



PIONEERING PATHWAYS: THE DAWN OF MUSLIM WOMEN EDUCATION IN MALABAR

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Abstract

This study explores the historical evolution and transformative journey of Muslim women's education in the Malabar region of Kerala. Anchored in the broader discourse of educational empowerment, the paper critically examines the Islamic perspectives on female education, the socio-political influences during the colonial period, and the pivotal roles played by community organizations and reformers. It highlights how entrenched patriarchal norms, poverty, religious conservatism, and colonial apathy once restricted Muslim women from accessing both religious and secular education. However, the concerted efforts of visionaries like Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Thangal, Chalilakath Kunhammed Haji, and Vakkom Moulavi, along with organizations such as the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham and the Muslim Education Society (MES), catalyzed a shift in societal attitudes and institutional structures. The paper traces educational milestones from the early 20th century through post-independence to contemporary times, illustrating a steady rise in literacy, increased access to higher education, and the emergence of Muslim women as active participants in socio-economic and political domains. While highlighting remarkable progress, the study also acknowledges persistent challenges such as rural-urban disparities and gender bias. Ultimately, this research underscores the vital role of education in reshaping the identity, agency, and aspirations of Muslim women in Malabar.

Key words: Islam, Community organization, social mobilization, Muslim women, social stratification, Modernity

INTRODUCTION

Education is a powerful driver of societal and national transformation. It fosters rational thinking, moderates instincts, and promotes inclusive development. Recognizing this, the Government of India enshrined free and compulsory education as a fundamental right under Article 21A of the Constitution. This legal provision reinforces the state's role in ensuring equal educational access for all. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) offered a detailed analysis of the socio-economic status of Muslims, highlighting the educational backwardness of Muslim women, who face layered disadvantages due to both gender and minority identity (Sachar Committee Report, 2006; Jose Sebastian, 2019, p.5).

Historically, Muslims in Malabar, Kerala, were slow to adopt modern education due to religious conservatism,

poverty, and colonial neglect (Jibin & Naseema, 2017, p.5354). Islamic teachings, however, strongly advocate education for all, with the Qur'an declaring: "Read in the name of your Lord who created" (Sura Al-Alaq, Ayat 1), and the Hadith stating that seeking knowledge is compulsory for both men and women. Prophet Muhammad encouraged education in religious and secular fields and used innovative methods, such as allowing prisoners to teach in exchange for freedom (Alavi, 2019, p.1535; Mueen, 2018, p.927). During the 1921 Malabar Rebellion, the British attempted reforms, but the 1921 census showed that only 7 in 1,000 Muslim women were literate (Hamza Thodengal, 2022, p.4390; Census Report, 1951).

Social reformers like Makthi Thangal, Kunhammed Haji, and Vakkom Moulavi played key roles in challenging barriers to Muslim women's education. They advocated for blending modern and religious knowledge and contributed to a shift in public attitudes (CN Ahmad Moulavi, 1978, p.23). Organizations such as the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham (1922) and the Muslim Education Society (1964) established schools and colleges to promote female education (Mishra, 2006, p.128). By 2011, literacy among Muslim women in urban Kerala surpassed 90%, and women entered fields like IT, healthcare, and administration (Sahala P.M., 2018, p.68; Pillai, 1981, p.39). Yet, challenges like early marriage, gender bias, and rural infrastructure gaps remain, requiring targeted interventions to bridge the urban-rural divide.

Islamic perspectives on the education

Islam has always upheld the value of education for all individuals, regardless of gender. The first revelation of the Qur'an emphasized the need for acquiring knowledge: "Read in the name of your Lord who has created" (Sura Al-Alaq, Ayat 1). Islamic scholars interpret this verse as a directive underscoring the importance of learning. The Qur'an emphasizes the term *Ilm* (knowledge) over 300 times, making it the second most mentioned concept after the name of God.

The Hadith also reinforces this view: "*Thalab-ul-Ilmi Fareedathun Ala kulli Muslimin va Muslima*" – meaning acquiring knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim man and woman. Prophet Muhammad strongly encouraged his followers to seek wisdom from any source, even stating that one should go to China in pursuit of knowledge. Following the Battle of Badr, he permitted prisoners of war to gain their freedom by educating illiterate Muslims, further emphasizing the value of education.

Islam not only promotes religious learning but also values secular subjects such as astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. The philosophical sciences were also respected, which led to the development of a rich intellectual tradition in Islamic history. From the 7th century onward, Muslims absorbed knowledge from various civilizations and became leaders in science and learning during the Middle Ages. Importantly, Islamic teachings do not promote a division between religious and secular knowledge, which historically contributed to the Muslim community's global contributions to science and technology. This intellectual tradition has continued with Muslim communities carrying this legacy wherever they migrated.

Education and Muslim Women in Malabar

Educational reforms among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar began notably around the time of the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. The British colonial government recognized that modern education could serve as a preventive measure against further uprisings and thus initiated policies to promote education among the Muslim population.

In 1926, the government appointed a Special Education Officer to focus on Mappila education. By 1929, twelve Deputy Inspectors were appointed—mainly in Muslim-dominated areas such as Eranad and Ponnani taluks. These reforms sought to integrate Muslim children into the modern education system. As part of this effort, part-time Qur'an teachers were placed in non-Muslim schools, and special scholarships were introduced for Muslim girls.

Major institutional milestones included the establishment of the Muslim Teachers' Training School (1931), the Malappuram Muslim High School (1936), and the Tirur Muslim Girls' High School (1940). These institutions provided

Muslim students access to both secular and religious education. Cultural accommodations, such as observing Friday as the weekly holiday and modifying summer vacations to align with Ramzan, helped improve school attendance among Muslim students.

Significantly, as early as 1872, the government had established separate primary schools for Mappila children, as Muslim students often felt discriminated against in Hindu schools and resisted sitting together with upper-caste students. The government responded by allowing Muslims to be educated separately when necessary.

Barriers to Muslim Women's Education

Despite these efforts, Muslim women continued to face severe educational disadvantages. Religious education was minimal, and secular education was largely inaccessible to women. Muslim women were often barred from mosques, and since religious instruction was often delivered there, this effectively excluded women from formal religious learning. During the colonial period, Muslims were among the most educationally disadvantaged communities in India. Muslim girls and women were particularly marginalized, lagging behind not only their male counterparts but also women from other religious communities. A significant factor was the community's mistrust of Western education, which extended even to regional languages such as Malayalam. The learning of English and Malayalam was discouraged due to anti-British and anti-caste sentiments (Hamza Thodengal).

Table1 *Decadal Percentage of Literacy in Malabar (1911–1951)*

Year	Overall Literacy (%)	Male Literacy (%)	Female Literacy (%)	Muslim Female Literates per 1000
1911	11.1	19.0	3.5	–
1921	–	–	–	7
1931	–	–	–	11
1951	31.3	41.3	21.7	–

(Proportion to the Total Population)

The table 1 indicates the picture of literacy for the period during the first half of the 20th century in the Malabar region. In Malabar, at the threshold of the second decade of the century rate of literacy was only 11.1 per cent. Male literacy (19 per cent) was just about eight percent higher than the average, while female literacy, which stood at

3.5 per cent, was very poor. In 1921, the Muslim literate females in Malabar were only a meagre seven per 1000 population. In 1931, it increased to just 11 per 1000. The decadal literacy in 1951 was 31.3 per cent, which marked 20.2 per cent growth from the 1911 position. Significant progress marked in gender-wise literacy when the male literacy reached 41.3 per cent and that of the female literacy 21.7 per cent within a period of 40 years.

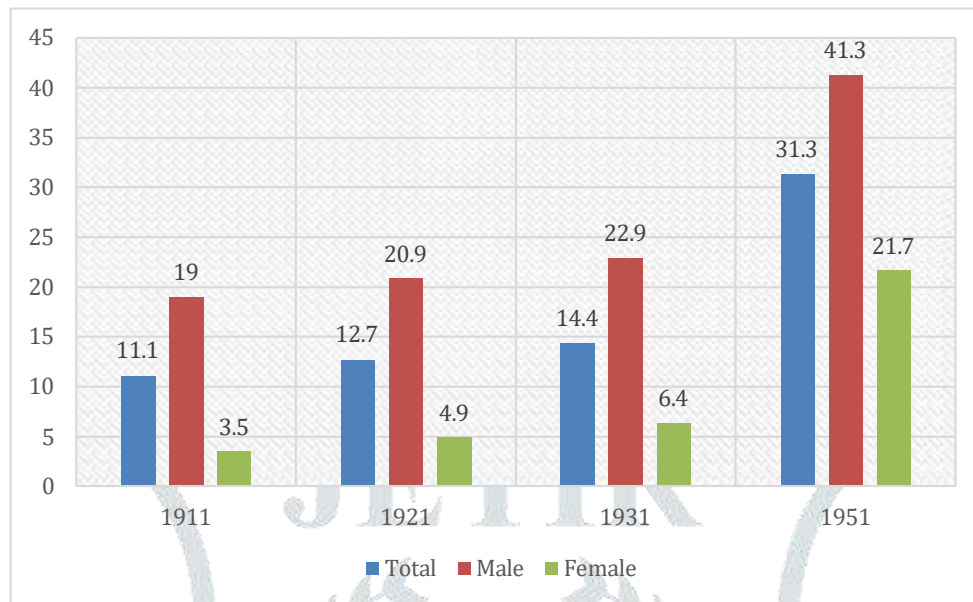


Figure 1 *Decadal Percentage of Literacy in Malabar (1911–1951)*

Social Reformers among Muslims

Recognizing the deep-rooted social, cultural, and educational backwardness within the Muslim community, several visionary reformers dedicated themselves to uplifting their society from these conditions. Their consistent and tireless efforts, alongside the work of numerous community organizations, played a crucial role in ushering progress. Today, this progress is evident across various domains such as civic participation, political engagement, and social advancement. Leading this reformative movement were notable figures like Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Thangal, Chalilakath Kunhammed Haji, Vakkom Abdul Qadar Moulavi, Sheikh Hamadani Thangal, K.M. Moulavi, Muhammed Abdurahiman Sahib, E. Moidu Moulavi, and K.M. Seethi Sahib. These reformers strongly believed that the revival of the community required a sound understanding of religious teachings, promotion of modern education, and the implementation of scientific pedagogical practices within institutions.

Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Thangal (1847–1921)

Makthi Thangal was a pioneering leader of the Muslim reform movement in Kerala. While upholding Islamic values, he strongly advocated for social modernization through education. He emphasized equal access to modern education for both boys and girls. Through various publications and journals, he spread awareness about the importance of education. He also designed syllabi for primary education that included Malayalam, Arabic, English, and Arithmetic a groundbreaking step at the time. He is recognized as the first prominent Muslim scholar in Kerala to champion women's education.

Chalilakath Kunhammed Haji (1864–1919)

Widely acknowledged as the father of the Madrassa Movement in Kerala, Kunhammed Haji introduced scientific teaching methods and structured academic schedules. At Darul Uloom Madrassa in Vazhakkad, he implemented the 'subject-wise period system,' which was revolutionary for the time. He integrated secular subjects such as astronomy, geography, mathematics, and Malayalam into the madrassa curriculum. He also advocated for girls' education and boldly enrolled his own daughter in school, challenging prevailing orthodox norms.

heikh Muhamed Mahin Hamadani Thangal

A noted Islamic scholar, Hamadani Thangal played a pivotal role in social and educational reforms. He actively promoted the modernization of society through both religious and secular education. He established organizations like Lajanat-ul-Hamadani (Azhikode) and Lajanat-ul-Islam (Eriyad) to further this mission, focusing on

harmonizing Islamic teachings with modern education.

Vakkom Abdul Qadar Moulavi (1873–1932)

Vakkom Moulavi was a prominent figure in Kerala's social renaissance. He worked relentlessly to eradicate regressive practices and foster educational and social reform within the Muslim community. His contributions led the Travancore government to introduce Arabic as a subject in schools to attract Muslim students. He was instrumental in founding the Thiruvithamcore Muslim Mahajana Sabha, and his influential journals such as *Al Islam* (Arabi Malayalam), *Deepika*, and *Muslim* helped disseminate his reformist ideas throughout Malabar.

K.M. Moulavi (1886–1964)

K.M. Moulavi was an eminent Islamic scholar and reformer who significantly shaped religious, social, and educational discourse among Kerala's Muslims. He actively supported women's rights, denounced superstitions, and promoted communal harmony. He served as Secretary of the Khilafat-Congress Committee in Eranad Taluk and helped organize Khilafat committees in Valluvanad, Ponnani, and Kozhikode. As a reformist writer and leader, he published the journals *Al-Irshad* and *Al-Islah*, and later became the first President of the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen upon its formation in 1950.

Muhammed Abdurahiman Sahib (1898–1945)

A distinguished scholar and reformer from Malabar, Abdurahiman Sahib focused on modernizing education among Muslims. He played a vital role in establishing the Cochin Muslim Education Society, through which he secured government stipends and scholarships for Muslim students. In 1924, he launched the journal *Al Ameen* with a dual purpose: to initiate religious reform and to rally Muslim support for the Indian National Movement.

E. Moidu Moulavi

Moidu Moulavi was a staunch socio-religious reformer and nationalist. He was the founding secretary of the Majlis-ul-Ulama, which aimed to rid the community of un-Islamic customs and promote social advancement. Through various journals and public initiatives, he worked to align the Muslim community with the larger national movement and enhance their educational status.

K.M. Seethi Sahib (1898–1961)

Seethi Sahib was a prominent social and political leader who dedicated his life to the educational upliftment of Kerala's Muslims. As a senior figure within the All India Muslim League, he advocated for gender equality, social justice, and modern education. His strategic interventions left a lasting impact on both the political and educational spheres in the state.

Muslim Women Reformers

In addition to these male reformers, a number of Muslim women notably Haleema Beevi, Kadheeja, and Mytheen Beevi emerged as courageous advocates for women's education and empowerment. Haleema Beevi, in particular, became an iconic figure in the reform movement. These women believed that education could elevate Muslim women's roles within both family life and the public sphere. They openly criticized conservative scholars (Ulema) who opposed female education and, with support from progressive leaders, helped bring about transformative changes in the educational landscape for Muslim women.

Community organization

Community organizations have played a pivotal role in uplifting the Muslim community in Kerala, particularly by promoting modern education. In the early 20th century, enlightened members of the community began advocating organized efforts to overcome socio-economic and educational backwardness. This led to the formation of several key organizations such as the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham (1922), Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama (1926), Jamaat-e-Islami Kerala (1941), Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen (1950), and the Muslim Education Society (MES) in 1964. These groups viewed education and modernity as essential tools for community

progress and engaged in regular programs like seminars, public meetings, and counseling to address various challenges. The Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham, for example, supported women's education, establishing a girls' school at Kalikavu in Malappuram in 1930. MES took a leading role in secular education by founding numerous institutions, including Madrasathul Banath in Chennamangallur—the first women's college in Kerala, established in 1960. Through such initiatives, these organizations significantly contributed to improving the educational status of Muslims in Kerala.

Table 2 *MES Institutions – Number and Percentage*

Sl. No.	Type of Institution	No. of Institutions	Percentage (%)
1	Arts & Science Colleges	21	17.50%
2	Women's Colleges	8	6.67%
3	Engineering Colleges	10	8.33%
4	Medical & Paramedical Institutions	2	1.67%
5	CBSE Schools	36	30.00%
6	State Syllabus Schools (Aided & Unaided)	12	10.00%
7	Teacher Training Institutes	5	4.17%
8	ITIs / Polytechnic / Skill Institutes	6	5.00%
9	Other Professional / Training Institutes	15	12.50%
	Total	120	100.00%

Table 2 shows that CBSE schools form the largest share of MES institutions (30%), followed by Arts & Science Colleges (17.5%) and Other Professional Institutes (12.5%). Medical institutions are the least (1.67%),

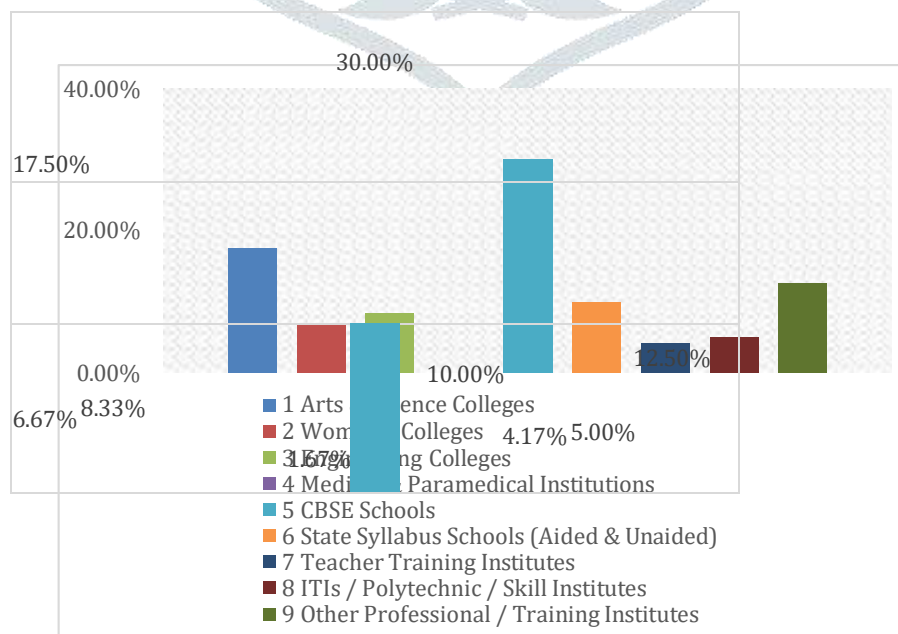


Figure 2 *MES Institutions – Number and Percentage*

Muslim women education in the present scenario

As a result of the activities of many community organizations and voluntary organizations, community-led educational institutions have increased in the Malabar region which has helped in raising the standard of education of the students in the community. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also taken on an increased role in the area of women's empowerment. This helped women to actively participate in the political processes and gain their rights. For the same, reservation was accepted as the most strategy to increase women's participation in the leadership. The participation of Muslims in various types of educational

opportunities seems to have taken off at the close of the first quarter of the 20th Century. The below given table shows the details.

Table 3 *Community- wise ownership of Aided educational Institutions*

Community	Malabar		Kerala	
	Aided Schools No. & %	Aided Colleges No. & %	Aided Schools No. & %	Aided Colleges No. & %
Christians	387, 5.42%	11, 5.39%	2596, 36.36%	95, 46.57%
Muslims	1174, 16.44%	29, 14.22%	1384, 19.38%	38, 18.63%
Hindus	1866, 26.13%	15, 7.35%	2957, 41.41%	63, 30.88%
Others	77, 1.08%	7, 3.43%	203, 2.84%	8, 3.92%
Total	3504, 49.08%	62, 30.39%	7140, 100%	204, 100%

Table 3 shows that Muslims own the largest number of aided schools in Malabar (16.44%), while Christians dominate college ownership across Kerala (46.57%). Hindus lead in total school ownership in the state (41.41%). The data reflects Muslims' strong presence in Malabar's school education and Christians' and Hindus' broader statewide dominance in educational institution ownership.

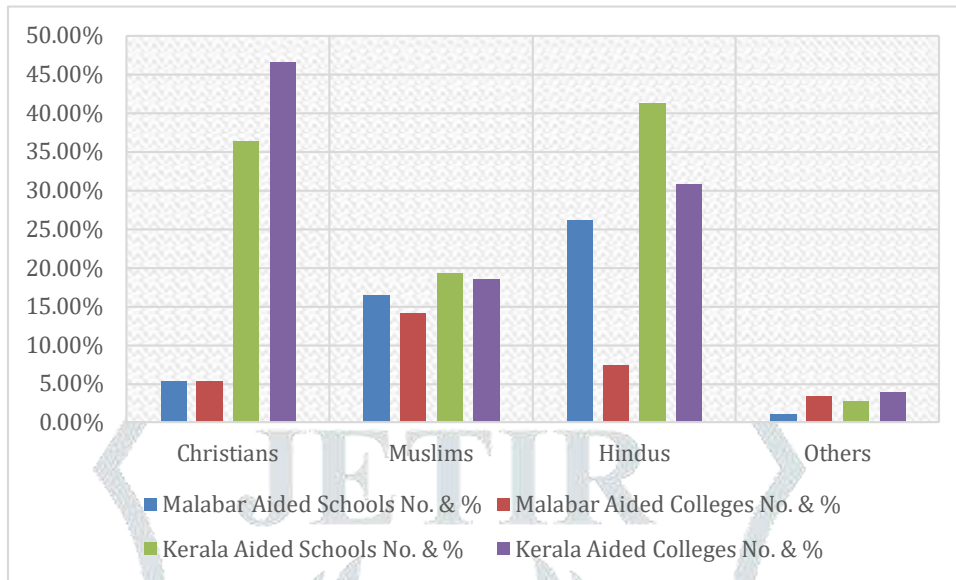


Figure 3 Community- wise ownership of Aided educational Institutions

Realizing the fact that, the Muslim community is educationally backward and therefore community organizations and other voluntary organizations established many educational institutions and thereby improved the standard of education of Muslims in Kerala, especially the educational status of Muslim women in Malabar region. According to the census of 1981 “The various sociological factors coupled with the greater stress on women's education have made a greater impact on the attitude of women. It is significant that the 95 percent of girls in age group of 10-14 have now become literate”. There has been a phenomenal growth in the number of women students in higher education, since independence.

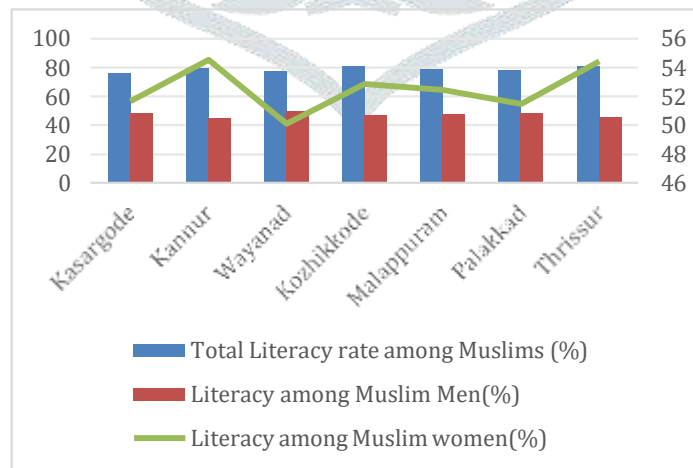


Figure 4 Literacy rate of Muslim women in Malabar region of Kerala

Sources- India Census 2011

According to the Census 2011, the literacy rate among Muslims in Kerala was

66.27 percent. The important point is that Muslim women literacy rate was increasing compare with Muslim male literacy.

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

The findings underscore a remarkable transformation in the educational profile of the Muslim community in Kerala, particularly within the Malabar region, over the last century. Early data reflects alarmingly low literacy rates, especially among Muslim women—only 7 per 1,000 were literate in 1921. By 1951, however, significant

progress had been made, with overall literacy climbing to 31.3% and female literacy improving to 21.7%. This advancement is largely credited to the efforts of reformist leaders such as Makthi Thangal, Chalilakath Kunhammed Haji, and Vakkom Moulavi, who strongly advocated for modern education and the empowerment of women, laying the groundwork for future reforms and institutional development.

Community-based organizations, notably the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham and the Muslim Education Society (MES), were instrumental in building upon these foundations. As indicated in Table 2, MES expanded rapidly, with CBSE schools comprising the largest segment (30%), followed by Arts & Science Colleges (17.5%) and various professional institutes. Importantly, MES placed a strong emphasis on women's education, exemplified by the establishment of Madrasathul Banath in 1960—the first women's college in Kerala. These developments highlight the growing awareness within the community of the pivotal role education plays in fostering social mobility and empowerment.

Muslims own the largest number of aided schools in Malabar (16.44%), although Christians and Hindus continue to dominate educational institution ownership at the state level, particularly in higher education. Nonetheless, the literacy gap between Muslim men and women has been steadily decreasing. According to the 2011 Census, the overall literacy rate among Kerala's Muslim population reached 66.27%, with a significant increase in female literacy. This trend illustrates the effectiveness of long-term educational initiatives and the gradual shift in societal perceptions toward Muslim women's education. Overall, the findings point to a positive trajectory in educational development, while emphasizing the ongoing need to close rural-urban disparities and ensure equitable access to higher education for all Muslim women.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The educational empowerment of Muslim women in Malabar has significantly improved over the last century, marking a shift from historical marginalization to active societal participation.
2. Community organizations, reformist leaders, and supportive government policies have collectively contributed to increased literacy rates and broader access to education for Muslim women.
3. Education has enabled Muslim women to enter diverse professional fields, engage in entrepreneurship, and assume leadership roles in local governance and public life.
4. There is a growing trend of Muslim women pursuing both secular and religious education, leading to more progressive interpretations of Islamic teachings and enhanced agency within their communities.
5. The rise in literacy and education among Muslim women has positively impacted healthcare awareness, economic independence, and advocacy for gender rights.
6. Despite significant progress, challenges such as rural-urban disparities and lingering socio-cultural barriers remain and require continuous attention to ensure inclusive and sustained development.

Remaining Challenges

Rural-Urban Divide: While urban areas of Malabar show significant progress, rural areas still face barriers like early marriages, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to higher education.

Gender Bias: Despite progress, gender discrimination persists in some communities.

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