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Research Paper

Building the Self: Examining Disparities in Identity between Muslim and Hindu Girls in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the self-concept structure of three groups: Hindu girls in higher education, Muslim dropout girls, and Muslim girls in higher education. There were 214 participants from the Allahabad district in the sample. Social identity, ideological beliefs, interests, ambitions, and self-evaluations are the five main categories and their corresponding subcategories (e.g., self-identity, group identity, gender role identity) of the Twenty Statement Test (TST), which was used to measure self-concept. The results show that self-concept is significantly shaped by schooling. Self-evaluation and social identification received the most answers from girls pursuing higher education, both Muslim and Hindu. While dropout females were more likely to highlight physical traits, educated girls were likelier to cite generic expressions of self-worth. While Muslim girls in higher education had both good and negative psychological states, Hindu girls in higher education placed more emphasis on psychological traits. Furthermore, Muslim dropout girls placed more emphasis on personal interests, while Muslim females in higher education showed stronger ambition-related self-descriptions. Overall, the findings highlight how education has a significant impact on how self-concept is developed and expressed in a variety of ways.

Keywords: *Self-concept, Girls, Hindu/ Muslim, Higher Education*

Women's capacity to deal with social, familial, personal, and national issues is greatly improved by education. As demonstrated by several demographic indices, gender differences in educational attainment still reflect the unequal status of women in Indian culture (Nayar, 2007). Deeply ingrained gender disparities in educational access were highlighted by the 2011 Indian Census, which showed that the female literacy rate was 65.46%, significantly lower than the male literacy rate of 82.14%. According to statistics, boys have a higher chance than girls of enrolling in, staying in, and succeeding in school (Bhat, 2015). Furthermore, to be a vital instrument for empowering women and helping them reach their full potential in the social, political, and economic arenas, education is a fundamental human right. Along with reducing poverty, education encourages critical thinking, empowering females to question conventional roles, overcome obstacles,

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and change their lives. It is essential to the larger conversation about social change and women's empowerment.

Development of Self-concept

Over the past few decades, the concept of self-concept has drawn much attention in the literature on psychology and sociology (Epstein, 1980; Gergen, 1971; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Yardley & Honess, 1986). As stated by Leary and Tangney (2011), it is commonly described as an ordered collection of ideas and opinions people have about themselves, frequently including cognitive (or "I") and reflective (or "me") aspects. These mental models aid in how people perceive the environment, mold their actions, and preserve their feeling of continuity and value (Oyserman & Markus, 1998). One's self-concept influences the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral facets of human experience. Physical traits, peer and familial interactions, and emotional development are examples of its content (Marsh, 1990; Harter, 2003). Disparities between one's actual, ideal, and ought selves frequently express evaluative components (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Self-attitudes, on the other hand, like self-efficacy and self-esteem, are subjective assessments of one's worth and competence (Bandura, 1977, 2001).

Based on factors including age, gender, ethnicity, and educational attainment, researchers have identified structural variations in self-concepts (Markus et al., 1982). Individuals typically receive information and act in ways that are consistent with their self-schema, suggesting that behavior regulation is facilitated by self-concept (Oyserman, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2007). Furthermore, a person may have several distinct self-concepts, each with differing levels of salience, complexity, and coherence (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Banaji & Prentice, 1994). Self-concepts are not unchangeable, despite their general stability. Significant re-evaluation and change may result from transitions and crises, particularly throughout adolescence or adulthood (Tice, 1992; Schienker et al., 1994). When forming one's self-concept, the cultural background is especially significant. Markus and Kitayama (1991), for example, made a distinction between independent (Western) and interdependent (Eastern) models of self. This point is further examined in connection with group connections and collective Identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg, 2003; Hogg & Reid, 2006). Because women's experiences, roles, and social expectations have a significant impact on how they see themselves and their place in society, gender also plays a crucial part in how people perceive themselves (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1993; Dhawan et al., 1995).

Present Study

There are two opposing viewpoints on women's involvement in higher education. Conventional viewpoints support basic education only to prepare women for their duties as mothers and wives. This viewpoint's proponents contend that women's everyday lives benefit little from formal education. On the other hand, the contemporary perspective views education as a crucial instrument for women's empowerment, facilitating their ability to express themselves and contribute to society (Nath, 2014). According to this theory, self-concept is a fundamental educational outcome affecting identity formation and psychological health. Scholars have long been fascinated by the idea of the self; Cooley's introduction of the "looking-glass self" in 1902 provided an early sociological explanation of how social contact shapes one's sense of oneself. Kuhn and McPartland (1954) expanded on this theoretical framework by creating the Twenty Statements Test (TST), an empirical tool for evaluating self-concept. The five areas into which the TST elicits personal reflections are

social roles and groups, ideological views, interests, aspirations, and self-evaluations (Kuhn, 1960; Driver, 1969).

Examining the self-concept of women from various communities is especially important in India, where several cultural and religious groups live side by side. Understanding how society, culture, and educational opportunities influence self-concept is essential for social integration and identity formation. Three groups—Hindu girls pursuing higher education, Muslim girls pursuing higher education, and Muslim girls unable to pursue higher education—will have their self-concepts examined and compared in this study. The primary tool for examining these variations and considering the sociocultural elements that influence them is the Twenty Statements Test (TST).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 214 female volunteers, ages 18 to 25, participated in the study. The researchers included three separate groups in the sample, according to their educational attainment and community background:

1. **Muslim Minority Girls Pursuing Higher Education (N = 82):** OBC and General category females enrolling in undergraduate or graduate programs at different Allahabad colleges were included in this group.
2. **Muslim Minority Girls Who Dropped Out (N = 72):** These participants stopped attending formal schooling after finishing the 10th or 12th grade for personal or socioeconomic reasons.
3. **Hindu Majority Girls Pursuing Higher Education (N = 60)**: This group consisted of girls from high castes enrolled in undergraduate programs in various subjects, including science, commerce, and the arts.

Table -1. Demographic details of participants (N= 214)

Groups	N	Age Range	Educational Level	Caste	Socio-economic Status	Marital status
Muslim minority girls pursuing higher education	82	18-25	PG - 51 Graduate - 31	GEN-32 OBC-50	High- 36 Low-46	Married-2 Unmarried-80
Muslim minority girls who have dropped out of college	72	18-25	Intermediate-56 High school-16	GEN-36 OBC-36	High-28 Low -44	Married-24 Unmarried-48
Hindu majority of girls pursuing higher education	60	18-25	PG-36 Graduate-24	GEN-60 OBC-0	High -44 Low -16	Married-4 Unmarried-56

Materials used/ tools of the study

Participants' self-concepts were evaluated using the Twenty Statements Test (TST), which was created by Kuhn and McPartland in 1954. This open-ended tool provides a rich, unstructured approach to gathering people's impressions of themselves by asking respondents to write 20 responses to "Who am I?" More formal tools might not be able to give respondents categories that are relevant to their particular subjective experiences, as Jones et al. (1974) pointed out. The TST was selected because of its adaptability and cross-

cultural relevance, which are especially important for identifying subtle variations in self-concept among various social groups.

Procedure

The researchers gathered higher education participants from several colleges connected to the University of Allahabad on request. In order to encourage voluntary engagement, the researchers built an initial rapport. A snowball sampling technique was used to find Muslim girls who had stopped their education, and they were contacted one-on-one at their families. Following an explanation of the study's objectives and a guarantee of secrecy and anonymity, each respondent received the TST prompt and was requested to submit 20 self-descriptive remarks. Where necessary, clarifications were given, and participants were urged to go into further detail with their answers. Age, marital status, educational attainment, caste, religious affiliation, family structure, income, academic background, and parental occupation and education were among the pertinent socioeconomic and educational background data gathered through the administration of a demographic information sheet. Every participant was aware that the information would be kept confidential and used only for scholarly purposes.

TST Coding Scheme, Scoring and Reliability

The original Kuhn (1960) coding technique, which Driver (1969) later extended, was used to examine the responses. Five key domains were used to classify the statements:

1. **Social identity** – self-identification, role identity, caste identity, group identity, gender identity.
2. **Ideological Beliefs** – beliefs about God, life, and the cosmos.
3. **Interests** – personal preferences, hobbies, or likes/dislikes.
4. **Ambitions** – subdivided into personal (self-ambition) and societal (social ambition).
5. **Self-Evaluations** – perceptions of personal worth, physical traits, psychological qualities, and emotional states (both positive and negative).

Following the coding guidelines recommended by Bond and Cheung (1983), multiple codes were allocated where statements overlapped across categories. Unidentified responses were those that did not fit into the predetermined categories. Across cultural contexts, Kuhn's TST and its coding scheme have been proven to be reliable. Bond and Cheung (1983) expanded its cross-cultural relevance to include participants from Hong Kong and Japan, while Driver (1969) showed its applicability in Indian and American populations. Dhawan et al. (1995) confirmed the resilience of the coding method for classifying self-concept expressions in the Indian context by reporting inter-coder reliability ranging from 0.70 to 0.97, with an average of 0.86.

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis was done along with ANOVA. Table 2 shows that Muslim girls in higher education (MGHE), Muslim dropout girls (MDG), and Hindu girls in higher education (HGHE) have significantly different self-concept categories. MGHE had the highest mean score (10.20) in the Social Identity category, suggesting that education is essential for improving one's understanding of one's social duties and connections. Muslim dropout girls received the lowest mean score (6.33), followed by Hindu girls in higher education (8.07). The F-ratio of 10.99 ($p < .01$) indicated that the differences were statistically significant, indicating that formal schooling strengthens Social Identity. The differences between the three groups in Ideological ideas were not statistically significant

(F = 1.49), suggesting that ideas about God, life, or the universe may be more established in cultural or familial traditions and are less influenced by educational achievement. Compared to MGHE (2.41) and HGHE (3.67), Muslim dropout girls reported the highest mean score (4.94) for interests, indicating that they define themselves more through hobbies and personal preferences. The statistical significance of these differences is demonstrated by the F-ratio of 7.65 (p <.01).

Table No. 2: Showing the responses of Muslim girls in Higher education (MGHE), Muslim dropout girls (MGD), and Hindu girls in Higher education (HGHE) on various categories of self-concept using the Twenty Statement Test.

Category	Mean (SD)			F ratio
	MGHE	MGD	HGHE	
Social identity	10.20 (5.78)	6.33 (5.31)	8.07 (4.07)	10.99**
Ideological beliefs	0.80 (1.20)	0.94 (1.76)	0.53 (1.12)	1.49
Interest	2.41 (3.00)	4.94 (4.79)	3.67 (4.43)	7.65**
Ambition	4.54 (3.37)	2.11 (2.08)	2.60 (2.64)	16.72**
Self-evaluation	9.39 (5.77)	5.78 (6.45)	10.60 (6.86)	11.18**

(**p< .01), (*p< .05)

MGHE had the highest Ambition score (4.54), indicating that education among Muslim girls leads to higher societal and personal aspirations. However, with an F-ratio of 16.72 (p <.01), MDG (2.11) and HGHE (2.60) had much lower scores, suggesting that higher education has a considerable impact on goal creation. Lastly, HGHE had the greatest mean score (10.60) in the Self-Evaluation area, followed by MGHE (9.39), while MDG had the lowest score (5.78). With an F-ratio of 11.18 (p <.01), this difference suggests that education has a beneficial impact on self-worth and self-evaluation. Overall, the results highlight how females' social awareness, goals, interests, and self-perception are greatly improved by higher education.

Table No. 3 - Showing the sub-categories listed under the categories of social identity, ideological beliefs, interest, ambition, and self-evaluation in the Twenty Statement Test among Muslim girls in Higher education (MGHE), Muslim dropout girls (MGD) and Hindu girls in Higher education (HGHE).

S.No.	Categories	Mean			F-Ratio
		MGHE	MGD	HGHE	
I.	**Social identity**				
1.	Self-identity	2.61 (1.51)	1.39 (.97)	2.73 (1.22)	24.74**
2.	Role-identity	2.83 (2.09)	2.06 (2.46)	2.07 (1.58)	3.49*
3.	Group-identity	2.34 (1.69)	0.94 (1.21)	1.73 (1.10)	19.85**
4.	Caste identity	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)	0.13 (0.35)	11.68**
5.	Class-identity	0.37 (.66)	0.00 (.00)	0.40 (0.91)	9.00**
6.	Gender-role identity	2.05 (1.87)	1.94 (2.98)	1.00 (1.41)	4.62*
II.	**Ideological beliefs**				
1.	Belief about God	0.12(0.33)	0.44(0.70)	0.13(0.35)	10.28**
2.	Belief about life	0.66(1.13)	0.28(0.75)	0.33(0.72)	4.02*
3.	Belief about cosmos	0.02(0.15)	0.22(0.73)	0.07(0.25)	4.03*
III.	**Interests**				
1.	Likes	1.88 (2.71)	4.56 (4.36)	2.53 (2.58)	13.53**
2.	Dislikes	0.54 (0.92)	0.39(0.97)	1.13 (2.41)	4.57*
IV.	**Ambitions**				

S.No.	Categories	Mean			F-Ratio
		MGHE	MGD	HGHE	
1.	Self-ambitions	3.20 (2.10)	1.56 (1.38)	1.87 (1.99)	17.44**
2.	Social-ambitions	1.34 (1.55)	0.56 (1.04)	0.73 (1.03)	8.42**
V.	**Self-evaluation**				
1.	A general expression of self-worth	4.32 (2.72)	1.61 (2.40)	3.87 (2.97)	22.02**
2.	Physical attributes	0.12 (0.45)	0.39 (0.97)	0.13 (0.51)	3.58*
3.	General psychological attributes	2.78 (2.90)	3.17 (3.91)	5.73 (4.31)	12.90**
4.	Negative psychological state	0.68 (1.36)	0.28 (0.57)	0.20 (0.56)	5.56*
5.	Positive psychological state	1.49 (1.63)	0.33 (0.84)	0.67 (1.44)	15.22**

(**p< .01), (*p< .05)

Using several dimensions of identity, beliefs, interests, ambitions, and self-evaluation, Table 3 compares the self-concepts of three groups: Muslim Girls in Higher Education (MGHE), Muslim Dropout Girls (MDG), and Hindu Girls in Higher Education (HGHE). The F-ratio values show the statistical significance of group differences for each category. HGHE and MGHE scored considerably higher than MDG in the social identity category regarding self-identification, indicating that females pursuing higher education are more conscious of and articulate their identities. There was also a slight variation in role-identity, with MGHE having the highest mean, suggesting that this group had a more prominent sense of their responsibilities. Significant differences were seen in group identity, with MGHE receiving the highest score once more, followed by HGHE and MDG, suggesting that further education could strengthen group bonds. Interestingly, while caste identity was almost non-existent in all groups, HGHE was slightly present, indicating that this group acknowledged caste more consciously. MGHE and HGHE showed a stronger correlation with class identity than MDG, indicating that exposure to education may increase awareness of one's class standing. The fact that MGHE and MDG had the greatest levels of gender-role identity suggests that Muslim girls may internalize or think about gender norms more than their Hindu counterparts.

MDG had the strongest belief in God among ideological views, followed by HGHE and MGHE. It may indicate that those who have stopped attending formal schooling depend on religious coping strategies. The highest level of life belief was found in MGHE, indicating that educated females had a more expansive or introspective perspective on life. On the other hand, belief in the universe was low in all groups but slightly higher in MDG, which may indicate irregular or looser metaphysical beliefs. MDG reported far more "likes" to their interests than the other two groups, which may indicate a stronger propensity to express emotional reactions or personal preferences due to the lack of academic or career structures. Conversely, HGHE had the greatest mean for "dislikes," suggesting that education may lead to a more critical or perceptive mind-set. Muslim girls continuing their education have higher personal aspirations, as evidenced by MGHE scoring the highest on self-ambitions. The same pattern was seen in social goals, with MGHE showing more concern for the influence on society than MDG and HGHE. It further supports the idea that education fosters a more expansive vision for the individual and society.

Lastly, MGHE and HGHE showed greater overall self-worth than MDG in self-evaluation, suggesting that higher education students had a more positive view of themselves. MDG placed somewhat more emphasis on physical characteristics, which can reflect a different

way of evaluating oneself outside of the classroom. HGHE scored exceptionally well regarding general psychological features, indicating that these girls might be more introspective or eloquent about their mental characteristics. On the other hand, although they were still low overall, MGHE reported the most negative psychological states, which may reflect the stress of scholastic obstacles. MGHE and HGHE had the highest levels of good psychological states, suggesting that ongoing education may improve psychological health and positive self-perception.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to use the Twenty Statement Test (TST) to investigate the self-concept disparities between Muslim dropout females and Hindu and Muslim girls enrolled in higher education. The data's analysis shows how important schooling is in forming one's self-concept, especially in ambition, interest, self-evaluation, and social identity. Among these, the categories of social identification and self-evaluation were the most prevalent in all the responses, demonstrating how education significantly impacts how young women view themselves regarding their roles, society, and personal goals. Compared to Muslim dropout girls and Hindu girls in higher education, Muslim girls who were pursuing higher education demonstrated a higher degree of self-identified social identity. The three groups' replies differed significantly, indicating that Muslim girls in higher education have grown more aware of their social roles and feel more a part of the community. Muslim dropout females, on the other hand, displayed the poorest social identity, presumably as a result of their less exposure to social institutions that support group affiliation and collective identification, such as education.

There were also notable variations in the self-evaluation category. Muslim dropout females scored far lower in this category than Hindu girls in higher education, who came in second and third, respectively. It implies that education, regardless of religious background, promotes a more robust internal evaluation of one's value, self-assurance, and capacity. These results are consistent with other research emphasizing education's importance in fostering personal agency and self-worth (Marsh, 1989). When examining ambition, Muslim female students in higher education once more distinguished themselves by describing themselves as more goal-oriented and future-focused than both Muslim dropout girls and Hindu female students in higher education. It may reflect a growing narrative among minority women who, after being given access to school, exhibit a great desire to transcend conventional limitations and reshape their destiny. These results support the claim made by Dubey and Tiwari (2020) that Muslim girls with access to higher education want to surpass conventional gender norms and accomplish lofty objectives.

Fascinatingly, there were few overall responses in this area across all groups, and the category of ideological ideas displayed slight variation. It could indicate that educated youth are becoming less interested in defining their ideological and religious identities or are reluctant to do so in their self-statements. The subcategory analysis further explains the nature of the evolution of one's self-concept. Both Hindu and Muslim college-age females gave substantially more answers about their overall sense of self-worth than did Muslim dropout girls. It suggests that exposure to education is crucial for developing a positive sense of self. Higher educated Hindu girls reported more psychological features, whereas Muslim dropout girls reported more physical attributes, including body characteristics and looks. Different priorities and sources of self-definition between educated and uneducated girls may be reflected by societal pressure in these responses. It is interesting to note that Muslim female students in higher education reported higher levels of both good and negative

psychological states. It implies a sophisticated understanding of their psychological and emotional experiences, which may have been cultivated by social and educational exposure. Such a sophisticated view of oneself is consistent with psychological development and represents the broader impact of education on the expression of emotions.

Both Muslim and Hindu girls in higher education defined themselves more in terms of group identity and self-identity than Muslim dropout girls in the social identity category. This finding emphasizes how important educational establishments are in helping people solidify their identities within societal norms. Additionally, Muslim girls showed a stronger sense of gender role identification, which may be related to the fact that they come from a community where women's education is still developing. Higher education access may increase their knowledge of gender roles and expectations. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) contends that people get a sense of self from belonging to specific groups, and the emotional and evaluative value they place on these connections might be used to interpret these results. Common cultural expectations for women in Indian society may explain the development of practically identical role identity among the three groups. Regardless of their level of education, women in these communities are taught to perform particular social and familial duties. Studies by Roland (1987) and Belenky et al. (1986) reinforce this conclusion, arguing that internalizing gender-based social obligations and relational roles frequently shape Indian women's self-concept.

In this context, the concept of the "familial self," as articulated by Roland (1987) and reaffirmed by Markus and Kitayama (1991), is especially pertinent. These scholars contend that rather than being established as an independent entity, the self is formed in connection to others—parents, siblings, and friends—in collectivistic countries like India. Especially for girls in higher education who are actively interacting with the world outside their family, this interconnected conception of self leads to a greater articulation of social and relational components in self-descriptions. In the subcategories of societal ambition and self-ambition, Muslim girls in higher education likewise reported higher levels of ambition than the other groups. It might reflect the larger sociopolitical environment in which Muslim women strive to succeed and overcome structural barriers while navigating limitations. Their answers reveal a desire for societal involvement and exposure in addition to personal growth. However, Muslim dropout females made more interest-related remarks, especially likes, which may indicate a more passive and individualized orientation of self-concept, perhaps influenced by a lack of opportunities and exposure. Stryker (1994) and Cross and Markus (1990) suggested that their answers also point to a constrained exterior identity influenced by conventional roles, familial expectations, and a lack of autonomy. Such hobbies are legitimate aspects of self-worth in traditional civilizations, where marriageability and domestic skills are valued more highly than career or academic aspirations.

The results also highlight how schooling transfers cultural resources essential for self-construction. Rorty and Wong (1990) revealed that education equips people with the skills to traverse social institutions, understand experiences, and create meaning. It is demonstrated by the educated females' capacity to characterize themselves regarding their goals, morals, roles, and emotional states. People who have received an education are better equipped to think critically, be independent, and envision different futures. The strong self-esteem responses from girls in higher education demonstrate this empowerment. Marsh (1989) states that psychological health and individual agency are intimately related to self-

esteem. Girls with higher levels of education show greater self-directed orientation and understanding of their own objectives, values, and social expectations.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study emphasizes how important schooling is in forming girls' self-concepts across socio-economic and religious origins. Ambition and psychological depth also emerge as important elements in self-definition among educated girls, while self-evaluation and social identification are the main topics. The relative lack of these characteristics among Muslim dropout females highlights the need for schooling for identity formation, emotional health, and future orientation in addition to academic success. The study also shows how education and religion frame the environment in which self-concept is developed. The relative importance given to specific facets of the self, such as ambition, psychological traits, or group affiliation, differs by religious background and educational access, even though all females share specific components of gendered identity. Cultural theories that stress collectivism, family responsibilities, and social expectations in forming identity align with these findings (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 1989).

Limitations and Future Directions

The study's lack of Hindu girls who have left school is a significant drawback because it would have provided a more thorough knowledge of how dropout status, regardless of faith, influences self-concept. Future studies should consider this group and delve more into the cultural, familial, and socioeconomic causes of dropout and how these elements affect females' self-worth, efficacy, and self-concept. Additionally, longitudinal research could shed light on how one's self-concept changes in response to ongoing education or lack thereof.

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Conflict of Interest

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