



## ***Women's Education as a Divine Imperative: Comparative Reflections from Pakistan and Malaysia***

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### ***Abstract***

*Education is a fundamental human right and a divine obligation in Islam. Rooted in the Quranic command to seek knowledge and the Prophetic emphasis on education for all, irrespective of gender, women's education is a cornerstone for individual empowerment, family cohesion, and societal progress. This study delves into the theological underpinnings of women's education in Islam and examines its contemporary relevance. Using Pakistan and Malaysia as comparative case studies, this research explores how cultural, political, and economic contexts influence educational opportunities for women in these Islamic societies. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing qualitative and quantitative data from policy documents, official statistics, and field research. Findings reveal that while both countries recognize the importance of women's education, their progress diverges due to socio-economic challenges, cultural norms, and governance structures. Malaysia has successfully integrated Islamic principles with modern educational frameworks, achieving higher literacy and gender parity. Meanwhile, Pakistan struggles with systemic barriers such as rural-urban disparities and socio-cultural constraints. The paper concludes by recommending strategies to enhance educational policies and align them with Islamic teachings, ensuring women's empowerment as envisioned by divine principles.*

***key words:*** *Women's education, Islam, Pakistan, Malaysia, gender equality*

### ***Introduction***

Education has always been a cornerstone of Islamic thought, regarded as a divine command that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. The theological foundation highlights education as both a spiritual and practical necessity, positioning it to elevate individuals, strengthen families, and advance society.



Women's education occupies a unique and critical place in Islamic discourse. Historically, Muslim women have made significant contributions to scholarship, governance, and societal development. Figures such as Aisha bint Abu Bakr, a revered scholar of Hadith, and Fatimah al-Fihri, the founder of the world's first university, illustrate Islam's rich legacy of valuing women's intellectual pursuits. However, in contemporary times, cultural and socio-economic barriers often hinder the realization of this divine mandate, particularly in many Muslim-majority societies.<sup>1</sup>

This article explores the theological and practical dimensions of women's education within the Islamic framework, focusing on the contexts of Pakistan and Malaysia. Both nations, despite their shared Islamic foundations, present contrasting realities in the promotion of women's education. Pakistan, grappling with entrenched socio-cultural norms and economic challenges, has struggled to achieve equitable educational access for women. Conversely, Malaysia has emerged as a model for integrating Islamic principles with modern educational policies, achieving notable successes in literacy and gender parity.

The study aims to bridge the gap between Islamic ideals and practical implementation, analyzing the cultural, political, and economic factors that influence women's education in these two countries. By adopting a comparative approach, this research sheds light on shared successes, persistent challenges, and actionable strategies to align educational policies with Islamic teachings. Ultimately, it underscores that empowering women through education is not only a societal necessity but a divine imperative, essential for fostering holistic development in Muslim communities.

### **Background of Study**

The Quran's first revelation, "Read in the name of your Lord who created",<sup>2</sup> underscores the universal obligation to seek knowledge, while the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized that the pursuit of knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim, regardless of gender. Narrated Anas ibn Malik: The Prophet (pbuh) said: "*Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.*"<sup>3</sup> In modern times, women's education has been universally recognized as a key driver of development. Educated women contribute to economic growth, social stability, and

<sup>1</sup> Lindsay, James E. *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005). 22

<sup>2</sup> Al-Qur'an: 96:1

<sup>3</sup> Abu Abdullah Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*. Edited by Muhammad Fawad Abdul-Baqi. Vol. 1. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1998). Hadith no. 224.



intergenerational progress. However, in many Muslim-majority countries, cultural, economic, and political barriers hinder women's access to education. This study focuses on Pakistan and Malaysia, two Islamic nations with distinct socio-political trajectories but shared religious foundations, to understand how these barriers can be addressed within an Islamic framework.

### **Research Objectives**

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the theological foundations of women's education in Islam.
2. To explore how Pakistan and Malaysia integrate Islamic teachings into their educational policies.
3. To compare the successes and challenges in promoting women's education in these two countries.

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs a comparative approach, analyzing primary data from policy documents, government reports, and statistical databases, alongside secondary data from academic publications. Qualitative insights are drawn from interviews with educators, policymakers, and community leaders, while quantitative data provides a statistical overview of literacy rates, enrollment figures, and gender parity indices.

#### **Theological Foundations: Education as a Divine Imperative**

Islamic teachings underscore the intrinsic value of education for all. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge to understand divine guidance and contribute to society. Numerous examples from Islamic history illustrate the active participation of women in education, challenging contemporary cultural norms that restrict women's access to learning. These principles remain relevant in addressing modern challenges, particularly in the context of Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan and Malaysia.

The Quran emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge for all believers, regardless of gender. For instance, Allah (swt) said in the Qur'an: *"The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong."*<sup>4</sup> This verse underscores the equal responsibility of both genders in seeking knowledge and upholding moral values.<sup>5</sup> Historically, women have made

<sup>4</sup> Al- Qur'an, al-Tawbah:71.

<sup>5</sup> *Equran Tuition*, "Verses from the Holy Quran on Women's Education," *Equran Tuition*, accessed January 22, 2025, <https://equrantuition.com/verses-holy-quran-womens-education/>.



significant contributions to education in Islamic societies. Fatimah al-Fihri, for example, founded the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in 859 CE, which is recognized as the world's oldest existing and continually operating educational institution.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary times, cultural and socio-economic factors continue to influence women's access to education in Muslim-majority countries. For instance, in Afghanistan, the Taliban's restrictions on women's education have led to widespread challenges for women seeking education.<sup>7</sup> These examples highlight the enduring relevance of Islamic principles regarding women's education and the ongoing challenges faced in realizing these ideals.

## **Comparative Analysis: Pakistan and Malaysia**

### **Historical Context**

Pakistan, since its independence in 1947, has struggled to develop an inclusive and equitable education system. Cultural norms, economic disparities, and political instability have perpetuated low literacy rates, particularly among women in rural areas. World Bank Report on Girls' Education in Pakistan highlights the significant challenges faced by girls in Pakistan, including lower enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, and poorer learning outcomes compared to boys.<sup>8</sup>

The Express Tribune Article on Gender Gap in Literacy discusses the gender disparity in literacy rates in Pakistan, noting that as of 2022, the male literacy rate stands at 70%, while the female literacy rate lags at 48%.<sup>9</sup>

Conversely, Malaysia, emerging from British colonial rule, prioritized education as a means of national development. By integrating Islamic values with modern educational strategies, Malaysia has achieved substantial progress in female literacy and educational attainment. UNICEF Report on Education 2030 in Malaysia provides insights into Malaysia's educational system, highlighting the country's commitment to achieving quality education for all, including the integration of Islamic values in the curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Martini Fisher, "Powerful Women and Higher Education in Ancient Islam," *Martini Fisher*, November 11, 2021, <https://martinifisher.com/2021/11/11/powerful-women-and-higher-education-of-ancient-islam/>.

<sup>7</sup> Financial Times, "The Taliban's Ban on Girls' Education Threatens to Derail Afghanistan's Future," *Financial Times*, December 20, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/03374986-d1fb-470f-9a01-5b95351e23d7>.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank, "Girls' Education in Pakistan," *World Bank*, accessed January 22, 2025, <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/dataviz/girls-education-pakistan/>.

<sup>9</sup> "The Need to Bridge Gender Gap in Literacy," *The Express Tribune*, September 1, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2431348/the-need-to-bridge-gender-gap-in-literacy>.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, *Education 2030 in Malaysia*, accessed January 22, 2025, <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/4621/file/UNICEF20Education20203020in20Malaysia.pdf>.



These sources offer a comprehensive view of the educational landscapes in Pakistan and Malaysia, addressing the challenges and progress related to women's literacy and the role of Islamic values in education.

### **Policy Frameworks**

Pakistan's National Education Policy (2022) highlights the importance of gender parity but faces implementation challenges due to limited resources and socio-cultural resistance. The National Education Policy 2022 emphasizes the importance of gender parity in education but faces implementation challenges due to limited resources and socio-cultural resistance.<sup>11</sup>

Naeem Akhtar discusses the challenges faced by Pakistan's educational sector, including the availability of qualified teachers and the impact of socio-cultural norms on education.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, Malaysia's Education Blueprint (2013-2025) adopts a holistic approach, emphasizing STEM education, inclusive policies, and the integration of Islamic principles into the curriculum. Malaysia's success is attributed to proactive governance, effective resource allocation, and public awareness campaigns.<sup>13</sup>

"STEM Education Elements in Islamic Studies Syllabus" is a research study on the discussed matter. This study examines the integration of STEM elements into Malaysia's Islamic Education syllabus, highlighting the country's commitment to combining Islamic values with modern educational strategies.<sup>14</sup>

### **Statistical Overview**

In 2023, Pakistan's female literacy rate stood at approximately 49%, with stark disparities between urban and rural regions. Enrollment in secondary and tertiary education remains low due to poverty, early marriages, and cultural restrictions. A Research on "Literacy Rate in Pakistan Based on Urban vs. Rural and Gender"

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<sup>11</sup> UN Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2024: Gender Equality in the 21st Century*, September 2024, [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/b30\\_report\\_pakistan\\_en.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/b30_report_pakistan_en.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Naeem Akhtar, al at. "Challenges in Implementation of Educational Policies in Pakistan," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 8 (2022): 8385-8395, <http://journalppw.com>.

<sup>13</sup> Government of Malaysia, *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025* (Putrajaya: Ministry of Education, 2013), <https://www.pmo.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Malaysia-Education-Blueprint-2013-2025.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Mohd Asmadi Yakob, al at. "STEM Education Elements in Islamic Studies Syllabus in Malaysia," *e-BPJ: e-International Journal of Business and Economics* 7, no. SI7 (2022): 393, [https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iSI7%20\(Special%20Issue\).3805](https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iSI7%20(Special%20Issue).3805).



indicates that the literacy rate in Pakistan is just below 60%, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas, and between genders.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Malaysia boasts a female literacy rate of over 95%, with higher participation in secondary and tertiary education. Government initiatives such as scholarships and transportation facilities have further facilitated access for marginalized groups. The article “Women Empowerment in Malaysia - Statistics & Facts” highlights that Malaysia has achieved commendable literacy rates, with 94.64% of Malaysian adults being literate, according to a recent UNESCO report.<sup>16</sup> The other research study on “Education Level in Malaysia: Global Insights and Local Concerns” notes that Malaysia has achieved commendable literacy rates, with 94.64% of Malaysian adults being literate, according to a recent UNESCO report.<sup>17</sup>

### **Socio-Cultural Factors**

Pakistan’s patriarchal norms often discourage women’s education, particularly in conservative rural areas. However, NGOs and community-led initiatives have made notable progress in addressing these challenges. A report indicates that the literacy rate in Pakistan is just below 60%, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas, and between genders. The other article “Beyond Boundaries: Addressing Women's Rights in Pakistan” discusses the need to address patriarchal norms and religious taboos through education, economic empowerment, and skill development to elevate rural women, especially in conservative areas.<sup>18</sup>

In Malaysia, traditional values are harmonized with modern aspirations, allowing women to excel in professional and technical fields. This balance reflects a societal commitment to empowering women within an Islamic framework.

“Educationally Successful Female Muslim Students in Present-Day Malaysia: Challenges, Chances and Change.” This research examines how female Malay-Muslim students balance personal lives and educational aspirations within the

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<sup>15</sup> Gul Rind & Kathleen Abowitz. (2022). “Education reforms and democracy in Pakistan: the problem of privatisation Education reforms and democracy in Pakistan: the problem of privatisation.” *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. 22(5), 875–889. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2022.2142934>.

<sup>16</sup> Statista, "Women Empowerment in Malaysia - Statistics & Facts," *Statista*, accessed January 22, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/topics/12153/women-empowerment-in-malaysia/>.

<sup>17</sup> Gen Gemilang, "Education Level in Malaysia: Global Insights and Local Concerns," *Gen Gemilang*, accessed January 22, 2025, <https://www.gengemilang.org/education-level-in-malaysia/>.

<sup>18</sup> Saira Samo, "The Need to Bridge Gender Gap in Literacy," *The Express Tribune*, September 1, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2431348/the-need-to-bridge-gender-gap-in-literacy>.



context of familial ties, reflecting the integration of traditional values with modern educational goals.<sup>19</sup>

### **Critical Analysis**

The comparative analysis between Pakistan and Malaysia highlights stark contrasts in the ways both nations have approached the empowerment of women through education, rooted in Islamic principles. Malaysia's success in advancing women's education is a result of a nuanced approach that harmonizes Islamic teachings with global best practices in education, policy, and governance. Malaysia's leadership has demonstrated a long-term commitment to women's education by prioritizing it in the national development agenda and fostering a policy framework that integrates inclusive practices with modern educational techniques. Government initiatives, such as scholarships, transportation facilities, and community outreach programs, have effectively addressed access barriers, particularly for marginalized groups. The emphasis on aligning Islamic values with contemporary educational goals has facilitated a societal consensus that supports women's education as both a religious and developmental imperative. The success of Malaysia lies in its ability to create an enabling environment where women are encouraged to excel academically and professionally, despite the challenges that exist in other parts of the world.

In contrast, Pakistan's approach to women's education is deeply entangled with systemic barriers that hinder progress at multiple levels. While the country professes adherence to Islamic values, the implementation of policies often falls short of ensuring equal access to quality education, especially for women. Structural issues such as inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, and political instability contribute to the low literacy rates and educational attainment among women. Additionally, entrenched cultural and patriarchal norms continue to restrict women's mobility and educational opportunities, particularly in rural areas. Although there is an increasing presence of NGOs and community-driven initiatives working to address these challenges, their impact remains fragmented and insufficient without strong governmental support and sustained policy interventions. These systemic constraints underscore the gap between the nation's potential and the realities of implementing effective educational reforms that respect both Islamic values and the socio-economic needs of women.

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<sup>19</sup> Simon Moses Schleimer. "Educationally Successful Female Muslim Students in Present-Day Malaysia: Challenges, Chances and Change." *Kajian Malaysia*, (2020) Vol. 38, Supp. 1, 2020, 51–66



Malaysia's experience underscores the critical role that effective governance plays in translating religious principles into actionable policies that lead to tangible outcomes. By embedding Islamic values within the framework of modern education, Malaysia has managed to create an inclusive and progressive system that addresses the needs of women while ensuring that traditional values are not compromised. Pakistan, on the other hand, continues to struggle with the implementation of policies that genuinely reflect the tenets of Islam, particularly in addressing gender inequality in education. The lack of coherent and consistent policy enforcement, coupled with political instability and resistance from conservative factions, makes the integration of Islamic principles into educational practices challenging.

This analysis underscores the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to women's education, one that integrates religious, cultural, social, and economic considerations. While both countries share a common foundation in Islamic teachings, Malaysia's model of effectively blending Islamic values with modern educational policies and practices serves as a benchmark for others. For Pakistan, the challenge lies not only in acknowledging the importance of women's education but also in creating a robust, stable infrastructure and fostering a cultural shift that empowers women to claim their educational rights. Until such systemic and structural reforms are made, Pakistan risks continuing to fall short of its potential in bridging the gender gap in education. The contrasting cases of Pakistan and Malaysia present valuable lessons on the importance of aligning policy implementation with the socio-political context and the transformative potential of integrating faith-based frameworks with progressive educational reforms.

### **Recommendations**

1. **Strengthening Policy Implementation:** Pakistan should prioritize rural education through incentives, partnerships with Islamic organizations, and community engagement.
2. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Both countries should emphasize Quranic teachings on women's education to challenge cultural misinterpretations.
3. **Collaboration with International Organizations:** Leveraging resources from UNESCO, the World Bank, and Islamic Development Bank can enhance infrastructure and policy efficacy.
4. **Technology Integration:** Online platforms and digital literacy programs can bridge access gaps, especially in remote areas.





## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of women's education in Pakistan and Malaysia underscores the vital role that Islamic teachings can play in shaping national educational policies and empowering women. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of education as a means of personal and societal development, where both men and women are encouraged to pursue knowledge. In the case of Pakistan, despite significant cultural and socio-economic barriers that hinder women's educational access, there have been notable efforts through community-driven initiatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to address these challenges. However, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms continue to limit the potential of women in rural areas, where early marriages, poverty, and restricted access to resources perpetuate the gender gap in education.

Conversely, Malaysia offers a more promising example, where the government has successfully integrated Islamic principles with modern educational strategies. Malaysia's robust education system has facilitated the active participation of women in professional, technical, and higher education fields. Initiatives such as scholarships, public awareness campaigns, and the integration of Islamic values within the curriculum have contributed significantly to reducing gender disparities in education, resulting in a female literacy rate that far exceeds Pakistan's.

Both countries highlight the importance of addressing structural inequalities—such as poverty, cultural restrictions, and lack of access to resources—while reinforcing the significance of education as outlined in Islamic teachings. For Pakistan, this means continuing to work on policies that empower women in rural areas and strengthen community-driven initiatives that provide educational opportunities. For Malaysia, maintaining its commitment to educational equity and the integration of Islamic values into its educational framework will serve as a model for other Muslim-majority countries.

By fostering an educational environment that aligns with both societal needs and religious principles, these nations can ensure that women are not only educated but also empowered to contribute meaningfully to their societies. The examples set by Malaysia and the ongoing efforts in Pakistan demonstrate that when Islamic values of education are harmonized with modern educational practices, significant strides can be made towards gender equality and national development. This approach will enable Muslim-majority countries to fulfill their divine mandate, offering women the tools they need to contribute to all aspects of societal advancement, from governance to scientific innovation.



Considering these insights, further research into the socio-cultural barriers, policy frameworks, and community initiatives in both countries is essential to understand the most effective strategies for closing the gender gap in education. Collaborative efforts between governments, religious scholars, and civil society organizations are crucial in ensuring that women's education continues to be a cornerstone for sustainable development, not only in Pakistan and Malaysia but across the Muslim world.

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