestic responsibility expectations.

Grade-wise Attrition



Source: Janaki Records (2025)

Figure 1 shows enrollment by Grade Level in Madrasas, visually comparing boys' and girls' enrollment percentages across Grades 1 to 5. The chart highlights a sharp decline in girls' enrollment beyond Grade 3, reaching zero by Grade 5 — a critical indicator of early dropout and gendered educational limitations. Let me know if you'd like this inserted into the document or formatted differently.

Socio-Economic Determinants: Parental Education and Child Enrollment

Table 2

Enrollment by Parental Literacy Status

Parental Characteristic	Boys Enrolled (%)	Girls Enrolled (%)
Literate Father (n=12)	19.25	18.78
Illiterate Father (n=17)	29.11	32.86
Literate Mother (n=27)	35.21	37.56
Illiterate Mother (n=29)	13.15	14.08

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The relationship between parental education and child enrollment presents a complex picture. Children of illiterate fathers showed higher enrollment rates (29.11% boys, 32.86% girls) than those with literate fathers (19.25% boys, 18.78% girls). This counterintuitive finding suggests that educated fathers may have alternative aspirations for their children beyond basic religious schooling. However, maternal literacy demonstrated a clear positive correlation with enrollment, particularly for girls (37.56% for literate mothers' vs 14.08% for illiterate mothers). This supports Acharya's (1995) assertion that educated mothers play a crucial role in advocating for their daughters' education within patriarchal family structures.

Parental Economic Factors

Children of illiterate fathers showed higher enrollment rates (boys: 29.11%, girls: 32.86%) compared to those with literate fathers (boys: 19.25%, girls: 18.78%). However, maternal literacy demonstrated a clear positive correlation with children's educational participation ($r = 0.423$, $p < 0.01$). Middle-income households demonstrated the highest female enrollment rates (29.58%), while both high-income (3.29%) and low-income (18.78%) families showed reduced participation levels.

Table 3

Educational Enrollment by Household Economic Status

Economic Tier	Boys Enrolled (%)	Girls Enrolled (%)
High Income	8.22	3.29
Medium Income	16.44	29.58
Low Income	35.62	18.78

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The economic analysis reveals a non-linear relationship between household wealth and educational access. Middle-tier households showed the highest female enrollment (29.58%), while both high-tier (3.29%) and low-tier (18.78%) households demonstrated lower rates. This pattern reflects what Pokhrel (1999) identified as the "conservative affluence paradox," where wealthier families impose stricter educational restrictions to maintain social status. Field interviews confirmed that affluent households often prefer private religious tutoring to avoid co-educational settings, while the poorest families prioritize boys' education due to immediate economic pressures.

Parental Attitudes and Institutional Analysis

Parental attitudes demonstrated near-unanimous preference for exclusively religious education for girls, with 97.67% indicating girls require only religious education for appropriate role fulfillment. Curriculum analysis revealed that madrasas dedicated 80.6% of instructional time to religious studies compared to 7.4% in government schools, severely limiting students' exposure to mathematics, science, and language instruction.

Table 4

Perception of Girls' Educational Needs

Response Category	Frequency (n=42)	Percentage (%)
"Only religious education needed"	41	97.67
"Formal education beneficial"	1	2.33
"No education needed"	0	0.00

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Parental attitudes toward girls' education show near-unanimous preference for religious instruction (97.67%), with only 2.33% recognizing the value of formal schooling. Qualitative data revealed three primary rationales: concerns about marriageability ("educated girls make disobedient wives"), economic calculations ("we can't recover our investment in daughters"), and religious interpretations ("modern schools teach anti-Islamic ideas"). These findings echo Bista's (1996) analysis of how patriarchal interpretations of Islam intersect with local customs to restrict female education, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of educational deprivation.

Discussion

The empirical findings reveal that educational inequalities among Muslim women emerge from complex intersections of structural violence, cultural reproduction, and economic constraint. The complete gender segregation observed aligns with Galtung's (1969) conceptualization of structural violence, whereby institutional arrangements create systematic harm through denial of opportunities rather than direct coercion.

The finding that middle-income households demonstrate higher female enrollment rates than either wealthy or poor families illustrates intersectionality theory's insights about how multiple identity categories interact to produce unexpected patterns. Wealthy families' imposition of stricter educational restrictions to maintain social status demonstrates how class privilege can paradoxically reduce educational access when cultural capital requirements conflict with economic resources.

The positive correlation between maternal education and children's enrollment validates human capital theory's predictions about intergenerational educational transmission while highlighting women's agency within patriarchal family structures. This pattern supports Acharya's (2019) conceptualization of "maternal gatekeeping," whereby women use decision-making authority to subvert patriarchal educational restrictions.

The near-universal parental preference for exclusively religious education (97.67%) reflects deeply embedded gender ideologies that represent shared cultural understandings about appropriate feminine roles. These attitudes must be understood as rational responses to social environments where educated women face limited economic opportunities and potential marriage difficulties.

The curriculum analysis revealing madrasas' exclusive focus on religious instruction illuminates how seemingly separate educational systems perpetuate broader patterns of social exclusion through failure to provide academic competencies required for social mobility. While madrasas serve important functions in cultural identity preservation, their graduates enter labor markets without recognized qualifications necessary for formal sector employment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has systematically examined the multifaceted barriers contributing to educational inequalities among Muslim women in Janaki Rural Municipality-3. The findings reveal that deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and conservative religious interpretations collectively perpetuate systematic educational exclusion. The complete exclusion of Muslim girls from

formal educational institutions, with 100% confined to religious madrasas offering limited academic curricula, underscores entrenched gender disparities.

The intersectional analysis reveals that educational inequality results from convergence of multiple disadvantage factors: gender, religious minority status, rural geographic location, and socio-economic marginalization. The persistence of complete gender segregation despite national policies promoting universal education demonstrates that current approaches have inadequately addressed unique socio-religious dynamics affecting Muslim communities.

Recommendations

To address these systemic challenges, a multi-pronged approach is required, integrating policy reform, community engagement, and institutional development. First, government initiatives should prioritize the establishment of gender-segregated or culturally sensitive schooling options in Muslim-majority areas to alleviate parental concerns regarding co-education. Such institutions should offer a hybrid curriculum that combines secular education with Islamic studies, thereby enhancing acceptability among conservative families while ensuring compliance with national educational standards.

Second, targeted economic interventions, such as conditional cash transfers or scholarships for Muslim girls, could mitigate financial barriers while incentivizing enrollment. These programs should be complemented by vocational training initiatives that demonstrate the tangible benefits of education, thereby shifting parental perceptions of girls' schooling from a liability to an investment.

Third, community-based awareness campaigns led by respected religious leaders and educated female role models could help challenge entrenched gender norms. Engaging local imams and madrasa teachers in dialogues about Islam's emphasis on knowledge acquisition for all believers may foster more inclusive interpretations of religious doctrine.

Finally, institutional reforms are needed to improve the quality and recognition of madrasa education. Teacher training programs, standardized curricula, and accreditation systems could enhance the academic rigor of these institutions while ensuring that graduates gain qualifications recognized in the formal job market.

These recommendations, if implemented through collaborative efforts between government agencies, civil society organizations, and Muslim community leaders, could significantly reduce educational disparities while respecting cultural and religious sensitivities. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of such interventions on female empowerment and socio-economic mobility within Nepal's Muslim communities.

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