Articles

Breaking Barriers
Muslim Women's Scholarship and Engagement in Higher Education Leadership in Nigeria

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Despite the global drive for gender equality and inclusive leadership, Muslim women remain significantly underrepresented in positions of higher education leadership in Nigeria. This gap not only reflects broader issues of gender and religious disparity, but also hampers the full potential of educational institutions to benefit from diverse leadership perspectives. This study explores Muslim women's engagement in higher education leadership in Nigeria. By scrutinizing global trends and specific challenges that Muslim women face, it identifies barriers obstructing their rise into educational leadership roles, and underscores the imperative of overcoming these obstacles for societal and academic progress. Employing a qualitative approach, the research illuminates the experiences of Muslim women, and considers the intersectional nature of gender and religion in educational leadership contexts. Using survey data, it discerns prevalent barriers, ranging from cultural expectations to institutional hurdles. It also elucidates coping strategies and narratives of resilience. The study's findings underscore the necessity of policy interventions and inclusive practices to foster diversity and empower Muslim women in leadership roles. The study recommends that higher education institutions implement targeted mentorship programs, gender-sensitive leadership training, and institutional reforms to create pathways that support Muslim women's leadership journeys. This study contributes to existing knowledge by shedding light on an overlooked demographic and advocates for concerted efforts to dismantle

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barriers hindering their participation in higher education leadership, thus fostering more inclusive and equitable environments.

Keywords: Muslim women, Higher education leadership, Nigeria, Intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholarship on leadership education and gender dynamics in higher education has grown significantly. Key areas of focus include the impact of gender on leadership styles, the challenges women face in attaining leadership positions, and the influence of institutional policies on gender equity. This study contributes to this discourse by delving into the experiences of Muslim women in Nigeria who aspire to, and engage in, leadership roles within the higher education landscape. Drawing inspiration from a range of scholarly works that explore gender, leadership, and education (Guthrie et al., 2021; Komives & Sowcik, 2020; Nash et al., 2017), this research sheds light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim women pursuing leadership roles in higher education institutions.

Globally, women's representation in higher education leadership positions remains disproportionately low, with persistent gender disparities in crucial decision-making roles (Webb et al., 2020; Whittaker & Montgomery, 2022). While there has been significant progress in promoting gender equity in various sectors, including academia, the underrepresentation of women, particularly those from minority groups, continues to pose a challenge to achieving inclusive and diverse leadership (Downs et al., 2014; Tariq & Syed, 2017).

The status of women in higher education leadership positions reflects broader social and cultural norms, and these challenges are even more pronounced for Muslim women. The intersectionality of gender and religion creates unique barriers that necessitate a nuanced understanding of their experiences. Despite the rich cultural and academic history in Nigeria, Muslim women face distinctive challenges in accessing and thriving in leadership roles within higher education institutions.

The decision to focus on Muslim women in Nigeria arises from recognizing that gender disparities in leadership are often compounded by cultural, religious, and societal factors (Alabi & Ramsden, 2021; Hayden et al., 2018). Despite the strides made in women's empowerment and education, Muslim women encounter specific obstacles in pursuing and

sustaining leadership roles in higher education. Identifying these barriers is crucial for addressing Muslim women's challenges and fostering an inclusive and diverse higher education sector that is representative of the broader population.

In Nigeria, where Islam is the predominant religion, the challenges faced by Muslim women in higher education leadership roles are deeply rooted in cultural norms and societal expectations (Bako & Syed, 2018; Lawson, 1995). Understanding and addressing these challenges is imperative for fostering an environment where all individuals, regardless of gender and religious identity, can contribute meaningfully to advancing education and society.

This research explores the experiences of Muslim women in Nigeria who aspire to, and engage in, higher education leadership roles. By doing so, the study unveils the multifaceted barriers that impede their progress and illuminates Muslim women's contributions to higher education's academic and administrative spheres.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policies and practices that can remove barriers hindering Muslim women's leadership aspirations. By understanding their challenges, educational institutions can implement targeted interventions to create more inclusive and supportive environments. Furthermore, acknowledging and harnessing the potential of Muslim women in leadership roles can contribute to the overall development of higher education in Nigeria.

This research aligns with the broader global agenda of promoting gender equity in leadership, recognizing that inclusivity benefits individuals and enhances the quality and effectiveness of institutions and their societal impact (Chen et al., 2020; Coers et al., 2023). In particular, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on breaking gender barriers in higher education leadership, with a specific focus on the experiences of Muslim women in Nigeria. It is important to acknowledge that in Islamic contexts, discussions around gender equity are shaped by religious principles and cultural norms, raising the question of whether such initiatives align with Islamic values. Thus, this study considers both the global push for gender equity and its acceptability within the framework of Islamic teachings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse surrounding women's participation in higher education leadership roles in contemporary academia has garnered significant

attention. Historically, women have been underrepresented in leadership positions across various sectors, including higher education. Despite advancements in gender equality and increased access to education, women face systemic barriers that inhibit their progression into leadership roles (Morin, 2022, p. 216). In the context of higher education, these barriers are multifaceted and encompass both structural and cultural factors. Structural barriers include institutional biases, lack of mentorship opportunities, and gendered expectations perpetuating the glass ceiling effect, limiting women's upward mobility (McCandie, 2023; Watson, 2024). In addition, women often encounter challenges related to work-life balance, discriminatory hiring practices, and unequal access to resources and funding (Morin, 2022).

Culturally, entrenched gender norms and stereotypes contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Societal expectations regarding women's roles and responsibilities often prioritize caregiving and domestic duties over career advancement, further marginalizing women in leadership roles (Lee et. al., 2023; Oyiana, 2021). These pervasive gender biases create a hostile environment for women aspiring to leadership positions, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and inequality within higher education institutions.

Within the broader discourse on women in leadership, Muslim women's experiences represent a unique intersection of gender, religion, and culture. Muslim women encounter distinct challenges and opportunities shaped by their religious identity, cultural background, and socio-political context. In Nigeria, Muslim women constitute a significant portion of the population, yet their representation in higher education leadership remains disproportionately low.

Studies on Muslim women in higher education leadership have highlighted the complexities of navigating both gender and religious identities within academic settings. Muslim women often face stereotypes and misconceptions regarding their capabilities and commitment to leadership roles due to prevailing Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobic narratives (Akel, 2021; Kperogi, 2017; 2024). These stereotypes intersect with gender biases, creating additional barriers for Muslim women aspiring to leadership positions (Almaki et. al., 2016). Furthermore, cultural norms within Muslim communities may perpetuate patriarchal structures that hinder women's leadership ambitions. Traditional interpretations of religious texts and societal expectations regarding gender roles may discourage women from pursuing higher education or seeking leadership positions outside the

domestic sphere (Al-Lamky, 2007; Ali et al., 2011). As a result, Muslim women in Nigeria confront intersecting layers of discrimination and marginalization that limit their access to and progression within higher education leadership. However, despite these challenges, there are examples of resilience and empowerment among Muslim women in higher education leadership. Initiatives promoting gender inclusivity and diversity within academic institutions have provided platforms for Muslim women to showcase their leadership abilities and challenge stereotypes (Ali & Rasheed, 2021; Reeves et al., 2012). In addition, the growing recognition of the value of diverse perspectives in leadership has led to increased advocacy for including Muslim women in decision-making processes within higher education institutions (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017; Hamzah et al., 2016).

Intersectionality theory provides a critical framework for understanding the interconnected nature of social identities and the intersecting systems of oppression that shape individuals' experiences. Within the context of higher education leadership, intersectionality highlights how gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and other identity markers intersect to produce unique forms of privilege and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). For Muslim women in Nigeria, intersectionality manifests in complex ways as they navigate multiple axes of identity within a predominantly patriarchal and Islamophobic society. Intersectional analyses reveal the compounding effects of gender and religious discrimination on Muslim women's access to leadership positions and their experiences within academic settings (Tariq & Syed, 2018). Furthermore, intersectionality underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the interconnected systems of oppression that perpetuate inequality within higher education institutions. By centering the experiences of marginalized groups, including Muslim women, intersectionality encourages a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics and calls for structural changes to promote equity and inclusivity in leadership roles (Collins, 2019).

The literature on women in higher education leadership, particularly within the context of Muslim women in Nigeria, underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to address the intersecting barriers they face (Balogun, 2023; Igiebor, 2021; Lawson, 1995; Mack, 2008; Sarumi et al., 2019). By acknowledging the complex interplay of gender, religion, and culture, academic institutions can work towards creating more inclusive environments that value diversity and promote the full participation of all individuals in leadership positions. Efforts to dismantle systemic discrimination and promote intersectional approaches to leadership development

are essential for breaking down barriers and fostering a more equitable higher education landscape.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative design, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complex social phenomena surrounding Muslim women's participation in higher education leadership roles. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable to understanding the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and barriers faced by marginalized groups, such as Muslim women, within organizational contexts. The participants in this study consisted of Muslim women who hold, or have held, leadership positions within Nigerian higher education institutions. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling techniques to ensure the inclusion of participants with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Criteria for participant selection included: holding a leadership position within a Nigerian higher education institution, self-identifying as Muslim, and demonstrating a willingness to participate in the study. Efforts were made to recruit participants from various disciplines, institutions, and geographical regions within Nigeria to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

Data collection was primarily conducted through semi-structured questionnaires supplemented by document analysis. Semi-structured questionnaires provide a flexible framework for exploring participants' lived experiences, challenges, and strategies for navigating higher education leadership as Muslim women. The questionnaire was designed to elicit detailed narratives and insights in the following areas: experiences of accessing leadership positions within the higher education sector; perceived barriers and challenges faced by Muslim women leaders; strategies employed to overcome the obstacles and promote inclusivity; aspirations and recommendations for enhancing Muslim women's participation in higher education leadership. The questionnaires were distributed across platforms that allowed for the sharing of Google form links, depending on participants' preferences and logistical constraints. The questionnaire also had a section that addressed participants' consent and space for responses taken verbatim for analysis.

Document analysis complemented the questionnaire data by examining relevant organizational documents, policies, and reports on higher education leadership in Nigeria. Documents such as institutional guidelines,

diversity initiatives, and strategic plans offer additional insights into the institutional context and prevailing discourses surrounding gender and religious diversity in leadership roles. The data collected from the questionnaire and document analysis provided valuable insights into the perceptions, challenges, and contributions of Muslim women in higher education leadership in Nigeria.

FINDINGS

The study explored the experiences of Muslim women in higher education leadership in Nigeria, shedding light on their challenges, coping strategies, and contributions. A significant proportion of the participants (72.5%) were female, primarily aged between 18 and 35 years (92.5%). A majority had postgraduate education (55%), and (47.5%) were unemployed.

The findings showed that a substantial number of respondents (57.5%) have personally encountered or observed the challenges that Muslim women face in leadership positions within higher education. The challenges identified included: stereotypes and discrimination related to the wearing of the hijab or modes of dress, lack of respect, harassment, and intimidation from superiors and society, religious sentiments, and gender inequality in leadership opportunities. These barriers hinder the progression and effective leadership of Muslim women in academia.

Despite facing multifaceted challenges, Muslim women in higher education leadership demonstrate resilience and employ various coping strategies. Some participants highlighted the importance of acknowledging and recognizing the contributions of Muslim women and advocating for inclusivity and diversity in leadership roles. In addition, suggestions were made to hold seminars, conferences, and awareness campaigns to highlight the experiences of Muslim women. This would better integrate their perspectives into academic discourse and empower them to take up leadership positions.

The study underscores the significance of understanding the challenges and contributions of Muslim women in higher education leadership for fostering diversity, inclusivity, and equitable representation. Participants strongly agreed (87.5%) that exploring Muslim women's academic experiences is crucial, citing benefits such as diversity, cultural competence, role modeling, mentorship, and research scholarship. They emphasized the need to address stereotypes, discrimination, and gender biases to create an enabling environment for Muslim women to thrive in leadership roles.

These findings suggest a number of recommendations to better highlight and integrate Muslim women's experiences, challenges, and contributions in higher education leadership into academic discourse. These include: organizing regular seminars, conferences, and roundtable discussions to address the issues faced by Muslim women and promote awareness; incorporating Muslim women's perspectives into curriculum development and academic research; providing support and mentorship programs to encourage Muslim women to pursue leadership positions; educating stakeholders and the broader community about Islamic principles and the importance of gender equality in higher education leadership; creating policies and initiatives that promote inclusivity, diversity, and respect for different religious beliefs within academic institutions.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences, challenges, and contributions of Muslim women in higher education leadership in Nigeria. The findings revealed crucial insights into Muslim women's responses in this context. The study showed a notable degree of awareness among the participants regarding Muslim women's challenges in higher education leadership roles. The majority of respondents acknowledged the significance of exploring the experiences of Muslim women in this context. This heightened awareness underscores the recognition of a pertinent issue within the Nigerian higher education milieu. Moreover, the study identified potential benefits, such as diversity enhancement, equitable representation, cultural competence, and scholarly contributions, which would accentuate the multifaceted advantages inherent in comprehending and addressing the challenges faced by Muslim women in leadership roles. Furthermore, the study's findings underscore a range of perspectives regarding the challenges encountered by Muslim women in higher education leadership, including issues such as stereotyping, discrimination, dress code restrictions, lack of respect, and stigmatization. These challenges underscore the systemic barriers that impede the full engagement and advancement of Muslim women in leadership positions. Addressing these challenges is pivotal for nurturing an inclusive and supportive environment conducive to the flourishing of Muslim women in higher education leadership roles.

The survey data provides a nuanced portrayal of Muslim women's challenges in higher education leadership. The challenges participants highlighted reflect deeply ingrained societal norms and biases that curtail the

opportunities available to Muslim women in leadership capacities. Moreover, the intersectionality of gender and religion exacerbates these challenges, further marginalizing Muslim women within the higher education landscape. Despite their formidable challenges, Muslim women occupying leadership positions in higher education make significant contributions to academia. Respondents underscored their roles as representatives of the female populace, mentors, advocates of Islamic values, and champions of diversity and inclusivity. These contributions highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing Muslim women's diverse perspectives and talents in leadership roles. By harnessing their unique skills and experiences, Muslim women can catalyze positive change and foster a more inclusive and equitable higher education environment.

The findings of this study carry important implications for policy formulation and operational practices in higher education institutions. Firstly, there is an imperative to enact policies aimed at dismantling the systemic barriers obstructing the participation and advancement of Muslim women in leadership roles. This may entail the implementation of anti-discrimination measures, the promotion of cultural competency training, and the fostering of inclusive recruitment and promotion protocols. In addition, educational institutions must prioritize the creation of supportive environments that accommodate Muslim women's religious and cultural needs, including provisions for religious attire and facilitation of religious practices. Moreover, targeted initiatives geared towards empowering and supporting Muslim women in pursuing leadership roles in higher education are warranted. These initiatives could encompass mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, and specialized networking platforms tailored to the unique requirements of Muslim women. By investing in the professional growth and advancement of Muslim women, educational institutions can harness the full potential of this underrepresented demographic and cultivate a more diverse and inclusive leadership landscape.

Future research should build upon the findings of this study to deepen our understanding of the experiences and challenges Muslim women encounter in higher education leadership. This may entail qualitative inquiries aimed at elucidating the nuanced dynamics and contextual factors shaping the experiences of Muslim women in leadership roles. In addition, longitudinal investigations can provide insights into the career trajectories and outcomes of Muslim women pursuing academic leadership roles. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for comparative research examining Muslim women's experiences across diverse cultural, geographical, and

institutional contexts. Researchers can discern commonalities, distinctive challenges, and opportunities facing Muslim women in varied settings by adopting a comparative lens. This comparative approach can inform the development of contextually relevant interventions and policies to support Muslim women's leadership aspirations in higher education. This study offers valuable insights into the experiences of Muslim women in higher education leadership in Nigeria. By addressing systemic barriers and leveraging Muslim women's distinctive talents and perspectives, educational institutions can foster a more inclusive and equitable leadership landscape that benefits individuals, institutions, and society.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined a significant realm that remains underrepresented and often misunderstood. Across the landscape of Nigerian academia, Muslim women continue to confront multifaceted challenges that impede their scholarly pursuits and leadership aspirations. However, amidst these barriers, this research has uncovered many insights, shedding light on Muslim women's experiences, aspirations, and contributions in higher education leadership roles.

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay of sociocultural, religious, and institutional factors that shape the educational trajectories and leadership journeys of Muslim women in Nigeria. Despite facing systemic discrimination and societal expectations, Muslim women exhibit resilience and agency in navigating these challenges. The study identifies Muslim women's lack of representation and visibility in leadership positions within Nigerian higher education institutions, underscoring the urgent need for greater inclusivity and diversity in leadership structures.

Furthermore, the research reveals the critical role of mentorship, support networks, and empowerment initiatives in fostering Muslim women's professional development and advancement in academia. By promoting an inclusive environment and providing targeted support, institutions can facilitate Muslim women's meaningful participation and leadership, thereby enriching the diversity and inclusivity of higher education leadership.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender, education, and leadership by centering the experiences and voices of Muslim women in Nigeria. The research highlights the unique challenges Muslim women face in Nigerian society by foregrounding the intersectional nature of their identity. Moreover, the study offers insights into the

strategies employed by Muslim women to navigate and challenge existing barriers, thereby enriching our understanding of agency and resistance in educational contexts.

Furthermore, this research has practical implications for policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders in promoting gender equity and inclusivity in higher education leadership. By recognizing and addressing the structural inequalities that hinder the participation of Muslim women, stakeholders can foster environments that nurture talent and empower individuals to reach their full potential.

In conclusion, it is essential to reflect on the broader implications of the study's findings and the imperative for concerted action. The marginalization of Muslim women in higher education leadership not only perpetuates inequities but also undermines the diversity and vibrancy of academic discourse. Therefore, social justice and equity principles must guide efforts to dismantle barriers and promote inclusivity. Moving forward, policymakers, educational leaders, and civil society actors must prioritize Muslim women's voices and experiences in shaping inclusive policies and practices. This necessitates a multifaceted approach that addresses systemic biases, promotes cultural sensitivity, and invests in mentorship and capacity-building initiatives for Muslim women in academia.

This study is a call to action for transformative change. By harnessing the talents and perspectives of Muslim women, Nigerian higher education can realize its full potential as a beacon of knowledge, innovation, and social progress. Through collective efforts and sustained commitment, we can break down barriers and build a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

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