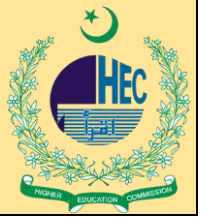



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A Systematic Review of Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Higher Education Across Muslim Countries

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Abstract

This systematic review investigates gender disparities in academic achievement within higher education institutions across Muslim countries. Drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and regional data from the past decades, the study critically analyzes patterns of educational performance among male and female students. The review explores multiple dimensions of gender-based academic achievement. The countries of the Muslim world including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Central Asia (The Stan States: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Azerbaijan has also been included in this section of the study), and Libya. I have ended to extract the published document till reaching the point of saturation and a total of 193 published documents has been reviewed. Despite the commonly held assumption that patriarchal norms disadvantage women, the findings reveal a complex and context-specific landscape: in many Muslim-majority contexts, female students outperform their male counterparts academically, yet face structural barriers to access and post-graduation opportunities. The study highlights the influence of educational reforms, religious interpretations, family expectations, and labor market structures on shaping gendered academic experiences. By synthesizing existing literature, this review identifies research gaps and proposes policy recommendations aimed at fostering gender equity in higher education across Muslim societies.

Keywords: Gender Disparities, Academic Achievement, Higher Education, Systematic Review, Muslim Countries.

INTRODUCTION

The gender reversal change is not only confined to the developed and developing countries, but it has also been observed in Muslim countries of the world (Basit, 2017; Munawar & Tariq, 2018; Rahman, 2002; Shah & Sobehart, 2008; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). The recent decades have seen a change in the gendered geography of education in Muslim countries (Shoaib, 2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024a). Many studies demonstrate that females are doing better than males in education (Al-Mazidi & Abusham, 2018; Jebreil, Azizifar, & Gowhary, 2015; Kabir & Greenwood, 2016; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Statistics, 2011; Yasin, Khansari, & Sharif,

2020). Initially, it is argued that girls at school level are performing better than boys (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e). It is pertinent to mention here that boys' underperformance and girls' outperformance are not limited to school level but also prevails in higher education (Abdulla & Ridge, 2011; Abdullah, 2011; Allam, 2020; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019; Smits & Huisman, 2013). Hence, this study based on systematic review investigates gender disparities in academic achievement within higher education institutions across Muslim countries.

DATA AND METHODS

This study has been based on systematic review of literature extracted from digital data bases including google scholar, Sage, Web of Science, Scopus, Tylor & Francis, Springer Nature, and Emerald. The inclusion criteria to select the published document has been based on the research title and the main theme on gender disparity in academic performance in the Muslim world. The countries of the Muslim world including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordon, Kuwait, Central Asia (The Stan States: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Azerbaijan has also been included in this section of the study), and Libya. I have ended to extract the published document till reaching the point of saturation and a total of 193 published documents has been reviewed. All the research published documents have been classified based on the country as affiliation and the basis of the study. Further, the data have been presented in by the country wise in the results and discussion section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section of the study has been consisted of the empirical evidences on gender disparity in academic performance in higher education in Muslim counties. The detail is as follow:

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Afghanistan: The progress for girls' education has not been made as per other Muslim countries (Afzali, 2017; Roof, 2014; Watch, 2017a, 2017b). Several girls do not go to school in Afghanistan due to worsened security in the country in the past (Intili, Kissam, & St George, 2006; Karlsson & Mansory, 2002; Khwajamir, 2016; Watch, 2017a). Moreover, harmful gender norms also kept girls at home and do not value their education (McBride & Wibben, 2012; Sadat, 2004; Yacoobi, 2008). Taliban and United States-led invasion are also restricted girls' education (Watch, 2017b). It is very difficult to provide an actual number of girls who received any education under war (Samady, 2013; Shayan, 2015). However, impressive progress for girls' education was started in 2001. Latterly, government reports that 39 percent of girls' students were attending schools in 2015 (Watch, 2017a, 2017b). Moreover, girls' education is reported as a success story by the Afghan government and donors (Othman, Manap, Ramli, & Kassim, 2018). In the early period after the war, there were fewer number of girls' schools than boys' (McBride & Wibben, 2012). Gradually, girls' education has become a significant fact where they are progressing along with boys in schools (Burde & Linden, 2013; Intili et al., 2006; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). At the primary and secondary level of education, females are trying to minimize the gender gap as well as most of the higher positions in exams are mainly occupied by the females (Bagguley & Hussain, 2014; BurrIDGE, Maree Payne, & Rahmani, 2016). At the higher education level, females are also playing their role to surpass males in different educational examinations (Afzali, 2017). Female students are trying to excel the male in education

as well as in professional fields (McBride & Wibben, 2012). The war in Afghanistan affected educational institutions generally and girls' educational institutions particularly (Morley & Crossouard, 2015; Roof, 2014; Watch, 2017a, 2017b). Currently, the situation of female students is good at the tertiary level of education in Afghanistan (Samady, 2013). They are trying to excel in number and also securing better positions in examination results in Afghanistan. Moreover, several studies highlight female success in educational examinations in Afghanistan (Abdulbaqi, 2009; Burde & Linden, 2013; Nazari & Himat, 2019; Roof, 2014; Shayan, 2015).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Bahrain: The gender reversal change in Bahrain has also been observed in terms of female students' outperformance males in examinations (Al-Ahmed, 1994; Al-Haddad & Hamadeh, 2003; Bennett & Wright, 2010; De-Jesus, 2016; Loori, 2005; Smits & Huisman, 2013). Bahrain has the oldest education system in the Gulf region and also has the highest literacy rate (Al-Mahdi, 2014). In Bahrain, free elementary education for males was started in 1919, and for females in 1928 (Karolak, 2012). Moreover, secondary education in Bahrain was started for males in 1936 and for females in 1951. Before 1968, students have to study abroad for tertiary education. The first tertiary educational institution named 'The University of Bahrain' was established in 1984 (Karolak, 2012). Furthermore, public and private sector tertiary educational institutions were started and enrollment gradually increased (Darwish, 2014; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2014). As a result, female students show competition not only in schools and colleges but also at tertiary educational examinations (Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2014; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2015; Mirza & Lawrence). Gradually, the gender gap in enrollment and examination results has reduced (Shafik, 2001). Several studies reveal that female students are not only getting a better score in examinations at schools but results also prevailed in tertiary education (Desmal, 2017; Karolak, 2012; Loori, 2005; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). Albaker (2017) asserts that in Bahrain, there is a vivid performance of female students and they are outnumbering males in different educational institutions. Moreover, the study findings of Bennett and Wright (2010) also support the argument of female outperformance in education. Contrary to it, the findings of De-Jesus (2016) highlight the better performance of males in mathematics and science subjects. In addition to these findings, several studies also highlight that females outshines males in educational examinations in Bahrain (Hayes & Findlow, 2020; Karolak, 2012; Kirk, 2013; Kosior, Barth, Gremm, Mainka, & Stock, 2015; Kukreja & Al, 2013).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Bangladesh: Basic education including girls' education was not given importance since the inception of the state (Huq & Rahman, 2008; Jayaweera, 1997a, 1997b; Kabir & Greenwood, 2016; S. Rahman, 2005). The educational policies were made but not implemented as per the spirit of the policies was concerned (Bagguley & Hussain, 2014; Cagna & Rao, 2016; Rahman et al., 2015). There were several impediments to getting an education for females. The cultural and religious barriers put the females' education in danger for a long time in Bangladesh. Over time, female education prevailed gradually (Kabir & Greenwood, 2016; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). Despite barriers, females have always been encouraged to get an education. Presently, females in Bangladesh, at the secondary and higher secondary levels are found contributing to education through active participation. The female and male ratio of education has a wider gap but now

the increasing number of females may shrink in future (Statistics, 2011). Females are getting an education at school and college levels by competing with the males. Most of the positions at school and college levels are obtained by females. Females are found progressive towards higher education (Huq & Rahman, 2008). Moreover, female students are outclassing male students in higher education as reported by Monem and Muhammad (2010). In addition, several researchers also assert that female students surpass males in educational examinations in Bangladesh.

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Egypt: Many studies in Egypt have revealed that female students outshine males in educational examinations (Assaad & Krafft, 2015; El-Missiry, Soltan, Hadi, & Sabry, 2012; El-Safty, 2004; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Sultana, 2008a, 2008b; Yousif, 2011). They are performing and scoring better grades in schools and colleges (Elbadawy, 2014; Lloyd, El-Tawila, Clark, & Mensch, 2001; Russell, 2004). The gender reversal change in educational examinations has also been observed at the tertiary level (Cupito & Langsten, 2011; El-Gamal & Abd El-Aziz, 2012; Elsayad, 2014). El-Sheikh, Shaker, Hussein, and Ramy (2013) reveal that female students are outnumbered in a higher educational institution of Egypt and also score better as compared to males (Buckner, 2013; Cupito & Langsten, 2011; El-Baradei, 2010; Elsayad, 2014). Moreover, the study findings of Youssef (2018) report that female students are actively participating and surpassing males in exams. Most of the developing world including Egypt is an evidence of the increasing female ratio of education at the primary and secondary levels (Abd-El-Fattah, 2006; Lloyd et al., 2001). Moreover, females started excelling males in education in different class performances (Abd-Elmotaleb & Saha, 2013; El-Gamal & Abd El-Aziz, 2012; Heba & Nouby, 2008). Female at tertiary level in Egypt are specifically outpacing males and this phenomenon is revealed by several studies (Cupito & Langsten, 2011; El-Baradei, 2010; El-Gamal & Abd El-Aziz, 2012; Elsayad, 2014; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Sobaih, Moustafa, Ghandforoush, & Khan, 2016; Yousif, 2011).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Indonesia: In the context of Indonesia, gender reversal changes in education have been observed in higher education in terms of female students beat males (Prasetio, Azis, Fadhilah, & Fauziah, 2017; Samarakoon & Parinduri, 2015; Susanti, 2011; Treagust, 2004). A considerable number of studies have revealed that females are also performing well at school and college levels examinations (Hansen, Saleh, Flinn, & Hotchkiss, 1989; Newhouse & Beegle, 2006; Octarra & Hendriati, 2017; Suryadarma, Suryahadi, Sumarto, & Rogers, 2006). In this regard, Suryadarma et al. (2006) and Deolalikar (1993b) assert that female students are outperforming male students not only in schools and colleges but also at the higher education level. In the exams held at the university level, female students outscore males and this gap is increasing with time in Indonesia (Deolalikar, 1993b; Hansen et al., 1989; Leigh, 1999). Currently, in Indonesian higher educational institutions, enrollment of female students has increased (Deolalikar, 1993a; Ismail, 2015; Theodore & Carpenter, 1974; Welch, 2007). Moreover, active participation of female students and scoring better grades in final examinations in Indonesia have been revealed by several studies (Deolalikar, 1993b; Kelly & Kelly, 2017; Sutantoputri & Watt, 2013; Treagust, 2004).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Iran: As for female students' outperformance is concerned, it has been observed in Iranian higher education (De-Jesus, 2016; Jebreil et al., 2015). In this regard, a huge body of literature revealed that

female students outnumber male students in higher education (Bennett & Wright, 2010; De-Jesus, 2016; Esfahani & Shajari, 2012; Kurzman, 2008). The education system of Iran is significant because female education has prevailed (Bennett & Wright, 2010; Mehran, 2009). Similarly, in the Iranian educational system, it is progressing in a better way especially the females are getting proper education and outnumbering the males at school and university levels (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011). There is acute educational competition between males and females in Iran (Mehran, 2009). Females are outnumbering the males at the secondary and higher secondary levels (De-Jesus, 2016; Esfahani & Shajari, 2012). Moreover, several studies report that female is outperforming males in educational levels including schools, colleges and universities (Hill & King, 1993; Jha, Bakshi, & Faria, 2012; Kim, Cho, & Kim, 2019; Kurzman, 2008; Mehran, 2009; Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Suryadarma et al., 2006).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Iraq: The situation of Iraq in terms of female education is not different as compared to other Muslim countries and gulf-states (Bennett & Wright, 2010; De-Jesus, 2016; Gardy & Akbay, 2015; Yasir, Elywy, & Radhi, 2018). The study findings of Altun (2019) also report that female students are outperforming males in school examinations. Similarly, Smits and Huisman (2013) highlight the vivid performance of female students at secondary level examinations. Further, the study results of female students surpassing males at tertiary level examinations have been reported by Bennett and Wright (2010). The review also supports the argument that female students are getting better scores not only at school and college levels but also showing vivid performance at tertiary level education (Al Khouri, 2015; Alahmar, 2017; Kourdi & Tuama, 2019; Mohamed, 2012). Additionally, several studies also assert that female students outrank and outnumber their counterpart in educational examinations of Iraq (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2015; Al-Mendalawi, 2010; De-Jesus, 2016; Issa & Jamil, 2010; Mahmood, Murad, & Kakamad, 2018; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yildiz, 2016).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Jordan: In the case of Jordan education system, female students outranked male students in educational performance in school and college levels (Bennett & Wright, 2010; Hamaideh, 2010; Khwaileh & Zaza, 2011). This success does not stop until a higher education level. Khwaileh and Zaza (2011) argue based on their study findings that female students outperform male students in Jordanian higher educational examinations for the last six years (i.e. 2002-2007). Moreover, they also point out that the enrollment of a female student at the university level in Jordan has also increased. Similarly, the study findings of Sawair, Baqain, Al-Omari, Wahab, and Rajab (2009) assert that female students outperform in different universities of Jordan including medical educational institutions. Moreover, a number of studies reveal that female students outrank males in educational examinations of Jordan (Jansen, 2006; Kanaan, Al-Salamat, & Hanania, 2010; Khader et al., 2008; Majzub, Bataineh, Ishak, & Rahman, 2011; Salameh, Al-Omari, & Jumia'an, 2011)

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Kuwait: The case of Kuwait for female educational performance is not different from other gulf countries (Alhajraf & Alasfour, 2014; Bennett & Wright, 2010; De-Jesus, 2016; Metle, 2001; Tannir & Al-Hroub, 2013; Zogheib, Zogheib, & El Saheli, 2015). Here, girls have started to show their performance and efforts in getting better scores than boys in schools (Alharbi,

2014; Hadi & Al-Omar, 2009; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Tfaily & Samarah, 2018). The incidence of performance by girls does not stopped at the school level but also prevailed at college and tertiary levels (Abdullah, 2011; Al-Fadhli & Khalfan, 2009; Karim, Becher Al-Halabi, Sadeq, Dawas, & Al-Abdulrazzaq, 2015; Meleis, El-Sanabary, & Beeson, 1979). Moreover, the study findings of Alanzi (2018) and De-Jesus (2016) reveal that female students are outshining in tertiary level examinations in Kuwait. Besides, the study findings of Karim et al. (2015) assert that female students outshine males in medical examination in Kuwait. Further, literature also supports that female students are performing better than males in accounting, and developing critical thinking in the environment of Kuwaiti universities (Al-Fadhli & Khalfan, 2009; Alanzi, 2015a). Additionally, several studies also highlight the performance of females over males in different educational examinations of Kuwait (Abdullah, 2011; Al-Othman, 2004; Al-Sahel, 2005; Al-Shalabi, 2016; Alanzi, 2015b; Alhajraf & Alasfour, 2014; Bennett & Wright, 2010; Hadi & Al-Omar, 2009; Smits & Huisman, 2013).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Central Asia: In the central Asian region (The Stan), the situation of girl students' performance in schools is very competitive with their counterparts (Ishkanian, 2003; Sabarwal & Terrell, 2008). Similarly, this competition has also been observed at the tertiary level (Brunner & Tillett, 2007; DeYoung Alan & Constantine Elizabeth, 2009). The study findings of Giddings, Meurs, and Temesgen (2007) reveal that female students outshine males in different examinations. Moreover, female student enrollment is also increasing in higher educational institutions in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Arabsheibani & Mussurov, 2007; Clement & Kataeva, 2018; Majidov, Ghosh, & Ruziev, 2010; Ruziev & Rustamov, 2016). The gender reversal changes in educational performance in terms of females surpassing males has also been observed in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Akin, 2013; Arabsheibani & Mussurov, 2007; Munko, 2017; Tiuliundieva, 2006; Zdorovets, 2017). Several studies reveal that female students outpace males not only at the school level but also at the tertiary level (Akin, 2013; Brunner & Tillett, 2007; Majidov et al., 2010; Ruziev & Rustamov, 2016). Nevertheless, education has been mainly considered the male domain in these Muslim states (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020). Results have shown an increase in enrollment of girl students not only in schools but also at the tertiary levels (Akin, 2013; Kocak, 2019). Currently, the results also reveal that females are progressing more than males and outnumbering even in male-dominant subjects like engineering and technology development in Azerbaijan (Aghayeva, 2013; Heyat, 2006; Mollaeva, 2017; UNICEF, 2002). Additionally, several studies highlight the success of female students in tertiary educational examinations in the central Asian region (DeYoung Alan & Constantine Elizabeth, 2009; Heyat, 2006; Ishkanian, 2003; Sabarwal & Terrell, 2008; Silova & Magno, 2004; Tiuliundieva, 2006).

Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Libya: For the last few decades in Libya, the situation has become better for females' education (Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012). The literacy rate has grown up but, still, in many parts of the country females' education is stigmatized on religious and ethnic basis (Abusbiha & Mustaffa, 2014). The girls entering the schools and college levels are found better in performance (Al-Agili, Mamat, Abdullah, & Maad, 2012). The positions in different intermediate boards have also been compared where girls are found outperforming the boys in getting positions (Appleton, 1979). Another aspect of

females' education has been evaluated by analyzing competition result for admission in colleges and university levels (Tamtam, Gallagher, Olabi, & Naher, 2011). It is pertinent that females are possessing more than half of the seats as compared to males (Shammas, 1962). Moreover, in colleges and universities, the female ratio is higher than males in securing the admissions as well as performing in the class competition (Rhema & Miliszewska, 2012, 2014). Presently, female ratio has increased significantly almost in every region of Libya. Rural areas of Libya have also been pointed out in securing a significant place in girls' education where previously the access to education was not properly given (Kibasan & Singson, 2016). Furthermore, several studies highlight that female students are securing better grades than males in examination results in Libya (Al-Agili et al., 2012; Appleton, 1979; Bharija, Kanwar, Singh, & Belhaj, 1988; Dyab, 1997).

CONCLUSION

This systematic review reveals that gender disparities in academic achievement in higher education across Muslim countries are not monolithic but vary significantly across national, cultural, and institutional contexts. Female students in many Muslim majority countries demonstrate equal or superior academic performance compared to their male peers often reflected in higher grades and graduation rates, they continue to face systemic barriers related to access, social mobility, and representation in certain disciplines and leadership roles. These disparities are influenced by intersecting factors such as sociocultural norms, economic constraints, policy environments, and the interpretation of religious values. The review underscores the paradox of academic success for women in contexts where broader gender inequalities persist, particularly in labor market participation and academic leadership. Addressing these disparities requires a nuanced, context-sensitive approach that integrates gender-responsive educational policies, institutional reforms, and culturally informed interventions.

Future Research: Future research should focus on longitudinal data, intersectional analyses, and country-specific studies to further understand and address the complex dynamics of gender in higher education across Muslim societies.

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