

## Original Article

### Status of Minority Women in Bihar: A Focus on Kishanganj District

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*Minority women in India often find themselves at the intersection of multiple layers of disadvantage: gender, religion, minority status, socio-economic backwardness, and regional marginalization. In the context of Bihar a state grappling with development deficits the district of Kishanganj offers a stark case: a Muslim-majority district, with low human-development indicators overall. This study examines the status of women especially minority Muslim and other minority religions women in Kishanganj, highlighting their socio-economic, educational, health, infrastructural and cultural realities. Using Census 2011 data, district-level indicators, and broader research on minority welfare, the paper outlines prevailing challenges and suggests policy prescriptions for inclusive development. Minority women communities form an essential part of the socio-cultural, economic, and demographic landscape of Bihar. Among these minorities, the Muslim population holds particular significance due to its substantial size and diverse socio-economic characteristics. Kishanganj district, located in the north eastern part of Bihar, represents a unique case for minority studies because Muslims constitute nearly 68 percent of its population, making it one of India's districts with the highest minority concentration. This research-oriented journal aims to analyze the status of minorities in Bihar with a special focus on Kishanganj district. Using empirical data, government reports, and socio-economic surveys, the study evaluates demographic patterns, education, health, infrastructure, economy, and developmental challenges. The paper concludes with a set of policy recommendations for strengthening minority development in the region.*

**Key word:** Demographic patterns, education, health, Infrastructure, economy, and developmental challenges.

#### Introduction

India's pluralistic society demands careful focus on minority communities to ensure equitable development. Women from minority communities, however, often remain underrepresented in research and policy-discourse. Their status cannot be understood just by gender metrics; one must examine the overlay of communal identity, economic deprivation, social norms, and regional backwardness. The state of Bihar, historically marked by developmental challenges, presents a complex scenario for minority welfare. Within Bihar, Kishanganj district is particularly significant: it is the only Muslim-majority district in the state, and features poor human development indicators. Thus, investigating the condition of women in Kishanganj especially minority women offers vital insights into structural inequities and potential interventions. India, as a pluralistic society, accommodates diverse religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. Minority rights are constitutionally protected through special provisions, safeguarding their distinct identity while promoting equitable access to development. Bihar, one of India's most socio-economically challenged states, presents considerable disparities in minority welfare, requiring deeper evaluation. The minority population in Bihar comprises primarily Muslims, who account for almost 17% of the state's population. Their socio-economic and educational indicators remain substantially lower than the state average. The district of Kishanganj stands out with its drastically different demographic profile. The unique religious composition, combined with geographical constraints, makes it an important case study for understanding the localised challenges and opportunities influencing minority women development.



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## This paper aims to

- Present demographic, educational, and socio-economic profiles of women in Kishanganj;
- Analyze the likely situation of minority women, given district-level data and minority-domination;
- Identify structural deficiencies and barriers faced by these women;
- Offer policy and developmental recommendations to improve their status.

## This research has three primary objectives

- To understand the demographic, social, and economic conditions of minorities women in Bihar.
- To critically analyze the educational, health, and infrastructural status of minorities women in Kishanganj.
- To propose evidence-based recommendations for sustainable development in minority-dominated areas.

## Methodology

The present study on “Status of Minority Women in Bihar: A Focus on Kishanganj District” employs a mixed-method, descriptive, and analytical research design. The methodology is carefully framed to examine the socio-economic, educational, health, and cultural conditions of minority women using both primary and secondary sources.

## Demographic and Institutional Profile of Kishanganj

Kishanganj district is located in north eastern Bihar, sharing a narrow stretch of border with West Bengal and lying close to Bangladesh. Geographically and culturally, it is part of the “Seemanchal” region. As per Census 2011, the total population of Kishanganj was 1,690,400 with 866,970 males and 823,430 females. The sex ratio stood at 950 females per 1000 males. Kishanganj is recognized as the only Muslim-majority district in Bihar: Muslims constituted roughly 67.98% of the population in 2011. The remainder includes Hindus and small proportions of other minorities. Given this strong majority, most women in Kishanganj likely belong to minority communities making demographic and district-level statistics a reasonable proxy for assessing minority-women conditions.

## Rural–Urban Distribution and Literacy Overview

Kishanganj is overwhelmingly rural: 90.5% of the population resides in rural areas, while only 9.5% lives in urban Centers. As per Census 2011, overall literacy in the district was 55.46%. Disaggregated by gender, male literacy was 63.66%, while female literacy was 46.76%. In urban areas of Kishanganj, literacy levels are higher: urban female literacy stood at 65.31%. In contrast, in rural zones where the vast majority of population lives female literacy was 44.74%. Thus, large sections of women especially in rural minority-dominated areas are likely illiterate or poorly educated.

## Educational Status of Minority Women

The female literacy rate in Kishanganj (46.76%) significantly lags behind male literacy, showing a gender gap of 17 percentage points. Given that Kishanganj has a Muslim-majority society, this gap suggests that many minority women remain outside formal education systems, especially in rural areas. Rural female literacy 44.74% is markedly lower than urban female literacy 65.31% underlining a rural–urban divide. Such disparities may be further deepened by poverty, lack of infrastructure, social norms and limited access to higher educational institutions.

## Barriers to Female Education for Minority Women

Though direct micro-level data on minority women in Kishanganj is unavailable, the following barriers are likely significant **Economic constraints** Given widespread poverty and low-income levels, families may prioritize child labour or early marriage over girls’ schooling. **Inadequate school infrastructure** Rural schools may lack basic amenities safe toilets, female-friendly facilities, female teachers discouraging female attendance, especially after puberty. **Cultural and social norms** Conservative traditions among minority communities may restrict girls’ mobility or prioritize domestic responsibilities over education. **Lack of higher educational institutions locally** For advanced education higher secondary, college, girls may need to travel or relocate a significant barrier for poor minority families. Hence, while some urban minority women may access education, a large proportion especially in rural areas remain deprived.

## Socio-Economic Status and Livelihood: Impact on Minority Women

### Economic Backwardness and Poverty

Kishanganj’s overall human development context is poor; economic opportunities are limited. The majority of population depends on agriculture or informal low-paid occupations. Given high poverty and low land ownership among minorities, minority women’s households likely face significant economic stress. For women, this translates into: increased likelihood of engaging in unpaid domestic work, informal labour agriculture, wage labour, or early marriage to ease household burden. Economic dependency often reduces women’s bargaining power and restricts access to education and health resources.

## Occupational Patterns and Women's Work

Due to lack of formal sector opportunities, many women may resort to informal labour: agricultural labour, daily wage work, livestock rearing, small-scale trade. However, such work is often unregistered, low-paid, and lacks social security. Moreover, dual burden household chores informal work may lead to poor health, lack of rest, and limited prospects for skill acquisition or upward mobility.

## Social Security and Welfare Access: Gendered Exclusion

Minority women may face additional obstacles in accessing government welfare schemes

- **Low awareness**— many may not know about schemes for education, health, or women's welfare.
- **Documentation barriers**— lack of identity proofs, domicile certificates, or literacy may hinder applications.
- **Patriarchal gate keeping**— husbands or male family members may control access to benefits.
- **Lack of female-friendly outreach**— majority of outreach programs may not account for gender minority identity intersectionality, resulting in exclusion.

Therefore, even existing welfare schemes may not effectively reach minority women in Kishanganj.

## Health, Nutrition, and Gender-Specific Challenges

Although district-level public data on health and nutrition for minority women is scarce, given broader patterns in Bihar and rural districts, minority women in Kishanganj are likely to face serious health and nutrition challenges.

## Maternal and Child Health Risks

In rural and poor districts, maternal health outcomes tend to be poor due to limited access to prenatal care, institutional delivery, postnatal care, and skilled birth attendance. For minority women who may face additional social or economic barriers these risks likely intensify. Maternal anaemia, Under nutrition, low uptake of maternal services, early childbearing, and inadequate childcare are probable. These factors impact not only women's health but also child health, infant mortality, and intergenerational socio-economic outcomes.

## Nutrition, Sanitation, and Hygiene

Minority households in Kishanganj likely struggle with basic utilities: safe drinking water, sanitation, clean cooking fuel affecting women disproportionately, as they are primary caregivers and often responsible for household chores. Poor sanitation and hygiene increase women's exposure to water-borne and sanitation-related diseases; inadequate nutrition contributes to chronic health burdens. Given that rural Kishanganj's literacy particularly female literacy is low, awareness of health, hygiene, nutrition, and family planning may also be limited, exacerbating vulnerabilities.

## Healthcare Infrastructure and Access Barriers

In rural, minority-dominant districts such as Kishanganj, health infrastructure primary health centres (PHCs), hospitals, maternal-child care Unit tends to be inadequate, understaffed, and poorly equipped. Distance, poor connectivity, cost, social norms especially for women, and lack of female healthcare workers make access difficult. As a result, minority women may rely on traditional healers, home remedies, or avoid seeking care altogether risking morbidity, mortality, and poor health outcomes.

## Socio-Cultural Dimensions: Minority Women's Lives in Kishanganj

### Intersectionality: Gender Minority Identity

Minority women in Kishanganj live at the junction of gendered and communal disadvantage. Their identity as women from religious minority communities often marginalized economically and socially places them in a structurally vulnerable position. This intersectionality influences their mobility social and physical, educational opportunities, labour participation, decision-making power, and access to public services.

## Family and Community Norms

Traditional norms in conservative minority communities may influence:

- Early marriage of girls
- Preference for domestic roles for women
- Lower priority for girls' higher education
- Social restrictions on women's mobility, work outside home, or participation in public life

Such norms, combined with economic constraints, reinforce gender inequality and limit women's empowerment.

## Women's Agency and Grassroot Resistance

Despite constraints, many minority women may exercise day-to-day agency: managing households, contributing to family income via informal work, raising children, and navigating public schemes when possible. Over time, as awareness grows and education improves, there is scope for social change. However, systematic

disempowerment via lack of institutional support, social stigma, and economic marginalization restricts large-scale transformation without intentional policy intervention.

### **Institutional and Policy Gaps Affecting Minority Women in Kishanganj**

Government schemes for education, health, women's welfare need tailored outreach in minority-populated districts. In Kishanganj, lack of data disaggregation by gender community, weak outreach mechanisms, and bureaucratic inertia impede effective coverage. Welfare schemes must account for cultural sensitivities, female literacy levels, and infrastructural deficits else minority women remain underserved.

### **Inadequate Infrastructure Schools, Health, Sanitation**

Rural schools may lack separate toilets, drinking water, female staff, or safe environments discouraging girls. Health centres may be distant, understaffed, or lack female healthcare providers discouraging women from seeking maternal or reproductive health services. Sanitation and water supply deficits further compromise women's health and hygiene. Without sustained investment, these gaps continue to reproduce deprivation.

### **Absence of Data and Research on Minority Women**

A critical limitation is the absence of disaggregated data on minority women in Kishanganj education rates by religion & gender; health outcomes; labour participation; social welfare uptake all are lacking. This blind spot makes policy design and evaluation difficult. Without data, interventions may remain generic and fail to target those most in need.

### **Potential and Opportunities for Empowerment**

Despite the challenges, Kishanganj like other minority-dominated regions has latent potential for improving the status of minority women, if policies are designed inclusively and implemented effectively.

### **Education Accelerated Female Literacy and Vocational Training**

Improving female literacy should be a priority. Interventions could include: adult literacy programmes targeting women; scholarship schemes specifically for girls from minority families; girls' hostels; community awareness campaigns about girls' education; recruitment of female teachers; and safe transport for female students. Vocational and skill-development programmes tailored to women in tailoring, handicrafts, small-scale trade, digital literacy can open livelihood avenues beyond agriculture and informal labour.

### **Healthcare & Women's Health Services**

Strengthening primary health centres (PHCs), maternal-child health centres, mobile health units, and recruiting women health workers can improve access. Outreach and awareness programmes on nutrition, prenatal and postnatal care, immunization, hygiene, family planning must be tailored to local cultural contexts and in local languages. Provision of clean water, sanitation safe toilets, drainage, clean cooking fuel by schemes such as Swachh Bharat, Ujjwala, or state-level programmes would especially benefit women.

### **Social & Economic Empowerment through Micro-enterprises and Self-Help Groups**

Encouraging women's self-help groups, micro-enterprises, small-scale agriculture allied activities poultry, dairy, handicrafts can promote financial independence, social status, and community solidarity. Special emphasis should be on minority women, marginalized rural areas.

### **Targeted Government Schemes and Affirmative Action**

Existing minority welfare schemes must be made gender-sensitive and accessible. Outreach and application processes must be simplified, localised, and inclusive. State and central governments along with NGOs must invest in data collection and research focused on minority women, to design effective and focused interventions.

### **Conclusion**

The case of Kishanganj district a Muslim-majority region with poor human development indicators underscores the multiple disadvantages faced by minority women at the intersection of gender, religion, poverty, and regional backwardness. Census 2011 data reveals that female literacy is extremely low 46.76%, rural women's access to education even lower, and the region is overwhelmingly rural. Given the socio-economic context, it is highly likely that a significant proportion of women in Kishanganj are from minority communities and suffer from limited education, poor health, lack of opportunities, and restricted freedoms. Structural barriers infrastructural deficits, economic deprivation, patriarchal norms, weak implementation of welfare schemes reinforce gender inequality. However, the weaknesses should not be seen as immutable fate. With targeted, culturally sensitive, gender-responsive interventions in education, health, livelihood, and social welfare the status of minority women in Kishanganj can improve significantly. Investment in female literacy, vocational training, health infrastructure, sanitation, and data-driven policy design can empower minority women and foster inclusive development. For sustainable human development in Kishanganj and similar minority-dominated districts of Bihar empowering women must be central. Only then can the district's demographic strength translate into equitable social and economic progress.



## **Policy Recommendations**

- **Female-focused Education Interventions:**— Launch community-level adult literacy campaigns, scholarships for girls from minority households, safe school infrastructure, female teachers, and girls' hostels.
- **Skill Development & Livelihood Support:**— Promote women-oriented vocational training and micro-enterprise support tailoring, handicrafts, dairy/poultry, small trade), along with access to credit & markets.
- **Strengthening Health Infrastructure:**— Upgrade PHCs, ensure maternal-child care services, deploy female health workers, promote awareness about maternal health, nutrition, hygiene, and safe water sanitation.
- **Social Welfare Inclusion:**— Simplify procedures for minority women's access to government schemes identity cards, pensions, social security, welfare grants with active community outreach.
- **Data Collection & Research:**— Conduct micro-level surveys and academic studies on minority women education, health, employment, social status to guide evidence-based policymaking.
- **Community & Cultural Engagement:**— Work with community leaders, local women's groups, NGOs to challenge conservative norms limiting women's education and mobility; promote social awareness about gender equality and minority rights.

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