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The Perspectives of Contemporary Islamic Scholars on Muslim Females' Participation in Higher Institutions in Sokoto State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the perspectives of contemporary Islamic scholars on Muslim females' participation in higher institutions in Sokoto State, Nigeria. The study was guided by two research questions. A qualitative research design was used. The population comprised 180 contemporary Islamic scholars in Sokoto State, from which 123 scholars were selected for the quantitative component using proportionate and simple random sampling techniques, while 12 scholars were purposively selected for qualitative interviews. Data was collected using the researcher-developed titled; Contemporary Islamic Scholars' Interview Guide (CISIG-MFPIHI). The questionnaire had a content validity index of 0.90 and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.88. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using NVivo. The findings revealed that the Islamic foundation was predominantly supportive of Muslim females' acquisition of beneficial knowledge, although participation was conditional upon Islamic values, modesty, moral conduct and religious obligations. The study established a high extent of support for Muslim females' participation in higher institutions. The study concluded that contemporary Islamic scholars generally supported female higher education when pursued within an Islamic-compatible environment.

Keywords: Contemporary Islamic scholars, Muslim females, higher institutions, Islamic values, female education.

Introduction

Education occupies a central position in Islamic thought because the pursuit, transmission, and application of knowledge are regarded as essential to the intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social development of the individual and the Muslim community. Although historical and

contemporary interpretations of Islam sometimes differ concerning the appropriate social roles of men and women, recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that the Islamic tradition does not establish a blanket prohibition against women acquiring knowledge. Contemporary Islamic scholarship has drawn attention to the Qur'anic emphasis on knowledge, human dignity, moral responsibility, and intellectual development as principles that apply to both sexes. Bayhaqi and Mas'ud (2025), for instance, argue from a Qur'anic educational perspective that women's education is not merely permissible but constitutes an important element in building an equitable and sustainable society.

The historical record further provides an important basis for understanding contemporary Muslim women's participation in higher education. Muslim women have, at different periods of Islamic history, participated in scholarship, teaching, jurisprudence, literature, medicine, astronomy, and other intellectual activities. Guoddar and Ennam (2025), for example, highlight the contributions of early Muslim women to fields ranging from theology and law to mathematics and astronomy and point to Fatima al-Fihri as an important historical example of female involvement in higher learning. In the Nigerian context, Bawa et al. (2025) similarly demonstrate that Northern Nigerian Muslim women have historically contributed to Islamic education and intellectual development, challenging assumptions that Muslim women have traditionally been passive recipients rather than active producers and transmitters of knowledge.

Contemporary Islamic scholarship is increasingly being challenged to reconcile classical Islamic jurisprudence with contemporary realities, including the need for gender-inclusive educational development. As modernization spreads across Nigerian society, many Islamic scholars have begun advocating for female education as a means of empowering women within the limits of Shariah, citing historical examples such as Aisha (RA), who was both a scholar and educator in early Islamic history (Nasir, 2020).

The question of Muslim females' participation in higher institutions is also significant because higher education increasingly extends beyond the acquisition of certificates to encompass professional development, economic empowerment, leadership, research, community service, and participation in national development. Recent Nigerian scholarship indicates that Muslim women are contributing to education, professional activities, scholarship, and broader social development, although their participation remains constrained in some contexts. Fahm and Memud (2024) emphasize the contributions of Muslim women to sustainable development in Nigeria, while Fahm (2025) reports that Muslim women remain underrepresented in higher education leadership and identifies cultural expectations and institutional barriers among the factors affecting their advancement.

Given this context, the present study seeks to examine the views of contemporary Islamic scholars on Muslim females' participation in higher institutions in Sokoto State. It aims to bridge the gap between religious tradition and modern educational needs by highlighting scholarly interpretations that either support or challenge the idea of female higher education. The study will provide insight into how religious leaders can be engaged as partners in promoting educational equity while respecting Islamic values. The findings are expected to contribute significantly to educational planning, policy formulation, and advocacy strategies that foster inclusive and balanced development in Muslim-majority communities.

Statement of the problem

In an ideal Islamic context, education is considered a fundamental right and obligation for both males and females, as Prophet Muhammad (SAW) stated, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah, Hadith 224), while the historical contributions of Muslim women such as Aisha

(RA) as scholars and teachers demonstrate that Islam does not inherently prohibit female education. Ideally, Muslim females should have access to all levels of education, including higher institutions, provided that such participation conforms to Islamic ethical and moral principles; this is also consistent with the recognition of female education as an important contributor to economic productivity, health awareness, and civic development (UNESCO, 2022). However, in many Muslim-dominated communities, including Sokoto State, a gap exists between this ideal and reality, as Muslim females continue to encounter cultural stereotypes, economic constraints, and differing interpretations of Islamic teachings regarding higher education (Salihu, 2021). While some contemporary Islamic scholars support female participation in higher institutions under Islamic conditions, others express reservations because of concerns about moral conduct, co-education, and Western cultural influences, and such divergent perspectives may affect parental decisions and female enrolment (Abdullahi & Mohammed, 2022). The resulting educational disparity can limit Muslim females' economic empowerment, intellectual development, professional opportunities, and contributions to family and societal development, while their limited representation in academic and leadership spaces may also reduce diversity in societal decision-making. Therefore, examining the perspectives of contemporary Islamic scholars is important for clarifying the religious position on Muslim females' participation in higher institutions and providing evidence for educational policies, culturally sensitive advocacy, and practices that reconcile Islamic values with the developmental benefits of higher education. Against this background, the study investigated the perspectives of contemporary Islamic scholars on Muslim females' participation in higher institutions in Sokoto State**.**

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the perspectives of contemporary Islamic scholars on the Muslims females' participation in higher institutions in Sokoto. The specific objectives ware to:

1. Examine the views from Islamic foundation
2. Examine the views of contemporary Islamic scholars in Sokoto on Muslim females' participation in higher institutions.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study

1. What are the views from Islamic foundation?
2. What are the views of contemporary Islamic scholars in Sokoto on Muslim females' participation in higher institutions?

Review of Related Literature

The concept of contemporary Islamic scholars refers to Muslim intellectuals, jurists, theologians, Qur'anic exegetes, Hadith specialists, educators, and other qualified authorities who possess recognized knowledge of Islamic sources and apply that knowledge to religious, educational, social, and ethical issues arising in the modern world. Unlike scholars whose interpretations are confined exclusively to historical circumstances, contemporary Islamic scholars engage with present-day realities and attempt to interpret Islamic principles in ways that respond to changing social conditions while remaining grounded in the Qur'an, Sunnah, Islamic jurisprudence, and established scholarly traditions. Ahmed and Chowdhury (2024) explain that contemporary Islamic educational thought involves connecting foundational Islamic concepts with the realities of present-day Muslim societies, thereby demonstrating that Islamic scholarship continues to engage with contemporary educational questions.

The concept of Muslim females' participation in higher education refers to the involvement of Muslim women in post-secondary educational activities through access, admission, enrolment, attendance, academic engagement, completion of programmes and participation in the broader intellectual and institutional life of higher educational institutions. Mehrabani and Obaid (2025) argue that Islam places substantial value on knowledge and recognizes women's entitlement to education, while Bawa et al. (2025) demonstrate that Muslim women in Northern Nigeria have historically participated in Islamic education and contributed to knowledge production.

Malik (2026), for example, identifies socioeconomic, sociocultural, and institutional factors as important in understanding Muslim women's participation in higher education, while Fahm (2025) demonstrates that Muslim women in Nigeria continue to encounter cultural and institutional barriers, particularly in relation to higher education leadership. Therefore, participation should not be interpreted simply as physical presence in an institution but as meaningful and sustained involvement in higher education.

The concept of higher institutions, also referred to as higher education institutions or tertiary institutions refers to formally established and officially recognized institutions that provide education and training beyond secondary school and award recognized academic, professional, or vocational qualifications. Such institutions include universities, polytechnics, colleges, specialized institutions, and other approved establishments offering post-secondary programmes. UNESCO (2020) defines a higher education institution as an establishment that provides higher education and is recognized by the competent authority as belonging to a country's higher education system. Higher institutions perform several important functions, including teaching, research, knowledge production, professional training, innovation, skills development, and community service.

According to Mehrabani and Obaid (2025), Islamic teachings place a high value on knowledge and recognize education as a right and responsibility that is not restricted to men. Similarly, Bawa et al. (2025) observed that Islamic teachings support women's acquisition of knowledge and that Muslim women in Northern Nigeria have historically made significant contributions to Islamic education. Ardo et al. (2024) further noted that Islamic perspectives on female education provide substantial support for educating girls and women, although cultural practices within some Hausa communities may influence how such principles are interpreted and implemented. These views suggest that contemporary Islamic scholarship increasingly distinguishes between Islamic principles concerning the acquisition of knowledge and cultural practices that may restrict women's educational opportunities.

Ibrahi, Inda, Khan, Yusof, and Atan (2024), in their study titled "Relationship Between Happiness, Culture, Socio-Economic Status, and Religious Coping Among Muslim Women Students Residing in Sokoto State, Nigeria. The findings showed significant relationships involving culture, socioeconomic status, religious coping, and happiness among Muslim women students, with the study indicating the importance of positive Islamic religious coping in helping Muslim women deal with social and personal challenges. The study concluded that cultural and religious factors are important in understanding the experiences of Muslim women students in Sokoto State and recommended strengthening positive religious coping and extending similar research to other Northern Nigerian states.

Sarkin-Kebbi, Musa, and Danjuma (2024), titled "Low Enrolment of Female Students in Tertiary Educational Institutions in Sokoto State, Nigeria: Cause, Challenges and Way Forward," conducted in Nigeria. The findings showed that inadequate accommodation, low student income, lack of counselling, inadequate sanitation facilities, poor communication, an unfriendly learning environment, and pregnancy among married female students were important challenges. More importantly for the present study, responses from religious leaders, parents, and community members indicated that poverty (M =

3.32), fear of negative changes in female students (M = 3.09), high educational cost (M = 2.71), socio-cultural beliefs (M = 2.82), patriarchy (M = 3.19), and lack of support for women's Western education from religious leaders (M = 3.52) were perceived as causes of low female enrolment. The study concluded that economic, sociocultural, patriarchal, and religious factors contribute to low female participation in tertiary institutions in Sokoto State.

Balogun (2023), in his study titled "Guiding Muslim Women in the University: The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria Women's Programmes in Northern Nigeria. The study found that MSSN encourages Muslim women to pursue Western education while maintaining Islamic identity and Prophetic traditions, and that its programmes address education, piety, marriage, family responsibilities, professional careers, gender relations, and societal challenges. Balogun observed that these programmes enable Muslim women to participate actively in public and professional life while negotiating tensions surrounding religion, education, marriage, and societal expectations. The study concluded that Islamic-oriented student organisations can facilitate rather than necessarily restrict Muslim women's participation in higher education by providing religious guidance and support. It recommended continued attention to women-centred Islamic educational programmes, counselling, mentorship, and approaches that enable Muslim women to combine educational advancement with Islamic values.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design. The population comprised 180 contemporary Islamic scholars identified from recognised Islamic organisations, Islamic educational institutions, mosques, Qur'anic and Islamic learning centres, and other recognised sources of Islamic scholarship across the three senatorial zones, comprising 60 from Sokoto East, 70 from Sokoto North, and 50 from Sokoto South, as obtained from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2025)**.** From the population, 12 Islamic scholars were purposively selected based on their recognised Islamic training, scholarly experience, active involvement in Islamic teaching, preaching, counselling or jurisprudential interpretation, knowledge of contemporary Islamic issues, and willingness to participate in the study. The study employed purposive sampling**.** Contemporary Islamic Scholars' Interview Guide on Muslim Females' Participation in Higher Institutions (CISIG-MFPIHI), which contained open-ended questions covering scholars' Islamic interpretations, views, concerns, and recommendations concerning female higher education. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by five experts comprising two specialists in Islamic Studies, one in Educational Foundations, one in Measurement and Evaluation, and one in Educational Management, with an I-CVI ranging from 0.80 to 1.00 and an overall S-CVI/Ave of 0.90. A pilot study was conducted with 20 Islamic scholars who were excluded from the main study, and the interview guide was refined based on the pilot exercise. Since the instrument was qualitative and consisted of open-ended questions, Cronbach's alpha was not used; instead, credibility was enhanced through expert validation, pilot interviewing, refinement of questions, and consistency in the interview procedure. The researcher personally conducted and recorded the 12 interviews, with participants' permission, at convenient locations, while confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo-assisted thematic analysis.

Research Question One: What are the views from Islamic foundation?

The qualitative responses were analysed thematically in NVivo by transcribing the interviews, coding meaningful statements, grouping similar codes, and developing overarching themes. The analysis of respondents' opinions on the Islamic foundation of Muslim females' participation in higher institutions produced four major themes: Islamic obligation and right to acquire knowledge; historical evidence of

Muslim women's scholarship; conditional permissibility of higher education; and preservation of Islamic morality and identity.

On the first theme, the majority of respondents indicated that Islam does not prohibit women from acquiring beneficial knowledge. One scholar stated:

> *"From the Islamic foundation, seeking beneficial knowledge is not restricted to men. A Muslim woman can acquire knowledge that will benefit herself, her family and the wider Muslim community."*

Another respondent explained:

> *"Islam encourages knowledge because an ignorant person cannot properly understand her religion, fulfil her responsibilities or contribute meaningfully to society."*

The second theme concerned the historical participation of Muslim women in knowledge acquisition and scholarship. Respondents referred to the history of Muslim women who studied, taught, transmitted Hadith, and contributed to Islamic intellectual development. One respondent observed:

> *"If we look at Islamic history, women were not completely excluded from learning. There were women who were teachers and transmitters of Hadith, so it is difficult to say that Islam categorically forbids women from education."*

Another scholar stated:

> *"The early Muslim community provides examples of women who acquired knowledge and taught others. Therefore, the issue is not whether a woman should be educated, but what type of education she receives and the environment in which she receives it."*

The third theme was conditional permissibility of participation in higher institutions**.** Although respondents generally expressed support for female education, their support was not always unconditional. Several scholars emphasised that Muslim females' participation should be consistent with Islamic principles relating to modesty, appropriate dress, moral conduct, gender interaction, personal safety and religious obligations. One respondent explained:

> *"There is no problem with a Muslim woman attending a higher institution if the education is beneficial and she is able to maintain her Islamic identity, modesty and religious obligations."*

Another stated:

> *"The university environment should not force a Muslim woman to abandon her religion. Where there are issues of unnecessary mixing, immoral behaviour or absence of proper Islamic accommodation, those matters should be addressed."*

A further respondent noted:

> *"We should not confuse opposition to certain practices within higher institutions with opposition to education itself."*

The fourth theme was preservation of Islamic morality, family responsibilities and Muslim identity. Respondents indicated that higher education should enhance rather than undermine the religious and social responsibilities of Muslim women. One scholar remarked:

> *"Education should make a Muslim woman more useful to her family and society, not separate her from her religion."*

Another stated:

> *"A woman can become a doctor, lecturer, lawyer or other professional and still remain a practising Muslim. What matters is that education should be pursued within the limits of Islam."*

However, some respondents expressed concern about institutions where cultural or social pressures could affect Muslim women's religious identity, marriage expectations and family responsibilities. Overall, the NVivo thematic analysis indicated that the Islamic foundation identified by the respondents was predominantly supportive of Muslim females' acquisition of beneficial knowledge, but support for participation in higher institutions was generally conditional upon preservation of Islamic values, modesty, moral conduct, religious obligations and appropriate social responsibilities**.**

Research Question Two: What are the views of contemporary Islamic scholars in Sokoto on Muslim females' participation in higher institutions?

The qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo, through transcription of the interviews, initial coding, categorisation of related codes, identification of recurring patterns, and development of overarching themes. The analysis revealed that the contemporary Islamic scholars generally expressed a supportive view of Muslim females' participation in higher institutions, particularly where education was considered beneficial and consistent with Islamic principles. The first major theme was acceptance of female higher education as permissible and beneficial. Respondents explained that Islam does not generally prohibit women from acquiring useful knowledge and that educated Muslim women can contribute to their families and society. One respondent stated,

> *"I support Muslim women going to higher institutions because Islam encourages the acquisition of beneficial knowledge, and women need education to understand their religion, manage their families and contribute to society."*

Another scholar observed,

> *"There is nothing inherently wrong with a Muslim woman attending a university or college; the important thing is that the education should be beneficial and should not make her abandon her Islamic values."*

This finding is consistent with Ibrahi et al. (2024), who found that religious coping, culture and socioeconomic circumstances were significantly associated with the experiences of Muslim women students in Sokoto State. It also agrees with Balogun (2023), who found that Muslim women's participation in Western education in Northern Nigeria could coexist with Islamic identity and religious commitment.

The second major theme was conditional support based on Islamic morality, modesty and appropriate educational environments. Although most respondents supported female participation, their support was

accompanied by conditions concerning Islamic dress, moral conduct, religious obligations, gender interaction, safety and preservation of Muslim identity. One scholar explained,

> *"Our position is not against female education; rather, we want women to study in an environment where their dignity, modesty and religious obligations will be protected."*

Another respondent stated,

> *"A Muslim woman can become a doctor, lecturer, lawyer or any other professional, but she must remain conscious of Allah and observe the Islamic principles of dress and behaviour."*

A further participant opined,

> *"If the institution provides a safe environment and allows the Muslim woman to practise her religion, there is no reason to oppose her education."*

The NVivo coding therefore showed that the scholars' perspectives were better described as conditional support rather than unconditional approval. This finding supports Balogun (2023), who reported that Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria programmes encouraged Muslim women in Northern Nigerian universities to pursue Western education while maintaining piety, family responsibilities and Islamic identity. It also corresponds with Sarkin-Kebbi et al. (2024), whose study in Sokoto State found that religious leaders' attitudes were an important factor in female enrolment in tertiary institutions.

The third major theme was recognition of the social and community benefits of educating Muslim females. Respondents emphasised that higher education could equip Muslim women to become teachers, health professionals, administrators, entrepreneurs and other professionals who could contribute to the development of Muslim families and the wider society. One respondent remarked,

> *"When a Muslim woman is educated, she can educate her children and become a source of knowledge and development in her community."*

Another scholar noted,

> *"We need educated Muslim women, especially in areas such as medicine, education and social services, because there are situations where women need qualified female professionals."*

A participant further explained,

> *"Opposing female education completely would deprive the Muslim community of the contribution of educated women."*

Overall, the NVivo thematic analysis indicated that the scholars were predominantly supportive of Muslim females' enrolment and active participation in higher institutions, although their support was moderated by expectations concerning Islamic conduct, modesty, religious commitment, personal safety and family responsibilities. The finding therefore suggests that contemporary Islamic scholars in Sokoto did not generally perceive higher education as incompatible with Islam; rather, they advocated a form of female participation that combines educational advancement with Islamic identity and moral values. This interpretation is also supported by Sarkinfada (2022), who identified sociocultural and

socioeconomic factors as important influences on women's participation in higher institutions in Sokoto State.

Discussion of Findings

The finding from Research Question One indicated that the Islamic foundation of Muslim females' participation in higher education was predominantly supportive of the acquisition of beneficial knowledge, although such support was generally conditional upon adherence to Islamic values, modesty, moral conduct, religious obligations, and appropriate social responsibilities. This finding suggests that the respondents did not perceive Islam as categorically prohibiting Muslim females from acquiring higher education; rather, they viewed education as acceptable where it contributes to personal, family, and community development without compromising Islamic principles. The finding collaborates with the work of Balogun (2023) who found that Muslim women in Northern Nigerian higher institutions could pursue Western education while maintaining Islamic identity, piety, and religious responsibilities. Balogun's submission resonates with the present finding because both emphasise that the central concern is not necessarily women's acquisition of higher education, but the manner and environment in which such education is pursued. Similarly, Ibrahi et al. (2024) found among Muslim women students in Sokoto State that religious coping and cultural considerations were important dimensions of their educational experiences.

The finding from Research Question Two revealed that contemporary Islamic scholars in Sokoto were predominantly supportive of Muslim females' enrolment and active participation in higher institutions, although their support was moderated by expectations concerning Islamic conduct, modesty, religious commitment, personal safety, and family responsibilities. This finding indicates that the scholars did not generally regard higher education as incompatible with the Islamic faith; rather, they viewed female participation as acceptable and beneficial when it was pursued within a framework that protected Muslim identity and moral values. This finding collaborates with Balogun (2023), who found that Muslim women in Northern Nigerian universities participated in Western education while maintaining Islamic identity, piety, and religious responsibilities. Balogun's finding resonates strongly with the present result because both suggest that Islamic commitment and participation in higher education are not necessarily contradictory. Similarly, Ibrahi et al. (2024) found that religious coping and cultural factors were significantly associated with the experiences of Muslim women students in Sokoto State. Their submission integrates with the present finding by demonstrating that Muslim women's participation in higher education can occur alongside religious commitment, provided that educational experiences accommodate their religious and cultural identities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that contemporary Islamic scholars in Sokoto State generally supported Muslim females' acquisition of beneficial knowledge, enrolment, and active participation in higher institutions, and that their perspectives were substantially rooted in Islamic principles that recognise the value of education for both individual and community development. However, such support was largely conditional rather than absolute, as the scholars emphasised the preservation of Islamic values, modesty, moral conduct, religious obligations, family responsibilities, personal safety, and appropriate social interaction.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made

1. Islamic scholars and religious organisations in Sokoto State should intensify public enlightenment on the Islamic foundation of female education by emphasising that the acquisition of beneficial knowledge is compatible with Islamic principles.
2. Higher institutions in Sokoto State should strengthen policies and facilities that enable Muslim females to participate in higher education while observing their Islamic values.

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