

## MUSLIM WOMEN'S VOICES AND ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA

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### **ABSTRACT**

African women generally have long time been advocating for their rights in ensuring a gender balance in every societal activity, be it religious, economic, social, political and education. There are quite number of feminists among African Muslim women. This research work tries to reveal the reactions of African Muslim women on issues pertaining to their dealings with the public and family affairs and the activities of Islamic movements founded by them. The research adopted a qualitative research design; relying on secondary sources of data collection. The research reveals that African Muslim women are faced with the challenges like: unequal treatment by the authorities concerned in the society, beating in a matrimonial home, raping, denial of right to exercise some religious duties etc. on the notion that they are inferior and incapable of making relevant contributions as men. The study further establishes that there are Islamic movements in Africa that are solely belong to Muslim women. The movements, as revealed in the study, have the aim of promoting Islam through different means; focusing also on the issues that concern women, especially in the public. The study recommends that government in each country should engage in women empowerment program and make every opportunity available accessible to all; both men and women. It further recommends that Muslim women in Africa should seek knowledge continuously and be more active in advocating for their rights that are guaranteed by Islam and seek peaceful means in addressing their grievances.

**Keywords:** Muslim Women, Islamic Movements, Africa

## **Introduction**

It is universally believed that women are physically and mentally inferior to men, and their activities should be restricted to child bearing and rearing as well as domestic chores. Over the years women in Africa have been advocating for their participation in the political, economic and social development of their various countries. African Muslim women are part of the struggle and are seen participating from religious angle; establishing various Islamic movements as it will be revealed in this work (Gabriel, 1995). African women experiences of Islam reveal the reach and layered ways in which belief has shaped not only their deeply personal relationship to Allah but also broader political, social, economic and cultural processes (Shobana, 2022). The experiences they had gained enabled them to contribute immensely to societal development.

African history shows examples of pious Muslim women who have made notable contributions through their activities to profess their own faith and strengthen believers and practices within their communities over many centuries (Shobana, 2022). Among them are Sumayyah bint Khayyat (d. 615 AD), an Abyssinian, who was among the first women to accept Islam and was tortured to death alongside her husband, Yasir bn Amir by Abu Jahl for accepting Islam, Umm Ayman (d. 644 AD), an emancipated Ethiopian slave, who participated in the battle of Uhud during the Prophet's time, caring for the wounded and attending to them, Fatima Al-Fihri of Morocco (d. 876 AD) who is known for her charity and taking in young boys who studied under her and was also known as the first woman to set up a university in history, Aisha Al-Mannubiyya (d. 1,267 AD), from the village of Al-Manubba in Tunisia who studied extensively and was renowned for associating with the impoverished inhabitants of Tunis and for her kindness, generosity and ability to inspire others through both word and deeds, Sayyida Al-Hurra (d. 1552 AD) from the town of Chefchaouen, northwest of current Morocco who participated actively in politics and became the governor of the town of Tetouan upon the death of her husband, Nana Asmau of Nigeria (d. 1864 AD), the daughter of Shaikh Uthman Dan Fodio, who was a poet, historian, educator, a religious scholar who played a vital

role in the political, cultural and intellectual development in West Africa and the last, Fatima Soudi bint Abderremane (d. 1878), a descendant of Merina of Madagascar royal family who as a Queen of Mwali, the smallest island in Comoros grappled with the power struggle between France and Sultanate of Zanzibar (Mahdi, 2022).

The aspiration of African Muslim women to be part of the public activities is as a result of the belief they have in themselves. As every human being, women also have the capacity to contribute immensely to the society if the authorities concerned give such opportunity.

### **Muslim Women's Voices in Africa**

Muslim women in Africa had long time been demanding for their rights which are said to be marginalized. It means nothing but injustice if the women are deprived of their rights. Here, some African Muslim women's voices are documented as to reveal vividly the nature of the situation.

In Morocco, Muslim feminists endeavour to promote women's empowerment through education, knowledge and legal rights; they raise women's awareness about the family law and the labour code through their Non Government Organizations (NGOs) and community-based groups. The number of women's NGOs in Morocco has exploded during the last two decades, representing both the channeling of energies and passions into directly addressing and trying to solve single issues about women care profoundly, as well as the limitations of government programs in addressing social problems (Moha, 2021).

Some women's NGOs attempt to solve perceived problems directly, such as capacity building, or by establishing income-generating activities, orphanages, shelters for battered women or schools. Other attempts have been made to pressurize the government and the private sector into undertaking solutions and reforms. Women's NGOs are also active in politics, peace and legal human rights, among innumerable others. They engage in diverse activities, as a result, they have accumulated a great deal of experience in mobilizing women in local development. The challenge facing the NGOs is to elaborate autonomous strategies

and to establish themselves as independent forces in their partnership with the state and with political parties (Moha, 2021). It seems like the struggle of Muslim women in Morocco is not given much attention by the government making them to involve in self-empowerment. Government is the key master of all activities and must reasons in making women part of the country activities.

The African Women Development Fund (AWDF) in its publication puts on records some of the reactions of women in Africa as regards feminism. Some of the reactions of women are rich and varied, while some carry messages of anger, rage, frustration and pain (2009). Underneath is some of the reactions made by some African women. An Egyptian woman, Hakima Abbas, as documented by AWDF, reveals the challenges faced by African women to be the multiple oppression based on race, class, sexuality, gender amongst others. (African Women Development Fund, 2009). A Nigerian woman, Hajiya Mairo V. Bello, reveals that women in Africa are faced with the challenge of clarifying their values and balancing the multiple roles they play in making the society a humane place to live for everybody. She added that women in Africa need to fight against the tendency to undervalue themselves as the society taught them to do (African Women Development Fund, 2009).

Another Muslim woman, Rissi Assani, who is from Ghana, explained one of the challenges facing African Muslim women to be stigma as a result of negative perceptions of the concept of equality of men and women. She expresses the readiness to challenge the patriarchal nature of the communities and governments by promoting women's leadership and encouraging them to seek authority positions at the level of governance and be fully involved in decision-making processes. Another Muslim woman from South Africa established that throughout her life, she had committed herself to end racism, classism and sexist oppression against women (African Women Development Fund, 2009). In Zambia, a number of Muslim women also made a lot of complaints about physical and sexual violence, and this is said to be common among less educated ones (Simona, Mazuba and Harriet, 2015).

The voices of these African Muslim women call for serious attention of both individuals and government. It is an undisputable fact that society cannot achieve success without women participation. It is by nature that we are created from a single soul and therefore need to work hand in hand to be able to arrive at dependable solutions to the challenges. Referring to the origin of men and women, Allah says:

O mankind, fear your Lord, Who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through who you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an observer (Q4: 1).

Every authority needs to realize the Islamic message in this verse, a man in a highest position and a common woman from a village are from the same source and compassion must always be resorted to in favouring everyone; male or female.

### **Women Islamic Movements in Africa**

There are quite number of Islamic movements that belong to Muslim women in Africa. The movements originated through objectives that are based upon the faith. They also serve as a carrier of feminist advocacy concerning the issue of inferiority of women as believed by the society. The movements are listed below.

### **Women Islamic Movements in Ghana**

Muslim women in Ghana deemed it necessary in 1960s to mobilize themselves into an active group to prove to the public, particularly, the non-Muslims who believed that, the highest office of the Muslim woman is the home and rendering services to husband and children. Among the women Islamic movements in Ghana are the following:

1. *Al-Ansāriyyah* Islamic Society: This is the women's wing of *Ahlu-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah*. It was formed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, 2003 by Hajia Hajara Sidik and Hajia Sakina Ja'far who saw the need to form an association to uplift the image of Islam through women activities. The society has the following objectives:  
(a) To uplift the image of Islam in Kumasi and its environs.

- (b) To educate their children in line with Islamic principles and improve the social standard of Muslim women.
  - (c) To promote the interest and foster good relationships among members.
  - (d) To teach their members how to recite and read the Qur'an in its original text, Arabic and interpretations.
2. The Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Ghana (FOMWAG): The association was founded in 1992. The founders felt the need to mobilize Muslim women of Ghana under the umbrella body as to give them voice and recognition.
  3. *Tijāniyyah* Muslim Women Association: The association was set up in Ghana in 1952. The objectives were to foster brotherhood, inculcate the virtues of Islam as well as *Tarīqah* (*Sūfī* path) into the women, making the masses aware of the importance of women's education (Agyare, 2011).

The effort of Ghana Islamic movements of women is strongly geared towards empowering the members through education as presented above as to give them voice and recognition. This is an indication that, women, when given the opportunity have a lot to contribute to societal development. Their deprivation will equally result to waste of human resources.

### **Women Islamic Movement in Nigeria**

The most recognized Islamic movement in Nigeria is the Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN). It was founded in 1985 in Minna, Niger State, Nigeria. Prior to the formation of FOMWAN, there was no distinct forum where the voice and yearnings of Muslim women could be coordinated in a united form. Hence, with the organizing ability and untiring energy of the first Amirah (Women Leader) of the organization, Hajia Aisha Lemu, FOMWAN has become a household name not only within the Muslim circles in Nigeria but also among all progressive minds outside the country (FOMWAN, 2007).

FOMWAN has made significant contributions in political mobilization of women and has attempted to shift some of the hegemonic discourses on women to ones that are more favourable (177). The objectives of this organization are listed as follows:

- (a) To create awareness of the true teachings of Islam in the Qur'an and *Sunnah* among Muslim women, and to encourage women to live in accordance with those teachings.
- (b) To promote and propagate the cause of Islam in Nigeria and beyond.
- (c) To make a positive impact on National matters both religious and secular with a view to safeguarding the interest of Islam.
- (d) To unite and coordinate Muslim women's organization in Nigeria so as to enable them speak with one voice, by acting and making decisions together.
- (e) To serve as a liaison body between Muslim women and the Governments (Federal, State and Local) of Nigeria.
- (f) To do away with sectarianism, ethnic and other divisive factors among Muslim women in all parts of the country (FOMWAN, 2007).

FOMWAN is therefore a Muslim women organization in Africa that enables women present any challenge confronting them, especially, as relate to public dealings. The movement is a strong one which is recognized by both Muslims and non-Muslims in the country and at the international level.

### **Women Islamic Movement in Egypt**

In 1932, Muslim women movement was created in Egypt out of the existing Islamic organization known as Muslim Brotherhood, whose founder was Hassan Al-Banna. The movement was given a name as *Firqatul-Akhwātil-Muslimīn* (the Muslim Sisters' Group). The group consisted mainly of the daughters, wives, and other relatives of the brothers. The aim in forming the Muslim Sisters' Group was to uphold the Islamic ethos and spread virtue through lectures and women-only gatherings. The women's organization did not have its own head; instead, it was under the authority of the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, who communicated with the sisters through a female deputy. Soon, Al-Banna soon appointed a

man, Shaikh Mahmud Al-Gohari, to supervise all women's activities and act as a link between the women activists and the Supreme Guide (Abdel-Latif, 2008).

Despite a promising beginning, the activities of the women's division soon came to a standstill due to lack of female cadres. Al-Banna approached Zainab Al-Ghazli, an icon of Islamist women activism at the time, to help revive the division. She declined, preferring to focus on her independent work. It was not until 1943 that a group of 120 young women who attended Al-Banna's weekly sermon formed the nucleus that revived the Muslim Sister's Group (Abdel-Latif, 2008).

### **Women Islamic Movement in Zambia**

In Zambia, Muslim women are also organized through associations. There are two prominent organizations linked to Muslim women in Lusaka, namely, the Lusaka Muslim Women Trust (LMWT) and Zambia Islamic Child Care Education and *Da'wah* Association (ZICEDA). The LMWT provides female religious teachers in four townships of Lusaka (Matero, Old Kanyama, Chawama and Mtendere) where the majority of the participants are lower class women. By the end of the last century, Muslim women have already taken their place in the growing Muslim community as LMWT substantially contributed to the affirmation of the Zambian Muslim women identified through religious instruction, regular gatherings and charitable projects (Nelly, 2019).

It is a good development to have such women movements in Zambia. Carrying out religious activities and helping others through charity confirms their good social relation in their communities which is expected from a good individual, either male or female.

### **Women Islamic Movement in South Africa**

In South Africa, the Muslim women movement was established in 1970 in Durban, and since its inception has dealt with numerous women's issues in South Africa. These issues include inviting foreign women guests to deliver speeches, establishing a Women's Council;



campaigning for women to be allowed spaces and attempting to form a 'Women's Islamic Movement'. The 'women in mosques' campaign attracted a great deal of attention in the Muslim community. The MYM campaigned for mosques to provide facilities where Muslim women could pray. Many of South Africa's mosques especially in the northern provinces have no prayer facilities for women in their mosques (Zubeida, 2004).

As with other International Islamic revivalist movements at the time, the participation of women in Muslim life was important for the MYM. The movement's insistence on the public involvement of women was one of the main reasons for it earning the disapproval of the conservative '*ulamā*' (Muslim scholars). For the '*ulamā*', the MYM's call for women to be accommodated in the mosques, conventions, youth camps and other programmes where men and women participated together, even though segregated, were seen as a deviance against the version of Islam that they had been promoting (Zubeida, 2004).

It is important to note that limiting women from participating in public activities and failure to create space for them in the mosque are violations of women's rights in Islam. As men have role to play in the aspects of religion, social, economic, family and political affairs, women also have the same. The rights of women in those aspects will be discussed as solutions in the next sub-heading of this research work.

### **Women Rights in Islam**

Islam accords rights to human beings including women, irrespective of their colour, gender, race and nationality. Muslims are thus cautioned not to engage in anything which violates the rights of others. Some of the rights of women in Islam are listed here:

1. Equality: According to the Qur'an, men and women are equal before Allah. No where in the Qur'an, from where quality is derived, is the woman made inferior to man. Allah says in the Qur'an:

Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim men, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting

women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so, for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward (Q33:35).

Allah further says:

Whoever does good whether male or female and he is a believer, We will most certainly make him live a happy life, and We will most certainly give them their reward for the best of what they did (Q16 : 97).

It becomes obvious in these verses that men and women are equal before their Creator, Allah. Rewarding people for what they had done is not gender-basis. Each one, either a male or a female gets reward of what he or she does, in matters relating to religion, without compromise.

2. Right to Choose a Husband: Women in Islam have been granted full freedom in the choice of her husband. According to Islamic law, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent. In connection to this, the Qur'an states:

And when you have divorced women and they have ended (their term of waiting), then do not prevent them from marrying their husbands when they agree among themselves in a lawful manner (Q2: 232).

Preventing them from marrying men whom they wish is a violation to their rights as the above verse states. So, they are very free to choose a husband that their minds soften with provided he is a Muslim.

3. Right to Fair Treatment in Marriage: Islam recognizes monogamy and polygamy and makes regulations to govern each system. It limits the number of wives to be taken to four (Abdulhamid, 2016). Women must be treated with mercy by their Muslim husbands. Allah says:

And they (women) have rights similar to those against them in a just manner, and the men have a degree over them (Q2: 228).

Having a degree over a woman as stated in the above verse means that men are to treat women more fairly than they treat them. It thus means that any form of maltreatment against women must be avoided.

4. Right to Acquire Education: In Islam, both men and women have the capacity to study, understand and teach. This is because, the more a person, male or female, studies the creation and its workings, the more he or she would appreciate the Divine Being who originated and sustains all creation. Regarding seeking knowledge, the following Qur'anic verses state in general term:

Recite in the name of your Lord Who created. Created man from a clinging substance. Recite, and your Lord is the Most Generous. Who taught by the pen (Q96: 1-5).<sup>5</sup>

It is through knowledge women can contribute meaningfully to the society. A knowledgeable woman trains her child through the spirit of knowledge and such a child is surely expected to behave well in the society.

5. Right to Dressing according to Religious Dictate: Modesty is a virtue enjoins upon Muslims, men and women. (Zubeida, 2004). The Qur'an states:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty, that will make for them greater purity, and Allah is well aware of what they do. And say to the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or those whom their right hands possess, or the male servants not having need (of women), or the children who have not attained knowledge of what is hidden of women; and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! So that you may be successful (Q24:30-31).

According to the verses, both men and women have right to proper dressing in Islam. As for the women, they are not allowed to display their beauty and adornments except for that which must be ordinarily appear. What may appear according to majority of Muslim scholars include face and hands and whatever appears of their body owing to uncontrollable factors such as the blowing of the wind, or out of necessity such as the bracelets or even the outer clothes

themselves. Likewise, their dress must be loose enough so as not to describe the shape of their body (Badawi, 1969).

Therefore, based on understanding from the above verses, no Muslim woman is expected to be denied of her right to dressing as her religion prescribes. And the command is purely good for the society, especially in the current situation we found ourselves, where women appear naked in public without fear of consequences.

6. Right to Participation in Public: It is the right of a woman in Islam to participate in public affairs that are said to be lawful in Islam. The Qur'an states:

The believers, men and women are protectors of one another; they enjoy what is just and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity and obey Allah and His apostle. On them will Allah pour His mercy; for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise (Q9: 71).

The obligation of commanding and ensuring what is good in the society as well as suppressing evil by Muslims, men and women depicts that every Muslim, irrespective of gender, can contribute significantly to societal development by encouraging the good and forbidding unlawful acts.

7. Right to Economic Activities and Possession of Properties: Women in Islam also have rights to engage in business activities that are considered lawful. She likewise has the right to own properties. The Qur'an reads:

O you who believe! When you deal with each other in transactions involving future obligations in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing... (Q2: 228).

The content of this verse deals with testimony in case of financial transactions (Saira, 2014). It is clear that the instruction in the verse is general, involving men and women who are believers. This confirms the participation of men and women in trading activities. Allah says in another verse:

Men shall have the benefit of what they earn and women shall have the benefit of what they earn (Q4: 32).

So, whatever is acquired of properties through a man's or a woman's effort belongs to him or her. A woman has the right to claim ownership of what belongs to her as a man does. Indeed, women are protected as men in Islam. Discussing rights of women is never an exaggeration. It is part of the religion and must be respected by everyone including the government. Neglecting it means neglecting the divine prescriptions and upholding it depicts upholding the divine dictates.

### **Conclusion**

African women are faced with the problem of gender discrimination because the society considers them as inferior who could not withstand males in any dealing. Even some of the Muslim scholars are of the opinion that Muslim women are not to participate in public affairs for the religion has not permitted them. In response to this and other related issues like rape, beating by the husband, denial of education among others, African Muslim women express their dissatisfaction and were able to form some movements as to empower themselves religiously, educationally, socially, economically and politically. Islam reserves undisputed rights for women, these include equality, right to choose a husband, right to fair treatment in marriage, right to acquire education, right to dressing according to religious dictates, right to participate in politics and right to economic activities and possession of properties.

This research therefore recommends that government of each country should see the reason in empowering women in general by making all the opportunities available and accessible to all; both men and women. Muslim scholars who see the participation of women in public activities that are meant for the success of the society as a violation of Islamic law should seek more knowledge in the aspect of Islamic feminism and not to prohibit what Islam prescribes. Also, Muslim women in Africa should continuously seek knowledge and be more active in advocating for their rights that are granted by Islam and seek peaceful means in addressing it.

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