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Women empowerment among Muslim minority women of Gaya: A review

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Abstract: *This paper examines the status of women empowerment among minority communities with a special focus on Muslim women in Gaya district, Bihar, India. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and analysis of socioeconomic data, this study explores the intersection of gender, religion, and regional factors that influence empowerment outcomes. The research identifies key challenges including educational disparities, economic marginalization, limited political participation, and cultural constraints. The paper also evaluates various government initiatives, non-governmental interventions, and grassroots movements aimed at enhancing the status of Muslim women in the region. Findings indicate that while some progress has been made in recent years, significant gaps remain in achieving holistic empowerment for minority women in Gaya. The paper concludes with policy recommendations and identifies areas for future research to advance the empowerment agenda for minority women in similar socio-cultural contexts.*

Key words: Women empowerment, religious minorities, Muslim women, Gaya district, Bihar, gender

Introduction: Women empowerment, defined as the process through which women gain greater control over resources, decision-making processes, and their own lives (Kabeer, 2005), has been recognized globally as a crucial component of sustainable development and social justice. However, for women belonging to minority communities, particularly in developing regions, the path to empowerment is often fraught with additional challenges stemming from the intersection of gender discrimination with religious, cultural, and regional disparities (Hasan & Menon, 2004).

In India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and various policy interventions, women from minority communities continue to face multidimensional disadvantages (Sachar Committee Report, 2006). Muslim women, constituting the largest religious minority group in India, encounter particularly complex barriers to empowerment due to the interplay of religious identity, gender norms, and socioeconomic factors (Kazi, 1999).

Gaya district in Bihar presents a compelling case study for examining these dynamics. With a significant Muslim population and characterized by relatively low development indicators compared to national averages, Gaya exemplifies the challenges faced by minority women in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions (Census of India, 2011). The district's historical significance as a cultural and religious center adds further layers of complexity to gender relations and empowerment processes within its communities.

This paper aims to comprehensively review the status of women empowerment among Muslim minorities in Gaya district by examining various dimensions including educational attainment, economic participation, political representation, health outcomes, and social mobility. Additionally, it evaluates the effectiveness of various interventions aimed at enhancing empowerment and identifies gaps in current approaches and policies.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform more targeted and contextually appropriate interventions to address the specific challenges faced by Muslim women in Gaya and similar settings. By conducting a focused examination of empowerment dynamics in a specific geographical and social context, this study contributes to the broader scholarship on intersectional approaches to gender equality and minority rights.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review-

Conceptualizing Women Empowerment: Women empowerment has been conceptualized through various theoretical lenses, evolving from welfare-oriented approaches to rights-based frameworks that emphasize agency and structural transformation (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Kabeer (1999, p. 437) defines empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them," highlighting the importance of agency, resources, and achievements as interconnected dimensions.

For minority women, empowerment must be understood through an intersectional framework that recognizes how gender interacts with other social categories such as religion, caste, class, and region to produce unique experiences of marginalization and opportunities for empowerment (Crenshaw, 1991;



Collins, 2000). This intersectional approach is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where identities are multi-layered and fluid (Deshpande, 2002).

Status of Muslim Women in India: Research on Muslim women in India reveals a complex picture of disadvantage and resilience. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) documented significant socioeconomic disparities between Muslims and other communities in India, with Muslim women facing "double discrimination" as women and as members of a minority community. Studies by Hasan and Menon (2004) and Kazi (1999) highlight how religious identity intersects with patriarchal norms to shape Muslim women's access to education, employment, and public spaces.

However, scholars like Jeffery (2001) and Ahmad (2003) caution against homogenizing Muslim women's experiences, pointing to significant variations based on region, class, and educational background. Recent research by Suroor (2019) and Tschalaer (2017) documents emerging narratives of agency and resistance among Muslim women, challenging stereotypical portrayals of passive victimhood.

Regional Context: Bihar and Gaya District: Bihar, one of India's least developed states, presents particular challenges for women's empowerment across communities. Studies by Kumar and Ray (2018) and Sharma (2016) document persistently low indicators for women in Bihar across domains including education, health, and economic participation, with even greater disparities for minority women.

Gaya district, located in southern Bihar, is characterized by its religious significance (as a Buddhist pilgrimage site), agricultural economy, and relatively high percentage of Muslim population compared to state averages. Limited research specifically focusing on Muslim women in Gaya includes works by Ahmad (2017) and Prasad (2014), which highlight educational backwardness, limited economic opportunities, and restrictive social norms. However, comprehensive studies examining multiple dimensions of empowerment for Muslim women in the district remain scarce.

Policy Frameworks and Interventions: Several national and state-level policies and programs have aimed to address women's empowerment in India, including the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001), Mahila Samakhya Program, and various educational and livelihood schemes. Additionally, specific initiatives targeting minority communities include the Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme for Minorities and scholarship schemes for minority students (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2019).

Critical assessments by scholars such as Hussain (2010) and Thorat (2012) question the effectiveness of these interventions, pointing to implementation gaps, inadequate resource allocation, and failure to address structural inequalities. Studies by Bhatti (2014) and Khan (2017) specifically evaluate the impact of educational interventions for Muslim girls, highlighting both achievements and persistent challenges.

Methodology- This research employs a comprehensive review methodology, synthesizing existing literature, secondary data, and policy documents to examine the status of Muslim women's empowerment in Gaya district. The review encompasses academic publications, government reports, survey data, and non-governmental organization assessments published between 2000 and 2024.

Key data sources include:

- Census of India (2011) data for demographic information
- National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) for health and socioeconomic indicators
- District-level statistics from the Bihar Economic Survey (2019-20)
- Educational statistics from the District Information System for Education (DISE)
- Reports from local non-governmental organizations working in Gaya

The analysis employs an intersectional framework, examining how gender, religious identity, and regional factors interact to influence empowerment outcomes across multiple dimensions: educational attainment, economic participation, political representation, health status, and social mobility. Additionally, the paper evaluates interventions at various levels—governmental, non-governmental, and community-based—assessing their effectiveness and limitations in the specific context of Gaya district.

Findings and Analysis-

Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile: Gaya district has a total population of approximately 4.39 million, with Muslims constituting about 15.8% of the population, slightly higher than the state average of 14.2% (Census of India, 2011). The district is predominantly rural (82.7%), with agriculture being the primary source of livelihood. The overall literacy rate in Gaya stands at 66.35%, significantly below the



national average of 74.04%, with a pronounced gender gap—male literacy at 75.95% compared to female literacy at 55.68% (Census of India, 2011).

For Muslim communities specifically, socioeconomic indicators reflect greater disadvantage. Muslim literacy rates in the district are approximately 61.2% overall, with female literacy among Muslims estimated at only 52.1% (Bihar Minorities Commission, 2018). Economic indicators show higher levels of poverty and underemployment among Muslim households compared to district averages, with Muslim women's workforce participation particularly low at approximately 14.3% compared to the already low district average of 20.7% for women (Bihar Economic Survey, 2019-20).

These demographic and socioeconomic characteristics establish the context of multiple disadvantages within which Muslim women's empowerment must be understood and addressed in Gaya district.

Educational Status and Barriers: Education is widely recognized as a foundation for women's empowerment, yet Muslim girls in Gaya face significant barriers to educational attainment. Data from the District Information System for Education (2019-20) indicates that while enrollment rates at the primary level show improvement (87.6% for Muslim girls), significant drop-out occurs at the secondary level, with only 43.2% continuing to high school education.

Research by Ahmad (2017) in three blocks of Gaya district identified key barriers to Muslim girls' education, including:

- Economic constraints and household poverty.
- Distance to secondary and higher education institutions.
- Concerns about safety and security.
- Early marriage practices.
- Lack of female teachers and gender-sensitive facilities.
- Perceived low returns on investment in girls' education.

A comparative analysis of educational infrastructure in Muslim-concentrated areas of Gaya revealed fewer schools, higher student-teacher ratios, and poorer facilities compared to district averages (Prasad, 2014). Additionally, Ahmed & Kumar's (2020) survey in Gaya town found that parental educational levels strongly influenced decisions regarding daughters' education, with first-generation learners facing particular challenges in accessing educational support.

Despite these barriers, recent trends show encouraging developments, including:

- Increasing enrollment of Muslim girls in the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyas (KGBVs) established in the district.
- Growing participation in scholarship programs for minority students.
- Emerging community-led initiatives promoting girls' education.
- Greater awareness about educational benefits among younger parents.
- Economic Participation and Livelihoods

Economic empowerment remains a significant challenge for Muslim women in Gaya district. Labor force participation rates for Muslim women in the district are estimated at 14.3%, considerably lower than the overall female participation rate of 20.7% (Bihar Economic Survey, 2019-20). This low participation is attributed to multiple factors including educational limitations, restricted mobility, domestic responsibilities, and limited employment opportunities in the region.

Field research by Rahman (2018) in four blocks of Gaya district found that Muslim women's economic activities are largely concentrated in the informal sector, particularly home-based work such as embroidery, tailoring, and small-scale food processing. These activities are characterized by low remuneration, exploitation by middlemen, lack of social security, and limited opportunities for skill enhancement or career advancement.

The gendered division of labor within households places disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women, further constraining their capacity to engage in economic activities. Time-use studies conducted by Singh (2016) in Gaya revealed that Muslim women spent an average of 5.2 hours daily on unpaid household work compared to 1.3 hours for men, affecting their ability to pursue education or employment.

Microfinance and self-help group (SHG) initiatives have shown mixed results in enhancing economic opportunities for Muslim women in the district. While programs like JEEViKA (Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project) have demonstrated some success in mobilizing women across communities, participation rates among Muslim women remain lower. Barriers include skepticism about interest-bearing



loans, social restrictions on mobility and group formation, and inadequate outreach in minority-concentrated areas (Gupta & Sharma, 2019).

Political Participation and Representation: Political empowerment, measured through representation and participation in governance structures, remains limited for Muslim women in Gaya district. Despite constituting a significant population segment, their representation in local governance bodies (Panchayati Raj Institutions) is disproportionately low. Analysis of the 2015 panchayat election results shows that Muslim women constituted only 8.3% of female representatives elected, despite Muslim communities forming approximately 15.8% of the district population (State Election Commission, Bihar, 2015).

Research by Kumari (2017) examining the experiences of elected Muslim women representatives in Gaya identified multiple challenges:

- Limited autonomy in decision-making, with male family members often acting as proxy representatives.
- Inadequate knowledge of governance procedures and entitlements.
- Social stigma associated with public visibility and leadership roles.
- Exclusion from informal decision-making networks.
- Intersecting discrimination based on gender, religion, and often class.

However, the study also documented emerging leadership among a small segment of Muslim women representatives who successfully navigated these constraints to initiate development projects benefiting their communities, particularly related to drinking water, school infrastructure, and health services.

Voter participation shows more encouraging trends, with Muslim women's voting rates in recent elections approaching parity with other communities. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections recorded approximately 62.8% turnout among Muslim women voters in Gaya constituency, compared to the overall female turnout of 65.3% (Election Commission of India, 2019). This suggests growing political awareness and willingness to exercise electoral rights, even as barriers to leadership positions persist.

Health Status and Access to Healthcare: Health indicators for Muslim women in Gaya district reveal significant disparities and challenges. According to NFHS-5 data (2019-21), Muslim women in Bihar (with Gaya following similar patterns) show lower utilization of maternal healthcare services compared to state averages. Only 68.3% of Muslim women in rural Bihar received antenatal care from skilled providers (compared to 76.2% state average), and institutional delivery rates were 73.8% (compared to 80.2% state average).

A district-level health survey conducted by Rasheed & Singh (2019) in Gaya identified specific barriers to healthcare access for Muslim women:

- Geographical distance to quality healthcare facilities.
- Economic constraints and high out-of-pocket expenditure.
- Language and communication barriers with healthcare providers.
- Concerns about privacy and availability of female providers.
- Limited health awareness and traditional health beliefs.
- Inadequate outreach of health programs in Muslim-concentrated areas.

Reproductive autonomy remains limited, with contraceptive prevalence rates among Muslim women in Gaya estimated at 34.7%, significantly lower than the district average of 42.3% (District Health Survey, 2018). Research by Ahmed (2018) found that decisions regarding reproduction were largely controlled by husbands and extended family members, with women having limited agency in determining family size or spacing between pregnancies.

Nutritional status indicators also highlight concerns, with anemia prevalence among Muslim women in the reproductive age group estimated at 63.8%, higher than the district average of 61.2% (NFHS-5, 2019-21). This reflects broader patterns of gender-based food allocation within households and limited nutritional awareness.

Legal Rights and Access to Justice: Access to legal rights and justice mechanisms is a critical dimension of empowerment, particularly in the context of personal laws governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance for Muslim women. The implementation of legal provisions and judicial reforms such as the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, remains uneven in rural contexts like Gaya.



Research by Khatoon (2016) examining Muslim women's legal awareness in Gaya found limited knowledge about constitutional rights, personal law provisions, and available legal remedies. Only 23% of respondents could correctly identify their rights under Muslim personal law regarding inheritance, and merely 18% were aware of legal provisions against triple talaq (instant divorce).

Institutional barriers to accessing formal justice systems include:

- Geographical distance to courts and legal aid centers.
- Prohibitive costs of legal proceedings.
- Procedural complexities and delays.
- Language barriers and limited legal literacy.
- Social stigma associated with legal recourse, particularly in family matters.

Community-based dispute resolution mechanisms, while more accessible, often reinforce patriarchal norms and prioritize family honor over women's rights and interests. Interviews with local women's organizations by Kumar (2019) revealed that Muslim women in Gaya predominantly rely on family elders and community leaders rather than formal legal institutions for resolving domestic conflicts, limiting their ability to claim legally guaranteed rights.

Role of Civil Society and Community Organizations: Non-governmental organizations and community-based initiatives play significant roles in promoting Muslim women's empowerment in Gaya district, often filling gaps left by government programs. Organizations such as Aghaz Foundation, Rahat Welfare Society, and AIMWPLB (All India Muslim Women Personal Law Board) local chapters have implemented various interventions focusing on education, livelihood, legal awareness, and health services.

Evaluation studies of these initiatives by Singh & Ahmad (2020) identified several successful strategies:

- Engaging religious leaders and community elders as advocates for girls' education and women's rights.
- Establishing community learning centers in Muslim-concentrated areas.
- Combining religious education with mainstream curriculum to address parental concerns.
- Creating safe spaces for women to discuss issues and develop collective solutions.
- Training community paralegals to provide basic legal information and support.
- Implementing craft-based livelihood programs that accommodate mobility restrictions.

However, challenges persist, including limited funding and sustainability, restricted geographical coverage, dependency on individual leadership, and difficulties in scaling successful models. Additionally, civil society initiatives sometimes face resistance from conservative elements within communities who perceive empowerment activities as threatening to traditional family structures (Ansari, 2017).

Government Policies and Programmes-

National and State Level Initiatives: Several national and state-level policies and programs have been implemented to address the empowerment of women from minority communities, including Muslim women in Gaya district. Key initiatives include:

Multi-sectoral Development Programme (MsDP): Launched in 2008-09 and later renamed as Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram (PMJVK), this scheme aims to address development deficits in minority-concentrated areas. In Gaya, PMJVK-funded projects have included construction of school buildings, community centers, and healthcare facilities in Muslim-concentrated blocks (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2019).

Scheme for Leadership Development of Minority Women: This initiative provides training for women from minority communities to assume leadership roles in various sectors. Implementation in Gaya has been limited, with only three training programs conducted between 2015-2020, reaching approximately 210 women (District Welfare Office, Gaya, 2020).

Nai Roshni: A leadership development program specifically targeting women from minority communities, Nai Roshni has been implemented in select blocks of Gaya through NGO partners. The program focuses on financial literacy, health awareness, legal rights, and communication skills (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2018).

Scholarship Schemes: Various pre-matric and post-matric scholarship programs for minority students have been implemented, with data from the District Education Office (2019-20) indicating that approximately 4,200 Muslim girls from Gaya received scholarships under these schemes. However, issues with timely disbursement and awareness about application procedures have limited their effectiveness.



Mahila Samakhya Programme: This women's empowerment initiative, though not specifically targeting minorities, has been implemented in parts of Gaya district, establishing Mahila Sanghas (women's collectives) that address issues including education, health, and violence against women.

District Level Implementation and Challenges

Assessment of implementation effectiveness at the district level reveals significant gaps between policy intentions and ground realities. A study by Prasad & Kumar (2018) evaluating minority-focused schemes in Gaya identified key challenges:

Limited awareness: Surveys indicated that only 42% of eligible Muslim women were aware of government schemes designed for them, with awareness particularly low among less educated and rural women.

Procedural complexities: Documentation requirements, online application processes, and multiple verification stages created barriers for women with limited literacy and digital access.

Implementation deficits: Funds allocation and utilization showed significant delays, with the district utilizing only 63% of allocated funds under minority-focused schemes during 2018-19 (District Planning Department, Gaya, 2019).

Coordination gaps: Limited coordination between departments responsible for implementing various aspects of empowerment programs led to fragmented interventions rather than holistic approaches.

Inadequate representation: Muslim women's limited representation in implementation committees and monitoring mechanisms resulted in reduced sensitivity to their specific needs and constraints.

Geographical disparities: Benefits of government programs were concentrated in urban and peri-urban areas, with remote rural locations showing limited coverage and impact.

Case Studies and Success Stories- Despite the challenges documented, several successful interventions and individual journeys offer insights into effective approaches to Muslim women's empowerment in Gaya district.

Hunar Skills Development Centre, Gaya Town- Established in 2014 by a local NGO with support from corporate social responsibility funding, the Hunar Centre provides skill training specifically designed to accommodate the cultural context of Muslim women. The center offers courses in computer applications, fashion design, beauty culture, and spoken English, scheduling classes to accommodate household responsibilities and ensuring safe transportation.

- An impact assessment conducted in 2019 found that:
- 317 Muslim women had completed training programs.
- 42% of graduates had secured employment or started home-based enterprises.
- Average monthly earnings of employed graduates reached ₹4,500-6,000.
- Participants reported significant improvements in mobility, decision-making capacity, and family status.
- Key success factors included involvement of community elders during planning, employment of female Muslim instructors, and integration of market linkages with training programs (Khan, 2019).
- Talimi Biradari (Educational Brotherhood) Movement

This community-led initiative, started in 2012 by educated Muslim youth in Gaya, focuses on promoting education among Muslim girls through awareness campaigns, community scholarships, and peer mentoring. The movement works within the religious framework, using Islamic teachings to counter misconceptions about girls' education.

By 2020, the initiative had:

- Established 14 community learning centers in Muslim-concentrated areas
- Provided supplementary education to over 1,200 girls
- Mobilized community resources to support 87 girls in higher education
- Reduced dropout rates in target areas by approximately
- Organized exposure visits for girls and parents to educational institutions and workplaces
- Engaged over 40 religious leaders as advocates for girls' education

The initiative demonstrates the effectiveness of approaches that work within cultural frameworks rather than challenging them directly (Ahmad & Rahman, 2019).

Individual Narratives of Change



Qualitative research by Begum (2020) documented the life histories of ten Muslim women from Gaya who had achieved significant educational and professional advancement despite socioeconomic constraints. These narratives identified common enabling factors:

- Support from at least one progressive family member (often father or brother).
- Access to female role models from similar backgrounds.
- Quality early education establishing strong foundations.
- Scholarships or financial support for continuing education.
- Mentorship from teachers or community leaders.
- Participation in collective forums or women's groups.
- Strategic navigation of cultural expectations rather than direct confrontation.

These individual journeys highlight the importance of both structural support systems and personal agency in the empowerment process, demonstrating how women negotiate multiple constraints to achieve advancement.

Challenges and Barriers to Empowerment: The research identifies several persistent challenges to Muslim women's empowerment in Gaya district:

- Structural and Institutional Barriers
- Economic marginalization: Limited economic opportunities in the region affect all communities but disproportionately impact Muslim women due to intersecting disadvantages.
- Educational infrastructure deficits: Inadequate secondary schools in Muslim-concentrated areas, shortage of female teachers, and poor facilities create barriers to educational continuation.
- Governance failures: Limited implementation of development schemes, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies reduce the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives.
- Political underrepresentation: Minimal representation of Muslim women in decision-making bodies at all levels limits their influence on policies affecting their lives.

Socio-cultural Constraints-

Patriarchal norms: Gender-based restrictions on mobility, decision-making, and public participation affect women across communities but may be reinforced by specific interpretations of religious teachings.

Early marriage practices: Despite legal prohibitions, early marriage remains prevalent, curtailing educational and economic opportunities for girls.

Seclusion practices: Varying degrees of purdah or seclusion limit women's access to public spaces, services, and opportunities, particularly after puberty.

Community pressure: Fear of social ostracism and concern about family honor constrain individual choices and behaviors.

Intersectional Disadvantages-

Religious marginalization: Growing polarization and occasional communal tensions create environments of insecurity that particularly restrict women's mobility and participation.

Socioeconomic status: Class divisions within Muslim communities result in highly divergent experiences, with poorer women facing compounded disadvantages.

Urban-rural divide: Rural Muslim women have significantly less access to resources, opportunities, and support systems compared to their urban counterparts in Gaya town.

Policy and Implementation Gaps-

Inadequate targeting: Generic approaches to women's empowerment fail to address the specific contexts and constraints of Muslim women.

Limited consultation: Policy formulation with minimal input from affected communities results in interventions that may not align with actual needs and priorities.

Resource constraints: Insufficient allocation of resources for minority-focused development programs limits their effectiveness and reach.

Monitoring deficits: Weak monitoring mechanisms and lack of disaggregated data collection impede assessment of program impacts on Muslim women specifically.

Conclusion- This comprehensive review of Muslim women's empowerment in Gaya district reveals a complex landscape of challenges, opportunities, and emerging changes. While significant barriers persist across educational, economic, political, and social dimensions, evidence also points to gradual improvements and successful intervention models that could be expanded and replicated.



The analysis highlights the importance of understanding empowerment as a multidimensional process shaped by the intersection of gender, religious identity, class, and regional factors. Generic approaches to women's empowerment or minority development that fail to account for these intersections have shown limited effectiveness in addressing the specific constraints faced by Muslim women in Gaya district.

Successful interventions share common features: they work within cultural frameworks rather than in opposition to them; engage multiple stakeholders including family and community influencers; address practical barriers such as mobility and safety; and combine tangible services with consciousness-raising and collective action. The most effective approaches recognize Muslim women's agency and build upon their aspirations and capabilities rather than positioning them as passive recipients of external interventions.

The path forward requires collaborative efforts involving government institutions, civil society organizations, community structures, and Muslim women themselves. Policy interventions must be complemented by changes in social attitudes and institutional practices to create enabling environments for empowerment. Particularly important is the development of spaces where Muslim women can articulate their priorities, exercise collective voice, and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives.

While this study has focused on Gaya district, its findings and recommendations have broader relevance for understanding and addressing the empowerment needs of women from minority communities in similar socio-cultural contexts. Future research should further explore the dynamics of change, document emerging models of agency and resistance, and contribute to developing more nuanced theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing empowerment at the intersection of multiple marginalities.

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