# ISLAM'S POSITION ON GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSLIM WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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***ABSTRACT***
*Gender-based discrimination remains a significant social and development concern in Nigeria, including among Muslim communities. Although public debates sometimes attribute restrictions on Muslim women directly to Islam, Islamic primary sources and the history of Muslim women's participation present a more complex picture. This paper examines the ethical teachings of Islam on gender justice and analyses the educational, political, economic, health, and legal challenges experienced by Muslim women in Nigeria. Using qualitative document analysis, the study reviews the Qur'an, selected hadith, classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship, recent empirical studies, and official institutional reports. Documents were purposively selected for their relevance to women, gender, Islam, Nigeria, and comparable Muslim-majority contexts, while older foundational works were retained where necessary for theological interpretation. The analysis identifies a persistent gap between normative Islamic principles and social practice, but it also cautions against treating culture, patriarchy, institutional weakness, and religious interpretation as interchangeable explanations. Recent evidence from Northern Nigeria shows that gender norms affect women's decision-making and access to maternal healthcare, while national and comparative evidence demonstrates continuing barriers to political representation, education, and economic opportunity. The paper argues that gender justice in Nigerian Muslim communities requires context-sensitive reforms that combine religious literacy, women's education, effective law enforcement, economic empowerment, accessible healthcare, and meaningful participation in public decision-making.*

***Keywords:*** Islam; Gender-Based Discrimination; Muslim Women; Nigeria; Gender Justice; Islamic Ethics; Women's Empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

Gender-based discrimination remains a deeply entrenched social problem worldwide, and Nigeria is no exception. Across many regions, Nigerian women, especially in marginalized and rural communities, continue to confront systemic barriers to equal participation in public and private life. These constraints manifest in limited access to formal education, underrepresentation in political institutions, restricted economic opportunities, and pervasive social norms that devalue women's contributions. Within Nigeria's Muslim communities, these challenges are

frequently intertwined with a complex mixture of religious tradition and cultural practice. Observers and critics often argue that Islamic teachings inherently limit women's rights, suggesting that the religion perpetuates gender inequality. However, a careful and contextual reading of Islam's foundational sources, the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, reveals a fundamentally different narrative. Islam explicitly condemns injustice in all its forms, including gender-based oppression, and establishes a moral and legal framework that guarantees dignity, equity, and agency for women.

Historically, the position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia was dire. Female infants were sometimes buried alive, women had virtually no legal claim to property, and their social identity was primarily derived through male relatives (Ahmed, 1992). The advent of Islam brought profound social reform. Allah affirmed the intrinsic worth of all human life, irrespective of gender, declaring that God honored the children of Adam:

> *"We have honoured the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of Our Creation" (Q17:70).*

Allah also emphatically prohibited the devaluation and destruction of female life, denouncing the practice of infanticide in no uncertain terms. In this regard Allah said:

> *"When the female (infant), buried alive, is questioned. For what crime she was killed" (Q81:8–9).*

Prophet Muhammad, (peace be upon him) further reinforced these revolutionary ethical changes. He insisted upon consent in marriage, financial independence through property and inheritance rights, and fair treatment in all social relations. His governance, personal conduct, and sermons consistently emphasized justice, compassion, and mutual respect. The Prophet's Farewell Sermon explicitly reminds his community to treat women kindly, noting that women are a sacred trust in their care (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 1218).

Despite these strong moral and legal foundations, Muslim women in Nigeria continue to face significant hurdles. Many of these challenges do not originate from Islamic doctrine itself but from misreadings, cultural customs, and entrenched patriarchal structures. In Northern Nigeria especially, where Islam is highly visible in both religious and social life, women's participation in public affairs remains constrained. Empirical research shows that in several Nigerian states, women have low representation in political offices and decision-making bodies, and girls often face barriers to continuing formal or religious education (Bello et al., 2018). While efforts by non-governmental and civil society organizations, such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria, have made some inroads, progress toward gender parity has been inconsistent and slow (Bawa, 2017).

The persistence of these challenges highlights a critical disjunction: the gap between Islam's ethical ideals and social realities in Nigerian Muslim communities. On one hand, Islam's texts and early history articulate a vision of justice that enshrines women's rights in spiritual, legal, and economic domains. On the other hand, dominant cultural practices and institutional structures often distort or suppress these teachings. Misinterpretations of religious texts, consolidated patriarchal hierarchies, economic marginalization, and limited access to religious education all contribute to a lived experience of discrimination for many Muslim women in Nigeria.

This paper therefore seeks to address this disjunction by examining three interrelated dimensions. First, it analyzes how Islam, in principle, condemns gender-based discrimination,

drawing on the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and classical and modern scholarship. Second, it identifies and scrutinizes the primary areas where Muslim women in Nigeria continue to face discrimination, including education, political participation, economic rights, and social services. Third, the paper proposes actionable and ethically grounded solutions, rooted both in Islamic ethical teachings and in modern human rights frameworks, for promoting greater gender justice in the Nigerian Muslim context.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, analytical approach. It relies on textual analysis of the Qur'an and hadith, as well as scholarly interpretations from classical and contemporary Muslim thinkers. These theological insights are supplemented by empirical research on the lived realities of Muslim women in Nigeria, drawn from academic studies, reports, and gender-focused organizations. By weaving together religious principles and social science, the paper offers a coherent account that elucidates what Islam prescribes and how these prescriptions can be more fully realized in Nigeria's diverse social landscape.

Ultimately, this investigation endeavors to close the gap between Islamic ethical vision and social practice. By aligning practical reforms with the moral and legal teachings of Islam, Nigerian Muslim communities can work toward a more just society, one in which women's rights are not only recognized in theory but lived out in everyday life. In doing so, the study contributes to broader conversations about gender justice, social transformation, and the authentic application of Islamic ethics in contemporary contexts.

## Literature Review

Recent Nigerian evidence strengthens the argument that the experiences of Muslim women cannot be understood through theology alone. Belaid et al. (2024), in a qualitative evaluation of a gender-equity intervention in Bauchi State, used nine key-informant interviews and 14 focus group discussions involving women, men, community leaders, and programme personnel. The study found that changes in gender norms could increase men's support for women's maternal healthcare and household responsibilities. This is important for the present study because it demonstrates empirically how gender relations operate through household decision-making, resource control, and community expectations rather than through religious doctrine alone.

Research on political participation also points to institutional and attitudinal barriers. Fahm (2022) specifically examined Muslim women in Nigerian party politics and reported that cultural and religious bottlenecks constrain their participation. Similarly, Ngwu et al. (2022), using focus-group evidence from Enugu State, found that socio-demographic and political factors contribute to women's underrepresentation in political decision-making. These studies complement the present paper by showing that the problem is not simply whether women participate, but whether political institutions, parties, communities, and voters create conditions in which participation can translate into representation.

Educational inequality remains particularly important in Northern Nigeria. UNICEF's Girls' Education Project Phase 3 evaluation reported persistent gender and regional disparities in basic education and identified socio-cultural norms, poverty, insecurity, governance constraints, and school-level conditions as barriers to girls' education (UNICEF, 2023). UNICEF's 2024 education fact sheets likewise emphasize the need to address inequities in access and learning. These findings caution against explaining educational exclusion exclusively in religious terms and support a multidimensional account that includes poverty, location, insecurity, institutional capacity, and gender norms.

Economic evidence also suggests that women's empowerment depends on access to assets, finance, markets, skills, and decision-making power. The World Bank's diagnostic of women's economic empowerment in Nigeria identifies structural constraints affecting women's economic participation and emphasizes the importance of policies that expand women's access to productive resources and opportunities (Vaillant et al., 2022). More recent evidence from the Nigeria for Women Project shows that women's affinity groups can provide financial services, training, mentorship, and market access at scale (World Bank, 2025). Such evidence supports the paper's recommendation for economic interventions but also suggests that empowerment programmes should be evaluated by measurable outcomes rather than by broad claims about empowerment.

Comparative scholarship from Muslim-majority contexts further complicates simple claims that Islam either causes or automatically prevents gender inequality. In Indonesia, Cameron (2023) finds that gender equality is shaped by development, institutions, and economic participation, while White et al. (2024) show that patriarchal political attitudes can affect support for women candidates and gender quotas. At the same time, the Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women documents substantial diversity in Islamic women's activism, hermeneutics, law, scholarship, and political participation across Muslim-majority societies (Sonneveld & Lindbekk, 2023). Comparative evidence therefore suggests that religion interacts with institutions, education, political ideology, economic structures, and local histories.

## METHODOLOGY

Research design. The study uses qualitative document analysis and thematic synthesis. This design is appropriate because the paper is not based on newly collected interviews or survey data; instead, it brings together normative Islamic texts, scholarly interpretations, empirical studies, and institutional evidence to examine the relationship between Islamic ethical principles and the lived realities of Muslim women in Nigeria.

Document selection criteria. Documents were purposively selected when they met at least one of the following criteria: (a) they addressed Qur'anic, hadith, legal, or ethical perspectives on women and gender; (b) they provided empirical evidence about women's experiences in Nigeria, particularly in Muslim-majority northern settings; (c) they examined women's gender relations in other Muslim-majority contexts in a way that illuminates the Nigerian debate; or (d) they were official reports or datasets providing evidence on education, health, political representation, or economic empowerment. Recent empirical and policy evidence was prioritized, while older works were retained where they represented foundational scholarship or primary religious sources.

Analytical procedure. The documents were read comparatively and organized around five themes: education and knowledge; political participation and leadership; economic rights and empowerment; health, family, and social welfare; and law, culture, and religious interpretation. Within each theme, the analysis distinguished between normative claims about what Islamic sources prescribe and empirical claims about what women experience in practice. The final synthesis then compared recurring explanations—religious interpretation, cultural norms, patriarchy, poverty, institutional weakness, insecurity, and political structures.

Analytical rigor. To strengthen rigor, the analysis used source triangulation: claims about religious principles were grounded in primary Islamic texts and established scholarship; claims about contemporary Nigerian conditions were checked against empirical studies and institutional evidence; and comparative claims were supported by research from other Muslim-majority contexts. The revised paper also avoids presenting a single interpretation of gender roles in Islam

as universally uncontested. Instead, it identifies areas of scholarly disagreement and explains the position adopted in the analysis.

**Islamic Ethical Teachings against Gender Discrimination**

At the heart of Islamic ethics is the principle that all human beings are equal before God in spiritual worth, moral responsibility, and potential for reward. The Qur'an emphasizes personal piety, righteousness, and moral accountability rather than biological gender as criteria for divine judgment. In *Surah an-Nahl*, Allah stated:

> *"Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while being a believer, we will surely give them a good life" (Q16:97).*

This verse clearly illustrates that ethical conduct and faith, rather than gender, determine spiritual reward. It reinforces the notion that salvation and virtue are universal ideals accessible to all humans, reflecting Islam's foundational commitment to justice and equality.

Another important verse addressing gender equity is found in Surah al-Ahzab:

> *"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women … for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward" (Q33:35).*

The structure of this passage places men and women side by side, highlighting their equal spiritual status. Scholars of Islamic ethics interpret these parallel references as affirming reciprocal rights and responsibilities, signaling that neither gender holds intrinsic superiority over the other in matters of faith and moral accountability (Wadud,1999). Such verses provide a strong theological basis for rejecting gender-based discrimination within social, economic, and political spheres.

Islam further underscores the inherent dignity of all human beings. Allah declares: *"We have certainly honored the children of Adam"* (Q17:70), thereby affirming that both men and women are created with intrinsic value and deserving of respect. In addition, Islam explicitly condemns pre-Islamic practices that devalued female life, such as the burial of infant girls. The Qur'an asks rhetorically, *"For what crime was she killed?"* (Q81:8–9), emphasizing the injustice of such acts. By raising these questions, the text not only rejects the dehumanization of women but also establishes moral accountability for society as a whole. The early Islamic ethical framework thus places protection of life and human dignity at the center of social policy.

One of the most transformative principles in Islam is the right to knowledge. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, stated, "*Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim"* (Ibn Majah, Hadith No. 224). The term "Muslim" here is inclusive, extending the obligation to women as well as men. Historically, women played critical roles in Islamic scholarship and education. Aisha, the Prophet's wife, is noted for narrating over two thousand hadiths and serving as a teacher and mentor to both male and female students (Brown, 2014). By encouraging the pursuit of knowledge for all believers, Islam not only empowered women to acquire religious literacy but also enabled their active participation in intellectual, spiritual, and civic life. Education, therefore, is a vital mechanism for achieving gender equity and social justice within Islamic societies.

In addition to education, Islam granted women tangible economic and legal rights. The Qur'an stipulates that both men and women are entitled to a share of inheritance. Allah said:

> *"From what is left by parents and those relatives, or orphans, or poor, are present, feed them out of the (property), and speak to them words of kindness and justice" (Q4:7–11).*

Ensuring women's financial security. Women in early Islamic society also engaged in commerce, trade, and professional activities. Khadijah, the Prophet's first wife, is renowned for her

entrepreneurial success and independent management of her wealth (Ali, 2010). Furthermore, women retained the right to receive a mahr, or dower, which remained their property and could not be taken without consent. The Qur'an and Sunnah also recognized women's right to initiate divorce through the process of khulʿ under certain conditions. These provisions reflect Islam's balanced approach to gender relations, safeguarding women's autonomy and promoting justice in both private and public spheres.

Islamic ethical teachings also explicitly prohibit forced marriage and coercion. Allah instructs:

*"And do not inherit women against their will"* (Q4:19)

This verse highligh the necessity of consent in marital arrangements. The Prophet Muhammad actively annulled marriages contracted without the woman's consent and consistently discouraged mistreatment of women. In his farewell sermon, he emphasized, "*Fear Allah concerning women, for you have taken them as a trust of Allah"* (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No.1218). This teaching underscores that marital relationships should be guided by mutual respect, moral accountability, and compassion, reinforcing the broader Islamic commitment to justice.

Early Islamic history provides numerous examples of women's active participation in public, political, and religious life. Figures such as Nusaybah bint Kaʻb, who defended the Prophet during the Battle of Uhud, and Umm Waraqa, recognized as a teacher of the Qur'an, illustrate that women were not relegated solely to domestic roles (Esposito, 2001). Their involvement in both social and religious spheres demonstrates that Islam's moral and legal framework historically supported women's agency, leadership, and engagement in the affairs of the community. These examples provide a foundation for advocating gender equality within contemporary Muslim societies, showing that ethical and spiritual principles can guide social reforms that empower women while remaining faithful to Islamic teachings.

Islam's ethical system explicitly condemns gender-based discrimination. Through its teachings on equality, human dignity, the right to education, economic participation, marital consent, and active engagement in public life, Islam establishes a comprehensive moral framework that protects and empowers women. The Qur'an, Sunnah, and early historical practices collectively demonstrate that gender justice is not only a spiritual imperative but also a practical requirement for building equitable societies. These principles provide a strong foundation for addressing contemporary challenges facing Muslim women in various contexts, including Nigeria, and offer ethical guidance for policy, education, and community reforms that promote gender equality and social justice.

**Critical Discussion: Interpretations, Culture, and Lived Realties**

The distinction between Islam and culture is analytically useful, but it should not be presented too simplistically. Gender norms in Muslim societies can emerge from multiple sources at once: scriptural interpretation, family structures, customary law, economic dependency, state institutions, political ideology, and social expectations. A practice may therefore be defended in religious language while also reflecting local customs or patriarchal interests. Conversely, a practice can be rejected by some Muslims as inconsistent with Islamic ethical principles while being accepted by others as a legitimate interpretation of Islamic law.

The scholarly debate over gender roles illustrates this complexity. Egalitarian interpreters emphasize Qur'anic passages that address men and women in parallel and argue that justice, moral agency, and reciprocity should guide interpretation. Hierarchical approaches, however, often emphasize differentiated family responsibilities and classical interpretations of verses such

as Qur'an 4:34. Contemporary scholarship does not treat this disagreement as merely a choice between 'Islam' and 'culture'; rather, it concerns hermeneutical method, authority, historical context, language, jurisprudence, and the relationship between textual norms and changing social conditions (Saeed, 2023).

This debate matters for Nigeria because religious interpretation can influence how communities understand education, mobility, marriage, political leadership, inheritance, and women's decision-making. Yet empirical evidence shows that these outcomes are also shaped by material conditions. For example, the Northern Nigerian home-visits study by Belaid et al. (2024) demonstrates that gender norms affected household responsibilities, access to resources, and maternal-health decision-making, and that community-based engagement could modify some of these relationships. The implication is that reform cannot depend solely on textual argument; it also requires institutional and community interventions.

The comparative Indonesian evidence adds another caution. White et al. (2024) found that patriarchal political attitudes were associated with lower support for women candidates and gender quotas, while university education was associated with more egalitarian views. This does not prove that Islam itself causes political exclusion, nor can Indonesian findings be transferred directly to Nigeria. It does, however, demonstrate why the relationship between religious identity, education, political attitudes, and women's representation must be examined empirically rather than assumed.

Accordingly, this paper adopts a position of qualified critique: Islamic teachings contain strong resources for affirming women's dignity, moral agency, property rights, education, and protection from injustice, but appeals to Islam alone do not explain contemporary outcomes. At the same time, describing every restrictive practice as merely 'cultural' risks overlooking the real influence of religious interpretation and institutions. A stronger analysis recognizes interaction among text, interpretation, culture, material conditions, and power.

## Challenges Facing Muslim Women in Nigeria

Despite the strong ethical foundations provided by Islam, Muslim women in Nigeria continue to encounter significant challenges that limit their full participation in society. These challenges arise from a complex interplay of religion, culture, historical context, and socio-political structures. While Islam provides explicit guidance on the rights and dignity of women, the lived experiences of Muslim women in Nigeria often reveal a gap between these ideals and social practice. These obstacles manifest across educational, political, economic, and social domains, with deep-rooted cultural norms frequently compounding structural inequalities.

## Educational Challenges

One of the most pressing challenges faced by Muslim women in Nigeria is underrepresentation in Islamic educational institutions. Access to religious education is often limited by a combination of structural barriers, social expectations, and inadequate institutional support. Many women, particularly in Northern Nigeria, are denied opportunities to pursue formal Islamic scholarship, resulting in a lack of female scholars and teachers in religious settings (Adegoke, 2011). Historically, women served as co-educators and transmitters of knowledge within their communities, yet contemporary systems often overlook these contributions. The absence of women in key educational roles diminishes their authority, restricts their capacity to influence curricula, and perpetuates gendered inequalities in religious literacy. This imbalance not only undermines women's personal development but also reduces the

potential for more inclusive interpretations of Islamic teachings that align with principles of gender justice.

**Political and Social Challenges**

Muslim women in Nigeria are also notably underrepresented in political and decision-making processes. Despite their significant demographic presence, cultural and religious barriers frequently discourage women from participating in politics. In many communities, traditional norms limit women's visibility in public life, framing political engagement as a male domain. Studies have observed that women in Nigerian party politics encounter "cultural and religious bottlenecks" that impede their involvement, ranging from restrictions on mobility to social stigmatization for political activism (Fahm, 2022). Civil society organizations such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) have made important strides in advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and the promotion of female leadership, yet progress remains inconsistent (Sarumi et al., 2019). The combination of cultural expectations and limited institutional support thus continues to hinder women from exercising their political rights and shaping policies that affect their lives.

**Economic Challenges**

Although Islam grants women explicit economic rights, including inheritance, property ownership, and engagement in trade, many Nigerian Muslim women remain economically marginalized. Cultural practices and patriarchal family structures often restrict women's inheritance rights, business activities, and access to financial resources. Research shows that women's participation in commerce, agriculture, and local markets is frequently limited by traditional norms that favor male decision-making and control over economic resources (Hanafi & Jibril, 2023). The resulting financial dependency exacerbates social vulnerability and reduces women's capacity to make autonomous decisions, further entrenching gender disparities. Economic empowerment is therefore a critical area where gaps between Islamic ethical principles and societal practices must be addressed.

**Cultural Practices and Legal Barriers**

In parts of northern Nigeria, cultural practices sometimes distort Islamic teachings, resulting in harmful social practices that disproportionately affect women. Forced and child marriages remain prevalent in certain communities, with young girls being married in mass ceremonies, often without consent. Domestic violence also continues to be a significant concern, with some interpretive traditions and cultural norms silencing women's voices within households. These practices demonstrate the tension between patriarchal cultural norms and the ethical imperatives of Islam, which emphasize justice, protection, and dignity for women.

The implementation of Sharia law in several northern states has further highlighted challenges for women's rights. While Sharia law has the potential to protect women in areas such as inheritance and family law, patriarchal interpretations sometimes undermine these protections, limiting women's legal recourse (Bawa, 2017). In addition, health-related issues continue to affect Muslim women, particularly in rural areas. High maternal mortality rates, limited access to healthcare, and restrictive consent practices hinder women's well-being and violate the Qur'anic objective of preserving life and protecting human dignity. These combined challenges illustrate the multifaceted obstacles Muslim women face in reconciling their religious, social, and legal rights in the Nigerian context.

Overall, the challenges confronting Muslim women in Nigeria are multidimensional, encompassing educational, political, economic, social, and health-related issues. They stem not from the ethical principles of Islam but from cultural misinterpretations, patriarchal traditions, and structural inequalities. Addressing these obstacles requires interventions that are both culturally sensitive and grounded in Islamic ethics, including promoting female education, encouraging political participation, supporting economic empowerment, and ensuring women's access to healthcare and legal protections. Bridging the gap between religious ideals and social realities is essential for the realization of gender justice within Nigeria's Muslim communities.

Additional empirical evidence strengthens these observations. UNICEF (2023) reported persistent gender and regional disparities in basic education in northern Nigeria and identified socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, insecurity, and institutional factors as barriers to girls' schooling. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's current data also show the continuing weakness of women's representation in Nigeria's House of Representatives, with women holding 15 of 356 seats (4.2%). These data demonstrate that political exclusion is not simply anecdotal, although they do not by themselves establish that Muslim identity is the cause of underrepresentation.

Health inequalities are similarly serious. The latest United Nations maternal mortality estimates place Nigeria's maternal mortality ratio at about 993 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2023 and estimate that Nigeria accounted for more than one-quarter of global maternal deaths that year (WHO et al., 2025). This national figure is not specific to Muslim women, so it should not be presented as a Muslim-women statistic. It is nevertheless relevant to the paper because a large proportion of Nigeria's Muslim population lives in northern regions where health-service access and gender norms can affect women's ability to obtain care.

## Addressing the Challenges: Islamic and Practical Solutions

Despite the significant social, economic, and political challenges confronting Muslim women in Nigeria, there are practical and ethically grounded strategies that can be employed to bridge the gap between Islamic ideals and social realities. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that integrates education, legal reform, economic empowerment, healthcare, and political participation, all while remaining consistent with Islamic ethical teachings.

### Promoting Islamic Education and Scholarship

A central strategy for empowering Muslim women is the promotion of Islamic education and scholarship. Female-focused schools, mentorship programs, and the recruitment of women teachers can greatly enhance women's religious literacy. Educated women can serve as scholars, teachers, and community leaders, thereby increasing the presence of gender-sensitive interpretations of Islamic texts (Adegoke, 2011). Such initiatives not only equip women with knowledge of their religious and legal rights but also challenge patriarchal interpretations that may restrict women's participation in society. Community-based workshops and study circles can further encourage critical engagement with religious texts, fostering a culture in which men and women collaboratively uphold the principles of justice and equity emphasized in Islam.

### Legal and Policy Reforms

Legal and policy reforms are equally critical in ensuring the protection of women's rights. The Nigerian government has enacted laws such as the Child Rights Act and anti-domestic

violence legislation, but enforcement is often uneven, particularly in regions where cultural practices overshadow legal mandates (Bawa, 2017). Islamic legal principles provide a foundation for these reforms, as Islam itself emphasizes justice, protection, and accountability. Strengthening the implementation of existing laws, coupled with targeted public awareness campaigns, can help reduce harmful practices such as forced and child marriages. Furthermore, training religious leaders in gender-sensitive approaches can prevent misinterpretations of Sharia and ensure that women's rights are upheld within both religious and legal frameworks (Sarumi et al., 2019).

**Economic Empowerment**

Economic empowerment is another crucial dimension in addressing gender-based inequality. Many Muslim women in Nigeria face economic marginalization due to cultural restrictions on inheritance, business, and access to capital (Hanafi & Jibril, 2023). Sharia-compliant microfinance programs and entrepreneurship initiatives can provide women with financial independence while respecting Islamic ethical guidelines. Supporting women's participation in trade, agriculture, and local businesses can increase their economic autonomy, reduce dependence on male relatives, and enhance their decision-making power within households and communities. Additionally, vocational training and capacity-building programs can equip women with practical skills that improve employment opportunities and promote sustainable development.

**Healthcare Access and Social Welfare**

Access to healthcare is another area where intervention is vital. Muslim women, particularly in rural northern Nigeria, often face limited healthcare services, high maternal mortality rates, and restrictive consent practices that hinder their well-being (Fahm, 2022). Establishing community-based maternal and reproductive health programs, employing female health workers, and providing culturally sensitive services can improve access and quality of care. These interventions align with the Qur'anic principle of preserving life and protecting human dignity (Qur'an, 2004, 5:32). Health education initiatives can also empower women to make informed choices about their bodies and families, thereby enhancing their autonomy and social participation.

**Encouraging Political Participation**

Finally, fostering political participation among Muslim women is essential for achieving gender justice. Leadership training, mentorship programs, and advocacy campaigns can encourage women to engage actively in politics and public life (Sarumi et al., 2019). Organizations such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria have successfully supported women in grassroots mobilization, policy advocacy, and decision-making processes. Expanding these initiatives, while addressing cultural and structural barriers, can ensure that women's voices are represented in governance and public policy, leading to more inclusive and equitable decision-making.

Addressing the challenges facing Muslim women in Nigeria requires a holistic approach that combines education, legal reform, economic empowerment, healthcare, and political engagement. Promoting Islamic education and gender-sensitive scholarship can strengthen women's understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Effective legal and policy reforms, guided by Islamic ethical principles, can protect women from harmful practices. Economic

initiatives and healthcare programs can enhance women's autonomy and well-being, while political empowerment ensures their active participation in public life. By integrating these strategies within the framework of Islamic ethics, Nigerian communities can work toward achieving social justice, gender equity, and the full realization of women's rights.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges faced by Muslim women in Nigeria and to bring social practices in line with Islamic ethical teachings, several key recommendations are proposed. First, efforts should be made to strengthen women's access to both Islamic and formal education by establishing more female-led schools, increasing the recruitment of female Islamic scholars, and providing scholarships and mentorship programs that enable girls and women to pursue higher learning. Enhancing religious literacy will empower women to understand their rights and counter patriarchal interpretations that restrict their participation in society.

Legal reforms are also essential; laws such as the Child Rights Act and anti-domestic violence legislation must be fully implemented, while imams, judges, and Sharia court officials should be trained in gender-sensitive jurisprudence to ensure that women's rights are upheld in legal and religious spaces.

Economic empowerment should be prioritized through Sharia-compliant microfinance schemes, vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and public awareness on Islamic inheritance rights, enabling women to gain financial independence and reduce vulnerability. Additionally, expanding access to healthcare especially maternal and reproductive services through community-based clinics, female healthcare workers, and health education initiatives will safeguard women's well-being in line with the Qur'anic principle of protecting life.

Finally, political participation should be encouraged by providing leadership training, strengthening advocacy groups such as FOMWAN, and eliminating cultural and structural barriers that limit women's engagement in public life. By integrating these educational, legal, economic, healthcare, and political strategies within an Islamic ethical framework, Nigerian Muslim communities can advance gender justice and promote the full realization of women's rights and dignity.

## CONCLUSION

Islamic teachings provide a clear ethical framework that condemns gender-based discrimination and affirms the inherent dignity, rights, and spiritual equality of women. The Qur'an and Sunnah consistently emphasize that both men and women are equal in moral responsibility and spiritual potential, establishing a foundation for justice, fairness, and mutual respect. These sources not only affirm women's spiritual standing but also provide concrete guidance on education, property ownership, economic participation, marital relations, and social engagement. Early Islamic history further illustrates women's active involvement in religious, educational, social, and even political spheres, demonstrating that Islam's ethical vision inherently supports women's agency and leadership.

The contemporary challenges faced by Muslim women in Nigeria—including limited access to education, economic marginalization, forced and child marriages, political exclusion, and inadequate healthcare cannot be attributed to Islam itself. Rather, these issues stem from cultural practices, patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, and structural inequalities that distort the religion's ethical teachings. Misunderstandings of Islamic law, combined with entrenched social norms, have often restricted women's opportunities and prevented them from fully realizing their rights. Consequently, addressing these disparities requires a nuanced

understanding that separates religious principles from cultural practices that undermine women's well-being.

Solutions to these challenges must integrate Islamic ethical principles with practical interventions in multiple spheres of life. Promoting female education and religious scholarship strengthens women's knowledge of their rights and empowers them to contribute to community decision-making. Legal reforms, including the effective implementation of the Child Rights Act, anti-domestic violence legislation, and gender-sensitive interpretations of Sharia law, are necessary to protect women from harmful practices. Economic empowerment initiatives, such as microfinance programs and entrepreneurship support, can enhance women's autonomy and reduce dependence on patriarchal structures. Expanding access to healthcare, particularly maternal and reproductive services, ensures the physical well-being of women, which is a core objective of Islamic ethics. Encouraging women's political participation through mentorship, leadership training, and advocacy further ensures that their voices are represented in governance and policy-making processes.

By aligning practical reforms with the moral and legal teachings of Islam, Nigerian Muslim communities have the potential to bridge the gap between religious ideals and lived realities. When education, law, economic opportunity, healthcare, and political engagement operate within the framework of Islamic ethics, gender justice becomes attainable. This approach not only empowers Muslim women but also strengthens the moral and social fabric of communities, promoting equity, social cohesion, and human development. In essence, the realization of women's rights in Nigeria is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity, one that Islam explicitly supports through its commitment to justice, compassion, and equality.

The evidence reviewed in this paper therefore supports a more careful conclusion than either a blanket defence of all practices in Muslim communities or a blanket attribution of gender inequality to Islam. Islamic sources provide substantial normative resources for dignity, moral responsibility, education, property, consent, and protection from injustice, but the translation of these principles into social outcomes depends on interpretation, institutions, economic resources, and community practice. The most defensible path for Nigerian policy and community reform is consequently one that combines religious literacy with empirical evidence, legal accountability, women's participation, and context-sensitive social interventions.

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