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**Address:** Islamic Studies Unit  
Department of Religions  
Lagos State University  
P.M.B. 1087,  
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# THE MUSLIM WOMEN AND CHALLENGES OF THE CONTEMPORARY TIME

By  
MUHIB .O. OPELOYE

## I. Introduction

Gender Studies is increasingly becoming an important field of academic study in view of the interest it has been generating, not only among the political scientists and philosophers but also the theologians. The interest generated in this field must have resulted from degradation to which womanhood has been subjected through the ages. It is a fact well known that the ancient civilizations such as the Byzantine's and Persian's as well as the primordial religions like Hinduism and Buddhism have nothing favourable about women who were held in very low esteem. It was Islam at its advent which accorded women due honour and dignity. Unfortunately, however, it was not long when due to some socio-cultural factors Muslim Women were deprived of rights accorded them by Islam. The Muslim reformists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century including Muhammad Abduh and Jamalud Din al-Afghani tried with little success in the Muslim world to restore dignity and honour to womanhood. This was about the time feminism as a movement for emancipation of women was gaining ground in the West. Prior to that time (and precisely in 1792) Marry Wallstonescraft had published her celebrated book: *The Rights of Women* in which she advocated the need for the betterment of the lot of Women<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the reformists' efforts, the achievements remained negligible during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not until about the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that the activities of the feminist movements began to yield the desired results especially with the intervention of the United Nations Organizations Agencies, but then the impact was minimal in the Muslim world. The effect of feminist movements the world over has been so monumental that we can say our world today is becoming "the women's world".

Today's world is where women have been leaving their mark in virtually every field of human endeavour viz: polity, diplomacy, sports, commerce, industry, as well as science and technology as evident in the list of the world's most powerful women published recently in the Sunday Leadership<sup>2</sup>.

The most powerful women in the world today according to the publication is Angela Merkel, the current German Chancellor, followed by Condoleeza Rice, the United States Secretary of State. The list reveals that presently 30 Women are in the top echelons of government throughout the world with 14 of them occupying the position of President or Prime Minister across the continents as follows:

Germany	-	Chancellor
Chile	-	President
New Zealand	-	Prime Minister

Bangladesh	-	Prime Minister
Finland	-	President
Phillipins	-	President
Liberia	-	President
Ireland	-	President
Litvia	-	President
South Korea	-	Prime Minister
Mozambique	-	Prime Minister
Jamaica	-	Prime Minister
Bahrain	-	Prime Minister
Sri Lanka	-	President

We also have women running big companies as Chief Executives, or Chairmen throughout the world with the United States topping the list followed by Europe then Asia. In all of these Muslim women are lacking behind.

Coming to the Nigerian scene, it is worthy of note that as far back as the colonial era, the likes of Madam Tinubu, Queen Amina, Madam Magret Ekpo and Chief (Mrs) Olufunmilayo Kuti made remarkable contributions towards the growth and development of our nation.

With Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, women are being made to be active participants in governance to the extent that we now have women as Deputy Governors, Speakers of Legislative Houses, Ministers of important Ministries, just as we have women as Chief Executives and Chairmen of big companies and industries. It should be interesting to note that currently the Institute of Chartered Accountant, the Council of Chartered Insurance Institute of Nigeria and the Chartered Institute of Bankers have women as Presidents.

Nevertheless, when we look at the Muslim societies around the world including Nigeria, we must admit that there is still a long way to go. It is true that Indonesia, the world most populous Muslim country once had a Muslim Prime Minister in person of Megawati Sukarnoposria, it is equally true that Bahrain and Bangladesh are currently on the list of world countries with women as Prime Ministers; it can also not be denied that even in Nigeria the likes of Alhaja Lateefat Okunu, Alhaja Sinat Ojukutu have served as Deputy Governors while Alhaja Salamat Badru is currently a serving Deputy, the fact still remains that the Muslim women are still generally backward despite the legacy of women emancipation left by Islam for humanity since the 7<sup>th</sup> century

The question then arises, what are the factors accounting for the general backwardness of the Muslim women? In spite of their limited success how do we assess the role of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim reformists in liberating the Muslim women to be able to face the challenges of their time? Can we say feminism as a movement of women emancipation in the contemporary period is of any significant effect on the

Muslim women? How much is the feminists' ideology in tune with the tenets of Islam? These are germane questions which would need to be addressed in our attempt to discuss the subject of this lecture. The discussion will have a general focus on Turkey, Egypt, Iran and a particular focus on Nigeria. It would be appropriate to first and foremost examine the Islamic attitude to womanhood.

## II. Islamic View of Women

Of all the world religions and civilizations, it is Islam which accords woman enhanced status, freedom and rights and this we can appreciate if we consider what her status is in the older religions and civilizations. Hinduism which enjoys superiority of being the oldest among the existing religions and ethnical systems holds women in extremely low esteem to the extent that she is denied every right of independence. In the belief system only a sinful soul is born as woman. Buddhism on the other hand teaches that salvation which is the goal of human life cannot be attained in the company of a woman. In other words the belief system forbids conjugal life and preaches celibacy. Judaism too has nothing favourable for the woman. She is held responsible for all vices and evils. According to Hebrew Scriptures woman is under an eternal divine curse and for that reason she must be ruled by her husband.

Christianity likens women to Eve and they are consequently believed to be co-sharers in God's sentence passed on them. St John Chrysotom one of the Greek fathers of the Church says: "She is an eternal mischief, an attractive calamity, a domestic risk, a charming and decorated misfortune<sup>3</sup>.

In the African tradition, a widow is so held in contempt that she is made to sleep with the corpse of her deceased husband and also drink from the bath water of the corpse, all in an attempt to prove her innocence of the husband's death.<sup>4</sup>

In Arabia, the birthplace of the prophet of Islam, the position of woman was in no way better. The patriarchal form of social structure made woman a part of man's property that had no right of inheritance, as she would rather be inherited. Worse still, female infanticide was a common practice. With the emergence of Islam, the status of women improved considerably. The Qur'an which is the most basic source of guidance leaves no one in doubt about Islam's earnestness for womanhood. The 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur'an that discusses at length woman related issues is appropriately titled *an - Nisa'* (The Women) It is worthy of note that the notion of woman's equality with man was first preached by the Qur'an in *Surah* 33:35 as early as the 7th Century C.E.

The status of equality accorded to both sexes by the Qur'an is illustrated by the fact that divine revelation which is Allah's greatest blessing to mankind is experienced by both men and women<sup>5</sup>. The assertion in the Qur'an 2:187 that man and woman complement one another in their roles, functions and rights is borne out

of sex equality concept. In view of the fact that man and woman are complementary to one another and both enjoy equal status and rights, equality between them is an inherent and assured fact. Differences defined in the progressive laws of Islam for men and women are based on roles played and responsibilities assumed by them.

To illustrate the dignity accorded woman by Islam, we shall examine three of the rights granted her.

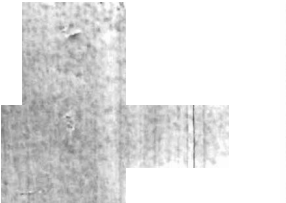
### **The Right to Education**

The prophet of Islam (SAW) opened avenues of knowledge acquisition for men and women when he asserts: "the search for knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim (women inclusive)". In another tradition, the prophet was reported to have enjoined the Muslim to seek knowledge even if it would mean traveling as far as China (a non Muslim land) which suggests to us that useful education is not limited to religious education in Islamic perception. Similarly, in the Qur'an, when reference is made to knowledge acquisition, those addressed are believers in general, nevertheless, women education is particularly encouraged. A superior education seems to have been placed on the education of women when we are taught by the Hadith of the Prophet that if we educate a man we have only educated a person but if it is a woman, then we have educated a nation. An Arab adage corroborates this as it projects the mother as a school. It is when a girl is properly trained and educated that she can play the role of a school to her children on attainment of motherhood. It is therefore not surprising that 'Ā'ishah, the prophet's wife, was given the freedom to develop her intellect. She was so renowned an intellectual in her time that her advice in affairs of the state was considered invaluable by the early Muslim rulers<sup>6</sup>. 'Ā'ishah was a great authority in Islamic Jurisprudence. The prophet was so earnest about female education that he directed his followers to educate even their slave girls.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore important to note that in terms of educational pursuit, a Muslim woman can be encouraged to attain the highest possible level. Islam places a great premium on women education realizing that it is the tool which can equip them to face the challenges of all time.

### **Women's Right to own Property**

Islamic law recognizes the full right of the Muslim women not only to earn a living but also to own property as contained in *Surah* 4:32 which reads:

And wish not for the things in which Allah has made some of you to excel others. For men there is a reward for what they have earned and for women there is a reward for what they have earned, and ask Allah for His bounty...



Similarly, the Hadith of the Prophet recognizes the right of women to work to earn a living as evident in the tradition reported by Jabir b Abdullah who related that his aunt who was in *‘iddah* of widowhood went out to get some of her date palms harvested and was stopped by some one. The woman complained to the Prophet who gave a verdict thus: “You go out and get date tree harvested so that you may be able to do some other good work”<sup>7</sup> In the light of these scriptural references, it can be concluded that women are permitted to engage in jobs of their interest like men, they are allowed to engage in legitimate enterprise or enter into lawful contracts, and they are entitled to rewards for the tasks performed in the same way as men.

The recognition accorded to women’s right to own property by Islam is so remarkable that it is appreciated even by non-Muslims like Pierre Crabites who was nominated by President Ttaft of the United States in 1911 to act as a member of one of the mixed tribunals of Cairo. He has this to say in his article titled: “Things which Muhammad did for women” and I quote:

When all is said and done, however, nothing astonished me more than to have proof driven home to me that before .AD. 632, the prophet of Islam had accomplished more to safeguard the property rights of women of his land than the legislature of Louisiana has as yet done for her who bears my name<sup>8</sup>

The right of the Muslim women to own property derives from four sources viz:

- *Hibah* (gift)
- Mahr* (dowry)
- Nafaqah* (maintenace)
- Iktisab* (earning)

The rationale behind this right of the Muslim woman is not far fetched. First and foremost, it enables her to perform her basic religious duties like the payment of *zakāt* from which she is not exempted and spending out of her wealth to promote good cause. Moreover, the right enables her to take care of herself and her family in the emergency situation like the husband losing his job or he suddenly becoming irresponsible or in the event of the woman losing her husband. If spouses are to be protectors of one another as taught in *Surah* 2:187, it implies that they should both have means of livelihood. The experience of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) with his first wife drives home the argument as it illustrates a situation where the wife was the breadwinner of the family because of her enormous wealth.

## Right to Political Participation

Islam recognizes in the Muslim women the right to participation in public life as illustrated in the political history of Islam. Their views in state matters were considered valuable and they were encouraged to take part in the social life of the community. Few examples to cite to illustrate this point include employment of Shifa bint Abdullah as superintendent of markets in Madinah by Caliph 'Umar b. Khattab and participation of Muslim women in wars as in example of the role of 'Ā'ishah, the wife of the Prophet in the Battle of Camel and the role of Ummu Ammar in the Battle of Uhud.

Muslim women enjoy absolute freedom of expression just like their male counterparts. Again, evidences of this abound as we have in Khaulah bint Tha'labah's protest to the prophet about her husband Aus bin Samit recorded in *Surah* 58:1-4. Another example is the case of a woman who in a congregation rose to counter 'Umar bin Al-Khattāb in his attempt to put a ceiling on the amount of *mahr* payable to a woman by her suitor. Umar was cautioned not to set a limit on what Allah had left open. Umar in appreciation of the woman's view admitted his error<sup>9</sup>. 'Ā'ishah the wife of the prophet was an acknowledged consultant not only on religious issues but also on political matters of her time.

Following from these historic antecedents, the Muslim women should take the challenge of exercising their socio-political rights including the right to vote and be voted for, right to express their view on matters affecting their life and the right to participate in politics and governance. It must however be emphasized that while pursuing their political and economic interests, they should not do it in a manner that will jeopardize their domestic duties which constitute their primary responsibilities as enjoined by Islam.

Discussing the nature of political appointments, Muslim women may pursue, Noibi<sup>10</sup> opines that they are excluded from high offices such as the presidency, head of government, appointment as judges, head of legislative arm of government and other highly demanding and sensitive offices. He argues that demands of such offices are inconsistent with the physiological and psychological make-up of women. According to him, the physiological and psychological changes which women undergo during their monthly periods and during pregnancy as well as the period immediately following child-birth can indeed constitute a great impediment to effective leadership. They may occur in emergency situation while the excessive strains that accompany them may adversely affect the decision of women in such decision making positions. While one would admit that Muslim women may not be considered for the post of chief executive of a government in view of the Hadīth provision in that regard, one would not subscribe to the view excluding women from such other positions as mentioned. The reason adduced in our considered opinion is

not plausible because offices as high as those in question should normally be occupied by highly experienced and fully matured people who should have passed the age of menstruation or child-bearing and it is the age when women are excused from the use of *hijab* as evident in *Surah an-Nisa'*

It is easy to conclude from the foregoing discussion that Islam recognizes gender equality in terms of the rights granted both sexes. However, the question can still be asked whether it is possible to talk about woman's absolute equality with man in Islam when in:

- (i) *Surah* 4:34 men are described as *Qawwamun 'ala nisā'* (protectors and maintainers of women)
- (ii) The law of inheritance (*Surah* 4:11) men are entitled to double of women's share and
- (iii) *Surah* 2:282 testimonies of two women are equated to a man's testimony.

With regard to the first observation, we have to know that in Islam, man is made to play the role of maintaining the women because the leadership of the domestic team is vested in the husband. The leadership, it must be noted, is not that of superiority but that of responsibility. That man is given this responsibility harmonizes with his tougher nature and manliness. Women cannot bear children, nurse and nurture them and still be expected to carry the family maintenance.

As for Islamic law of inheritance, man is made to have double the woman's share because of the higher domestic responsibility placed on him. As the family head, he has responsibility not only towards the children but also towards the wife including his intended wife on whom he has to pay *sadaq*. This point can be driven home by an illustration with the hypothetical example of a brother and a sister who after getting their respective shares of their father's inheritance planned to start family life. While the brother will have to pay the *sadaq* for his intended wife, possibly from his share of the inheritance, the sister will, in her own case, receive *sadaq* from her intended husband which, if added to her share of the inheritance, could possibly make her richer than the brother.

With regard to equating a man's testimony to two women's, it must be noted in the passage that reason is given for seeking testimony from two women in the place of the testimony of one man by saying "...so that if one of them should make a mistake, the other could remind her..." this clearly shows as noted by Tahaj. al Alwani<sup>11</sup> that in the early days of Islam, there were differences in the ability of women to serve as competent witnesses in cases involving financial transaction. This was because transactions were not often matters of concern to women at that time. He opines that once a society advances beyond that level and women are knowledgeable in such matters, there should no longer be any need for such an arrangement.



### III. Efforts towards Restoration of the Rights of Muslim Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Muslim World

Despite the noble teachings of Islam about womanhood, women continued to be subjected to indignity in different parts of the Muslim world up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Muslim reformists of the period identified this as one of the problems they needed to tackle. Their efforts thus coincided with feminists' movements in the West. The publication of J.S. Mill's master piece "Subjection of Women" in 1869 which emphasized the need for betterment of the lot of women helped a great deal in the promotion of the feminists' movement in the West<sup>12</sup>.

Feminism as a movement for women's emancipation though already had foundation in the Muslim world, received further boost as a result of her contact with the West. The contact of the West with the Middle East was as a consequence of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the last decades of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt was sequel to the West's political intrusion in the region, while the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 multiplied the importance of the region in no small measure. With these developments, it was easy for the Christian missionaries to move to the region to establish schools which provided education that developed in the children western culture and ideas. Similarly, it became possible for a great number of students from the Muslim countries to travel to the West to train in the western universities. The reformists in the Muslim countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered training in the west necessary if they were to succeed in their struggle to bring modernity to the Muslim world.

Among the Muslim countries, Turkey was considered as the most progressive in terms of socio-cultural reforms. She was the first Muslim country to work for the emancipation of women<sup>13</sup>. Salim III was the first in the history of the Ottoman Empire to advance the cause of women arguing that unless women were placed on equal pedestal with men and were enlightened about the national ideals, the empire could not survive. Salim's efforts did not succeed as Turkish women continued to languish in the state of despondency till the beginning of the *tanzimat* era. The tanzimatists rediscovered the ideas of Salim and launched a move to elevate the status of women and advocated gender equality. The progress of a nation according to them is measured by the status of its women. The country's constitution protected the interests of women including their educational advancement while the western ideas of liberty and freedom for women were imbibed by the people in general and the aristocracy in particular. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the leadership of the feminist movement in Turkey was taken over by Turkey's leading scholars and adopted intellectual approach to advance the cause of women. They argued that the subjugation of women which has gone so far as to deprive them of their rights and freedom was neither of Turkish nor Islamic origin, rather, it was an unfortunate heritage from the Persian and Byzantine which must be rejected<sup>14</sup>. The scholars in

their writings attacked vehemently the practice of purdah saying it was primitive, it was anti-progress and it led to humiliation of women in all spheres of life.

Sultan Abdul Hamid showed his opposition to feminists' movement by encouraging women subjugation and placing restrictions upon the activities of the feminists' leaders. His anti-feminine moves were frustrated as the people refused to listen to him.

After Turkey, it was in Egypt that feminists' movements yielded considerable influence. Realizing that not much was done by Muhammad Ali Pasha in terms of efforts towards women emancipation, Caliph Ismail (1830-1895) took it upon himself to initiate a definite move in that regard. One of the measures he took to emancipate women was his discouragement of veil. In 1873, he founded the first school for Muslim girls.

At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century appeared four great reformists of modern Egypt who in their reform programmes accorded serious importance to elevation of women status. These were Jamal-ud-Din al- Afghani; Sheikh Muhammad Abduh; Qasim Amin and Malak Hifni Nasit. The scholarly contributions of the four reformists helped in no small measure in building the ideological foundations of the feminists' movement in Egypt. They advocated in their writings the necessity for the training and education of girls no less than of boys and the reform of the social conditions and customs affecting the lives of the Muslim women. They preached against unconditional polygamy which was prevalent in Egypt. Some of the writings of Qasim Amin, particularly his first book *Tahrirul mar'a* "the emancipation of women" and the second, *al-Mar'a al jadidah* (the new woman) earned him condemnation among the masses and he was stigmatized as a rebel who was trying to undermine the foundation of the Muslim society. He was however appreciated by the enlightened groups and was hailed as the founder and hero of feminists awakening. In Qasim Amin's opinion, the situation of Muslim women was not a result of religion but of social condition, arguing that the Qur'an gave to Muslim women the rights which their western sisters received of late. This being the case, the emancipation of Muslim women did not require religious reform but only the filling of the gap between precepts and practice<sup>15</sup>.

#### **IV. The United Nations' Charter and the Woman Rights Question**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century ended without the Muslim reformists making meaningful progress in their efforts to restore to the Muslim woman the rights and freedom accorded her by Islam, hence the relevance of the United Nations provisions on women's rights and freedom in the Muslim world as elsewhere.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century being the age of democracy, the architects of the United Nations charter included the question of women's rights and privileges in the preamble of the charter. The preamble declares that the people of the United Nations

are determined to re-affirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of a human being, and in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small. The charter generally protects the rights of women, promotes their equality with men and eliminates all kinds of prejudices and discrimination against them.

In order to implement these provisions, the Economic and Social Council of the UNO appointed a sub-commission to advise on the status of women in January 1946. Subsequently, a nuclear group of nine outstanding women of the world was formed to outline a further course of action. The outcome was the following resolution: "women, whether married or unmarried, shall have access on equal terms with men, to posts in the public service at all levels including diplomatic, consular, legal and judicial office and to all liberal and other professions".

The United Nations commission on the status of women has drafted many declarations, which provide guidelines for the member nations. Under the auspices of the organization, a convention of the political rights of women was held in 1957, a convention of marriage consent in 1962 and a declaration of the elimination of discrimination against women in 1967. This declaration recommends legislation to guarantee women equality with men, equal chances in education and in the economic sector and full participation in public life. The general assembly of the UNO in 1972 made a resolution to proclaim 1975 as international women's year, a move that was to focus attention on the plight of women in many parts of the world and to women's equality with men.

Also in 1975, the International Labour Organization held a conference at Geneva, which affirmed the need to promote women's equality with men. The conference focused on women's participation in the workforce; vocational guidance and training; promotion of equality of opportunity and treatment in employment, occupation and social security, review of protective legislation; right to maternity protection; women's effective participation in national, regional and international bodies. In 1985, the United Nations convened the third world conference on women in Nairobi, Kenya. The conference evolved new strategies contained in a blue-print for action by governments and non-government organizations for women advancement towards the year 2000. The last world conference on women was the one held in Beijing in 1995. It was prompted by the failure to achieve women's equal participation with men in virtually every aspect of life and by the desire to search for new methods of implementing the Nairobi resolutions, which had not been fully implemented. The 132. page document of Beijing declaration and the platform for action as synthesized by Jadesola Akande<sup>16</sup> reveals twelve thematic interrelated critical areas of concern addressed by the conference. They are poverty, education, health, violence against women, armed conflict, inequality in women's access to and participation in economic structures, decision making, mechanism to promote

advancement of women, human rights, mass media, women and environment and situation of the girl-child.

Many countries of the world that have adopted the UNO convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in line with the themes mentioned above did so in different degrees. The degree of adoption of each country determines the extent to which its women are able to face the challenges of the modern time.

When we look around the Muslim world today, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a leading Muslim nation where women enjoy conventional rights and freedom. There are two factors responsible for this. First, is the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 which prepared ground for the application of the human-nurturing divine principles of Islam to enhance the status of women in the society. Second is the adoption of the United Nations strategies for the advancement of women.

Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>17</sup> is a country committed to the provision of all necessary means, including appropriate legislations, to enhance women's scientific, educational, social and political capacities in order to be fully prepared to face the challenges of the contemporary time. This explains why the Iranian woman is active educationally, economically and politically.

In the political arena, the following features of women political participation are worthy of note:

Women have liberty to vie for the highest political office of the President. In the election that produced President Ahmadi Nejad, 9 women aspirants made it to the last stage of the screening process.

- Women are elected as mayors. The city of Isfahan once had a woman mayor while one of the 12 councils in the city of Tehran currently has a woman mayor.

The 290 – member parliament (Islamic consultative council) has 12 women (representing 4.1%) as members.

The highest political office held by a woman in the current government is Deputy President which is being occupied by Fatemeh Vaezjvadi.

Women are appointed as ministerial councilors and presidential advisors.

With regard to women's participation in economic endeavours, women in today's Iranian society continue to demonstrate capabilities and talents that enable them to contribute to national wealth and economic development. Their awareness and voluntary participation in wide range of economic fields continue to increase having been provided with more technical and scientific knowledge. In the public sector of the economy, women are found more in the ministries of education and health constituting 43.8% and 40% of their workforce respectively. Their impact in the public sector is equally felt.

Today in Iran, women have virtually overcome constraints which hindered their education to the extent that the educational gap between men and women is fast reducing. In point of fact, many Iranian universities currently have higher enrolment of women than men.

Like the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nigeria is a signatory to the UNO's convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) which was signed and ratified in 1985 and 1989 respectively<sup>18</sup>. Since then, the country has been making progress in pursuing women advancement course as evident in the establishment of the Ministry of Women Affairs; increase in the number of women in decision making positions; economic empowerment programmes and increase in school attendance rate for girls as well as literacy rate of women. The establishment of the Ministry of Women Affairs is significant as it is charged with the responsibility of pursuing policies and programmes aimed at according women their due rights to participate in the economic, social and political affairs of the country.

The national policy on women, which was adopted in July 2000, provides for affirmative action to increase to 30 percent the total women representation in the legislative and executive arms of government. The policy aims at redirecting public policies to promote gender equality and enhance complementary role which men and women should play in development.

In spite of the relative progress recorded by the federal government in pursuing women advancement course, the women's representation is still low. For example, female representation in the National Assembly was about 3.4% after the 1999 election. Nonetheless, there have been marginal increases in the number of women elected into the 360-member Federal House of Representatives from 4 in 1979 to 12 in 1999 and 20 in 2003 representing 5.8%. Nigeria has only four female senators as against 105 male senators representing 3.7%. Out of 49 ministers in 1979 only three were women representing 6% of the cabinet. The figure rose to 6 out of 44 in 1999 – 2000 an equivalence of 13.6%, thus witnessing a 7.6% increase representation in the federal cabinet.

The picture is hardly different at the state level and it is indeed more pathetic in the states predominantly Muslim, especially when it comes to women's interest in elective positions as evident in the table below.

**Table 1: Showing percentage of women representation in the executive and legislative arms of government in selected states of the federation.**

States	Commissioners			House of Assembly		
	Males	Females	% of females	Males	Females	% of females
Bornu	13	2	13.3	28	0	0
Kano	13	2	13.3	40	0	0
Lagos	21	2	8.7	38	2	5
Osun	10	1	9.1	21	1	4.5
Zamfara	19	2	9.5	27	0	0
Ogun	16	2	11.1	24	1	4
Sokoto	12	1	7.7	46	0	0
Oyo	13	2	13.3	32	0	0

(Source: Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development)

It is easy to deduce from this table that women from the Muslim states of the north are less interested in elective positions than women from the southern part of the country which shows that they are less prepared to face the political challenges of the contemporary time.

With regards to women's economic empowerment, the Nigerian constitution provides that women shall have equal rights as men with respect to employment opportunities, choice of professions, promotions and remunerations. Even though there are no core professions reserved specifically for men or women, the fact still remains that some professions are popular among men while some are popular among women. Men in particular are preferred for jobs which often involve hazards, frequent mobility, transfers, frequent travels and irregularity in working hours. Such jobs include immigration, armed and national security forces, diplomatic career, peace keeping operations etc. Muslim women are particularly averse to such employments because Islam frowns at women engaging in jobs that make no allowance for their domestic duties.

Teaching happens to be one profession very popular among women the world over. Islam's recommendation of the profession for the Muslim women should have enhanced its popularity among them but this has not been the case with the Muslim women in states of the northern Nigeria predominantly Muslim due to the general educational backwardness of the people in western education as the table below reveals:

**Table 2: Gender classification of the primary school teachers in selected states of the federation.**

State	Number of males	Number of females	Percentage of females
Bornu	1,828	632	25.7
Kano	26,210	8,297	24.0
Lagos	2,481	5,644	69.5
Osun	4,622	8,597	65.0
Zamfara	6,639	1,678	20.2

(Source: State Universal Basic Education Boards of respective States)

As we can observe in the table, the number of female teachers in Osun and Lagos States almost doubles the number of male teachers unlike the situation in the northern states.

Career in the medical field is another profession highly recommended by Islam for Muslim women because Islamic ethics favours a situation where female doctors would deal with female patients. This is why a country like Islamic Republic of Iran has more women in the field of medicine than men. For instance the gender ratio of students who graduated in medicine at the University of Tehran in 1992/1993 academic session was 55% female and 45% male<sup>19</sup>.

Again, this ideal, desirable as it is, may not be easily attained in Nigeria if the gender ratio of medical graduates produced by a northern university like Bayero is anything to go by as evident in the data below:

**Table 3**

Session	Number of males	Number of females	Total number of graduates.
2001/2002	16	7	23
2002/2003	26	15	41
2004/2005	23	10	33

(Source: Academic Office of the Bayero University, Kano)

If the Muslim women are not pulling their weight in the professional fields, if they are not advancing in the political arena to be able to face the challenges of the contemporary time, the problem is not with Islam it is with the people, their culture and attitude.

## **V. Obstacles Against Women's Political and Economic Advancement**

In Nigeria, as in most African societies, the Muslim women's advancement problem whether in the political or economic arena derives from lack of proper understanding of Islam. Their misconception of Islamic tenets affects their attitude to

education, marriage and women seclusion (purdah) among others. This we shall briefly discuss.

### **The Northerners General Aversion To Western Education**

Without educational empowerment, it is hardly possible for women (and men as well) to advance in any field of human endeavour. Unable to realize this, many Muslims take the education of their children, especially the female children's with levity. This is particularly true of northern states of Nigeria where child marriage is very much in vogue<sup>20</sup>.

The practice of child marriage which derives from the principle of *ijbar* as taught by Imam Malik has been traced to the marriage of the prophet (S.A.W) with 'Ā'ishah. The principle, though controversial, enjoys popular practice among the followers of Imam Malik with the attendant havoc it has caused not only to the education of the minor girls but also their health as a result of vesico-vaginal fistula. Throughout the three zones of the north, a number of steps have been taken to curb the practice including

- Enactment of laws to discourage withdrawal of girls from school for marriage;
- Establishment of special schools for girls;
- Provision of free mid-day meals to encourage girls attendance;
- Provision of free scholarships and bursaries;
- Introduction of free education policy under the UBE scheme.

In spite of these measures, wide disparity still exists in the education of the southern and northern female students in the country as the table below shows.



**Table 4: Statistics of entries in English Language by gender for May/June 2001-2003 WASSCE in selected states of the federation.**

	State		2001	2002	2003
North-West	Katsina	M	6.7	7.4	7.9
		F	2.3	2.5	2.6
		T	9.0	9.9	10.5
	Kebbi	M	4.6	4.9	5.3
		F	1.5	1.7	1.8
		T	6.1	6.6	7.1
	Sokoto	M	4.3	5.7	6.4
		F	1.4	2.1	2.1
		T	5.7	7.8	8.5
North-East	Bauchi	M	5.5	7.4	6.2
		F	2.6	3.5	3.1
		T	8.1	10.1	9.3
	Taraba	M	6.1	7.1	6.9
		F	2.5	3.1	3.4
		T	8.6	10.4	10.3
	Yobe	M	3.9	4.9	5.5
		F	1.3	1.4	1.6
		T	5.2	6.3	7.1
South-East	Anambra	M	10.6	11.3	8.0
		F	17.3	18.6	11.6
		T	27.9	29.9	19.6
	Enugu	M	14.7	15.8	14.6
		F	21.6	22.9	21.9
		T	36.3	38.7	36.5
	Imo	M	20.0	21.1	17.0
		F	24.2	27.3	21.1
		T	44.2	49.4	38.1
South West	Ekiti	M	77.1	83.3	75.0
		F	74.4	80.7	72.1
		T	151.5	164.0	147.1
	Lagos	M			
		F			
		T			
	Ogun	M	27.6	22.6	30.9
		F	23.3	27.8	27.9
		T	50.9	60.4	58.8

(Source: Statistics Department of the West African Examinations Council, Yaba)

A close look at the table above reveals that in the two northern zones selected there is wide gender disparity due to the problem of female aversion to western

education. There is also gender disparity in the southeast where females ironically have higher entries. It is in the southwest that we have male and female entries in fairly balanced proportions.

### **The Practice of Purdah**

Purdah is defined by Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as seclusion and concealment. It is understood to be seclusion of women from public observation among Muslims and Hindus. The practice as prevalent in some parts of Islamic world has no basis in pristine Islam and indeed it runs counter to the right and privileges granted women by Islam as already discussed.

The protagonists of purdah have failed to appreciate the import of the passages of the Qur'an which take cognizance of our society as a place where men and women interact. Two examples will suffice. The first is *Surah* 24:30 which admonishes women to lower their gaze when they meet men and the men are likewise admonished. If women are to be confined in the four walls of the home, why would the need arise for the counseling to lower the gaze and why would it be necessary to prescribe dress code and regulate behaviours as evident in *Surah* 24:31 and 33:59.

*Surah* 33:59 is the passage of the Qur'an which the protagonists of purdah erroneously believe to lend support to the idea of purdah. A close look at the passage reveals that the wives of prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) who are different from other women were advised to stay indoors for a purpose, the purpose being to have time to treat religious problems brought to them by the people without using seductive language. Any society where its women are shut within the four walls of the home can hardly experience any form of advancement.

### **Man's Chauvinism**

Chauvinism, according to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, is the feeling of superiority towards the opposite sex. In a patriarchal society like ours, women as victims of male chauvinism are subjected to different forms of discrimination. An average Muslim man has the tendency to be chauvinistic in view of the verse of the Qur'an which gives the husband a superior role to play in matrimony. It is easy for a Muslim to deny his wife the right to engage in a good job or any job at all under the pretext that she would not have time for her domestic duties and as such act contrary to Islamic tenets whereas, the reason, most of the time, is the husbands thought that his woman may be exposed to the glare of men and therefore start to have affair.

For as long as these obstacles persist, the Muslim women will continue to live in perpetual bondage and subjugation. Conscious efforts therefore must be made by the appropriate authorities to remove the obstacles and put in place measures that will ensure liberation of the Muslim women to be able to face the challenges of the contemporary time. The following are therefore our recommendations:

- i) Since most of the travails encountered by Muslim women are as a result of misconception of the Islamic tenets, efforts should be made to restructure our school curriculum in a way to make teaching of religion compulsory, while Islamic organizations take up administration of the Muslim adult Islamic education.
- ii) More so that Islam is not opposed to female education, governments especially of the northern states should make more efforts to close the gender gap in the primary and secondary schools by making education free and compulsory.
- iii) In view of the fact that *Ijbar* is not a fundamental principle of Islamic marriage government should enact and strictly enforce laws to ensure that marriage is only entered into with the free and full consent of the intending spouses while a reasonable minimum age of marriage is fixed.
- iv) Islamic organization should be more active in their Islamic enlightenment campaigns against cultural practices which stand against the progress of the Muslim women.
- v) Nigeria as a signatory to the United Nations' Convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women should endeavour to ensure minimum of 30% female participation in the decision making bodies as recommended by the convention.

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