

## Gender Disparity in Literacy What Influences More: Region or Religion (Islam)?

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### ABSTRACT

*The influence of religion, especially Islam upon gender disparity has been debated for long. Some scholars have cited some of the Islamic values as the cause of high percentage of gender disparity in the Islamic countries, whereas other scholars attribute it more to other factors. Using secondary source data, this paper tries to analyze if gender disparity in literacy is influenced more by regional differences or on the basis of religion (Islam). It uses UNSD reports for youth and adult literacy to compare the countries at world and region (continent) level. Analysis through descriptive and inferential statistics (independent T test) shows that although at the world level, Islamic countries have significantly higher gender disparity; at regional level, such differences appear in Africa only. The differences between Islamic and non-Islamic Countries are so significant in Africa that they influence and change the overall picture at the world level. Further analysis reveal that Africa itself is the only region where gender disparity is significantly higher as compared to all other continents in both adult and youth literacy. If the differences were due to the influence of Islam, the same pattern should have been observed in the other continents as well; but the results indicate that those differences might be due to regional factors other than religion.*

**Keywords:** Gender disparity, literacy, Islam, regional influence, Islamic and non-Islamic countries

### INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity, especially in education has been a global issue; affecting the overall growth and development of a country (Klasen, 1999; Moheyuddin, 2005; Brummet, 2008; Chaudhry and Rahman, 2009; Pervaiz et al., 2011). Women contribute a little less than 50% of world's population (The World Factbook, 2012). How can a sustainable overall growth be achieved without including them? Recently, there have been considerable efforts at various levels to eradicate it. Eliminating or at least reducing gender disparity is part of almost all the important global goals and objectives (World Education Forum- Dakar 2000, Millennium Development Goals- goal 2 and 3, Education for All- goal 2, 4 and 5). With that, a great debate has also been going on about its causes so that they might be uprooted. Some of the more commonly observed and found causes are poverty (Oxaal, 1997; Filmer, 1999; Stromquist, 2010), and social and cultural set up (Subrahmanian, 2002; Cooray and Potrafke, 2010). Some researchers have also mentioned religion as one of the causes. That point was especially emphasized with reference to Islam (Boone, 1996; Dollar and Gatti, 1999; Burch, 2004). Some of them were especially critical about Islam as one of the most important reasons behind gender disparity (Burch, 2004). Salih (2004) and Coulby (2009) also mention this attitude in their papers. This opinion seems to be further justified by the

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data and maps which show higher gender disparity in the Islamic countries (MDG, 2010; Discrepancy in Education Map, 2010; World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education, 2012).

But are these statistics really indicative or maybe deceptive? Do those events and data show the trend of an overall pattern or mindset in Islamic countries? Can we really see an across the board pattern in which girls are held back in Islamic countries due to their religious norms or this is the overall trend in those regions that has more to do with such numbers and figures? Is it appropriate to take and analyse such statistics and events without regional context? The paper attempts to answer these questions.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Previous researches about gender disparity in education/ literacy amongst Muslims or in Islamic countries give a contrasting picture.

Mehran (2003) while talking about gender and education in Iran mentions that since Islamic Revolution, Iran has observed a marked improvement in female literacy at all levels. Mansur et al. (2009) also found out the same trend in Malaysia, saying that the financial growth of the country is due to the increased participation and literacy of women in the country. Jaschok and Chan (2009) found varied trends about the condition of women in both religious and state (secular) education in China, varying from region to region. This is said to be because of different mindset of the Muslims in different regions (local culture). Suryadarma (2009) while comparing the education standing of Muslims and Non-Muslims in Indonesia finds that at some levels of education, Muslim girls are lagging behind. Although he said that the causes were other than religion. Also mostly these differences were not statistically significant. Okun and Friedlander, (2007) and Hajj and Panizza (2008) compared the condition of Muslims and non-Muslims in Israel and Lebanon respectively. They did not find any evidence that Muslims discriminate against girls in education. Alam and Raju (2007) comparing the socio-economic situation of Muslims and Hindus in Rural Bihar (India), found that overall Muslims fared worse than the Hindus in all aspects of life. The Muslim women did much worse, but while analyzing the causes, the researchers rejected 'particularized theology hypothesis' which considers the religious thinking and mindset as a result of this socio-economic backwardness. They thought that 'Characteristics Hypothesis' provided a much better understanding and logic of the causes instead of pointing out religion.

Yet there is a lot of research that sees and finds Islam or Islamic values as restraining force that does not allow girls to get education as much as boys. Borooah and Iyer (2004) examined the influence of religion and caste in Rural India. Comparing Hindus, Muslims and Dalits (lower caste); they concluded that the religious practices do influence the school enrollment rate, and that Muslims parents are less keen to send their children especially daughters to schools due to their perceptions, ideologies and thought. Muslim women did much worse than the Muslims men when compared to their Hindu counterparts. Burch (2004) opined that Islamic jurisprudence is responsible for the backwardness of women in Islamic countries.

Some other scholars (Boone 1996, Dollar and Gatti (1999) have also echoed the same opinion. Salih (2004) also mentions the same attitude by some scholars where Muslims are considered 'anti-modern subjects'.

Is Islam really promoting gender disparity? Do Islamic countries really have distinctive higher gender disparity rate (as compared to other countries in the region)? It is true that Islamic countries have higher gender disparity rate as compared to mean average of the world, but it would be more logical to see it in the regional context. Are those Islamic countries which are behind on gender parity index are really doing worst than other countries

in the region? Are those fault lines (about gender disparity) more clear and wide on religious lines or a more prominent on the regional bases?

This paper tries to answer these questions. It does not investigate to find the causes of gender disparity, but only tries to find out if Islamic countries really have a higher gender disparity rate compared to other countries in the same region, and if Islam (Islamic values) are responsible for that. The paper focuses on Islamic and non-Islamic countries, not on Muslims and non-Muslims.

## **METHODS AND DATA**

This paper uses secondary source data. The data has been taken from UNSD annual reports for 2011 on literacy. The data was regrouped and analyzed as per the requirement (Islamic and non-Islamic country wise, and the continent wise).

The paper focuses on literacy (youth literacy- 15 to 24 years), and adult literacy. There were 151 Countries and dependent territories in adult and youth literacy group each (53 Islamic and 98 non-Islamic). Literacy was focused upon as it is the basic and fundamental human rights. The absence of literacy shows the worst condition of education level. Youth literacy shows the current and recent trends in the country whereas adult literacy can unfold the trend of the further past. These two findings, if read together, may also be helpful in longitudinal analysis.

There were questions about what would be criteria to determine if a country is Islamic or non-Islamic. The criteria could not be if the state religion or policies are Islamic or pro-Islamic. It would have been hard to determine what Islamic policies are. Also some of the countries are secular by constitution (e.g. Turkey, Kyrgyzstan etc.). Determining by if the Muslims are in majority in that country was also considered, but it was dropped due to certain difficulties. Finally the full membership of OIC (Organization for Islamic Cooperation) was taken as a criterion to determine if the country be considered 'Islamic' or 'non-Islamic'. Although, it also had problems, as Suriname is given the full membership of OIC (as it has the biggest population of Muslims in South America), but the Muslims constitute only around 20 percent in the country (Chickrie, 2011). Finally, it was decided to keep it in the list of Islamic countries to make sure that only one method was followed, and followed strictly.

This paper focuses on the Islamic countries rather than focusing on the Muslims. The reason was quite obvious. When the Islamic countries are analyzed; it not only shows the attitude of the population (predominantly Muslims), but also the tendencies of the governments which are Muslim if not Islamic, and their policies (how much attention they pay to girls' education and to the issue of equity and equality in education). It was essential because many researchers (Burch, 2004 etc.) have blamed Islamic governments to promote and protect gender disparity. This paper divides the countries into continents, and then upon the basis of Islamic and non-Islamic for analysis. The paper uses the term *region* instead of *continent*. It is because Oceania is geographically and technically not a continent.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The paper uses both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings of those statistical analyses are as follows:

### **Statistical Analysis**

Where the sample size is sufficient, both descriptive and inferential statistics are used; while in other regions, only descriptive analysis is used.

Independent T tests are used to compare Islamic countries with non-Islamic countries while One Way ANOVA is used to compare all the continents.

***Comparison between Islamic and Non-IC (Inferential and Descriptive Statistics)***

All the data from these adult and youth literacy is divided into Islamic and non Islamic countries and dependent territories. The data is further divided on the bases of regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania and South America), and then the comparisons are made between Islamic and non Islamic countries and dependent territories at world and regional levels. The findings are as below.

*At World Level*

There were 53 Islamic and 98 non-Islamic sovereign countries and dependent territories mentioned in UNSD report for both adult and youth literacy. After data cleaning, 96 non-Islamic and all 53 Islamic in adult literacy, and 95 non-Islamic and 53 Islamic countries are qualified for final analysis.

In adult literacy, the mean percentage of gender parity in non-Islamic countries is 93.302 (100 being the equal parity between men and women) whereas in Islamic countries, the percentage is 80.391. The standard deviation in non-Islamic countries is 11.417 which is considerably less than that in Islamic Countries (17.494). It shows that there is much more fluctuation and variation in Islamic countries as compared to non-Islamic countries.

**Table 1. Comparing Islamic and non-Islamic countries at world, Asia and Africa level**

	<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of Literacy</i>	<i>Non- Islamic/ Islamic</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	
Gender Parity Rate	At World Level	Adult Literacy	Non- Islamic	96	93.302	11.417	
			Islamic	53	80.391	17.494	
		Youth Literacy	Non-Islamic	95	98.776	6.811	
			Islamic	53	90.911	12.619	
		Asia	Adult Literacy	Non- Islamic	17	87.666	13.896
				Islamic	25	91.274	11.658
	Youth Literacy		Non- Islamic	16	96.577	6.327	
			Islamic	25	97.933	6.745	
	Africa	Adult Literacy	Non- Islamic	25	86.289	14.761	
			Islamic	25	67.359	13.664	
		Youth Literacy	Non- Islamic	26	96.756	11.356	
			Islamic	25	82.772	12.973	

In youth literacy, the situation seems comparatively better but still the differences are huge. The non-Islamic countries have almost perfect parity (98.776) with very little variation (standard deviation 6.811). In Islamic countries, the mean is 90.911 and the standard deviation is almost twice of that in non-Islamic countries (12.619) which shows that the situation is not only worse, but also almost twice more fluctuating in Islamic countries.

The Independent T test shows the following results:

Adult Literacy:  $t(76.999) = 4.835, p < 0.05$

Youth Literacy:  $t(69.246) = 4.208, p < 0.05$

The mean difference between non-Islamic and Islamic countries is 12.911 in adult literacy, and 7.864 in youth literacy (in favor of non-Islamic countries). The Sig. (2-tailed) is .000 in both adult and youth literacy indicating statistically significant difference between the two groups. It has to be kept in mind that the paper does not take into account literacy rate at any level, but gender disparity rate (% of girls as compared to boys).

#### *In Asia*

In adult literacy, there are 17 non-Islamic and 25 Islamic countries; whereas in youth literacy, the numbers are 16 and 25 respectively. In adult literacy, the mean average in non-Islamic countries is 87.666 and standard deviation is 13.896; while in Islamic countries the mean is slightly higher at 91.274 and standard deviation is 11.658. It shows that in Asia, there is not only higher gender parity in Islamic countries, but also the situation is less fluctuating as compared to non-Islamic countries. The same trend can be witnessed in youth literacy, although at lesser degree (mean of non-Islamic countries 96.577, Islamic countries 97.933), but standard deviation is slightly more in favor of non-Islamic countries (non-Islamic countries 6.327, Islamic countries 6.745).

Independent T test shows the following results for the region.

Adult Literacy:  $t(40) = -0.911, p < 0.05$

Youth Literacy:  $t(39) = -0.643, p < 0.05$

Although the descriptive statistics show higher gender parity in Islamic countries (mean difference of 3.608 and 1.356 in favor of Islamic countries in adult and youth literacy respectively), independent T test shows that the differences are not statistically significant at significance level 0.05.

#### *In Africa*

There are 25 Islamic and non-Islamic countries each in adult literacy, in youth literacy; the numbers are 26 and 25. In adult literacy, mean gender parity rate in non-Islamic countries is 86.289 which sink tremendously amongst Islamic countries to the mean of 67.359. The standard deviation has very little difference (non-Islamic countries 14.761, Islamic countries 13.664). The situation in youth literacy is equally grim in Islamic countries (mean 82.772, standard deviation 12.973) as compared to non-Islamic countries in the same region (mean 96.756, standard deviation 11.356)

The Independent T test shows the following results in Africa.

AL:  $t(48) = 4.706, p < 0.05$

YL:  $t(49) = 4.100, p = 0.05$

The test shows that the mean difference between non-Islamic and Islamic countries is 18.93 in adult and 13.984 in youth literacy. The Sig. (2-tailed) is .000 in both types of literacy indicating that the difference is statistically highly significant.

#### *In South American and Europe*

Sample size for South America and Europe is too small to use inferential statistics. That is why in these two regions, only descriptive statistics are used to draw a comparison and get a picture (taking mean and median of the two groups).

In 10 non-Islamic and one Islamic country from South America, in adult literacy mean and median for non-Islamic countries are 97.311 and 99.705 respectively, whereas in the one Islamic country (Suriname) the number is 98.190. The difference between that one Islamic country and the mean of non-Islamic countries is 0.879 (in favor of the Islamic country) whereas the difference in the median is 1.515 (in favor of non-Islamic countries) showing almost the same percentage in adult literacy in both groups. In youth literacy, mean and median for non-Islamic countries is 100.336 and 100.205, whereas in the Islamic country the number is 100.080. That shows a difference of 0.256 and 0.125 (in favor of non-Islamic countries) in mean and median, but the differences are insignificant.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics for S. America, Europe, N. America and Oceania**

	<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of Literacy</i>	<i>Non Islamic/ Islamic</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Standard Dev.</i>
Gender Parity Rate	South America	Adult Literacy	Islamic	1	98.190	98.190	-
			Non-Islamic	10	97.311	99.705	4.299
		Youth Literacy	Islamic	1	100.080	100.080	-
			Non-Islamic	10	100.336	100.205	.885
	Europe	Adult Literacy	Islamic	2	98.360	98.360	1.499
			Non-Islamic	23	99.043	99.440	1.394
		Youth Literacy	Islamic	2	100.295	100.295	.417
			Non-Islamic	23	100.118	100.070	.368
	North America	Adult Literacy	Non-Islamic	17	98.472	99.890	6.124
		Youth Literacy	Non-Islamic	16	100.465	100.130	2.911
Oceania	Adult Literacy	Non-Islamic	4	96.097	97.725	5.2	
	Youth Literacy	Non-Islamic	4	102.325	100.245	4.217	

Europe has 23 non-Islamic and 2 Islamic countries in both adult and youth literacy reports. In adult literacy, the mean and median for non-Islamic countries and dependent territories are 99.043 and 99.440 respectively; while in Islamic countries, the number is the same for both mean and median (98.360).

That shows a mean and median difference of 0.683 and 1.08 (in favor of non-Islamic countries). The differences are insignificant. In youth literacy, the numbers for non-Islamic countries are 100.118 and 100.07; and for Islamic countries 100.295 for both mean and median. That shows the differences of 0.177 and 0.225 in mean and median (in favor of Islamic countries), which is again insignificant.



*In North America and Oceania*

There are no Islamic countries in North America and Oceania. Still, it would be interesting to know the situation in those two regions. Table 2 shows that in adult literacy, mean and median of all 17 countries in that region are 98.472 and 99.89 respectively, with low variability (standard deviation 6.124). In youth literacy, the situation seems to be perfect with mean and median of 100.465 and 100.13 with almost same situation throughout the region (standard deviation 2.911). In Oceania, 4 countries are qualified for the analysis. The mean and median of those countries are 96.097 and 97.725 in adult literacy (standard deviation 5.2), and 102.325 and 100.245 in youth literacy (standard deviation 4.217). These numbers suggest a very high level of gender parity in these two regions.

**Comparisons among Regions (One way ANOVA and post hoc)**

In an attempt to find out the difference between different continents, one way ANOVA test was conducted; comparing all the regions to each other. Here the continents were taken as a whole (including both Islamic and non-Islamic countries). The purposed was to find out how much gender parity varies from region to region. The ANOVA results show that in adult and youth literacy, the between group differences are statistically highly significant (P = .000 in both adult and youth literacy).

**Table 3. Post hoc (LSD) test for adult and youth literacy**

(I) Continent	(J) Continent	Adult Literacy			Youth Literacy		
		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Africa	Asia	-12.990*	2.570	.000	-7.503*	1.905	.000
	Europe	-22.164*	3.008	.000	-10.231*	2.218	.000
	N. America	-21.648*	3.448	.000	-10.561*	2.603	.000
	S. America	-20.567*	4.090	.000	-10.411*	3.020	.001
	Oceania	-19.274*	6.381	.003	-12.424*	4.704	.009
Asia	Europe	-9.174*	3.102	.004	-2.728	2.305	.239
	N. America	-8.658*	3.530	.015	-3.061	2.678	.255
	S. America	-7.577	4.159	.071	-2.908	3.085	.347
	Oceania	-6.284	6.426	.330	-4.921	4.746	.302
Europe	N. America	.516	3.860	.894	-.333	2.908	.909
	S. America	1.597	4.443	.720	-.181	3.287	.956
	Oceania	2.890	6.613	.663	-2.193	4.879	.654
N. America	S. America	1.081	4.752	.820	.152	3.558	.966
	Oceania	2.374	6.825	.728	-1.860	5.065	.714
S. America	Oceania	1.293	7.170	.857	-2.012	5.290	.704

\* Mean difference is statistically significant at significance level 0.05

The post hoc test [Table 3] shows a clearer picture. It shows that in Africa gender disparity is significantly higher as compared to all other regions in both adult and youth literacy (significance level 0.05). The differences are significant even at significance level 0.01. Apart from Africa, Asia is the only region which has significantly higher gender disparity as compared to two other regions (Europe and North America), but even those differences with those two regions occur in adult literacy only. Other than these mentioned cases, there is no other region which has significant differences with any other region

## **DISCUSSION**

When the results are taken at world level [Table 1], it appears that gender disparity is really significantly higher in the Islamic countries as compared to non-Islamic. This finding is quite true and has been observed before by other researchers and scholars. Overall, gender disparity is much higher in Islamic countries as compared to non-Islamic countries. The question posed in this paper is if those differences are more due to regional influences or due to the religious elements. It is realized that gender disparity is a very complex problem which has causes and roots in social, economic, religious and political system in different ways. Even those reasons vary from country to country, region to region. The question is not to find the causes or the most important cause even. The question is ‘Can the overall low gender parity in Islamic countries be attributed to Islam or it is the regional influence that matters more?’ Some of the research shows that Islam or Islamic values indeed play a significant role in gender disparity (Boone 1996, Dollar and Gatti 1999, Borooah and Iyer 2004, Burch 2004). Such research is either based on data collected in a certain region, as is the case with Borooah and Iyer (2004); or opinions which are based on overall pattern and trends in the world, such as Burch (2004). Their general arguments are that Islam prevents equal freedom to women. The restrictions of veil, free movement, mixing with men in the society and assumptions that they are supposed to stay at home and do household works, practically put them on the back seat.

Speaking about Islam as the “root cause” in keeping Muslim women back, she (Burch 2004) says,

“Deference to fundamentalists ignores the voices of dissent from Muslim female groups and prevents an effective campaign that identifies and targets religion as the root cause.” (P. 3)

The contrasting arguments are also very strong and based on data collected from different parts of the world, either looking at educational attainment amongst Muslims women in one country (Mehran 2004, Mansur et al. 2009) or comparing that in various religious groups in one or more countries (Alam and Raju 2007, Hajj and Panizza 2008, Suryadarma 2009). This research shows that there is no significant discrimination against women by Muslims or in Islamic society. Some of these researches show that Muslim women are doing as well in those countries as other non-Muslim women are.

An overall picture does show a higher gender disparity amongst Islamic countries; but when it is broken down it into different regions, the findings are very interesting. These analyses reveal that in Asia, Europe and South America; the differences between Islamic and non-Islamic countries are negligible. This trend is persistent in both adult and youth literacy. Actually, in some regions and type of literacy, Islamic countries tend to do better than non-Islamic countries (for example in Asia). The only continent where huge mean differences are observed is Africa. The differences between Islamic and non-Islamic countries are totally opposite to the pattern that has been observed in the rest of the regions (statistically insignificant differences between Islamic and non-Islamic countries). In Africa, the mean



difference between Islamic and non-Islamic countries is 13.984 in youth literacy. In adult literacy, it further balloons up to 18.93. Both of these figures are statistically highly significant. The impact of this one region is so huge that it changes the overall picture, giving the illusion that this is the trend everywhere.

Is it really the impact of that one region that has created that impression? In order to find answer of this question, both Islamic and non-Islamic countries have been compared excluding Africa. A question might have been asked over why Africa is excluded. It is because Africa is the only region that shows a different pattern than the rest of the regions.

**Table 4. World level comparison between Islamic and non-Islamic countries (excluding Africa)**

	<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of Literacy</i>	<i>Non Islamic/ Islamic</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Gender Parity Rate	World level excluding Africa	Adult Literacy	Non-Islamic	71	95.772	8.857
			Islamic	28	92.027	11.216
		Youth Literacy	Non-Islamic	69	99.537	3.816
			Islamic	28	98.179	6.401

The results [Table 4] clearly show that without Africa, the mean differences are 3.745 and 1.358 in adult and youth literacy in favor of non-Islamic countries, which is very small.

Independent t test further confirms this conclusion. It shows that without Africa, the differences between all other Islamic and non-Islamic countries are statistically insignificant (at significance level 0.05). Even when the confidence level was set at 99, the results are the same.

**Table 5. Overall Average Mean Difference between Islamic and non-Islamic countries (excluding North America and Oceania)**

	Region	Adult Literacy		Youth Literacy	
		Non Islamic (N)	Islamic (I)	Non Islamic (N)	Islamic (I)
Mean Gender Parity Rate	Asia	87.666	91.274	96.577	97.933
	Africa	86.289	67.359	96.756	82.772
	Europe	99.043	98.36	100.118	100.295
	S. America	97.311	98.19	100.336	100.080
	Overall Mean	92.577	88.796	98.447	95.27
	<i>Overall Mean Difference</i>	<i>(N-I) 3.781</i>	<i>(I-N) -3.781</i>	<i>(N-I) 3.177</i>	<i>(I-N) -3.177</i>
	Overall Mean without S. America	91	85.664	97.817	93.667
	<i>Overall Mean Difference without S. America</i>	<i>(N-I) 5.336</i>	<i>(I-N) -5.336</i>	<i>(N-I) 4.15</i>	<i>(I-N) -4.15</i>

Another attempt has been made to eliminate the influence of region and to see the differences based on religion. Those regions that do not have the presence of any Islamic country or non-Islamic country have been taken out (Oceania and North America); whereas in the remaining regions (Asia, Africa, Europe and South America), only mean average of Islamic and non-Islamic countries has been taken so that a greater number of either Islamic or non-Islamic countries in a certain region may not influence the results. It is done to eliminate the regional influence. The results [Table 5] show that the average difference overall in adult and youth literacy (excluding North America and Oceania) will be 3.781 and 3.177 only (in favor of non-Islamic countries), which again is not significant or big.

If South America is also excluded (as taking Suriname as an Islamic country is questionable), the overall differences between Islamic and Non-Islamic countries would be 5.336 and 4.15 in the favor of non-Islamic countries in adult and youth literacy, which still is insignificant.

The findings suggest that gender disparity is something which is more prominent on the regional bases. The difference between Islamic and non-Islamic countries in most of the regions is insignificance. Only region that has statistically significant gender disparity difference between Islamic and non-Islamic countries is Africa, which itself the only continent which has significantly higher disparities as compared to all other continents, both in adult and youth literacy [Table 1]. As a result, the findings in Africa might be considered as extreme case or outlier.

It is also interesting to note that the same trend is also found within countries as well. In China- a country so big that it can be divided into many regions with varying social, economic and cultural backgrounds; Jaschok and Chan (2009) found the importance given to girls' education by Muslim community varies from region to region. The paper finds that whereas Ningxia's Hui Muslim communities seem to have more equal role for women in education, in Xinjiang they seem to be at disadvantage in education. The same question arises here, "If higher level of gender disparity in Xinjiang be attributed to the religious values of the Muslims, why the same trend not found in Hui Muslims in Ningxia?" The same trend is found in some Islamic countries as well which are not homogeneous culturally. UNESCO (2010), citing from Pakistan social and living standards measurement surveys, shows that Pakistan (a Muslim majority country with around 95% Muslim population) has an overall literacy percentage of 69 and 44 amongst males and females respectively; but the figures fluctuate greatly at provincial level. In Punjab, the corresponding numbers are 70 and 48. In Balochistan, the percentage for males is almost the same as national level- 66; but for women they drop dramatically to 23. Both of these provinces are Muslim majority provinces, but the situation for women is poles apart. Other than poverty, law and order situation and lack of infrastructure; Balochistan lags behind due to its regional culture- a social set up based on old tribal system which does not encourage girls to attend schools. Religion is the same in both provinces, these are other characteristics that are different, and make the situation for women totally different.

Alam and Raju (2007) found the same thing. They could not find the substantial evidence of "particularized theology hypothesis" instead they thought that "Characteristics Hypothesis" gives better answers to this situation. Social, economic and cultural characteristics such as poverty, regional influences, history, parents' education, locations of the area, availability of the schools etc made real differences; not Islam. The same findings have been echoed by most of the researchers whose papers have been studied. Almost all of them have found that recently, the Muslims women have been making rapid progress in different Islamic countries (Mehran, 2003; Mansur et al., 2009; Akkari, 2004). Those researcher who compare the gender disparity between Muslim and non-Muslim groups in different countries also mention

that the differences have been due to other factors. Those researchers use different statistical tests and approaches to come to the conclusion that if other factors are controlled, the differences between the compared religious communities will be insignificant (Suryadarma, 2009; Hajj and Panizza, 2008; Alam and Raju, 2007; Jah, 2006). Borooh and Iyer (2004) conclude that religious influence, especially Islamic values are causing gender disparities in the Muslim communities. Burch also used secondary data to come to the same opinion.

It can be said with some conviction that local/ regional culture rather than religion has more influence upon gender disparity (as it can be observed through aforementioned cases of China and Pakistan). Some scholars have used the terms together. It is worth noting that although religion is a part of culture and it influences that as well; but still these two are not interchangeable. Religion is something that remains the same, especially in case with the Islam. The core religious values remain the same regardless of time and space. Muslims also tend to stick to their core religious values a lot more than other religious groups. Islamic society usually has two set of values: permanent religious values that are constant and unaffected by time and space (core religious values), and peripheral social and cultural values which are more influenced by the local culture and values (for example the Muslims in the Africa have a different social mindset than the Muslims in Europe or North America; but the way they offer their prayers is the same- the differences might occur from sect to sect, not from region to region.). ElSafty (2005) finds the same pattern while talking about gender disparity in Arab countries. She says,

“... are strong cultural elements in Arab countries-as is the case in other Moslem countries-- that may intervene in this respect. Most Arab countries include a mixture of elements from other cultures, historically having been exposed to these influences, either through invasion/conquest, or as a result of cultural contact.”

If the perceived causes of increased gender disparity lie in core religious values of Islam, the trend should have been the same; but it can be seen in Asia, South America and Europe that Islamic countries have almost the same level of gender parity as non-Islamic countries.

It can ignite an interesting debate. The question can be asked that the progress of Islamic countries in those continents is influenced by the overall “culture” and “surroundings” of those non-Islamic countries. But even if we agree to this argument, it would suggest that gender disparity is more influenced by local and regional culture than religion. Also the other side of the picture will have to be accepted as well that very high gender disparity in Islamic countries in Africa has more to do with local and regional culture than Islamic one.

Focusing back on the influence of region and religion (Islam), it is worth noting that most of the Islamic countries are located in the under-developed or developing regions of the world (Asia and Africa). Out of 53 Islamic countries mentioned in the literacy reports, 50 are in Africa or Asia (25 in each region). If Suriname is not considered an Islamic country, the number would become 50 out of 52. That means that 94.34 percent Islamic countries are located in those two regions (96.15 percent without Suriname). On the other hand only 42 out of 97 non-Islamic countries are located in Africa or Asia (around 43.30 percent). Most of them are in Europe, North America, South America or Oceania with much more money and resources. Those regions also have a strong culture that emphasizes a lot more on gender equity and equality.

One common argument given to negate this point is that those regions are backward due to the mindset and influence of those Islamic governments and the people alike, but then the same question, “Why are other non-Islamic countries in the same region (Asia and Africa) also plagued by the same problem? Why the Islamic countries in Europe and South America

doing pretty well? Why are the non-Islamic countries in Asia doing even worse (although not statistically significantly) than the Islamic countries in the region?"

Finally, it might be interesting to a look at the situation in Iran as a short case study. It is considered a country with hardcore Islamic society and government. The laws about women are more strict than most of the other Islamic countries. The country has thinly veiled theocratic government where final authority is held by supreme leader and Council of Guardians. This situation would suggest very low literacy level amongst women, yet when the numbers are observed, they reveal a totally different picture. As per UNSD report (2011), youth literacy rate is around 89 and 81 percent amongst both men and women. In adult literacy, the corresponding rates are 99 for both genders. This shows a gender parity rate of 91 and 100 in both types of literacy. It is interesting to know that in 1966 gender parity index in Iran was 59.47 which improved only slightly in 1976 (at the time of Islamic Revolution) to 60.27 (Girgis, 1996). Although the literacy rate amongst women almost doubled during this decade (from 17.9 to 35.5), but the difference between male literacy and female literacy also doubled (from 12.2 to 23.4). If the Islamic practices have any negative correlation with gender parity in literacy, the gap should have widened further, instead now women in Iran are doing even better than men in some areas of literacy and education (Mehran, 2003).

## **CONCLUSION**

The above discussion indicates that Islam or Islamic values do not have a negative impact upon literacy amongst women. Keeping in mind, all the data and the results, it is safe to say that gender disparity is spread more on regional lines than on the religious ones. It is clearly observed through the data and statistics that gender disparity is more fluctuating form region to region than between Islamic and non-Islamic countries within the same region. The fact the almost all the Islamic countries mentioned in the report are located in Asia and Africa seem to make a difference when it comes to overall gender disparity rate in the world. As mentioned before, Africa itself is the only continent which has statistically significant higher gender disparity than other continents; and the differences between Islamic and non-Islamic countries in that continent are also really huge. If we consider Africa as an extreme case and take it out, the world level differences become insignificant.

It also clears the perception that came into being with the fact that there is a huge gender gap between Islamic and non-Islamic countries at world level (in both types of literacy). It can be said with some certainty that that gap is more because of geographical location of the Islamic countries and other factors (poverty, educational system, access to schools, law and order etc) than their faith or religion (Islam). Those two regions (Asia and Africa) are historically conservative and traditionalists where women's education has not been considered profitable and emphasized a great deal. If Islam were such a powerful and influential factor on promoting gender disparity, the same trend should have been observed in the Islamic countries in Europe, S. America and especially in Asia. The findings about Europe and South America can be contested due to certain reasons. The number of Islamic countries is too small, and the findings based on that cannot be generalized. Also putting Suriname in the group of Islamic countries is contentious. Yet, the findings can be contested, but cannot be ignored, especially in Europe. The findings cannot be generalized, but they show a pattern, especially when read with the results from other regions. No statistical difference is found in Asia even, with substantial number of both Islamic and non-Islamic countries.

The paper suggests that the higher gender disparity rate in Islamic countries have more to do with factors other than religion, most probably local/ regional culture. Also, that the gender

disparity is more visible and prominent on regional lines than on the basis of the mentioned religion.

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