

Assessing the Empowerment of Muslim Women in Malawi: A Case Study of the Muslim Women's Organization

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Abstract—This study critically examines the empowerment of Muslim women in Malawi, focusing on the Muslim Women's Organization (MWO) and its impact on gender equality within Islamic communities. It explores MWO's interpretation of Islamic women's rights, the stereotypes Muslim women face, and the factors limiting their rights. Utilizing qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, the research adopts phenomenological and feminist frameworks. Findings indicate that since its establishment in 1985, MWO has significantly advocated for gender equality by leveraging Islamic teachings and policy to support women's empowerment, enabling Muslim women to participate in social change. However, entrenched cultural traditions, patriarchal structures, and systemic poverty remain barriers to empowerment.

Keywords—Islam, women empowerment, Malawi, Islamic feminism.

I. INTRODUCTION

WOMEN'S empowerment has long been a subject of global discussion, particularly in developing nations such as Malawi, where cultural, social, and economic factors heavily influence the status and rights of women [1]. The empowerment of Muslim women, in particular, often faces additional challenges due to religious interpretations and patriarchal structures that limit their participation in social, economic, and political spheres [2]. This article focuses on MWO, a body established in 1985, to advocate for the empowerment of Muslim women in Malawi [3]. The organization aims to support women's rights through Islamic teachings and has been pivotal in addressing gender inequality.

1. **Research Problem:** While Islam advocates for the equality of men and women, the cultural and social realities in Malawi often restrict the rights of Muslim women. This study seeks to answer the key question: *How does MWO empower Muslim women in Malawi?*
2. **Thesis Statement:** This research argues that the MWO plays a critical role in promoting the empowerment of Muslim women by advocating for their rights through religious and social frameworks, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging economic independence.
3. **Objectives:** The study aims to achieve the following objectives:
 - a) Examine how MWO interprets Islamic teachings to promote women's rights and challenge patriarchal

interpretations of Islam in Malawi.

- b) Analyze the role of MWO in empowering Muslim women through education, economic participation, and leadership opportunities.
- c) Investigate the challenges faced by Muslim women in Malawi, focusing on the impact of patriarchal structures and cultural norms on their rights and freedoms.
- d) Evaluate the effectiveness of MWO's programs and initiatives in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment within the Islamic community.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on women's empowerment in Malawi has traditionally focused on socio-economic and political factors that affect gender equality, often examining women's roles in agriculture, education, and political representation [4]. Studies by scholars, such as Chirambo [5], have highlighted the structural barriers that impede women's full participation in society, including poverty, limited access to education, and legal constraints. However, these analyses have typically been secular, rarely addressing the role of religion—specifically Islam—in shaping women's empowerment. This creates a gap in understanding how religious teachings, especially within Islam, contribute to or challenge the empowerment of women in Malawi. Given that a significant portion of Malawi's population practices Islam, particularly in the southern regions, understanding this religious dimension is crucial [6].

Islamic feminism, which advocates for gender equality through reinterpretation of Islamic texts, has gained prominence globally but remains underexplored in Malawi. The MWO in Malawi uses Islamic teachings to challenge patriarchal structures and promote women's rights, offering a culturally sensitive approach that resonates in Muslim communities. Unlike secular feminist movements, MWO's advocacy is grounded in religious discourse, emphasizing that education, economic participation, and political involvement are religious obligations for all Muslims, thereby advancing women's empowerment in a unique socio-religious context [7], [8].

A. Theoretical Framework

The research employs phenomenology and Islamic feminist theory to explore how Muslim women in Malawi interpret their roles and navigate barriers to empowerment within Religious

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and social contexts.

- a) *Phenomenology*: This theoretical approach focuses on the lived experiences of individuals; specifically, how Muslim women perceive their rights and roles in society [9]. Phenomenology allows the research to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of the women involved in the study, providing insight into their empowerment journey within the Islamic faith.
- b) *Islamic Feminism*: Islamic feminism seeks to reinterpret Islamic teachings to promote gender equality. It argues that the Quran and Hadith provide a foundation for the equality of men and women, but patriarchal interpretations have historically marginalized women's roles [7]. This framework is critical for understanding how MWO uses Islamic teachings to advocate for women's empowerment.

By employing these frameworks, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how MWO facilitates the empowerment of Muslim women within a religious and cultural context.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze the data. This approach was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of the participants [10]. The study was conducted in Blantyre and Mangochi, Malawi, focusing on women from the Yao tribe, the country's largest Muslim group.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was used to understand how Muslim women perceive their empowerment through MWO. This involved collecting data from participants who had first-hand experiences with the organization's programs and initiatives.

Data Collection

The data were collected through three main methods:

- a) *In-depth Interviews*: Three serial in-depth interviews were conducted with key research participants from MWO. These interviews focused on understanding the participants' perceptions of their rights and empowerment within the framework of Islamic teachings.
- b) *Focus Group Discussions*: A focus group discussion was held with five members of MWO. This provided a platform for participants to share their experiences, challenges, and views on the organization's role in promoting women's empowerment [11].
- c) *Participant Observation*: We attended several MWO events and meetings to observe the interactions and activities within the organization.

Sample Population

The sample population consisted of eleven participants: one coordinator for MWO's empowerment initiatives (Research Participant A), two executive leaders of MWO (Research Participants B and C), three representatives of MWO's subsidiary women's group (Research Participants D, E, and F),

and five members of MWO. A simple random sampling technique was used to ensure that all participants had an equal chance of being selected.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying key themes and patterns in the participants' responses. These themes were then interpreted within the phenomenological and feminist theoretical frameworks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the empowerment process [12].

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards by obtaining informed consent from all participants. The participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. All data collected were kept confidential and used solely for the research.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into the empowerment of Muslim women in Malawi, there were some limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, due to financial and time constraints, the study was limited to Mangochi and Blantyre districts and did not include other districts where MWO operates.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of the study reveal that the MWO has played a crucial role in the empowerment of Muslim women in Malawi, particularly in the areas of education, economic empowerment, and challenging societal stereotypes.

MWO's Role in Interpreting Islamic Women's Rights

The gender teachings in Islam vary in interpretations depending on the geographical and historical setting of the area. For example, in Malawi, there is a prominence on the role of women in society and also the rights that are given to them [13]. One of the most significant roles of MWO has been its ability to reinterpret Islamic teachings to promote women's rights. The organization emphasizes the right to education, the right to participate in economic and social activities, and the right to dignity and protection.

a) Right to Education

Islam emphasizes education as vital for societal progress [8]. The Quran's first word, Iqra (meaning "read" or "recite"), highlights the importance of knowledge for all, as seen in verses like al-Zumar (39:9), which underscores that education is essential for everyone to fulfill their duties to God [14]. Mashema and Kawu [8] argue that educating women is crucial for societal advancement, enabling them to support themselves and their families. The Prophet Muhammad declared the pursuit of knowledge obligatory for all Muslims, supported by Quranic verses and Hadiths, such as Ibn Maja's assertion that "the acquisition of knowledge is binding on all Muslims" [15].

Educating women is essential, as it equips them to raise responsible children, reinforcing their role as primary educators

in families [15]. MWO highlights historical examples of educated women, such as Aisha, Muhammad's wife, who made significant contributions to interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith, narrating an unmatched number of Hadiths [16], [17]. Other notable figures include Nafisa, Shudah bint Ahmad al-Ibar, and Amra bint Aburrahman, who exemplify women's scholarship in Islamic texts [18]. These examples illustrate that Muslim women possess the ability and right to pursue knowledge, showcasing Islam's commitment to equality [16]. MWO actively promotes education for women and girls, leveraging Quranic teachings to encourage educational pursuits. Their outreach programs have successfully increased access to education for girls in rural areas, leading many to pursue higher education and professional careers in fields like law, medicine, and teaching.

b) Right to Economic Empowerment

Islamic law grants Muslim women the right to inherit and own property, as highlighted by various Quranic texts. While historically, women faced significant barriers to inheritance, Islamic laws established their status as legal inheritors [16]. Inheritance serves as a means of justice, allowing both male and female relatives to claim their shares, although men often receive a larger portion, typically at a 2:1 ratio between sons and daughters [19]. Women also retain ownership of their pre-marriage possessions and dower (mahr), ensuring financial security, particularly in divorce cases [20]. MWO emphasizes women's economic rights within this framework, advocating for their autonomy in managing property without being burdened by household expenses, a responsibility that lies with husbands [20].

Khadija, the first wife of Prophet Muhammad and a successful businesswoman, exemplifies women's economic empowerment [7], [21]. MWO uses such historical examples to argue for contemporary interpretations of the Quran that uphold women's rights [22]. Despite these advancements, socio-economic and cultural factors often hinder the practical application of property rights. MWO plays a crucial role in economic empowerment by providing training and resources to women, including facilitating Stokvel (banki nkhone) groups for communal savings and investments in small businesses. This initiative has enabled many women to achieve financial independence and enhance their families' well-being, while skills training in areas like tailoring and farming further boosts their income-generating potential.

c) Right to Participate in Political and Social Activities

Muslim women have historically participated in political and social activities, as seen in early Islam, where they were involved in voting, law-making, and trade [7]. Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, is a key example, contributing significantly to religious and political discourse [16], [17]. Scholarly works underscore women's roles across sectors such as education, management, and the judiciary, highlighting their vital presence in civil service [7]. MWO advocates for women's empowerment and leadership, drawing on historical precedents. While focus group discussions support the idea that Muslim

women should engage in politics, economics, and social services, the study reveals a gap between ideal interpretations of Islamic law and the realities faced by women in Malawi, where cultural norms often limit their participation. The study critiques MWO's approach of oversimplifying the comparison between past and present contexts. The different customs and policies that shaped early Muslim women's experiences contrast with the challenges faced by modern women, suggesting that historical comparisons should account for these variations to strengthen advocacy efforts.

d) Right to Marriage and Divorce

Muslim women have the right to consent to or deny a marriage proposal, as emphasized in Islamic texts like the Quran and Hadith. Surah 4:19 prohibits forcing women into marriage, while Sahih Al-Bukhari highlights the necessity of obtaining a woman's permission before marriage [17]. These principles affirm that Islam does not allow marriages against a woman's will, underscoring her autonomy in this critical decision. Additionally, women have the right to seek divorce if unhappy, a process that can be initiated by either spouse [24]. Although the Quran encourages reconciliation, it also advises both parties to act honorably if reconciliation fails [24].

MWO stresses that marriage should be a consensual agreement; however, many rural women face societal pressure to enter into early marriages without choosing their partners, often due to cultural and economic factors. MWO asserts that practices contrary to their interpretation of Islamic teachings on marriage and divorce are not genuinely Islamic. Some participants expressed concerns about the rigidity of divorce procedures, noting that the waiting period can be emotionally taxing and may favor men, and others countered that this period can offer women security and a chance for reconciliation, complicating the process of marital dissolution.

e) Right to Dignity and Protection

Muslim women have the right to dignity, self-respect, and protection from abuse—physical, emotional, psychological, and financial abuse [26]. The Quran, in Surah 65:6, urges the kind treatment of women and rejects actions that cause them harm [26]. MWO emphasizes that Islam condemns violence and mistreatment, viewing domestic abuse as un-Islamic. It also advocates for women's dignity, calls for stricter penalties for abusers, and promotes awareness campaigns encouraging women to report abuse, highlighting that Islamic teachings uphold their right to protection and respect [26]. Despite these efforts, the study revealed that negative perceptions and cultural practices within some Muslim households can contribute to the abuse of women. Traditional views that position men as the sole providers can disadvantage women, making them less likely to voice concerns or resist abusive situations [27]. MWO challenges these cultural norms by highlighting Islamic teachings that affirm the dignity and protection of women, advocating for a shift in attitudes that perpetuate violence and discrimination.

Challenging Stereotypes

Muslim women in Malawi face a range of stereotypes,

particularly concerning their roles in society. Traditionally, women have been viewed as submissive and relegated to domestic roles [27]. The research reviewed various studies on media representation of Muslim women, highlighting a consistent portrayal of them as oppressed and discriminated against [28], [29]. Additional publications from abroad also depict issues of violence and discrimination faced by Muslim women, raising questions about Islam's stance on women's rights [29]. In Malawi, similar views exist, where Islam is seen as a hindrance to societal progress [30], [31]. The study identified three key areas contributing to stereotypes of Muslim women in Malawi: the wearing of the hijab, their perceived exclusion from various societal roles, and family hierarchy.

a) Wearing of the Hijab

The hijab is often associated with backwardness and vulnerability [31], [32]. Hasan [31] observes that many women who wear the hijab often do not engage in various social, political, and economic activities within their communities. Furthermore, in colonial, orientalist, and mainstream feminist discourses, the hijab is frequently negatively portrayed as a symbol of female oppression, a sign of backwardness, and a means of rendering women invisible [31]. The perception of the hijab in Malawi reflects a similar sentiment, where it is viewed as a barrier that restricts Muslim women from fully participating in social, political, and economic activities [31], [33]. While some regard the hijab as a symbol of passivity, others associate it with violence and discrimination. Tyrer and Ahmad [32] found that many participants wearing the hijab were stereotyped as passive victims of oppression. Additionally, Hasan [31] notes that the hijab is frequently perceived as a symbol of oppression and male dominance within families and society.

b) Exclusion from Participation

Islam condemns discrimination and the seclusion of women, but issues around women's participation in religious, social, political, and economic spheres persist. In mosques, Muslim women are often seated separately from men, which has drawn criticism, especially as it limits some women's participation in religious activities [23]. However, MWO argues that these arrangements maintain prayer sanctity, not discrimination. Socially, Muslim women in Malawi are often seen as secluded, with limited community involvement, partly due to low representation in education and the workforce [30]. In tallying, MWO believes that women's participation in social groups fosters unity and provides a platform to improve their skills, gain confidence, network, and share ideas. This, in turn, helps women harness their abilities and develop the attributes needed to excel in leadership roles [28], [35]. Politically, Muslim women are underrepresented, with only 20 Muslims elected out of 192 members in the 2014 parliamentary elections, representing 10% of Malawi's Muslim population, which was 12% according to the 2012 census [34]. Historically, their late political integration has restricted their participation [35]. Economically, while fewer Muslim women engage in financial activities, some have successfully started small businesses.

MWO notes that women can accumulate wealth and support their husbands despite the common perception of financial dependence.

Advocacy through Proselytization

MWO provides platforms, such as the Ijtimah (gathering), where Muslim women can discuss issues affecting their lives, share ideas, and network with other women. MWO has used proselytization (dawah) as a tool for advocacy [36]. By incorporating Islamic teachings into their messages, MWO encourages families to educate their daughters and challenge societal norms that limit women's roles. MWO's success in this area is evident in the increasing number of women taking up leadership positions in their communities and participating in decision-making processes. MWO plays a crucial role in empowering Muslim women through advocacy and community engagement. By hosting events like the Ijtimah, MWO creates platforms for women to discuss challenges, share ideas, and network [36]. These gatherings have successfully encouraged Muslim families to prioritize education for their daughters, addressing issues such as maternal health, gender-based violence, and HIV/AIDS [23]. Research participants noted that MWO's integration of Islamic teachings into their advocacy not only promotes education but also inspires women to pursue leadership roles, ultimately enhancing their families' social and economic status.

Factors Limiting Muslim Women's Rights

Despite MWO's successes, several factors continue to limit the full empowerment of Muslim women in Malawi. These include cultural traditions, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings, poverty, and institutional barriers [4]

a) Cultural Traditions

The status of women in Islam, particularly in Malawi, is influenced by cultural traditions and historical contexts. In pre-Islamic times, women were often viewed as property, and the birth of a girl could evoke negative feelings from fathers [25]. This perception persists in many Islamic communities, where cultural norms overshadow Islamic teachings that advocate for women's rights. As a result, women's roles are frequently limited to domestic responsibilities, restricting their participation in social, political, and economic activities. Research shows that cultural beliefs often assign lower status to girls, hindering their access to education and empowerment opportunities [27]. These cultural expectations dictate that women remain submissive, affecting their ability to voice opinions or challenge male authority. This dynamic is evident in both family and political spheres, where women are often confined to supportive roles rather than leadership positions [34]. Consequently, even when women wish to engage politically, they encounter significant barriers, such as a lack of confidence and societal endorsement [27]. While Islamic law provides women with certain rights, the prevailing cultural norms significantly limit their ability to fully exercise these rights, leaving many Muslim women in Malawi constrained by traditional gender roles and marginalized in broader societal affairs [1].

b) Patriarchal Interpretations of Islam

While Islam promotes gender equality, patriarchal interpretations often distort these teachings, perpetuating male dominance and limiting women's rights. This distortion poses challenges in many Muslim societies, where cultural values intertwine with religious beliefs. Fiedler [4] notes that women's subjugation stems from patriarchal structures misusing religious teachings to uphold male authority. For instance, certain Quranic verses about inheritance and leadership are skewed to imply male superiority, despite the Quran's advocacy for justice and fairness for all genders [1]. Similarly, some Hadiths reinforce male dominance, such as the notion that men are responsible for educating their wives and female slaves, justifying control over women's access to knowledge [15]. Mashema and Kawu [8] argue that such interpretations overlook Islam's broader emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge for everyone, regardless of gender. MWO actively challenges these patriarchal views through Islamic feminism, asserting that all Muslims are equal in God's eyes [7], [13]. MWO advocates for a return to core Islamic principles of justice, equality, and dignity for all believers, promoting women's participation in education, leadership, and economic activities. Their efforts include reinterpreting religious texts to reflect Islam's true egalitarian spirit, aiming to dismantle patriarchal structures that restrict women's rights. This shift is gradually altering perceptions within the Islamic community and contributing to societal changes regarding women's rights [2]. By promoting Islamic feminism, MWO empowers Muslim women in Malawi to advocate for their rights within both religious and social contexts.

c) Poverty

Poverty is a significant barrier to women's empowerment in Malawi, especially for those in rural areas. Many women lack access to resources that could improve their socio-economic status. While MWO has made strides through economic empowerment programs, deeper systemic issues remain [4]. Malawi was ranked the tenth poorest country globally in 2010, with an annual per capita GDP of just USD 800 [38]. Over 50% of the population survives on less than USD 165 annually, with about one-fifth experiencing extreme poverty [37]. This economic context hinders growth and sustainability, affecting both general and Muslim households. MWO outlines women's rights to inheritance, property ownership, education, and participation in business and politics. However, poverty restricts their ability to exercise these rights, forcing reliance on husbands or male relatives. The loss of a breadwinner can leave women in dire economic straits, unable to support themselves or their families. Limited financial resources can lead to situations where poor women are pressured into forced marriages for financial security. Research Participant E recounted instances where families married off daughters to wealthy older men as a survival strategy. Such practices, often justified by Islamic guardianship principles, deprive women of their right to education and choice in marriage [37]. Consequently, many Muslim women become victims of male dominance and various forms of abuse [26].

d) Institutional Barriers

Institutional policies in Malawi often limit Muslim women's empowerment and access to their rights. Key institutions, including banks, schools, and national service centers, implement policies that do not accommodate Islamic beliefs. For example, many banks charge interest on loans, which is prohibited in Islam. Without banking options aligned with Islamic principles, women struggle to secure funding for businesses and save for the future. Research Participant B emphasized that if banks were more accommodating, Muslim women could better exercise their rights to property ownership and financial independence. Additionally, institutional barriers, such as a lack of access to education and healthcare, continue to hinder the empowerment of Muslim women in Malawi. MWO has been advocating for policy changes that would improve access to these essential services, but progress has been slow.

e) Geographical Setting

Geographical disparities in Malawi limit Muslim women's access to their rights, with rural women facing more significant challenges than those in urban areas. Urban women benefit from better resources and services, enabling them to exercise their rights more fully. In contrast, rural women suffer from marginalization in health, income, education, and resource access, exacerbated by underdevelopment. Despite Islamic law allowing for social and economic participation, rural women often face financial burdens due to their husbands' inability to provide for basic needs. Poor infrastructure and limited access to essential services, such as schools and hospitals, further confine rural women, preventing them from achieving empowerment. Focus group discussions highlight that urban Muslim women have easier access to education, jobs, and legal assistance, while rural women must travel long distances, impacting their rights and empowerment [26].

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that MWO has played a pivotal role in empowering Muslim women in Malawi by advocating for their rights within the framework of Islamic teachings. The organization's emphasis on education, economic empowerment, and advocacy through proselytization has had a significant impact on the lives of Muslim women, enabling them to participate more fully in society.

Empowerment through Islamic Teachings

MWO's use of Islamic teachings to promote women's rights has been particularly effective in challenging traditional gender roles and encouraging women's participation in public life. By framing women's empowerment within the context of Islam, MWO has been able to gain the support of both women and men in the community. This approach has allowed the organization to address gender inequality in a way that is culturally and religiously acceptable, making it more likely to succeed.

Intersection of Religion and Gender

The intersection of religion and gender is a key theme in this

study. While Islamic teachings provide a foundation for gender equality, patriarchal interpretations of these teachings often limit women's rights. MWO's efforts to challenge these interpretations through Islamic feminism have been instrumental in empowering Muslim women to assert their rights [32], [33], [35]. However, as the findings suggest, there is still a long way to go in fully realizing gender equality in Malawi's Islamic communities.

Economic Empowerment as a Path to Independence

One of the most significant ways that MWO has empowered Muslim women is through economic initiatives such as the Stokvel groups. These initiatives have enabled women to achieve financial independence, which is critical to their overall empowerment. The ability to generate income has allowed Muslim women to contribute to their households, send their children to school, and invest in their communities [39].

VI. CONCLUSION

MWO has been a key player in the empowerment of Muslim women in Malawi. Since its establishment in 1985, the organization has worked tirelessly to promote gender equality and women's rights within the framework of Islamic teachings. Through education, economic empowerment, and advocacy, MWO has challenged traditional gender roles and provided Muslim women with the tools they need to succeed. However, challenges such as cultural traditions, patriarchal interpretations of Islam, poverty, and institutional barriers continue to limit the full empowerment of Muslim women.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This research highlights the importance of religious-based organizations in promoting women's rights in conservative societies. The findings suggest that Islamic teachings, when interpreted through a feminist lens, can be a powerful tool for advocating for gender equality. Policymakers and practitioners should work closely with organizations like MWO to develop initiatives that empower women while respecting cultural and religious contexts.

Future Research

Future research should explore the long-term impact of MWO's initiatives on the lives of Muslim women in Malawi. Additionally, studies should be conducted in other regions of Malawi to determine if MWO's model can be replicated in different religious contexts.

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