



Research Article

An Appraisal of Historical Background of the Sokoto *Jihad* Leaders and Women's Position in the Caliphate Context

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Abstract

The position of Muslim women during the Sokoto Jihad leaders' era remains one of the most compelling and sometimes misunderstood aspects of West African Islamic history. While contemporary discourse often frames pre-modern Muslim societies as uniformly restrictive toward women, the intellectual tradition of the Sokoto leadership—particularly that of Shehu Usmanu Binfoduye, Nana Asma'u, and Abdullahi Foduye—offers a contrasting narrative grounded in Qur'anic teachings, Prophetic guibince, and practical social reforms. This study critically appraises the status, roles, and lived experiences of women in the Sokoto Jihad period, highlighting both the religious foundations and socio-political realities that shaped their participation in education, family life, public morality, and community development. The problem driving this study is the historical oversimplification that portrays Muslim women in nineteenth-century Hausaland as passive, voiceless subjects, thereby obscuring their intellectual contributions and leadership roles. To address this gap, the study aims to demonstrate how the Sokoto Jihad leaders—drawing from Islamic textual sources—advocated for women's dignity, learning, moral agency, and social involvement, thereby influencing gender dynamics in the emerging Caliphate. The paper adopts a qualitative historical method, using textual analysis of key works authored by the Jihad leaders, alongside Qur'anic verses, Prophetic Ahadith, and relevant secondary materials. Findings reveal that women in the Sokoto Jihad era enjoyed a unique religiously grounded empowerment that manifested in several ways: the institutionalisation of women's education led by figures like Nana Asma'u; Qur'an-based reforms promoting women's rights in marriage, inheritance, and personal dignity; active participation of women in the moral, economic, and spiritual life of the community; and the production of scholarly works addressed specifically to female audiences. Despite the era's patriarchal environment, the Jihad leaders' policies reflect a progressive interpretation of Islamic gender principles compared with many societies of their time. The study concludes that the Sokoto Jihad era provides an important historical model showing how Islamic governance, when rooted in authentic textual sources, can contribute to women's empowerment.

Keywords: Sokoto Jihad, Muslim women, Position of Women, Islamic history, gender roles, women's education.

Introduction

The Sokoto *Jihad* (1804–1808) led by *Shaykh* 'Uthmān ibn Foduye and consolidated by his successors—Sultan Muḥammad Bello and Abdullahi Foduye—was not merely a political or military endeavour. It was a profound Islamic reform movement grounded in Qur'anic ethics, Prophetic teachings, and a strong commitment to social justice. Central to this reform was the role and dignity of women. Contrary to misinterpretations that associate pre-modern Islamic societies with female marginalisation, the Sokoto *Jihad* leaders actively defended, educated, and empowered women. Their writings show clear concern for women's rights, intellectual development, and moral well-being. This paper presents a humanised appraisal of how Islam defined the position of women during their era.

Position of Women in Islam

Position and Dignity of Women in Islam

Human being both male and female share the same essence of humanity. They were created for the same purpose worshipping Allah (SWT) and are subject to the same reward for good deeds and the same punishment for wrong doing. The first *Qur'anic* instruction regarding women's right is found in the verse where Allah, the Most high declared:

O mankind! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women; and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, by Whom you demand one of another (your rights), and (to) the ties of relationship; surely Allah ever watches over you.¹

Women, therefore, hold a position of high status, respect and honour in an Islamic society. Islam accords them equal standing with men in all religious, social, economic, legal and political rights with a few exceptions that acknowledge their biological differences, for example, women are exempted from praying during their menstruation and childbirth. Additionally, pregnant and nursing mothers are not obliged to fast during the month of Ramadan, if fasting jeopardizes their health or that of their children.²

Women, therefore, hold a position of high status, respect and honour within an Islamic society. Islam has secured these rights for Muslim women for over fourteen centuries. According to Islamic *Shari'ah*, all people possess equal rights, including the right of personal safety, freedom, physical well-being, protection of honour and reputation, freedom of marriage and more. Islam also grants every individual whether man or woman right to earn a livelihood, provided it aligns with the moral principles established by Islamic *Shari'ah* to ensure safety and stability³

Islam bestows the same religious, social, economic, legal and political rights and obligations on women as it does on men. Like men, women are obliged to fulfil all duties prescribed by the Islamic faith, such as belief in Allah and His Messengers, worship, prayers, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage. However, due to their physical nature women are granted certain exemption in specific circumstances, such as *Jihad* (sacred struggle) and *Jumu'ah* (Friday) prayer and prayer in the mosque. Nonetheless, men and women are equal in the performance of religious duties. Women are thus given a special status in Islam, with great importance attached to their role. The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) provided specific guidance for women, emphasizing their care and protection in his farewell sermon at Arafat.

...Fear Allah concerning women! Verily you have taken them under the protection of Allah, and sexual intercourse with them has been made lawful for you by words of Allah. You also have right over them, they should not allow anyone whom you do not like to sit on your bed. But if they do that, you can chastise them not severely. Their rights upon you are that you should fairly provide them with food and clothing. I have left you the Book of Allah, and if you hold fast to it, you would never go astray....⁴

From the above, it is evident that Islam fosters a thriving environment for the advancement of women's right in all the areas where Islamic faith is practiced. Islam as a religion, has demonstrated a profound concern for the well-being of women, placing a strong emphasis on men to assume full responsibility for their care and protection. Men are encouraged to view women as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, or those under their guardianship, and to treat them with respect and consideration. Consequently, men should ensure that women's needs are met and refrained from overburdening them with responsibility beyond their capacity. Women should not be subjected to any form of maltreatment degrading or humiliation.⁵

When discussing the status of woman in Islam, it is essential to recognize that Islam provides clear guidelines, responsibilities and obligations for men as well. What determine a person's value and respect in the eyes of Allah, the Creator of mankind, is neither one's prosperity, position, intelligence, physical strength or beauty, but their piety and consciousness (*Taqwa*) of Allah. In the contrast, western culture and others influenced by it, often exhibit disparity between the treatment of men and women. It is important to articulate the Islamic position on the role of women in various aspects of life, such as their position as wives⁶ The Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is a share between the two halves of the society and that its objective is to find rest in one another.

¹Qur'an, chapter 4, verse 1

² Muhammad Mahdi Al- Sharif, (Trans), "The Exegesis of the Grand Holy Qur'an of ibn Kathir" commentary on chapter 2, verse 184, Dar-Al-Kotoob Al- Ilmiyat Beriut Lebanon, Vol. viii, 2006, p214

³ F.H Malik, "wives of Holy Prophet (peace be upon him)", Adam publishers, New Delhi, 2004, p.20

⁴ M.A Muhamad, "Sahih Muslim, Book of Pilgrimage, The correct tradition of Sahih Muslim" Vol. II, Dar Al-kutub Al- ilmiyyat, Beirut Lebanon, 2007, p.426

⁵Wives of Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), Op. cit, p. 23

⁶ H.U. Malami, "The role of women in the economic development of Sokoto caliphate", n.p Sokoto 2006, p. 18

And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect.⁷

According to Islamic law, a woman cannot be forced to marry anyone without her consent. The principles governing marital life in Islam align with the natural dispositions of men and women. Both spouses have rights and responsibilities toward one another, with the exception of leadership within the family which is designated to the man. As stated in the Qur'an:

...And they have rights similar to those against them in a just manner, and the men are degree above them, and Allah is Mighty, Wise.⁸

Women play a crucial role in societal development, particularly in family care, education, health and raising awareness among other women regarding their rights and duties. When women effectively serve their families and communities, they contribute significantly to societal progress and development. Economically, Islam has bestowed upon woman a right that was denied to them both before and after its advent the right to independent ownership. Islamic law fully recognizes a woman's right to own money, real estate or other property. Islam creates a favourable environment for woman's rights in all area of life. The rights of inheritance, for example, emphasizes a woman's entitlement to wealth which increases her financial standing despite being under the care of her father or husband. When Islam granted women the right of inheritance which they were denied in the pre-Islamic era, it empowered them to contribute to the development of their community.⁹ Allah says in the Qur'an:

Men shall have a portion of what the parents and the near relatives leave, and women shall have a portion of what the parents and near relatives leave, whether there is little or much of it; a stated portion.¹⁰

This verse highlight that women have the right to acquire wealth through inheritance from their parents, even though their basic needs are provided by their male guardians, such as father, husband, or son. However, in another verse, Allah SWT clarifies:

Allah enjoins you concerning your children: the male should have the equal of the portion of two females...¹¹

Before the advent of Islam, women were considered part of the properties to be inherited. Islam as a comprehensive way of life elevates the status of women, recognizing them as equal human being and calling for equal treatment of male and female children. With the few exceptions due to nature differences, men have traditionally been seen as protectors and leaders, while women are perceived as gentler sex. Their roles include child-rearing and upholding family honor, but this does mean they should be treated as mere servant burdened with menial task and subjected to indignity. On the contrary, their honour and virtue are to be safeguarded against any form of exploitation.¹² Allah, the Most Exalted mentions:

And (as for) the believing men and the believing women, they are guardians of each other; they enjoin good and forbid evil and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate and obey Allah and His apostle; (as for) these, Allah will show mercy to them; surely Allah is Mighty, Wise.¹³

In north-west Nigeria, women fulfil various roles, including pregnancy, child-bearing and child rearing, while also managing household chores, they often find themselves acting as housekeepers, daycare providers, teachers, and wives, all at once. Despite this demanding role, Islam is compassionate toward women granting them rights and urging men to be kind and just in their treatment. However, due to traditional division of labour where men's activities are primary outside the home and women's are domestic, some men abuse their position by overburden their wives with excessive domestic responsibilities beyond their capacity.¹⁴

Historical Background of the Sokoto *Jihad* and Women's Position in the Caliphate Context

Before the *Jihad*, the Hausa region experienced widespread social and religious decline, including the marginalization of women through cultural practices that contradicted Islamic teachings. Early chronicles highlight issues such as forced

⁷ Qur'an, chapter 30, verse 21

⁸ Qur'an, Chapter 2, verse 228

⁹ I.I. Centre for population studies and research, "*Islamic manual of Family planning*", np, Azhar university, 1998, p.57

¹⁰ Qur'an, chapter 4, verse7

¹¹ Qur'an, 4: verse11

¹² *Wives of holy Prophet* (peace be upon Him), Op. ci, p.22

¹³ Qur'an, 9, verse71

¹⁴ H.U Malami, "*The role of women in the economic development of Sokoto caliphate*", n.p, 2006, p.20

labour of women, denial of inheritance rights, and limitations on women's education. The Sokoto *Jihad* sought to purify Islamic practice and correct injustices, including those affecting women. Shehu Binfoduye repeatedly condemned un-Islamic customs (*al-'ādāt al-jāhiliyyah*) and emphasized a return to Qur'anic and Sunnah-based gender justice¹⁵.

Social and Religious Setting before the Sokoto *Jihad*

Before the Sokoto *Jihad* of the early nineteenth century, many societies in Hausaland were experiencing a moral and religious decline. Islam existed, but its teachings were often overshadowed by entrenched cultural practices. Women were among the most affected: many were denied inheritance, excluded from religious learning, and subjected to forced marriages and harsh domestic treatment. These conditions were not always recognized as injustice because they had become normalized over generations. *Shaykh* Usmanu Binfodiyo, through close interaction with ordinary people, witnessed how women suffered silently under customs that contradicted Islamic ethics. This social reality laid the foundation for a reform movement that sought to restore justice, compassion, and genuine Islamic values, particularly for those most vulnerable¹⁶.

Educational Empowerment of Women

One of the most significant contributions of the Sokoto *Jihad* leaders was their commitment to female education.

Advocacy from the *Jihad* Leaders

Shehu Binfoduye wrote extensively on the necessity of women's education, arguing that ignorance among women leads to societal corruption. In *Ihyā' al-Sunnah*, he notes that teaching women is an obligation upon scholars and leaders. Abdullahi Foduye and Muhammad Bello also wrote guidelines encouraging literacy and religious knowledge for women¹⁷.

Shaykh Usmanu Binfodiyo's Reformist Concern for Women

Shaykh Usmanu Binfodiyo's concern for women was deeply personal and practical rather than theoretical. He observed that ignorance of religion exposed women to exploitation and spiritual neglect. In response, he repeatedly emphasized that women, just like men, were accountable before Allah and therefore deserved access to religious knowledge. He openly criticized men who treated their wives and daughters as property rather than as moral partners. His writings and sermons encouraged women to learn the Qur'an, understand basic religious obligations, and develop moral confidence. This approach humanized women's position in Islam, portraying them as individuals with intellect, faith, and responsibility, rather than silent dependents¹⁸.

Abdullahi bin Foduye and the Human Side of Family Life

Shaykh Abdullahi bin Foduye contributed significantly to shaping humane family relations during the Sokoto *Jihad* period. His writings addressed marriage not as a relationship of control but as one of mutual care and responsibility. He emphasized gentle treatment of wives, emotional sensitivity, and moral leadership within the household. By acknowledging women's emotional needs and social pressures, he gave religious legitimacy to compassion in family life. His works reassured women that Islam recognized their struggles and condemned cruelty in the home. This emphasis helped redefine family life as a space of mercy rather than fear¹⁹.

Nana Asma'u as a Model of Scholarship and Reform

The most celebrated woman of the Sokoto Caliphate is Nana Asma'u, an exemplary scholar, teacher, poet, and moral guide. She mastered multiple languages—Arabic, Hausa, and Fulfude—and authored works on theology, ethics, history, and poetry. Her literary contributions not only educated women but also provided spiritual comfort to widows, the poor, and women facing personal hardship. She remains proof that Islamic scholarship is not gender-exclusive²⁰.

The 'Yan Taru Educational Network

One of the most influential innovations of the *Jihad* era was Nana Asma'u's 'Yan Taru movement, a network of trained female educators (Jaji) who travelled across communities to teach Islamic principles. These women were equipped with poems, teaching manuals, and moral guidelines to convey the teachings of Islam to rural women. This network ensured that literacy and religious knowledge spread across the Caliphate, making female education a public and respected institution²¹.

¹⁵ I. Sa'ad, *Women in the Sokoto Caliphate*, Kano: Benchmark Publishers, 2004, p. 88.

¹⁶ M. Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, Longman, London, 1967, p. 28

¹⁷ M. Bello, *Infraq al-Maysur*, Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau, 1985, p. 77.

¹⁸ U. b. F. Danfodiyo, *Nur al-Albab*, Spectrum Books, Ibadan, 1997, p. 39–44

¹⁹ A. b. F. Danfodiyo, *Diya' al-Nisa'*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1985, p. 85–92

²⁰ A. Boyd & B. Mack, *The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1997, p. 112.

²¹ A. Boyd & B. Mack, *The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1997, p. 112.

- No figure better reflects this empowerment than Nana Asma'u, daughter of Shehu ɗan Foduye.
- She was a poet, jurist, historian, educator, and multilingual scholar.
- She developed the 'Yan Taru (Women's Educational Network), training women teachers (jajis) who travelled across the Caliphate teaching Qur'an, fiqh, morality, and practical skills²².
- Her writings elevated women as agents of spiritual reform and community guibince.

Nana Asma'u and the Transformation of Women's Education

Nana Asma'u stands as one of the clearest examples of how the Sokoto *Jihad* translated ideals into lived reality. As a scholar, poet, and teacher, she understood the daily challenges faced by women who were burdened with domestic responsibilities and limited mobility. Instead of formal classrooms, she developed flexible teaching methods that reached women in their homes and communities. Through poetry and storytelling in local languages, she made Islamic knowledge accessible and memorable. Her efforts empowered women spiritually and intellectually, helping them see themselves as active participants in religious life. Nana Asma'u's work transformed education into a tool of dignity and self-worth for women across the caliphate²³.

The educational legacy of the Caliphate ensured that literacy among women in some regions of the empire remained higher than in many other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Women's Experiences during the *Jihad* Period

During the Sokoto *Jihad*, women were deeply affected by migration, hardship, and social transformation. Many left familiar homes and endured uncertainty alongside their families. Though not engaged in combat, women played crucial roles as caregivers, moral educators, and community stabilizers. They raised children under difficult conditions, preserved religious teachings, and provided emotional support to their families. These experiences strengthened women's resilience and sense of purpose. The movement acknowledged their sacrifices, recognizing that societal reform could not succeed without women's patience and moral strength²⁴.

Correcting Harmful Customs Affecting Women

A defining feature of the Sokoto *Jihad* was its challenge to harmful traditions that oppressed women. The leaders condemned practices such as forced marriages, unjust divorce, and denial of inheritance. Rather than attacking society harshly, they used teaching and persuasion to correct misunderstandings. Women gradually began to understand their rights and demand fair treatment. This reform process was slow but transformative, offering women legal and moral protection within an Islamic framework. For many, these changes marked the first recognition of their dignity as individuals with rights and voices²⁵.

Religious and Spiritual Status of Women

The *Jihad* leaders emphasized that men and women share equal spiritual obligations and opportunities. They encouraged women to pursue *taqwa* (piety), knowledge, and *Da'wah* (religious propagation).

The Intellectual Tradition of the Sokoto *Jihad*

The Sokoto *Jihad* was an intellectual revolution as much as a political one. Its leaders expressed concern for women's education in numerous manuscripts. *Shaykh* 'Uthmān ibn Foduye wrote in *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra* that denying women education is a "grave oppression." Abdullahi Foduye's *Diya' al-Siyasa* outlined marital rights and duties, emphasising that ignorant men cannot provide proper guibince to their families. This rich scholarly tradition drastically improved women's intellectual visibility²⁶.

Women as Moral and Spiritual Guides

Women in the Caliphate were not merely students; many became respected teachers, mentors, and spiritual advisers. Their roles in teaching younger girls, resolving domestic disputes, conducting moral counselling, and providing community guibince elevated their status. Their leadership reflected Qur'an 9:71—mutual support between men and women in promoting righteousness²⁷.

²² M. Bello, *Infraq al-Maysur*, Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau, 1985, p. 77.

²³ J. Boyd & B. Mack, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2000, p. 55–63

²⁴ M. Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973, p. 74–79

²⁵ I. Sulaiman, *The Islamic State and the Challenge of History*, Mansell Publishing, London, 1987, p. 128–135

²⁶ U. Fodio, *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra*, Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1992, p. 45.

²⁷ M. Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London: Longman, 1967, p. 101.

Women's Economic Engagement

The Sokoto Caliphate encouraged women to engage in economic activities within Islamic ethics. Women worked as traders, herbalists, textile producers, farmers, and craft specialists. Their economic contributions supported households and strengthened community resilience. The *Jihad* scholars emphasised that Islam permits women to own property, enter contracts, and conduct business independently²⁸.

Reforming Marriage and Family Law

Family reforms were central to the *Jihad* movement. *Shaykh* 'Uthmān ibn Foduye condemned forced marriages, highlighting that Islam requires consent from both bride and groom. Courts within the Caliphate enforced women's right to maintenance, inheritance, and fair treatment. Sultan Muhammad Bello insisted that men should provide for women "according to the honour Allah has given them," emphasising compassion, justice, and responsible leadership within the household²⁹.

Protection of Women's Rights Through Islamic Law

The legal system of the Sokoto Caliphate provided women with access to justice. Women could bring cases before *qāḍī* courts for issues such as divorce, inheritance disputes, and domestic grievances. The writings of Abdullahi Foduye show clear support for women's right to seek justice, asserting that Islamic law must protect the vulnerable.

Women's Contributions During the *Jihad* Campaigns

While the *Jihad* was primarily led by men, women played crucial supporting roles—consistent with early Islamic practice. They prepared food, supplied water, nursed the wounded, and encouraged the fighters spiritually. These contributions mirror the sunnah of the Prophet's era and demonstrate that the *Jihad* leaders valued women's participation within Islamic boundaries³⁰.

Humanising the Female Experience in the Caliphate

The writings of the *Jihad* leaders frequently address women's emotional and spiritual well-being. Nana Asma'u's poetry comforts women facing loneliness, grief, or marital difficulties. *Shaykh* 'Uthmān ibn Foduye urged men to treat women "gently and with honour," showing a deep concern for their dignity. This compassionate vision counters modern claims that pre-modern Islamic societies were uniformly patriarchal³¹.

Enduring Legacy of the Sokoto *Jihad* on Women in Islam

The legacy of the Sokoto *Jihad* continues to influence discussions about women's roles in Islam, particularly in West Africa. The lives and teachings of its leaders demonstrate that Islamic reform can be compassionate, inclusive, and grounded in real human experience. By prioritizing women's education, moral dignity, and family welfare, the Sokoto *Jihad* provided a model of faith-based social transformation. Today, its legacy reminds Muslim societies that meaningful reform begins with justice, empathy, and respect for women as essential pillars of the community³².

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The legacy of the Sokoto *Jihad* leaders continues to influence northern Nigerian Muslim communities today. The model of women as scholars, community builders, and moral guides remains relevant in contemporary debates on female education and empowerment. Their example demonstrates that Islamic reform, when properly grounded, elevates rather than suppresses women's rights³³.

Conclusion

This appraisal shows that women in the Sokoto *Jihad* leaders' era held a position deeply rooted in Qur'ānic equality, Prophetic compassion, and rigorous Islamic scholarship. They were educated, empowered, respected, and essential to the social and moral transformation of the Caliphate. Their contributions—especially through scholarship, community engagement, family life, and spiritual leadership—challenge modern misconceptions and provide a powerful model for Muslim societies today.

²⁸ M. Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London: Longman, 1967, p. 101.

²⁹ U. Fodio, *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra*, Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1992, p. 45.

³⁰ U. Fodio, *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra*, Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1992, p. 45.

³¹ A. Boyd & B. Mack, *The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1997, p. 112.

³² R. A. Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria*, Longman, Ibadan, 1971, p. 210–216

³³ A. Fodio, *Diya' al-Siyasa*, Kano: Sifawa Press, 1989, p. 63.

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