



Research Article

Professional Engagement of Muslim Women: A Case Study in the Ampara District of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT



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The main objective of this study is to analyse the engagement of Muslim women in the professional fields and the influencing factors. As this is a qualitative-based research, data was collected from both primary and secondary sources through in-depth interviews and review of literature, respectively. Findings show that Muslim women's involvement in professional field has increased. However, their contribution in the field of nursing, engineering, law and other sectors are very low except teaching and development officers. Moreover, even though women's participation is higher in medical field, their involvement in special fields is lacking. The research identified that there are several factors led to dearth of professional field such as job satisfaction in teaching profession, lack of family support and family responsibilities, social recognition, cultural practices, religious obligation and values and financial difficulties. In Future, researchers can expand this topic based on specific fields and several other geographical regions.

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Introduction

Women's engagement in professional field is major topic that has been widely discussed in various field in current era. The awareness that has arisen among women in recent times has enabled them to contribute in various field whole over the world. Raheema & Omar (2017) note that nowadays, women have more freedom of choice, including the right to work and participate in other social activities. Educated Muslim women work in various fields, including teaching, education, engineering, law, and even the army and police for evidence.


However, in Sri Lankan context, many skilled females chose deskbound career without concerning their merit. It led to increased underemployed rate. Hence, according to Jayawardena (2002), a large number of highly qualified female scientific graduates opt out of entering the appropriate sector and instead pursue desk jobs or teaching. Despite being a widespread issue in Sri Lanka, the Muslim community is also affected by it. As a result, Muslim women also concentrate primarily on particular fields, as the Ampara district demonstrates. Though they are equally skilled and capable in certain areas as males, the majority of Muslim women in this district work as teachers. Many competent women who operate in particular disciplines also work in other fields. For instance, women with engineering degrees working for lower salary as instructors and development officials.

Consequently, the Muslim community lacks female professionals. Ali (2016) said that Muslim women face significant obstacles in the form of a male-dominated labor market, a society that does not publicly recognize the intellectual accomplishments of women, and the social structure. According to Salfiya Ummah et al. (2019), female children are prohibited from pursuing higher education, from supporting their enterprises, from traveling alone to engage in training and capacity-building programs, and from engaging in many other activities because of the distinctive norms of Muslim culture.

As a result, the Muslim community saw this development as a major concern. Investigating this matter is therefore imperative. Should this circumstance persist, Muslim society would forfeit the future contribution that Muslim women may provide to the community. Because there hasn't been much scientific study on Muslim women's encouragement of contemporary research, even pertinent research has been undertaken. Taking into account the aforementioned problems and the knowledge gap, the study will centre on the subject of how Muslim women are treated in the workplace and what causes the lack of female professionals. Therefore, the primary goals of the current study are to assess the position of Muslim women in the workforce and to pinpoint the variables that contribute to the low number of women in the workforce in the Ampara district.

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Literature Review

Muslim women's contribution in professional field in modern era

The contribution of Muslim women in professional sectors is explained by a number of academics globally. Majid et al. (2004) demonstrate that engineering is difficult as a result. Conversely, Muslim women make up 30% of UTM's engineering faculty. Thirteen percent of these women received professorships in recognition of their accomplishments and efforts. Just two of the 506 Muslim women instructors have professional engineering certifications. Similarly, Pio & Syed (2013) noted that India has a sizable population of professionals who are educated women. The authors also suggest interventions aimed at encouraging more women to pursue careers in non-traditional sectors like engineering. According to Assi & Marcati (2020), data from Mc Kinsey & Company indicates that, in comparison to a moderate, the UAE (0.22), KSA (0.31), Oman (0.35), and Jordan (0.44) have the lowest female-to-male ratios in professional and technical professions. According to Farook (2019), between 2017 and 2018, the male percentage of employment in the professional field in the Punjab province of Pakistan was 2.38, while the female proportion was 1.52. In certain businesses, prejudice stems from people's innate views.

Few studies have been conducted in Sri Lanka that take into account the variety of vocations that exist there. Sri Lankan writers Karunagaran & Samudrage (2019) studied the topic of examining gender equality in the accounting profession. Iromi et al. (2019) released a paper on gender discrimination against female professionals and managers in the private sector of Sri Lanka. Research on gender inequality in Sri Lanka has been analysed by Gunawardane (2016). According to him, the majority of engineers are women (13.2%). Of the women who work in substantial numbers, schoolteachers make up 69.3% of the workforce. Due to the lack of work prospects in the defense industry, women are underrepresented in the air force (9%), police, and other professions.

Factors Influence Women Employment Choices

According to some experts, Muslim women's employment choices are influenced more by a variety of societal variables than by their personal preferences. According to Alsheeb & Hodges (2019), sociocultural norms in Arabia might affect women's rights and their capacity to work, particularly in sectors where males predominate like engineering. Beyond this, however, several research demonstrate that cultural attitudes, not religion, are what influence women's decisions to enter the labor market rather than religion itself. This is demonstrated by Azizah et al. (2019). According to Pratap & Singh (2015), women may voluntarily or unintentionally acquire outward symbols of their group identification on their person and behavior. Furthermore, Das (2003) highlights the role that cultural norm of status and isolation have in explaining Muslim women's reduced visibility in high-status employment, Indian politics, and the country's economy. Some scholars claim that a variety of issues hinder women's advancement in the workforce across different countries. Al-Asfour et al. (2017), for example, noted that women in Saudi Arabia face several challenges, such as limited opportunities, a dearth of family support, and a significant workload. Furthermore, Manel & Perera (2017) make the assumption that religious prohibitions, particularly those pertaining to Muslims, would prevent the majority of non-Buddhist women in Sri Lanka from obtaining work prospects. Social norms and cultural expectations in Sri Lanka restrict the employment options

available to women in a variety of sectors, particularly when it comes to family duties (Silva et al., 2023). Based on this literature gap and claims, the current study focuses on analysing the engagement of Muslim women in the professional fields and factors influenced.

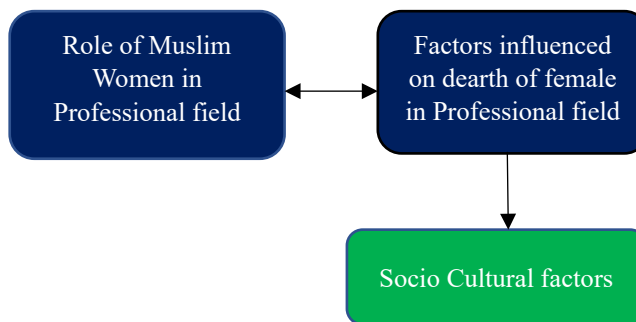


Figure1: Conceptual framework of the study

Study Area

The study was conducted in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, known for its significant ethnic and religious diversity. The province encompasses an area of 4,415 km² divided into twenty divisional secretariats. As of 2021, the population density in this region is approximately 170.3 individuals per km², totalling around 752,000 residents. The ethnic composition of the district is varied, with Sinhalese representing 38.9% (252,458 people), Tamils accounting for 17.4% (113,303 people), and Muslims forming the largest ethnic group at 43.4% with 281,702 individuals. Islam is the predominant religion in this area (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012a). In terms of employment, the three primary industrial sectors are agriculture (30.7%), industry (24.7%), and services (44.6%). The professional sector shows a disparity in gender representation, with women constituting only 13.7% of the workforce compared to men, who make up 4% (Annual Report of the Labour Force Survey, LFS 2022).

Methodology

This qualitative research focuses on the Ampara district in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, which is home to the majority of Muslims. Fourteen professional women that includes lecturers, librarians, registrars, development officers, counselors, doctors, and engineers from both academic and non-academic backgrounds participated in the study. These participants were chosen using the purposive sampling technique; they are university graduates working in the public sector. Sainthamaruthu, Maruthamunai, Nintavur, Akkaraipattu, Sammanthurai, and Oluvil are among the places they represent in the district. Semi-structured in-person interviews were carried out to obtain comprehensive perspectives. A plethora of knowledge on the topic was made possible by the comprehensive collection of replies made possible by these interviews. Every interview was performed in the participant's native language, Tamil, verbatim recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English for additional examination. The QSR Nvivo10 program was used to analyze the data. After carefully going over the transcripts, key information from each question was classified and then put into the appropriate categories. The researchers discovered and inferred important "themes" pertinent to the goals of the study via this procedure.

Results and Discussion

Main and Sub-themes on the Status of Muslim Women in Employment and Factors that Influenced it.

Codes / Unitization	Sub-Theme / Categorise	Main Themes
Women's career growth	Women's	Women's
High-participation fields	Engagement in	Employment
Low-participation fields	Professional	conditions
Underutilized skills	field	and Factors
Job Satisfaction in teaching profession		Contributing to the
Lack of Family Support and family responsibilities	Factors	Shortage of Females in Professional Fields
Social Recognition	Contributing to the Shortage of Female	
Cultural Practices	Professionals	
Religious Obligation and Values		
Financial Difficulty		

Muslim Women's Engagement in Professional Fields

In Ampara district, less than one-fifth of women participate in the country's labor force. The district in Ampara had the lowest LFPR in 2019 (Vithanagama 2020). However, the current study shows women's advancement in employment in Ampara district. The majority of the participants, six, indicated that women's engagement in employment has increased in recent times. Women are engaged in several fields. Muslim women's engagement in the teaching profession is high in this district. In addition, their contribution is higher in education-related fields too such as the directors of educational firms, principles of schools, and lecturers at the universities.

The data revealed from three divisional secretariat reports of 2021/2022, namely Akkaraippattu, Addalaichenai, and Nintavur of Ampara district, out of five divisions, clarifies Muslim women's engagement in some professional fields in the above-mentioned division as follows: Teachers (902), development officers (517), medical doctors (73), university lecturers (27), lawyers (7), and engineers (0). According to D.S.W. Gunawardena's finding in 2016, "school teachers (69.3%) are among the women who work in significant numbers" in the academic sector in Sri Lanka. Hence, the current study also revealed that Muslim women's participation is higher in the teaching profession in the educational sector. Three were pointed out at this point. The following quote from one's respondent is mentioned here: "There may be more workers in the teaching sector" (Respondent 9).

Concerning non-academic fields, eight respondents consider that Muslim women's participation is higher in other official works, the defense field, engineering, medical, IT (information technology), and other government-related professions besides the teaching profession. This was indicated by Basith (2022) that there are very few Muslim women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Thus, the current study also showed that in the fields of medicine and engineering, Muslim women's engagement is very low. The medical field remains doctors and nurses. Similarly, half of the respondents said that Muslim women's participation is low in the engineering field, and four indicated that the rate is low in the field of law. Four respondents indicated that Muslim women's contribution is less in the administrative field. Another notable field indicated by the respondent that's contains lack female participation was politics. According to the national data on women political movement notably underrepresented (Haniffa, 2014). Moreover, they assumed that women do not show much

keen interest in the field of law. Likewise, among them limited respondents assumed that there are shortage in the field of counselling, public services, health-related fields, and library-related fields. Two were indicated that in the field of academic, especially lecturing, Muslim women are lower.

However, all participants agree that women's contribution to the specialist field of a sector is very low. Thus, female doctors are not show their interest into certain professions. Hence, five noted that field experts are lacking in the medical field, especially in visiting obstetrician gynecology (VOG). Six were indicated regarding this. According to the findings of Silva et al. (2023), very few women are involved in gynecology and obstetrics. Hence, their study shows that women's participation in these sectors was less than 6% over the period from 2015 to 2019. It is very low compared to other sectors such as surgery, orthopedics, and stomatology. Likewise, men dominate other specialist fields in the medical sector in Sri Lanka. Female medical graduates face challenges to become orthopedic, surgery and neurosurgery specialist. Even though it is a common practice, it includes Ampara District too. Hence, a female medical doctor's quote confirms it as follows: "Yes, none of the Muslim women in the Ampara district are VOGs as of yet" (Respondent 3).

Some participants assumed that there was a prevailing shortage of female experts in other fields except the medical field, such as engineering, business, administration, technical, law, and health, which are related fields.

The current research notes that highly qualified females are underemployed. This was another important finding of this research. It remains that they work in low-skilled jobs or work at a low wage and drop their jobs. As indicated by Jayewardene (2002), many outstanding female scientific graduates choose desk-bound or teaching careers rather than entering other qualified fields according to their merit. Karunakaran and Samudrage (2019) also pointed out that in Sri Lanka, a plethora of women are employed in desk-bound careers, and they never prefer to overcome their traditionally nature-related field. Although this is common practice in Sri Lanka, the same practice is observed among the Muslim society of Ampara district too. Hence, among the fourteen respondents, nine pointed out that there was prevalent underemployment. A female engineer who is working as a development officer shared her personal experience as follows: "Yes, without a doubt; you can use me as an example" (Respondent 9).

Similarly, the bulk of the respondents indicated that many female engineers and doctors are in a deskbound profession, especially as teachers and development officers. Moreover, they said with great sadness that some engineers and doctors are housewives, engineers work at a private company with a low salary, and doctors left their jobs. They assumed that it was not suitable for their merit and below their qualifications. Six participants indicated that some female doctors and engineers who completed their degree in engineering and medicine are housewives. Following quotes confirm their statements as follows:

"Personality-driven and talented engineers opt for official roles like development officers and teaching" (Respondent 10).

"Housemaids are also women who have graduated from medical schools" (Respondent 2).

"Housewives are not often engineers" (Respondent 7).

In a similar vein, the data revealed that almost all competent female university graduate who works as a development officer, clerical worker, or teacher is qualified to become a lecturer or an accountant. One person gave the following example of her experience:

"In my first session, I met an instructor who had a degree in management information technology. She works in the elementary sector as a teacher" (Respondent 12).

Factors Influenced on Dearth of Female in Professional Fields

This section clarifies that what are the socio-cultural factors influenced on dearth of female in professional field. Hence, collected the data revealed that there are several factors influenced in this regard. Those are clarified under the following themes:

Job Satisfaction in Teaching Profession

Data analysis report showed that majority of the women are teachers in Ampara district. Hence, this scenario on one of the major factors for shortage of females in other professional fields. According to the bulk of respondents' views, less working time, more leaves compared to other office related works, easier to maintain work life balance, higher education is not compulsory, suitable, and safe and stress free in teaching profession led them to higher involvement in teaching profession. Briefly, they feel job satisfaction in this profession. Apart from those reasons unwillingness to suffer and lack of family contribution to go another profession also other reasons. one respondent's statement indicated as follow:

"Women in the Ampara district, in particular, favored teaching, which is why they also needed to be near to their homes. Despite the fact that there is a school across the street, they will be content. They desire a salary more than they want suffering.... Most families... give their consent to teaching as a career.. Even if there are options to pursue other careers. There could not have been any family cooperation or coordination, particularly if they are married, and her spouse might not have appreciated it" (Respondent 13)

In a similar vein, a few participants noted that a large number of women opt out of the engineering sector, in contrast to the medical industry, since there are relatively limited career opportunities, and most of them focus on finding employment locally. One participant shared her experience:

"Before starting this work, I attempted to pursue a career in hardware engineering. But I believed it belonged in the Ampara district. However, there are no engineering-related occupations in the Ampara area. I so focused mostly on looking for an office close to my house" (Respondent 4).

Doctors provided another explanation: "It is a tremendously demanding profession. No matter where we travel, we have to get straight to the hospital".

Hence, data revealed that job satisfaction in teaching profession, lack of family support and unwillingness to suffer are led to lack of female in other professional filed except teaching.

Lack of Family Support and Family Responsibilities

As indicated by [Worthington \(2013\)](#), family support and consent are very crucial factors in Muslim women's engagement in public sphere and by [Kashkooli & Ganganhar \(2019\)](#), in the Muslim Society, family is the important element that decides whether or not a woman should work outside home. Hence, another important factor identified that lack of family support led to low engagement in professional fileds. Bulk of respondents (nine) indicated family as a reason. According to their concern, which included financial support, motivation, barriers or restriction from husband. They assumed that even women prefer to engage to travel in particular preferred field, mostly it cannot be possible without family support. Similarly, in some family structure as parent fear for their female children's security. Therefore, they try to get marry their daughters soon after their

secondary education. This practice also led to shortage of females in professional fields. Likewise, having family responsibilities indicated as a reason for the lack of female involvement. Eight respondents noted that this situation led to women not becoming field experts in medical, nursing, law and social service. [Silva et al. \(2023\)](#) stated that though the medicine is very devoted profession, women doctors feel that family life and relaxation are more vital. Therefore, they did not prefer to work long time. Hence, in this study, bulk of respondent felt that they have to give more significant role to their family responsibilities. For example, a respondent working as a doctor shared her experience as follows:

"Ah, there is no one to look after the kids while the husband-and-wife work at separate locations. When a woman is working toward a postgraduate degree, her husband's support is crucial. I'm not familiar with your field.... In terms of our area, I have to study for three years to pursue postgraduate work in paediatrics, and there will be a registration period similar to training.... Our work schedule should be around the clock, and the training location will shift every six months.... This will affect the children's education.... Fathers bear comparatively less responsibility for their children's education than women do. My child became sick just before I had to go in for a radiological exam. Women might also find themselves in similar situations. The majority of men, she added, would advise that "you have to give priority to yourself, your kids, and then the community"" (Respondent 10).

According to [Ibrahim and Hamdard \(2018\)](#), the largest barriers to Muslim women's professional progression in this base are family duties. It was also seen in the most recent investigation.

Social Recognition

Data revealed that another notable reason mentioned by the participant that social recognition is not given to some specific jobs for women specially law, engineering and nursing. Teaching is accepted and dignified by the society. Six participants mentioned regarding this. Moreover, they explained that society assumed that engineering is suitable only for men and biology related fields suit women due to lack of job opportunities and hardship in the fieldwork especially in civil engineering. A respondent who is engineer shared her opinion as follows:

"Society believes that all engineering is civil engineering, despite the fact that there are numerous other technical specialties. As a result, I believe that women are having difficulty selecting this career. People could believe that I have no employment after graduating from engineering school and that there are few career options for engineers" (Respondent 5).

[Saumyadi & Jayawardane \(2020\)](#) showed that there is a misconception among the society in Sri Lanka that engineering is not suitable for women rather than teaching, nursing and medicine. However, in current study, respondent said that it is not true. Nowadays, societal view has changed compared to past. They assumed that women could work from home. There are several opportunities except for fieldwork. It is indicated by [Mew & Societies \(2023\)](#) as evidence. They said that lot of fields are offered in engineering such as designing, building, and improving technology and infrastructure to contribute to society. Some of them said that due to her nature women cannot tackle what they face in the field of law. Moreover, while women have to work with men alone in some situation, it can cause many moral issues.

It has been proofed below by a respondent who is a lawyer.

"Women do not argue as often as males do because they are loving. Since that woman is blamed for a lot of things while working as an apprentice under a more experienced lawyer, Because of these moral concerns, I know a lot of female lawyers who work from home" (Respondent7).

Similarly, some of them assumed that nursing profession remains lacking social recognition while medical will be highly valued. Moreover, even income is higher in nursing comparing to other professions, they do not like pursue it due to the different mind-set in this regard. Likewise, one respondent said that there is mentality among the society that women do not want to engage in higher position. It also led to lower engagement in higher positions.

Cultural Practices

Dowry practice, early marriage, dress code and male dominance culture are indicated by the participants as other important reasons for lack of female participation in the professional fields. Six participants pointed out that it also determined the scarcity of female experts. Hence, a participant indicated that dowry practice is very high in the research area. According to their explanation if a woman is a doctor, is married by another highly qualified man who is a doctor or an engineer, expectation of dowry will be arise from bride. As it is assumed as extra burdens to parents, they do not allow their daughters to pursue higher studies.

Fawzer & Feroziya (2018) have mentioned it. They discovered that while the number of female doctors in the sector is high, especially specialists are relatively rare. Due to the unsound nature of the family support structure and their efforts to generate income for their next generation to provide a larger dowry. Dowries are involved in 98% of marriages, especially in the Ampara. Nearly everyone requires a home. Professionals in Sainthamaruthu, Kalmunai, Maruthamunai, Sammanthurai, Akkaripattu, and Nintavur in particular often ask for a house in their hometown in addition to a second house in Colombo. This tradition is somewhat recent. Professional grooms like as physicians, engineers, teachers, etc. are usually awarded dowries in this manner. The value of the dowry will depend on the bridegroom's job. Thus, the respondent surmised that parents worry that their daughter will be entitled to a sizable dowry to select a worthy husband based solely on her merits if she studies excessively or achieves a better position. Because of this widespread practice in the Ampara district, many smart women are impacted and are discouraged from pursuing large-scale careers. Rifas et al. (2023) also found that the primary concern in the Eastern province is the dowry where is Ampara district is located.

However, male dominance cultural practice was indicated by the respondents in minimum level. Three said regarding this. They said that some men even forbid their spouses from worrying about them and providing for them on their own. As a result, some working women find it difficult to focus on additional tasks. In certain cultures, women preferred not to work under men when there was a male in a higher position. They believe they ought to submit to him. Men so like to occupy important roles and attempt to dominate women as revealed by Almaki et al. (2016). They made it clear that both her subordinates and male and female co-workers share this mind-set.

In addition, a detrimental perception of women in higher positions within society is a significant reason to the lower number of women occupying leadership or higher positions. It is commonly believed that women should not advance to higher positions since they do less well than males and take longer vacations.

“Certainly, Male domination might undoubtedly be the cause. In terms of our workplace, our ADS is a woman as well. Thus, the guys who work for her believe that's the reason we have to submit to a woman” (Respondent 6).

In a similar vein, Ithram (2012) indicated that Australian Muslims had not yet realized the significance of having women in leadership roles. Because of the absence of parental guidance and obligations to pursue executive or competitive positions. They therefore believed that, despite the fact that women were just as qualified as men, they were not interested in working in certain sectors due of the males' attitude. In a similar vein, a small percentage of interviewees mentioned that child marriage is another obstacle for women to succeed in their career. Certain families under poverty line plan the weddings early. Though certain techniques exist, they are not numerous. Thus, there is little influence for this reason.

Similarly, a few of them stated that another obstacle to achieving a better job is the logical social mentality that suggests women should shoulder greater household responsibilities. According to Almaki et al. (2016), women are expected to take on more household obligations and take care of their families in traditional culture. This serves as another reason for women not achieving greater positions.

Religious Obligations and Values

The lack of female experts and minimal involvement were noted by the respondents, along with dress code limitations in several professions, especially nursing. Several respondents claimed that Muslim women's engagement in the nursing industry is quite low because of the clothing code. They clarified that, in general, people working in Sri Lankan environments wear short clothing, leave body parts exposed, and do not completely cover their heads. Nonetheless, Islamic cultural identification practices exist in certain areas where the overwhelming population is Muslim. On the other hand, they believe that, in contrast to other sectors, there are requirements to be met. Despite their preference, some women are required to work additional occupations. Saidun et al. (2018) further showed in their research that, in the case of Muslim minorities, the hijab is a significant barrier keeping Muslim women from pursuing nursing careers. Additionally, time is another factor. As a result, unlike in other jobs, they must work shifts. One person elaborated on her perspective as follows:

“Some sources claim that the clothing code might be troublesome. While working in places with a majority of Muslims, they dress whatever they feel most comfortable. Dress codes and working hours may occasionally be the cause of this, even if there are certain workplace dress code limits” (Respondent 4).

Financial Difficulty

The respondents mentioned economic difficulty as the next significant factor. Ten participants made a comment on this. In this base, the majority of them said that women's inability to pursue higher education owing to financial constraints affects their ability to choose a career path or become authorities in a particular subject. On the other hand, only one person stated that financial strain is an issue in the medical industry. So, all they need to pay is the course fee. Furthermore, there are instances where a husband would rather not send a wife because of the children's care even though she has a great work and a good wage. This will be resolved in the course of the marital consultations.

“She should not work as it would affect child-rearing” was a common reason given to them during marriage talks, even in circumstances when the spouse had a stable career. “I believe that it is due to some social factors” (Respondent 1). Women are therefore discouraged from entering a certain area or to quitting their careers as a result of this behaviour.

Conclusion

This research mainly focused Muslim women's status in professional field based on Ampara district of Sri Lanka and factors influenced on dearth of female in professional fields. Muslim women's involvement in professional field has increased. However, with the exception of teaching and office-related positions, they make little contribution to the fields of nursing, engineering, law, and other fields. Moreover, even though women's participation is higher in medical field comparing to nursing, engineering and law, their involvement in specialized fields is rare. There are several factors led to drought of professional fields including job satisfaction in teaching, a lack of family support and family responsibilities, social recognition, cultural practices, religious obligations and values and financial difficulty. Researchers can broaden this topic in the future by focusing on several additional geographical areas and specialized fields.

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