



## Academic Achievement and Gender Inequality in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Muslim Majority Nations

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper identifies gender inequality in academic achievement in higher education across Muslim majority countries. It is evident that female students outperform and male students underperform in higher education. This study has critically analyzed patterns of educational performance among students among students drawing on published research documents and regional data from the past decades. The countries of the Muslim world including Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen. I have ended to extract the published document till reaching the point of saturation and a total of 180 published research documents has been used in this study. It has been assumed that patriarchal norms hindrance females, the findings reveal a context-specific landscape: in many Muslim-majority contexts, female students outperform males in higher education in Muslim countries. However, females also face different barriers to access and opportunities. The study highlights the influence of educational developments, religious explanations, family prospects, and employment market structures on shaping gendered academic practices. This study identifies research gaps and proposes policy recommendations aimed at adopting gender equity in higher education across Muslim majority nations.*

**Keywords:** Gender Inequality, Academic Achievement, Higher Education, Review, Muslim Majority Countries.

### INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that the gender reversal change in academic performance in higher education has also been observed in Muslim countries of the world along with other countries (Basit, 2017; Munawar & Tariq, 2018; Rahman, 2002; Shah & Sobehart, 2008; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). It is important to state here that gender reverse change has been grasped a change in the gendered geography of education in Muslim majority nations countries (Shoaib, 2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024a). Several studies reveal that female students are doing better than male students in education (Al-Mazidi & Abusham, 2018; Jebreil, Azizifar, & Gowhary, 2015; Kabir & Greenwood, 2016; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Statistics, 2011; Yasin, Khansari, & Sharif, 2020). Primarily, it is claimed that girls at school level are performing better than boys (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e). It has been studied that boys' underperformance and girls' outperformance are not restricted to school level but also prevails in higher education (Abdulla & Ridge, 2011; Abdullah, 2011; Allam, 2020; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019; Smits & Huisman, 2013). Hence, this paper identifies gender inequality in academic achievement in higher education across Muslim majority countries.

### DATA AND METHODS

This paper has been based on systematic review of published research documents extracted from Sage, Springer Nature, Emerald, Scopus, Tylor & Francis, google scholar, and Web of Science. The inclusion criteria to select the published document has been based on the main theme on gender disparity in academic performance in the Muslim world and research title. The countries of the Muslim world including Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen. I have ended to extract the published document till reaching the point of saturation and a total of 180 published research documents has been used in this study. 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 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 based on the published research documents. The detail is as follows:

In case of Malaysia, several studies report that female students are progressing significantly as compared to male students in educational examinations (Ali & Musah, 2012; Anuar Zaini, Lim, Low, & Harun, 2005; Cagna & Rao, 2016; Khemlani-David, 1998). The gender reversal trend has been observed not only in Malay school but also at the college and university levels (Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin, & Uli, 2004; Jayaweera, 1997; Ong, 1990; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000; Yagci & Cevik, 2019). Yagci and Cevik (2019) and Unin (2010) assert that female students' learning is improved in examination results in different educational institutions including higher education. The study findings of Salvation and Adzharuddin (2014) and Wan-Chik et al. (2012) assert that female students achieve better grades in higher education as compared to males. In addition to the aforementioned studies, several researchers also reveal that female students outrank males in higher educational examinations in Malaysia (Arzuman, Ja'afar, & Fakri, 2012; Helou & Rahim, 2014; Jelas & Dahan, 2010; Remali, Ghazali, Kamaruddin, & Kee, 2013; Rosli et al., 2012).

#### Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Morocco

Similar to other Muslim countries, females are also showing their progress in examinations in Morocco (El-Alaoui, 2016). There has been observed that female students outnumber males and secure better positions in educational examination (Garmah & Bernouss, 2020; Liouaeddine, Bijou, & Naji, 2017). DeGorge (2002) reveals that female students outshine males in schools and colleges. The gender reversal change does not stop at schools and colleges but also prevails in higher educational institutions (Benmansour, 1999; Garmah & Bernouss, 2020). In the tertiary educational examination of Morocco, females surpass their counterparts in tertiary level examinations (Sadiqi, 2003; Spratt, 1992; Zaid, 2020). The study findings of Liouaeddine et al. (2017) assert that female students outshine males at the college level in Morocco. Moreover, female students' progress has also been observed after educational reforms in Morocco (Bedmar, 2015). In the same way, Ibourk (2016) reveals that female students' success in learning achievement in Morocco has also been observed. Likewise, female active participation in education has resulted in their academic performance (Agnaou, 2004; Ibourk, 2016; Kapchan, 1996; Lavy & Spratt, 1997). Additionally, several studies also point out the phenomena of female students outplaying in educational performance in Morocco (Auletto, 2017; Bedmar, 2015; Benmansour, 1999; D'hondt, Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2015; Griffiths, 1996; Herz, Herz, & Sperling, 2004).

#### Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Oman

The education system of Oman is very much supportive in the context of female students' performance in different examinations (Al-Aufi & Al-Azri, 2013; Al-Mazidi & Abusham, 2018; Chapman, Al-Barwani, Maawali, & Jones, 2014; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). Several studies report that female students are taking keen interest in educational participation and excelling in examination results of Oman (Al-Ani, Al Musawi, & Osman, 2020; Al-Mazidi & Abusham, 2018; Chapman et al., 2014; Khan & Fernandez-Carag, 2016; Mohamed Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2020; Yasin et al., 2020). Resultantly, females at secondary and higher secondary levels got impetus and came to outnumber the males in grades and positions (Chapman et al., 2014; Emam, 2020; Fontanella, Sarra, & Di-Zio, 2020; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). It does not only happen at school

and college levels but also at the tertiary level. The females are surpassing the males (Al-Aufi & Al-Azri, 2013; Aljahwari & Aldhafri, 2020; AlWahaibi, 2020; Bennett & Wright, 2010). Moreover, the study findings of Abdullah, Al-Ghafri, and Al-Yahyai (2019) reveal that female students are outpacing males in tertiary level examinations. Recently, the enrollment of female students has also increased in higher educational institutions in Oman (Al-Haremi, 2016; Hasan, 2016). Similarly, De-Jesus (2016) also highlights the vivid performance of female in the gulf region. It is pertinent here to mention that the study of Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) assert that female students have high goal achievements in examination results. In addition to these findings, several studies report that female students are high achievers in examination results in higher education in Saltant of Oman (Al-Bahrani, Allawati, Abu Shindi, & Bakkar, 2020; Al-Haremi, 2016; Al-lawati, 2019; Khan & Fernandez-Carag, 2016; Mohamed Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2020).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Pakistan**

Similar gender reversal trends of female students' outshining have occurred in the setup of the higher education system in Pakistan during the last three decades (Choudhary, 2014; Education, 2018; Khan & Hussain, 2019; Klitgaard & Currimbhoy, 1978; Qureshi, 2003). In Pakistan, gender differences exit at large scale because most of the population lives in rural areas with typical patriarchal social structure (Azhar, 2009; Malik & Courtney, 2011; Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024). Performance of boys and girls is to be debated because there is always a low performance of the boys and girls at school level whether in science or arts and higher educations (Afzal, Butt, Akbar, & Rosh, 2013; Ahmed, 2009; Latif, 2009; Mateju & Smith, 2015). A larger number of females have joined higher education and they are performing well (Afzal et al., 2013; AyubBuzdar, Ali, Akhtar, Maqbool, & Nadeem, 2013; Azhar, 2009; Batool, Sajid, & Shaheen, 2013). They are achieving higher positions in the exams than males (Shoaib & Ullah, 2019). The enrolment of the student in higher education students reveals that more females are getting admission, which is a proof of females' outperformance (Afzal et al., 2013; Ahmad, Ahmad, Shoaib, & Shaukat, 2021; Ahmad, Shoaib, & Shaukat, 2021; *Economic Survey of Pakistan*, 2018; Education, 2018; Latif, 2009; Shaikh, Baghat, & Gill, 2015). Over the time, the gap between the performance of male and female students is widening, and male students seem to be lagging behind (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a, 2021b; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024; Ullah & Shoaib, 2021).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Palestine**

In the case of Palestine, the situation of females' education is a little bit different from other Muslim countries (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008; Abu-Rabia-Queder & Arar, 2011; Alayan & Al-Khalidi, 2010; Yousif, 2011). Despite multiple challenges faced by Palestine, girls' education is making progress and they are performing well (Greenberg, 2004; Velloso, 1996; Zeidan & Jayosi, 2015), even though, girls' education at the primary and secondary level is affected badly in a different regions of Palestine (Alzaroo & Hunt, 2003). Nonetheless, females have been found pretty well in getting an education and outnumbering the males not only at the school level but also at higher level i.e., technical and professional fields (Alayan & Yair, 2010; Arar & Mustafa, 2011; Azaiza & Abu-Baker, 2010; Hilal & McGrath, 2016; Yousif, 2011). The study findings of Greenberg (2004) assert that education for Muslim girls is very important in Jerusalem. Similarly, Greenberg (2010) highlights importance of the girls' education which provides opportunity for preparing mothers for future. Furthermore, the study findings of Makkawi (2011) reveal that female students outperform males in educational examinations in Palestine. Likewise, female students are also outnumbering males in educational institutions of Palestine gradually (Arar & Mustafa, 2011; Azaiza & Abu-Baker, 2010; Greenberg, 2004, 2010; Hilal & McGrath, 2016). In addition to these studies, several researchers also report that female students

outshine males in educational examinations of Palestine (Sweileh et al., 2012; Tucktuck, Ghandour, & Abu-Rmeileh, 2018; Velloso, 1996; Wahbeh, 2006; Zeidan, 2010, 2015; Zeidan & Jayosi, 2015).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Qatar**

The gender reversal change in the education system of Qatar, has also been observed with similar trends in terms of female students' outscoring in examinations (Al-Thani, Al-Thani, & Semmar, 2014; Bennett & Wright, 2010; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Sulaiman & AlMuftah, 2010; Younis, Katsioloudes, & Al Bakri, 2020). The education system of Qatar is significant because female education has been progressing. Similarly, gulf-states are also progressing in education especially that of females (Al-Yafi, El-Masri, & Tsai, 2018; Sellami et al., 2017). Females are getting proper education and outnumbering the males at school and university levels (Bennett & Wright, 2010; Said, Al-Emadi, Friesen, & Adam, 2018). The study findings of Al-Thani et al. (2014) assert that the enrollment of female students at the university level supersedes males in Qatar. There is a competition between males and females in gulf countries including Qatar. The study findings of De-Jesus (2016) assert that females are outnumbering the males at the secondary and higher secondary level. Despite several challenges, Nasser and McInerney (2016) highlight that female students currently are progressing and are securing better positing in examination results in Qatar. Moreover, several studies reveal that female students outclass males in Qatar (Bennett & Wright, 2010; De-Jesus, 2016; El-Emadi, Said, & Friesen, 2019; Morsi & Al-Kobaisi, 1984; Nasser, 2013; Smits & Huisman, 2013).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia has also made necessary arrangements in education by revising its education policies with regard to female education (Alamri, 2011; Allam, 2020; De-Jesus, 2016; Hamdan, 2005; Saleh, 1986; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). Similarly, Saudia is progressing in better education especially the females are getting proper education and outnumbering the males at school and university levels (Al-Manea, 1985; Alfahad, 2012; Alsuwaida, 2016; Bennett & Wright, 2010; Khan, 2019). There is a competition between males and females to have better scores in examinations (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). Females are outnumbering the males at secondary, higher secondary, and tertiary levels (Alamri, 2011; Bennett & Wright, 2010; Smits & Huisman, 2013). Similarly, De-Jesus (2016) also asserts that mostly the males underperform females in educational examinations in gulf states. Moreover, Hamdan (2005) asserts that fifteen centuries-old traditions of Saudi Arabia have changed and now females are getting education. There were more female graduates in 1980 in humanities as compared to males. Several studies also report that female students are surpassing males in higher education in Saudi Arabia (Al-Alhareth, 2013; Alamri, 2011; Alfahad, 2012; Alsuwaida, 2016; El-Sanabary, 1994; Saleh, 1986; Smith & Abouammoh, 2013; Yamin, 2015).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Sudan**

In Sudan, basic education for girl students gradually progressed like other Muslim countries (Brown, 2006; Hale, 2003; Seri-Hersch, 2017; Yousif, 2011). It is pertinent here to mention that, through the educational policies for female education in Sudan were made but not implemented as per the spirit of the policies had been concerned (Bedri, 2013; El-Jack, 2010; Walker-Dalhousie & Dalhousie, 2009).

There were several impediments in getting the education of the females in previous decades in Sudan (Etim & Gindeel, 2016; Hale, 2003). The evidence shows that female education in Sudan prevailed gradually (Katz, 2001; Mirghani & Elnour, 2017). Despite war along with other barriers in Sudan, females are always encouraged to get education (Holmarsdottir, Ekne, & Augustad, 2011; Ibrahim, 2018; Joyner, 1996; Yousif, 2011). Presently, females in Sudan, at the secondary and higher secondary level, are found contributing towards the education through active participation (Batterjee & Ashria, 2015; Ibrahim, 2018; Mirghni & Elnour, 2017; Seri-Hersch, 2017). The female

and male ratio of education has a wider gap but now the increasing number of females may shrink it in future (Al-Mihaisi, 2016; Deng, 2003; Joyner, 1996; Katz, 2001). Females are getting education at school and college levels by competing with the males (Hale, 2003). Most of the positions at school, college, and university levels are secured by the females (Abdallah & Ahmed, 2015; Gindeel & Etim, 2014; Katz, 2001; Mirghani & Elnour, 2017). Similar gender reversal trends in educational performance has been observed in higher education levels in terms of female students' outpacing (Abdallah & Ahmed, 2015; Al-Mihaisi, 2016; Deng, 2003; El-Jack, 2010; Hale, 2003; Yousif, 2011).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Tunisia**

The case of Tunisia is significant to mention here where the ratio of females is increasing in schools at the secondary level and they are excelling the male students in getting positions and grades (Maddeh, Hermessi, Bennour, & Souissi, 2015; Rebai, Yahia, & Essid, 2019; Zayed, Zguira, Souissi, & Bali, 2019). Previously, females' education was not given importance as per males' education in Tunisia (Benstead, 2019). However, females at schools are worth mentioning because of their performance at secondary and intermediate level education (Akkari, 2005; Lockheed & Mete, 2007). For the last few decades, the female literacy level has also risen while males' ratio has been found consistent in higher education (Hamani, Chalhaf, Maaloul, & Azaiez, 2013; Karamti, 2016). The reforms at the secondary and higher secondary level are bearing fruit for the females by outnumbering the males at a large scale in higher education (Akkari, 2005). The study findings of Ayachi (2018), Rouis (2012), and Jebahi (2011) reveal that female students are progressing and securing better grades than males not only at school and college level but also at the university level in Tunisia. Moreover, it has also been observed by several studies that female students outshine males in tertiary level educational examinations (Karamti, 2016; Lockheed & Mete, 2007; Maddeh et al., 2015; Megahed, 2015; Megahed & Lack, 2013; Zayed et al., 2019).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Turkey**

The situation regarding female students in higher education in Turkey is also encouraging where education has been evaluated by the ratio of females joining the school at primary level (Atac, 2017; Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Caner, Guven, Okten, & Sakalli, 2016; Hadjar & Buchmann, 2016; Ozdemir, 2016). The female numbers in education are increasing as compared to male attending the school (Gok, Aydin, & Weidman, 2019; Hadjar & Buchmann, 2016; Yagci & Cevik, 2019). The actual comparison of male and female education lies at the heart of Turkey that how females are treated in getting an education (Akben-Selcuk, 2017; Caner et al., 2016; Kondakci & Zayim-Kurtay, 2019; Patrinos, Psacharopoulos, & Tansel, 2019). Moreover, several studies reveal that female students excel the males in getting higher education and showing good examination results (Akben-Selcuk, 2017; Atac, 2017; Aypay, Cekic, & Boyaci, 2012; Yagci & Cevik, 2019). Similar trends of gender reversal change in academic performance in higher education have been observed as females outscore males in examination results in Turkey (Dayioglu & Turut-Asik, 2007; Duman, 2010; Gök et al., 2019). Moreover, it is pertinent to mention here that female students' enrollment has increased in tertiary education (Caliskan, Akin, & Engin-Demir, 2020; Jacobs, 1996; Kondakci & Zayim-Kurtay, 2019). In addition to this empirical evidence, several studies also assert that female students surpass males in all Turkish educational examinations (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Dayioglu & Turut-Asik, 2007; Gok et al., 2019; Jacobs, 1996; Zengin-Arslan, 2002).

#### **Gender Disparities in Academic Achievement in Yemen**

Several studies assert that the female success in examination results in Yemen is not bad (Alim, 2007; Khair, Khairani, & Elrofai, 2012; Smits & Huisman, 2013; Yousif, 2011). Similar to the other Gulf States, females are outnumbering males in the Yemeni education system (Bennett & Wright, 2010; De-Jesus, 2016; Yousif, 2011). The study findings of Yuki, Mizuno, Ogawa, and Mihoko (2013) reveal that the gender gap in educational

performance in examination in minimizing in Yemen and females are actively participating to perform at different levels of education. Moreover, the enrollment of female students has increased recently in Yemen (Sánchez & Sbrana, 2009). Contrary to it, the study results of Khair et al. (2012) assert that male students outperform females in Mathematics in Yemeni educational examinations. Several studies point out female surpass males in Yemeni educational examinations (AL-Arashi, 2015; Alim, 2007; Igei & Yuki, 2015; Mizuno & Kobayashi, 2011; UNICEF, 2005).

#### **CONCLUSION**

The study conclusion reveals that gender inequality in academic achievement in higher education across Muslim majority nations are not gigantic 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 GPAs 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 including policy environments, economic constraints, sociocultural norms, and the interpretation of religious values. The study underscores the paradox of academic success for females 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 inequality in academic performance in higher education across Muslim majority nations.

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