

ASSESSMENT OF MARRIED MUSLIM WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN WESTERN EDUCATION IN NORTH-WEST, NIGERIA

Dr. Muhammad Gusau Ahmad
Isa, Abubakar Dutsin-Amare & Zulaihat Kamaluddeen
Department of Islamic Studies
Federal University of Dutsinma, Katsina State, Nigeria
amgusau@mail.com 08030628094

Abstract

This paper titled "*Assessment of Married Muslim Women's Participation in Western Education in North-west, Nigeria*" discusses the extent and challenges of involvement of married Muslim women in formal western education within the Nigerian context. The paper is motivated by the observed low enrollment and retention rates of this group in educational institutions, despite the rising national emphasis on gender equity and educational access. The paper aims to explore the factors influencing their participation, including cultural, religious, socio-economic, and institutional barriers. The paper revealed that early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and perceived religious incompatibility significantly hinder women's educational advancement. However, the paper lameted that there is a growing awareness and support for female education among some Islamic scholars and communities. The paper recommends targeted policy interventions, including flexible learning schedules, sensitization campaigns, and the establishment of women-friendly educational centers that align with Islamic values, to enhance access and sustained participation of married Muslim women in western education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Assessment, Muslim Married Women, Participation and Western Education.

Introduction

The participation of married Muslim women in western education in Nigeria remains a significant area of inquiry, intersecting religion, gender, culture, and development. In the North-west Nigerian context where Islam is widely practiced marriage is not only a religious and social institution but also one that deeply influences women's access to education and other public opportunities. A *Muslim married woman*, in Islamic understanding, refers to a female adherent of Islam who has entered into a lawful marital contract (*nikāh*) with a man, fulfilling the conditions stipulated by the *Sharī'ah*. These conditions include the proposal (*ijāb*) and acceptance (*qabūl*), the consent of both parties (particularly the bride), the presence of witnesses, and the payment of the dower (*mahr*). Upon meeting these requirements, the marriage is considered consummated, granting both spouses specific rights and responsibilities. Muslims are enjoined to marry and the injunction to that effect is found in both the Qur'an and Sunnah. In the Qur'an Allah says:

Marry women, who seem good to you, two, three, four, but if you fear that you may not act justly among them then marry only one, or what your right hands possesses." (Qur'an 4:3)

While Islam does not prohibit education for women, including married ones, certain cultural interpretations and socio-economic realities continue to shape and sometimes restrict their

educational advancement. Historically, western education in Nigeria has been met with varying degrees of acceptance within Muslim communities. While some embrace it as a tool for progress, others view it with suspicion, associating it with foreign values that may conflict with Islamic teachings. This ambivalence particularly affects Muslim women, whose roles are traditionally centered on domestic responsibilities. When these women get married, their priorities are often expected to shift further towards family obligations, sometimes at the expense of personal development, such as pursuing formal education.

The central variables of this study *married Muslim women* and their *participation in Western education* reflect the need to assess the extent of their engagement, the enabling or hindering factors, and the broader implications for individual empowerment and national development. Despite increasing advocacy for girl-child education and women's inclusion in formal sectors, married Muslim women remain underrepresented in educational institutions. The problem stems from a combination of factors including religious misinterpretation, patriarchal norms, early marriage, economic hardship, and institutional policies that inadequately support married female students. This paper, therefore, seeks to critically assess the level of participation of married Muslim women in western education in Nigeria, identify the barriers and enablers affecting their involvement, and provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders. Through this analysis, the study hopes to bridge the gap between religious values, marital expectations, and educational aspirations.

Concept of Western Education

Western education has its roots in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, where the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual inquiry were highly valued. As noted by Marrou (1956), the Greeks established the first formal educational system, with philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle laying the foundations of Western thought and educational ideals. In the middle ages, the rise of Christianity and the establishment of monasteries and universities played a significant role in shaping western education. According to Leff (1992), the medieval universities, such as those in Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge, became centres of learning and intellectual discourse, focusing on subjects like theology, law, medicine, and the liberal arts.

The Renaissance period, which began in the 14th century, marked a revival of interest in classical Greek and Roman culture, as well as a shift toward humanist ideals. As described by Grendler (1989), Renaissance thinkers like Erasmus and Rabelais advocated for a more well-rounded education that emphasized not only the classics but also the study of literature, history, and the natural sciences. The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries further shaped Western education by emphasizing reason, empiricism, and the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed new educational theories and methods, as highlighted by Cubberly (1920) that challenged traditional approaches and advocated for a more student-centered and experience-based learning.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, western education underwent significant reforms and expansions. As outlined by Rury (2016), compulsory public education systems were established in many Western nations, and new educational philosophies and movements emerged, such as those of Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, and Maria Montessori, who emphasized child-centered learning and the importance of hands-on experiences. Contemporary western education is characterized by a diverse range of educational philosophies, approaches, and systems, reflecting the rich intellectual heritage and ongoing debates within the western tradition. However, as noted by Spring (2014), common themes include an emphasis on critical thinking, inquiry-based learning, and the pursuit of knowledge across various academic disciplines.

Islamic Education and Western Education

From assertions made above, it is evident that Western Education is the type of education that stemmed out of the western culture of reading, writing, and arithmetic (3Rs of education). This is closely related with the ethos of western lifestyle. The role of Muslims in the advancement in the fields of sciences and humanities is directly related to the driving force of Islam. It is this Islamic ideology that deserves the credit and not the individual Muslims. Islam is not merely a religion but rather a unique and comprehensive ideology that guides the life of the human being. Islam has made it obligatory on all believers to acquire knowledge for themselves. In the very first verse of the Qur'an revealed to him, the Prophet (S.A.W) was instructed to read:

"Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists). Has created man from clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. Has taught man that which he knew not. " [Qur'an 96:1-5].

The importance of reading, writing and acquiring knowledge has been explained in this verse in a most forceful and direct manner. Since it is obligatory for every believer to obey Allah's commandments, it was therefore announced by the Prophet (SAW) that learning and searching after knowledge was a sacred duty of every Muslim. The Qur'an appeals constantly to reason and experiment which is a blessing indispensable to arrive at proper judgment.

"Say: 'Are those who know equal to those who know not?' It is only men of understanding who will remember (ie. get a lesson from Allah's Signs and Verses)" [Qur'an 39:9]

The Qur'an also directs man to study the physical world in order to understand the reality and to appreciate more the greatness of the Creator. Although Islam points to the physical world to make people think, it encourages people to discover more laws. The Qur'an is fundamentally a book of guidance and a code of life for mankind to enable it to differentiate between the right and the wrong.

And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing. And He gave you hearing, sight, and

hearts (intelligence and affections) that you might give thanks
(to Allah) [Qur'an 16:78].

Allah (SWT) reminds the human being that he is born into this world without any knowledge of the existence, but He has equipped this human with the tools -the five human senses- that he needs to explore the might of the creation in order that h e/she may give thanks to the Creator. The Creator, Allah (SWT), has taught man since his presence on earth, "And he taught Adam all the names (of everything)" [Qur'an 2:31], through the agency of *wahi* (revelation). The last revelation that is composed of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, does not establish itself in its followers by blind faith or imitation, but rather by an invitation to the human being to think deeply about his existence and his surroundings.

Islamic methodology calls human beings to ponder upon the profound nature of this universe and observe its many phenomena that establish a definitive proof for the existence of one creator. We are constantly discovering more and more laws that make up this order. The motives and objectives of all civilizations (and the resulting urban growth world-wide) is firstly, to discover and research the resources in the universe and aspects of matter and energy that are useful to man. This is asserted in the Qur'an,

Do they not look in the dominion of the heavens and the earth
and all the things that Allah has created? [Qur'an7:185].

The achievements and contribution of early Muslim scholars which have been completely neglected and overlooked in the Western books on the history of sciences, should be unveiled and incorporated into the curriculum of the Islamic educational system. Since the Islamic civilization was the longest in the history of humanity, scientific and humanitarian branches of knowledge flourished under its rule, and Muslim scholars led the world in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, agriculture and sociology, to name a few. The unveiling of this heritage which paved the way for the emergence of the modern sciences will dignify the sense of originality and belonging in the Muslim youth. Evidently, Islam is an ardent promoter of secular education as some of its earliest scholars were even forbearers in the fields of science.

Muslim Women and Western Education

The relationship between western education and Muslim women has been complex and multifaceted, shaped by cultural, religious and sociopolitical factors. Historically, access to formal education for Muslim women has been limited in many parts of the Muslim world, due to traditional gender norms and interpretations of Islamic teachings that prioritized male education (Leeman, 2007). However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, reform movements and the spread of Western educational ideals and institutions played a significant role in promoting women's education in Muslim societies. As noted by Syed (2010), the establishment of modern schools and universities in Muslim-majority regions, often modeled after Western systems, opened up new opportunities for women to pursue higher education.

Nonetheless, the integration of western education for Muslim women has faced resistance and challenges. Badran (2005) highlights the debates and controversies surrounding the adoption of western curricula, which were sometimes perceived as a threat to traditional Islamic values and gender roles. Despite these challenges, many Muslim women have actively embraced Western education as a means of empowerment and social mobility. As discussed by Hoodfar (1997), educated Muslim women have played crucial roles in advocating for gender equality, challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islam, and contributing to the advancement of their societies.

However, the experiences of Muslim women in Western educational institutions have also been shaped by issues of cultural identity, discrimination, and integration. Zine (2008) examines the challenges faced by Muslim women in navigating their religious and cultural identities within the secular and often Eurocentric frameworks of western education. Contemporary discourse on western education and Muslim women encompasses a range of perspectives, from those who view it as a means of liberation and progress to those who critique it as a form of cultural imperialism or a threat to traditional Islamic values (Daun & Arjmand, 2005). Overall, the relationship between western education and Muslim women remains a complex and ongoing negotiation, reflecting the broader tensions and debates.

Challenges faced by Married Muslim Women

Muslim women in the Northwest today are bedeviled with numerous challenges which affect the smooth running of their lives as Muslims. And this is largely due to the influence of western education which comes in with western culture and way of life. To start with, Islam enjoins modesty in women in their utterance, appearance and behaviour in the society. This is aimed at preserving the dignity and pride of womanhood and to ensure the existence of refined moral values which largely unveils the woman. The great challenge facing the Muslim woman today is how the west expose woman as someone who is beautiful, attractive and a commodity of display and advertisement and some of the resultant effects according to interview data are as follows:

1. Time of Prayer: The Muslim woman often encounters problems whenever it is time for prayer in her academic career and also when she starts working. Most of the time, exams are fixed without respect for the time of prayer. Likewise, meetings are arranged without having consideration for time of prayer. And this is because it is not part of the schedule of western education to consider the time of prayer when planning events. The act of prayer is that which differentiates between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. This is based on the prophetic declaration that:

The covenant between us and them is prayer, whosoever abandons it has committed disbelief" (Tirmidhi, 2007)

In another narration the prophet (SAW) also stated:

Between a man and Shirk and kufr stands his giving up the salah

(Muslim, 2007).

2. Dress Code: When a Muslim woman works as a Banker, a Lawyer, an advertiser or she works in the Military forces or Para-military agencies or even as a student etc. she cannot help but to adhere to the dress code of such institutions. This does not depict the Islamic teaching on dress code; it is contrary to the Qur'ān injunction on modesty. Unfortunately, some Muslim women take it as a pride and an opportunity to dress anyhow. On the other hand, some women do not respect the Islamic form of dressing on their own accord, but largely due to the influence of western education as against the emphasis on proper covering by the Islamic texts. The Qur'ān States:

"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss"

(Qur'an 24: 30-31).

3. Eroding Family Responsibilities: The ultimate end of western education is to get enlightened and have a means of livelihood by seeking for a job or any entrepreneurial skill. It does not however, look at the purpose of creation of man as does the Islamic education. Some of the resultant effects particularly on the woman is the abandonment of family life. The purpose of creation of a woman as taught by Islam is to procreate and to rear new generation. Though she can also do some other task like engaging in economic pursuit, taking a career job etc., but procreation is her greatest and primary work that no one can rival her. She has been prepared for that by her creator both physically and psychologically. But due to the ego to achieve the goal of western education, women often abandon this primary responsibility in the pursuit of working career. As such, one finds women that have passed marriage age not married at all.

Furthermore, house-helpers and maids have now assumed the role of parents as far as taking care of children is concerned. Very early in the morning both parents leave for work, leaving the child to the care of the house-helpers. By the time they returned in the night, the child would have been in bed. Come next day, the child would still be asleep while parents would have gone out in the morning. When then do parents (especially the mother) stay with the child to train, correct and make the child happy?

4. Free Mixing of Sexes and Shaking Hands: Based on Islamic teaching, Sharīah has placed restrictions on men meeting strange women in privacy. Similarly, no man other than her husband and some restricted closest relatives are allowed to touch any part of a woman's body. The Prophet (SAW) was reported in many traditions as forbidden and warning against these kinds of practices and said: "Do not call on women in the absence of their husbands" (Bukhari, 1997).

Aisha also said: The Prophet (SAW) accepted the oath of allegiance from women only verbally without taking their hands into his own hand. He never touched the hands of a woman who was not married to him (Bukhari, 1997).

According to Maududi (2000) these commandments apply in respect of young women. He said: "it is lawful to sit with the women of advanced age in privacy and touching them is also not prohibited. It has been reported that Abubakar (R. A.) used to visit the clan where he had been suckled and shook hands with the old women, in Doi (1983) stated.

Western education promotes mixing of sexes in every activity. Be it learning in class, recreational activities, working places, etc. But Islam teaches and preaches contrary to that because of the evil consequences that it may lead to. These consequences range from promiscuity resulting to adultery and fornication and unhealthy competition between the two sexes which leads to loss of identity.

Using Public Bath, Swimming Pools, Dance Halls and Gymnasiums: The Sharīah teaching prohibited the Muslim woman from using public baths or swimming pools in order not to expose herself to evil inferences. The mixed gymnasiums where women remove their dress and wear tight and scanty costumes for doing various physical exercises and where the curves of their bodies and feminine charm may attract onlookers are also intolerable for Sharīah, Doi (1983). The tradition of the Prophet (SAW) states: "Whosoever woman removes her clothes in the houses other than that of husband, Allah tears off the *satr* between her and Allah" (Ibn Majah).

5. Legal Laxity: Islam has a comprehensive legal system called the Sharīcah which is fully rich in content. The knowledge of Sharīah is basic for every Muslim because it is his guiding principle. It also serves as a better deterrent than the western law. For example, the western law does not hold fornication or adultery by itself as a crime, it becomes a crime only when it is committed forcibly i.e. rape. In contrast to this, the Islamic law looks upon fornication by itself as a crime and so also rape and adultery. The basic difference between view points of the two systems of law gives rise to the difference in the punishment of the offence, with Islamic law prescribing the severest punishment.

In his analysis of the situation, Sheik posited that, the western nations abhor the infliction of a hundred lashes or stoning to death not because they dislike the idea of physical torture. It is because their moral sense has not yet fully developed. At first they regarded fornication and

adultery as something indecent; now they look upon it as fun as a pastime which amuses two persons for a little while. Otherwise, they would have realized that zina (adultery and fornication), whether it is committed voluntarily or forcefully, is in each case a social crime that affects the entire society (Sheik, 2012).

Prospects

After seeking for knowledge and using it for the development of the nation, the woman must remember the limitations and restrictions placed on her by her nature and by God's laws as far as Islam is concerned. There are things for which women were created and others for which men were created. This informs the margin that has always existed in public as well as private lives of citizens in every state. There is therefore the need for women to bear in mind their intellectual, psychological and social make-up so that they will prepare for which they are created and become productive and constructive members of their family, society and ummah (Sani, 2005).

Islamic education teaches the woman to always pray to Allah for good in this world and the hereafter and seek protection from the hell fire. Allah commands thus: "O you who believe protect yourself and your family from the hell fire ..." (Qur'an 66:6) It also teaches that, the woman is accountable to God of the people under her e.g. her children and other people living in her husband's house or her house. The Prophet (S.A.W) said: "you are all shepherds and you will be asked on the day of judgement about your flock" (Bukhari, 9117 & Muslim, 2007). It is a duty of every Muslim woman to know the contemporary world intimately, to be able to analyse it using principles and concepts from the Qur'an and Sunnah, and to offer alternatives, for the prosperity of her future and that of humanity at large. The Prophet (S.A.W) said: "The best of mankind is he who is beneficial to others".

Conclusion

Humans need social change when the existing human needs are overwhelming and when new materials suggest better ways of meeting human needs. Islamic education has brought about phenomenal changes in every aspect of a Muslims life. The work presents the importance of education in the life of every woman. But then at the same time, it has shown that, it is the duty of every Muslim to seek for a beneficial knowledge. Therefore, that the work was able to draw an analysis of both western education and Islamic education is not without reason. Islam is full of teachings and exhortations but most importantly it draws the attention of its adherents to the knowledge and fear of Allah at every step of his or her existence.

The society we live is western education driven therefore; the Muslim woman has no space to express herself in accordance with the dictates of Islamic education and her religion. However, that does not stop her from striving to achieve what the Almighty Allah has commanded of her. And hence, Muslims should endeavor to make the societies we live a conducive environment

for the Muslim woman to come out and seek for a living free of all the ills of western education highlighted.

Recommendations

1. **Community-Based Sensitization Programs:** Launch grassroots awareness campaigns involving religious leaders, traditional rulers, and educators to address misconceptions about Western education and emphasize its compatibility with Islamic values.
2. **Flexible and Gender-Sensitive Learning Opportunities:** Government and other education stake holders Establish flexible learning schedules, part-time programs, and home-based or distance learning options to accommodate the domestic responsibilities of married women.
3. **Islamic Integration into Western Curriculum:** Government should introduce culturally and religiously sensitive curricula that incorporate Islamic studies and moral instruction, reducing resistance from conservative communities.
4. **Scholarships and Financial Support Schemes:** Government and philanthropies should provide targeted scholarships, stipends, and incentives for married Muslim women to ease the financial burden of schooling and encourage sustained enrollment and participation.
5. **Enhancement of Adult and Continuing Education Centers:** Government and other education stake holders should expand access to adult literacy programs and continuing education centers tailored for married women, especially in rural and underserved areas.
6. **Policy Reforms and Legal Safeguards:** Government should enforce policies that protect the educational rights of married women and prevent discriminatory practices, early marriage, or forced withdrawal from school.

References

- Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic law, authority, and women*. One world Publications.
- Al-Bukhari, M. I.** (n.d.). *Sahih al-Bukhari* (M. Muhsin Khan, Trans.). Darussalam.
(Original work published ca. 9th century CE)
- Muslim, I. H.** (n.d.). *Sahih Muslim* (A. Siddiqui, Trans.). Darussalam.
- Al-Tirmidhi, M. I.** (n.d.). *Jami' al-Tirmidhi* (A. I. A. Azmi, Trans.). Darussalam.
(Original work published ca. 9th century CE)
- Al-Munajjid, M. S. (n.d.). *Women's education in Islam*. Islam Question and Answer.
<https://islamqa.info/en/answers/10680/womens-education-in-islam>
- Badawi, J. (1995). *Gender equity in Islam: Basic principles*. American Trust Publications.

- Badran, M. (2005). Between secular and Islamic feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and beyond. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1(1), 6–28. <https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2005.1.1.6>
- Daun, H., & Arjmand, R. (2005). Education in Europe and Muslim demands for competitive and moral education. *International Review of Education*, 51(5/6), 537–557. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7733-z>
- Doi, A. R. I.** (1983). *Women in Shari'ah (Islamic law)*. Ta-Ha Publishers.
- Hoodfar, H. (1997). The veil in their minds and on our heads: The persistence of colonial images of Muslim women. *Resources for Feminist Research*, 22(3/4), 5–18.
- Leeman, J. (2007). Educating European Muslims: Historical debates and current perspectives. W. Bijmens & S. Loobuyck (Eds.), *Europe, Islam, and Muslims* (pp. 89–110). Uitgeverij Peeters.
- Mernissi, F. (1991). *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*. Addison-Wesley.
- Roald, A. S. (2001). *Women in Islam: The Western experience*. Routledge.
- Sheikh, M. I. (2012). *The role of Muslim women in society: Rights, responsibilities and status*. Dar al-Falah.
- Syed, J. (2010). The representation of Western females in the educational discourse of South Asia. *South Asia Research*, 30(3), 241–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272801003000303>