



An Assessment of the Position of Muslim Women in the *Hausaland* before and After the Colonial Period

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Abstract

The historical trajectory of Muslim women's position in Hausaland reflects a dynamic interplay of indigenous customs, Islamic reform movements, and colonial interventions. Before colonial rule, women in Hausaland occupied socially significant but culturally varied positions shaped by pre-Islamic Hausa traditions and the steadily expanding influence of Islam. While Islam introduced reforms that enhanced women's rights in marriage, property ownership, education, and religious life. The arrival of the Sokoto Jihad in the early nineteenth century further redefined women's roles by promoting Qur'anic learning, moral education, and legal protections, exemplified by the works of scholars like Usman dan Fodio and Nana Asma'u. The problem addressed in this study is the inadequate scholarly attention to the contradictions in women's experiences across these three major periods—pre-Islamic Hausa culture, Islamic reform under the Sokoto leadership, and British colonial administration. The aim of this paper is to critically examine how these historical forces shaped the position of Muslim women in Hausaland, and to highlight the continuities and ruptures that still inform contemporary gender relations in Northern Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative historical approach, drawing on archival materials, classical Islamic texts, ethnographic accounts, colonial records, and secondary scholarly works. Through comparative and thematic analysis, the paper examines legal rights, educational access, socio-economic participation, and religious engagement across the periods. Findings reveal that while Islam improved many aspects of women's lives by granting inheritance rights, emphasising education, protecting marital dignity, and encouraging spiritual participation, colonial rule weakened these gains by restricting Islamic judicial systems, undermining women-centred Islamic scholarship, and reorganising economic structures to favour men. The study concludes that understanding these historical layers is essential for framing current debates on gender, education, and Islamic reform in contemporary Hausaland.

Keywords: Hausaland, Muslim women, pre-colonial period, Sokoto Jihad, British colonialism, gender roles, Islamic reforms, Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

The position of Muslim women in Hausaland has undergone significant transformation over several centuries, shaped by complex interactions between indigenous Hausa customs, Islamic legal and moral norms, and later, British colonial policies. Hausaland—stretching across present-day Northern Nigeria and parts of Niger—has long been a centre of commerce, scholarship, and political power. Prior to the widespread Islamisation of the region beginning in the fifteenth century and intensifying through the Sokoto Jihad in the nineteenth century, Hausa societies were governed largely by a

blend of animist beliefs and hierarchical social structures. These early systems assigned women both domestic responsibilities and limited economic roles, although their rights were largely defined by custom rather than codified law.

With the gradual spread of Islam came significant changes to gender relations. Islam introduced a comprehensive moral and legal framework that affirmed women's dignity, rights, and spiritual equality. Marriage contracts became regulated, women gained clearly defined inheritance shares, and religious education became more accessible. The landmark reforms championed by the Sokoto Jihad leaders further institutionalised these ideals. Prominent scholars such as Shehu Usman dan Fodio criticised oppressive cultural practices and advocated for women's education, famously condemning men who denied their wives and daughters the opportunity to learn. His daughter, Nana Asma'u, played a pivotal role in transforming the intellectual landscape of the Caliphate through her *Yan Taru* women's educational network, producing poetry, pedagogical materials, and mentorship programs that empowered women across social classes.

However, the colonial period marked a sharp turning point. British indirect rule restructured Hausa-Islamic institutions in ways that curtailed women's influence. Colonial administrators, influenced by Victorian gender norms, privileged male authority and formalised patriarchal hierarchies. Women were gradually excluded from leadership structures, their economic opportunities diminished under new taxation and labour regulations, and their educational access was severely restricted. Moreover, the colonial philosophy of "non-interference" in Muslim women's domestic life reinforced seclusion practices that earlier Islamic reformers had attempted to balance with women's rights to social and intellectual participation.

Thus, the historical experiences of Muslim women in Hausaland cannot be understood without analysing these layered changes—pre-colonial customs, Islamic reform, and colonial restructuring. Each period introduced new challenges and opportunities, leaving legacies that still shape contemporary debates on women's rights, education, and public engagement in Northern Nigeria. The remainder of this paper explores these themes in depth, offering a comparative overview that highlights both the resilience and evolving roles of Muslim women in the region.

Position of Muslim Women in the *Hausaland* before the Colonial Period

Islam place significant emphasis in establishing a strong family foundation, with women playing a central role, whether as daughters, wives or mothers. A woman's unique physical and emotional characteristics enable her to fulfil essential function within the family that men cannot. This role particularly those related to reproduction, such as pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing, are crucial for the continuation of humanity. As the nurturer and educator of future generations, a woman hold a position of immense importance in the society, serving as the life blood of human civilization. In the context of Hausaland in north-west Nigeria, the role of Muslim women extends beyond mere household chores. She is the backbone of the family, contributing signific ally to productivity of her husband and the overall well-being of household. Her day typically begins as early as 5:0 am and extends until late in the evening, involving a range of duties from preparing meals and bathing children to ensure the cleanliness and orderliness of the home. Despite the demanding nature of these responsibilities, she often engages in additional occupations such as food preparation, hair braiding, and other small-scale trades, to support her family financially.¹

Islamic teachings stress the importance of a righteous family life, which begins with a sacred marital bond. A Muslim woman is entrusted with the management and supervision of the household, including safeguarding the moral integrity of her husband and family. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of modesty and the maintenance of moral dignity within the home. Allah Says:

And stay in your houses and do not display your finery like the displaying of the ignorance of yore; and keep up prayer, and pay the poor-rate, and obey Allah and His apostle. Allah only desires to keep away the uncleanness from you, O people of the house! And to purify you a (thorough) purify....²

From the above verse, it is clear that a woman should guard her chastity and the moral dignity of her husband and vice versa. Additionally, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) highlighted a woman's role as a guardian within her husband's household, responsible for the upbringing and discipline of children.³ As it indicates in one hadith of prophet says:

....A woman is a guardian over the household of her husband and his children and shall be questioned about them.....⁴

¹ The Ifeh centre for psychological studies, "*Gender & Behaviour*", Vol.vi, no.2, Ile ife, Nigeria, 2010, P.386

² Qur'an, chapter 4, verse 33

³I. Muhammad, "*Al' Bukhari's Sahih, Vol. III, Book of Marriage*", Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyyat, Lenanon.2007, P.396

⁴ M. M. Al-Sarif (Trans), "*Sahih Muslim*", Vol. III, Muhammd Ali Baydoun Publication, Dar-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, Beirut, Lebanon, 2005, p.209

From the above hadith it shows that a woman in Hausaland is not only a mother but also a deputy to her husband, assisting in the management of household affairs which indirectly or directly is contributing to the family's economic needs. She is the first teacher and moral guide for her children, instilling in them the values and principles of Islam from an early age. Through her dedication and efforts, she plays an indispensable role in the success and harmony of the family, ensuring that her children grow up to be responsible and obedient members of society.⁵

Islam seeks to form a righteous society which can only be attainable through family unit which is the beginning of the society. The family life begins with the sacred matrimonial relation between a man and a woman. Therefore, a woman is seen as both a wife and a mother who is expected to organize her own and her families' lives in such a way that they are free from problem. More so, it is the role of a mother in a family setting to manage and supervise the running of the household and these include, among others, guarding the morals of the husband in the society, which is one of the major and important roles prescribed upon her by Islam, as indicated in the Glorious Qur'an:

And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-cover over their bosoms,⁶

She is also in charge of orderliness and discipline in the family as a mother or a wife. A part from being a mother which is very important,⁷ North-west woman plays an essential role in the maintenance of this very important aspect of human existence. This is conferred upon her by the natural profession of general house-keeping which she does through her efforts in order to contribute to the success of the marriage by being obedient to the husband. She is guarding her moral status in the society and catering for the spiritual and social well-being of her children. She is expected to look after children's general welfare through caring for their health and cleanliness and bringing them up to be good and obedient members of the society. For example, in the case of female children, mothers are to teach them appropriate behaviour and responsibility for taking utmost care of the upbringing of children, especially in their early years.⁸

Additionally, as a mother/wife, a woman acts as a deputy to her husband, for she is respected in the house, as she assists her husband in running the household by performing the responsibilities that can be done domestically. She also participates in activities that help in satisfying some economic needs of the household through engaging herself in certain economic activities which help her in taking care of some of the economic problems of the family. She also serves as the first individual to whom the child is naturally exposed. Therefore, she is the first institution that gives rudimentary training to the child. From the initial stage of his development, she teaches him basic health rules and trains him in line with the moral norms and values of Islam, including respect for laws. She also helps them to revise their lessons taught to them at schools.⁹

The Role of Muslim Women in North-Western Nigeria After Independence of Nigeria

Muslim women in Islamic societies receive significant recognition rooted in the commandments of Allah and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). However, the specific influence of Islam on women's roles in Hausaland is often more complex than it might seem. In this region, as in many other parts of the Muslim world, a blend of Islamic principles and local cultural practices shapes women's lives. This blend sometimes leans toward patriarchal systems, influenced by both Middle Eastern traditions and local Hausa customs. As a result, it can be challenging to separate practices that are genuinely Islamic from those that are originally cultural Hausa traditions particularly among the ignorant Muslims women who are the majority inhabitants of Hausaland.¹⁰

A careful study of gender roles in Hausa society before and after the advent of Islam reveals that the spread of Islam particularly following the jihad of Shaykh Usman bn Fodiyo in the early 19th century brought significant changes to the social, political, and cultural conditions for women in Hausaland.¹¹ Islamization offered Hausa women opportunities to leave behind laborious fieldwork and instead develop skills in crafts and other domestic activities. The practice of secluding wives, which became more common, was encouraged by men because it was associated with piety and increased their prestige. This practice, while placing a greater economic burden on men, allowed women to accumulate personal wealth through activities like food preparation and other household tasks. In Hausaland, a Muslim woman's role

⁵ *Gender & Behaviour, Op. cit*, P.386

⁶ Qur'an, chapter 24, verse 31

⁷ H. Abdulrazaq Adelabu, "*Islamic Awareness in women*, Meshico Enterprises Ltd Lagos 1995, P. 52

⁸ C. Jason, "*Agriculture and the Rise of Female House Seclusion in Post-Colonial Hausaland*", (NP), 1997 P.6

⁹ M. W. Khan "*Women between Islam and western society*" (position of woman in the Islamic Shari'ah), Goal work Books PUT Ltd, New Delhi India, 1995, P. 131,

¹⁰ "*Women between Islam and western society*" (position of woman in the Islamic Shari'ah), *Ibid*, p.132

¹¹ C. Cale and B. Mack, "*Hausa Women in the Twentieth Century*", university of Wisconsin press, London, 1991, P.7

goes far beyond household chores. She is the foundation of the family, playing a vital role in her husband's productivity and the overall well-being of her household. According to Kulsum Kasim:

A Muslim women in northern part of Nigeria is responsible to look after her matrimonial home and the house in general, and her husband's property in particular. She is to maintain cleanliness in the house so that the entire family could live in a healthy environment. She bathes the children and washes their clothes; she takes care of any member of the family who falls sick. Apart from the use of modern medicine, she uses traditional ones like tree barks, roots, leaves among others in order to provide solution to ailments. Neem tree (*iccen dogonyaro*) leaves are used for stomach pains; potassium (*kanwa*) for stomach upsets; guava leaves for the control of diarrhea, and so on. The Muslim woman also takes many safety and preventive measures to safeguard her family against sickness and diseases. She also looks after the property of her husband, such as livestock animals like cow, goat, sheep and so on, birds like chicken, guinea fowl, pigeon, duck and so on. She also looks after all the domestic animals and feed them in different ways by giving them residue of food like *Dussa* (chaff) of maize or millet and some leftover food and waste product during food preparation. Also, in a situation where animals are taken out to the bush for grazing, she is responsible for tying them if they come back.¹²

In northwestern Nigerian states like Kano, where the economy is deeply intertwined with the norms and values of the people, everyone is expected to contribute through various activities, and women are no exception. Women often juggle multiple occupations simultaneously, playing a crucial role in supporting their families through small-scale enterprises. These activities include trading a wide range of goods and services. For instance, a woman might fry bean cakes for her young children to sell, prepare millet balls, spin cotton into thread, sell kerosene, and harvest groundnuts—skills often passed down from their grandparents. In addition to these economic roles, women are responsible for training their children, maintaining order and discipline within the family, and leading by example through their guidance and advice.¹³

Marriage is crucial for the continuation of humanity, and women in north-western Nigeria play an indispensable role in upholding this vital institution. Their natural role as homemakers allows them to contribute significantly to the success of their marriages. This involves not only being obedient to their husbands and upholding their own moral virtues but also catering to the spiritual and moral well-being of their children and the family as a whole. As the first person a child encounters, a mother is the initial and most influential educator, providing fundamental training from the earliest stages of development. She is responsible for her children's overall welfare, ensuring their health, cleanliness, and upbringing so that they grow into responsible and obedient members of society. The mother's role is particularly critical during the first five years of a child's life, a key stage in human development. During this period, the emotional bond formed through breastfeeding is vital, as it shapes the child's early experiences of happiness, satisfaction, or, conversely, sadness and despair. As a wife, a woman must be attentive to the various stages of her children's growth and development. She is expected to teach them essential life skills such as self-control, self-confidence, and creativity. By providing them with the necessary tools, she helps them develop intelligence and imagination. Additionally, she fosters a spiritual environment by encouraging family prayers and promoting self-expression, allowing her children to voice their personal views and ideas.¹⁴

Traditionally, Nigerian women are deeply involved in the upbringing of their children, handling responsibilities such as childbirth, nursing, and providing foundational home training. This training includes instilling social behavior, religious teachings, and basic principles of knowledge through play and early education. In north-western Nigeria, wives are often responsible for household tasks such as providing water, gathering firewood, and cooking for their families. While these duties remain common across much of the country, especially in rural areas, the women of north-western Nigeria, with the exception of the Dakarkari in Zuru, Kebbi State, are less frequently required to gather firewood. Instead, they are generally confined to their matrimonial homes, focusing on their roles as wives and mothers who manage the domestic affairs of the household. This reflects the traditional view that a woman's primary responsibility lies within the family and the broader community.¹⁵

In many northern states, women also assist their husbands in managing the household by taking on domestic responsibilities. Additionally, they participate in economic activities to support their families, often engaging in small-scale businesses such as tailoring, grinding, hair plaiting, and weaving. These endeavours help meet the family's financial

¹² Kulsum Kasim, 56yrs, Deputy commander General woman, kano manucipal, takuntawa, 29/11/21

¹³S. Jackson, "Review of african political economy (Hausa women on strike)", 1974, n.p, p.4

¹⁴Center For Population Studies And Research, "Islamic Manual of family planning", Azhar University, Np 1998, P.62

¹⁵ H.U. Malami, "The role of women in the economic development of Sokoto caliphate", n.p Sokoto 2006, p. 18

needs, including expenses for children's footwear, clothing, Islamiyyah school fees, and other necessities. Women often sell prepared foods like *Masa/Waina*, *Kunu*, *Kosai*, *Kuli*, *Fura*, *Tuwo*, *Dan wake*, and *Daudawa*, as well as woven items like *wundaye*, *tabarma*, *fayafayi*, and pottery such as *Tukane*, *tuluna*, *shantulla*, and *Asusu*. Through these efforts, they contribute significantly to the household economy.¹⁶

In addition to their domestic duties, such as processing and cooking meals for their families, mothers in northwestern Nigeria are also involved in preparing food for sale, often with the help of their daughters, who sell these items. They engage in local processing of cotton for household use, spinning, and pounding *fura* (millet balls consumed with cow's milk). Unmarried or divorced women often extend their trading activities to neighbouring villages, where they purchase goods to sell in their local markets.¹⁷ In addition, Mal. Aliyu Z. says:

Northwest Muslim women are also engaged in such roles of assisting their husbands in their profession; although some men claimed that women's role were limited within the house chores alone. For instance, the fishermen and hunters needed one herbal medicine or the other to protect themselves against cold, minor injuries and success in their profession, it is the duty of a wife to grind, sieve and prepare it for them. There were also mothers who specialize in plaiting and *henna (lalle)* decoration. They offer these services to the wives of aristocracy and the nobility and bridegroom as well as to others who can afford to pay for their services. Mothers sometimes earn enough to keep the whole family or at least look after their female children as well as keep little that will be taken to their female children's matrimonial homes, as their sole responsibility.¹⁸

Women have always been recognized and respected for their multifaceted roles, including that of a mother, agriculturalist, trader, and educator. Muslim mothers, in particular, embrace the role of homemaker, nurturing and educating their children, valuing the bond of marriage, and upholding the family's moral conduct. They play a crucial role in maintaining discipline within the family and the broader society. By safeguarding the family's moral standards, they contribute to the creation and preservation of a strong family unit, whose members are well-prepared to engage positively in the wider community.¹⁹

As a child's first teacher, a north-western woman instils values that discourage negative behaviours such as stealing, forming bad friendships, and neglecting religious practices. This highlights her role in overseeing the general welfare and upbringing of the Nigerian child. Beyond this, she contributes to the socialization and education of family members and engages in economic activities that supplement the family's income. Guided by the teachings of Islam, the Muslim woman in north-western Nigeria plays a crucial role in producing well-equipped civil servants and business people by supporting her husband, who relies on a harmonious home to perform effectively at work. She also trains her children to be respectful and obedient within the family and society. This upbringing fosters a responsible society, where individuals uphold the norms and values of north-western Nigeria, contributing to the region's low crime rates. The relative peace and harmony in north-western Nigeria, compared to other parts of the country, can likely be attributed to the Islamic influence on the populace, particularly mothers who serve as their children's first educators.²⁰

Therefore, women has contributed for the development of society being it economical, political, religious or cultural, in north-west Nigeria, more so, a woman is seen as daughter, or a wife/mother, in each of stage she finds herself have a role to play. Therefore the contemporary Muslim women use traditional herbal enhancement substance "*kayan mata*" in north-west Nigeria in order to strengthen their marriage life, the role she play as a house wife which some time exhausted her, she need to refresh herself to fulfils her husband needs as the use of *kayan mata* help in solving her problems, as we all know procreation is a crucial part human being where used of *kayan mata* help in ensuring both male and female potency as will be discussed in details by next chapter.

Conclusion

The historical experiences of Muslim women in Hausaland reveal a complex and evolving trajectory shaped by indigenous customs, Islamic reform, and colonial restructuring. In the pre-colonial era, Hausa women held meaningful, though culturally constrained, roles within their communities. They were active in economic life, participated in market activities, and contributed significantly to household organisation. Yet many of their rights were defined by customary traditions rather than by any uniform legal framework. The gradual spread of Islam, particularly from the fifteenth century onward, began to reshape this landscape by introducing clearer protections for women in marriage, inheritance,

¹⁶ Nation Council for women, "*The Nigerian women*" Macmillan Nigeria Publisher Ltd, Lagos, (N.d), P.14

¹⁷ F. D.Bello, "*Sokoto Journal of Histoty*", vol.1 usman dan fodiyo university press, sokoto,2012, P.214

¹⁸ Mal. Aliyu Zainu, 52yrs, chief Iman Jumu'at Mosque, kofar kaura katsina, 26/11/21.

¹⁹ *Awareness in women*, Op. cit, P.54

²⁰ The young Muslim stars Association of Nigeria, "*Ethics in Islam*," Bralougun company, Lagos, 1982, p.16

education, and personal dignity. This transformation became more pronounced with the reforms of the Sokoto Jihad leaders who emphasised women's spiritual and intellectual empowerment as core elements of Islamic life.

However, the advent of British colonial rule disrupted many of these advancements. Colonial administrators, guided by their Victorian gender ideals, restructured political and legal institutions in ways that reinforced male authority and marginalised women. Islamic educational networks for women, previously nurtured by scholars like Nana Asma'u, were neglected, while colonial economic policies diminished women's participation in trade and public life. Although colonial rule claimed to preserve "native customs," it selectively reinforced only those practices that aligned with its administrative goals—often to the disadvantage of women. As a result, Muslim women in Hausaland entered the twentieth century with reduced access to education, limited engagement in governance, and weakened legal protections.

Understanding these historical layers is essential for addressing contemporary gender concerns in Northern Nigeria. The pre-colonial and Jihad eras demonstrate that Islamic frameworks—when applied holistically—can support women's dignity, scholarship, and economic agency. Conversely, colonial distortions of both custom and Islamic law show how external interventions can entrench gender inequalities. Today, efforts to improve women's education, enhance legal awareness, and promote balanced interpretations of Islamic teachings must draw from this rich historical heritage. By recognising the strengths and setbacks of each period, policymakers, scholars, and community leaders can better articulate pathways for strengthening the rights and contributions of Muslim women in present-day Hausaland.

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