
Gender and Religious Authority in Muslim Communities: A SLR on Islamic Education and Multiculturalism

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Abstract

Objective: This study investigates how gender shapes religious authority, leadership, and participation within Muslim communities, with a specific focus on implications for Islamic education and multicultural contexts. The purpose of this research is to systematically analyze how gendered norms influence access to authoritative religious roles and how these norms are being renegotiated across diverse socio-educational settings. **Theoretical framework:** Grounded in a theoretical framework combining Islamic feminist thought, sociology of religion, and multicultural education, the study conceptualizes religious authority as a socially constructed and interpretive field influenced by power, identity, and knowledge production. **Literature review:** The literature review highlights three major strands in existing scholarship: (1) gendered hierarchies in traditional religious institutions; (2) emerging forms of women's authority through educational, digital, and community-based platforms; and (3) multicultural dynamics that reshape gender relations in minority Muslim contexts. **Method:** Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, the study follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines and employs qualitative meta-synthesis to integrate insights from peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. Studies were selected through transparent inclusion-exclusion criteria and evaluated using the CASP checklist. Thematic analysis was used to interpret patterns across the dataset. **Results:** The review finds that gender continues to significantly structure religious authority within Muslim communities, particularly through male-dominated leadership traditions and interpretive gatekeeping. However, the results also demonstrate increasing diversification of authority as women, youth, and minority groups gain influence through Islamic educational institutions, online platforms, and multicultural civic spaces. Reformist discourses influenced by Islamic feminism and inclusive pedagogies further contribute to reinterpreting religious texts and expanding gender-inclusive models of leadership. **Implications:** The study's implications emphasize the need for Islamic education systems to integrate gender-sensitive pedagogies and support pluralistic interpretations aligned with multicultural realities. **Novelty:** Its novelty lies in offering the first comprehensive qualitative SLR that synthesizes gender, religious authority, Islamic education, and multiculturalism into a unified analytical lens, providing a broader understanding of shifting power dynamics in contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: gender, religious authority, islamic education, multiculturalism, muslim communities.

INTRODUCTION

Gender and religious authority remain central analytical concerns for understanding social organization, leadership, and knowledge production within Muslim communities. Across diverse cultural and geographical contexts, religious authority operates not only as a theological domain but also as a social structure that shapes who may speak, interpret, lead, educate, and guide communal life. Historically, these forms of authority have been predominantly male-centered, rooted in classical jurisprudential traditions and institutional hierarchies that regulate access to religious knowledge and leadership. However, contemporary shifts, including expanding educational opportunities, global communication networks, and multicultural social environments, have begun to reshape gendered boundaries of authority. These changes create new spaces for women and marginalized groups to participate more visibly in religious discourse, challenge traditional interpretations, and contribute to evolving models of Muslim leadership [1].

The importance of studying gender and religious authority is amplified in the fields of Islamic education and multiculturalism. Educational institutions, whether formal or community-based, function as key sites where religious knowledge is taught, contested, and reinterpreted. They also provide structured pathways through which authority is legitimized or restricted. Understanding how gender influences these processes is crucial for developing educational practices that are equitable, inclusive, and responsive to diverse Muslim populations. Likewise, in multicultural societies where Muslims interact with broader normative frameworks of gender equality, human rights, and pluralism, questions of religious authority become deeply intertwined with identity negotiation, social integration, and intercommunity relations [2].

Despite growing scholarship on Islam and gender, existing research remains scattered across disciplines and contexts, lacking a comprehensive synthesis that connects gendered authority with Islamic educational environments and multicultural settings. This gap limits the ability of scholars and policymakers to fully grasp the dynamics shaping contemporary Muslim communities. Therefore, this study offers a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to integrate findings across 25 years of qualitative research, providing a coherent understanding of how gender mediates religious authority within educational and multicultural contexts. By doing so, the research contributes to advancing theoretical clarity, informing educational reforms, and supporting more inclusive models of leadership and community engagement in Muslim societies [2].

Gender and religion are closely linked social aspects that influence the daily lives of Muslim communities worldwide. Religious authority, which means the power to interpret, lead, and represent Islamic teachings, has traditionally favored men as legitimate leaders. This has often restricted women's roles to informal or private settings. However, in recent decades, Muslim societies have experienced major changes due to globalization, education, migration, and fresh interpretations of Islamic thought. These shifts have increased academic interest in how gender affects religious leadership, spiritual authority, and social involvement among Muslims in various settings [3].

In Islam, issues of gender and authority are both theological and socio-political. How men and women interact with religious knowledge, assert interpretive authority, or take on leadership positions illustrates the fluid intersections of power, culture, and faith [4]. For centuries, Islamic jurisprudence, scholarship, and institutional authority have been predominantly controlled by male scholars, leading to interpretations that frequently marginalize women's voices within religious contexts. Feminist scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Saba Mahmood have, on the other hand, questioned these patriarchal frameworks [5]. They want new ways to read Islamic texts that focus on justice, equality, and human dignity. Their work has motivated a new cohort of researchers and activists aiming to comprehend how Muslim women navigate religious norms while asserting their own identities. Their work has motivated a new cohort of researchers and

activists aiming to comprehend how Muslim women navigate religious conventions while establishing their own expressions of spiritual leadership and authority [6].

Even with all this new research, there still isn't a systematic way to put together qualitative studies that look at gendered religious authority in Muslim settings. Most of the studies that are out there are either focused on one region, like Indonesia, Egypt, or the UK, or they are thematically fragmented, looking at separate issues like women's mosque participation or women's religious scholarship. Consequently, there exists a constrained cross-contextual comprehension of the functioning of gendered power within religious institutions and communities worldwide [7]. This gap highlights the necessity for a systematic qualitative literature review that aggregates and analyzes evidence from various studies to offer a holistic understanding of gender and religious authority within Muslim societies.

Islam's religious authority is complex. It encompasses unofficial networks of influence in families, schools, and local communities in addition to the official structures of mosques, madrasas, and fatwa councils [8]. Despite their exclusion from formal leadership roles, women frequently exercise spiritual authority through community service, teaching, and counseling. By establishing new avenues for female agency within religious life, recent initiatives like women-led prayer groups, female Quran teachers (ustadha), and female preachers (da'iyah) have challenged established hierarchies [9]. These changes raise important questions about the definition, acceptance, and legitimacy of authority in Islamic philosophy and practice [10].

It is important to comprehend gendered religious authority for a number of reasons. First, it directly affects justice and social inclusion in Muslim societies. Access to education, family rights, and public engagement are all influenced by one's capacity to understand religious texts and set community standards [11]. Second, Muslim communities are increasingly navigating multiple cultural and legal frameworks in an era of globalization and migration, which complicates the negotiation of gender and authority [12]. Third, from an academic standpoint, combining qualitative research on this subject reveals the underlying discourses and power dynamics that characterize religious participation and leadership in various geographical areas.

Although this study does not directly adopt a Foucauldian framework, Michel Foucault's ideas of power and knowledge offer a helpful theoretical backdrop for comprehending these dynamics [13]. In Muslim contexts, religious authority can be understood as a type of power that establishes truth claims and controls behavior within a faith community. Whether they are female teachers or male clerics, those in positions of interpretive authority contribute to the creation of knowledge that excludes some gender roles while validating others. By documenting lived experiences, meanings, and negotiations that quantitative studies frequently miss, qualitative research provides profound insights into these processes [14].

Studies on gender and religious authority in Muslim communities that were published between 2000 and 2025 are examined in this review using a methodical qualitative meta-synthesis. The chosen timeframe represents a moment of profound change, characterized by the emergence of Islamic feminism on a global scale, rising female literacy in nations with a majority of Muslims, and the digitization of religious discourse [15]. To guarantee methodological rigor and transparency, the review adheres to PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Major academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR, were searched in order to find studies. Each study was critically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist to assess credibility and quality before thematic synthesis was conducted [16].

The following guiding questions are intended to be addressed by the review:

1. What effects do gender norms and identities have on how Muslim communities perceive religious leadership and authority?
2. What opportunities and obstacles do Muslim women face when trying to exercise or obtain religious authority?

3. What effects are feminist or reformist interpretations of Islam having on conventional notions of authority?

By asking these questions, the review aims to document how gendered hierarchies still exist in modern Muslim contexts as well as how transformative opportunities are emerging. It recognizes the diversity of Muslim women in terms of class, geography, sect, and cultural background rather than treating them as a monolithic group. As a result, the review highlights both common challenges and context-specific patterns by drawing on research done in a variety of locations, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and North America [17].

Although gendered hierarchies are still firmly ingrained in religious structures, they are being progressively contested by activism, education, and textual reinterpretation, according to preliminary findings from the reviewed literature. Women's participation in social service, religious instruction, and da'wa (preaching) constitutes an unofficial authority that reinterprets conventional notions of leadership. Ongoing conflicts between orthodoxy and reform are also evident in discussions surrounding women's religious scholarship, mixed-gender prayers, and female imams. These tensions are complicated negotiations influenced by regional histories, colonial legacies, and international feminist movements rather than merely being disputes between "tradition" and "modernity" [18].

This study offers an integrative understanding of the intersections between gender and religious authority in Muslim communities by synthesizing qualitative evidence. It draws attention to the variety of women's experiences and how religious power changes in response to societal shifts. By bridging the gaps between Islamic studies, gender studies, and the sociology of religion, the review advances scholarly discourse. It also provides guidance for community leaders and policymakers who wish to advance gender equity in religious institutions [19].

In the end, this essay makes the case that religious authority in Muslim societies is neither fixed nor unchanging. Gender norms, interpretive agency, and spiritual legitimacy are all continually being redefined in this dynamic and disputed field. By proving that the quest for equality within religious life continues to be one of the most important and dynamic challenges of the twenty-first century, the systematic qualitative review provided here provides a thorough basis for future studies on gender, faith, and power [20].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on gender and religious authority in Muslim communities has grown substantially, yet the scholarship remains dispersed across various disciplines such as Islamic studies, anthropology, sociology, and education. A central theme emerging from the literature is that religious authority is not merely anchored in textual mastery or institutional recognition, but is also shaped by gendered cultural norms and social expectations. Many studies highlight the persistence of male-dominated structures within formal religious institutions, particularly in traditional settings where leadership roles such as imams, jurists, and preachers are perceived as inherently masculine. These institutional patterns reinforce hierarchical interpretations of gender, limiting women's access to decision-making and interpretive authority [20].

However, another major strand of literature reveals the emergence of alternative spaces where women exercise influential forms of authority. These include community-based study circles, digital platforms, women-led educational initiatives, and informal counseling or spiritual guidance roles. Scholars note that such spaces often provide women greater flexibility to reinterpret religious texts, negotiate gendered norms, and develop grassroots leadership that resonates with local communities. These forms of authority tend to be relational and interpretive rather than institutional, reflecting a shift toward more decentralized models of religious influence [20].

The literature also shows that Islamic education plays a significant role in shaping gendered dynamics of authority. Educational institutions from pesantren and madrasas to university-based Islamic studies programs serve as crucial sites where knowledge legitimacy is constructed. Studies indicate that when women gain access to higher levels of religious education, they are more likely to challenge patriarchal interpretations and assert interpretive autonomy. Yet, disparities in curriculum design, teacher representation, and institutional culture often reproduce gendered barriers [21].

In multicultural contexts, the literature reports additional layers of negotiation. Muslim communities living as minorities frequently encounter external expectations related to gender equality, human rights, and pluralism. These encounters can stimulate internal debates about authority, identity, and reform. Multicultural environments may both constrain and expand gendered authority, depending on local social dynamics, state policies, and community engagement. Overall, the literature suggests that religious authority in Muslim communities is undergoing significant transformation, shaped by gendered contestations, evolving educational landscapes, and multicultural interactions.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the connection between gender and religious authority in Muslim communities, this study used a meta-synthesis approach in a systematic qualitative literature review. Finding, interpreting, and incorporating findings from earlier qualitative studies carried out between 2000 and 2025 that focused on how gender affects authority, participation, and leadership in social and religious contexts was the goal. To guarantee transparency, rigor, and replicability, the research design adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines. This method was selected because, as opposed to measuring outcomes, it enables a deeper comprehension of contextual realities and intricate social meanings. In order to develop fresh theoretical and conceptual viewpoints regarding gendered religious experiences in Islam, it places a strong emphasis on the interpretative integration of findings [21].

A thorough search strategy was created to find pertinent studies in a variety of scholarly databases that offer in-depth coverage of the literature in the humanities, religion, and social sciences, such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and the ATLA Religion Database. To find pertinent academic theses and grey literature, more searches were done on Google Scholar. Boolean operators and a combination of keywords, including Islam, Muslim, gender, women, religious authority, leadership, imam, and qualitative, were used in the search. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English were included in the search; however, a few works in Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, and French were also taken into consideration if they had English abstracts and could be translated correctly. To make sure no important works were missed, the reference lists of important studies were also manually reviewed [22].

The PICOS framework (Population, Phenomenon of Interest, Context, and Study Design) was used to create the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies that used qualitative techniques like ethnography, interviews, or case studies, looked at gender and religious authority in Islamic contexts, and concentrated on Muslim men or women, were all included. The only works deemed to represent current debates on gender and Islam were those released between 2000 and 2025. Studies that focused on secular or nonreligious topics, were exclusively quantitative, or lacked gendered analysis, were disqualified. This choice made sure the review focused on contextually grounded, interpretive, and empirical understandings of gendered religious authority [23].

Zotero was used to manage all of the retrieved articles, eliminating duplicates and carrying out a three-step screening procedure. In order to eliminate studies that were not pertinent, the first step involved screening abstracts and titles. To confirm eligibility in the second step, prospective papers had to be read in full text. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist, which looks at the clarity of goals, research design, data collection,

analysis, and ethical considerations, was then used to critically evaluate the methodological quality of the chosen articles. To ensure methodological rigor, studies with a CASP score of less than seven out of ten were disqualified. A PRISMA 2020 flow diagram that detailed the number of studies found, screened, and included in the final synthesis was used to document the entire selection process [24].

A standardized matrix that included key findings, author, year, country, research objectives, participant demographics, data collection methods, and theoretical frameworks was used to extract data. Following the three steps suggested by Thomas and Harden (2008), thematic synthesis was used to analyze the extracted data. In order to identify important concepts pertaining to gender and religious authority, the results of each study were first coded line by line. Second, descriptive themes representing recurrent patterns across studies were formed by clustering similar codes. In order to produce higher-order interpretations and conceptual insights that went beyond specific study contexts, analytical themes were finally developed [25].

The review followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to guarantee reliability. For transparency, every step of the process from database searching to theme development was meticulously recorded. Throughout the process, reflexivity was upheld by recognizing the potential influence of the researcher's own interpretive background and lens on data interpretation. The study did not need ethical approval because it only used secondary data. However, every study that was included was examined to make sure that it adhered to ethical research standards, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity [26].

In conclusion, this methodological framework produced a thorough understanding of how gendered dynamics shape religious authority within Muslim communities by combining qualitative interpretive synthesis with systematic search procedures. The study guarantees methodological integrity and interpretive depth by utilizing PRISMA standards, CASP appraisal tools, and thematic synthesis. This establishes the groundwork for the subsequent section's presentation of significant findings and thematic insights [27].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Included Studies

47 studies that were published between 2000 and 2025 and satisfied the inclusion criteria were found by the systematic qualitative review. Muslim communities in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and North America were among the various geographic and cultural contexts that were covered by the chosen works. Four main themes continuously surfaced, regardless of contextual differences: (1) the continuation of gendered hierarchies in religious authority; (2) women and marginalized groups negotiating informal and interpretive power; (3) the emergence of feminist and reformist reinterpretations of Islamic texts; and (4) the impact of globalization, education, and digital platforms on shifting gender norms. When taken as a whole, these themes show the nuanced ways that power and gender interact in Islamic religious life [28].

Table 1. Overview of Included Studies (2000–2025)

Region / Country	Number of Studies	Dominant Focus	Methodological Approach	Key Themes Identified
Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan)	11	Women's access to mosque leadership, fatwa councils, and religious	Ethnography, semi-structured interviews	Gendered hierarchies, authority legitimization, and male clerical dominance

		education		
Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei)	10	Female ulama, pesantren leadership, and Islamic feminism	Fieldwork, narrative analysis	Informal authority, Islamic feminism, reinterpretation of texts
Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania)	7	Gender roles in local Islamic courts and da'wah movements	Case studies, participant observation	Negotiation of social and religious roles, the intersection of gender and class
South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh)	5	Women's religious education and reformist activism	In-depth interviews, document analysis	Patriarchal traditions, reformist hermeneutics, and local gender activism
Europe (UK, France, Germany)	6	Muslim diasporas, mosque participation, and online da'wah	Focus groups, digital ethnography	Transnational authority, online visibility, and gendered participation in religious institutions
North America (USA, Canada)	4	Women-led mosques, interfaith initiatives, and digital sermons	Ethnography, discourse analysis	Globalized Islamic leadership, new forms of digital authority
Mixed / Global Comparative Studies	4	Cross-regional studies on gender and Islamic leadership	Literature synthesis, meta-ethnography	Comparative perspectives on reform, feminism, and power-knowledge
Total	47	—	—	—

Persistence of Gendered Hierarchies in Religious Authority

Religious education programs and interpretive traditions that favor male authority serve to further solidify the continuation of gendered hierarchies in religious authority. The curriculum of many Islamic universities and madrasas still emphasizes androcentric interpretations of classical texts, frequently ignoring the interpretive contributions of women. Selective interpretations of hadith and fiqh, which historically frame leadership and public religious duties as male responsibilities, are used to justify this exclusion. Even when women acquire advanced religious knowledge, their roles, such as managing family-oriented religious education or instructing other women, are frequently limited to private or women-only settings. According to Michel Foucault, this institutional marginalization is an example of epistemic power, which is the capacity to define what constitutes legitimate knowledge and decide who is permitted to produce it [29].

In addition, social and cultural factors intertwine with institutional structures to preserve patriarchal norms within Muslim communities. While femininity is symbolically linked to emotionality and domesticity, religious legitimacy is frequently linked to societal expectations of masculinity, authority, and rationality. Men and women are conditioned to internalize gendered models of piety through socialization processes and societal expectations, which perpetuate such dichotomies. For example, women are routinely excluded from decision-making positions on mosque committees, and community leaders defend this exclusion by citing religious propriety. A cycle of male dominance in religious life is reinforced by this disciplinary control, which creates conformity to accepted gender roles and reflects Foucault's idea of normalization [30].

These hierarchies are not unchangeable, though, and over the last 20 years, there have been more and more challenges to established authority. In places like Indonesia, Morocco, Nigeria, and the UK, women academics, activists, and reformist intellectuals have started to reclaim spaces for interpretation and education. They encourage readings of Islamic texts that emphasize justice (*adl*), equality (*musawah*), and compassion (*rahmah*) through organizations like Sisters in Islam and Musawah. Their reinterpretations pave the way for inclusive leadership models while challenging patriarchal jurisprudence. These changes show that authority in Muslim communities is not just a means of control but also a field that is contested and transformative, where gendered norms are constantly renegotiated and redefined [31].

Islamic Feminism and Reformist Hermeneutics

Islamic feminism functions as an internal reformist movement based on the Qur'anic values of justice (*adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and human dignity (*karamah*), rather than as an outward criticism of Islam. By claiming that the Qur'an itself maintains the spiritual and moral equality of men and women, it aims to reclaim the interpretive authority (*ijtihad*) that has historically been monopolized by male scholars. Islamic feminists use hermeneutical techniques like contextual and linguistic analysis to reinterpret verses that are typically used to support male superiority, emphasizing the moral and egalitarian nature of revelation. Centuries of patriarchal interpretation that confused divine will with male social privilege are challenged by this method [32].

Meanwhile, throughout the Muslim world, Islamic feminist movements have taken on various regional forms. For instance, Rahima and Musawah Indonesia promote women's involvement in mosque governance and gender-sensitive religious education in Indonesia. In Morocco, women's leadership within state-approved religious frameworks is institutionalized through the training of *murshidat*, or female religious guides. In the meantime, women have been able to get around traditional gatekeepers thanks to online platforms and digital *da'wah* initiatives, which have produced international networks of female activists and scholars who share ideas and foster cross-border solidarity. Islamic feminists are still accused of being Westernized or deviating from orthodoxy despite these developments. Their endeavors show that the fight for gender justice in Islam is a reaffirmation of the religion's fundamental moral and spiritual principles rather than a rejection of it, which is evidence of the continuous development of Islamic thought in the twenty-first century [33].

Furthermore, Islamic feminist hermeneutics has influenced the redefinition of religious epistemology itself in addition to gender equality. These movements upend the established hierarchy that favors textual knowledge over experiential knowledge by elevating women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of theological reflection. This change democratizes the creation of Islamic knowledge by giving women, young people, and underrepresented groups a voice in forming religious understanding. According to academics, this kind of epistemic inclusivity revives Islam's interpretive heritage and makes it more sensitive to the moral and social realities of the modern world. As a result, Islamic feminism is more than just a demand for women's rights; it is a revolutionary intellectual endeavor that rethinks the connection between text, context, and believer, ultimately advancing a more equitable and comprehensive understanding of Islam in contemporary societies [34].

Globalization, Education, and Digital Transformation

Muslim communities around the world now have a more integrated understanding of gender and religious authority as a result of globalization and transnational networks. International discussions on gender justice, pluralism, and human rights have prompted reinterpretations of Islamic ethics that prioritize respect for one another and inclusivity. In order to share knowledge and reform tactics, Muslim women scholars and activists are increasingly working together across continents, connecting experiences from Southeast Asia, the Middle East,

Africa, and Western societies. The idea of a monolithic Islam is called into question by this international discussion, which instead reveals a mosaic of interpretations influenced by political, historical, and cultural factors [35].

Furthermore, the areas where religious knowledge is created and shared have been reshaped by digital platforms and improvements in education. Muslim women preachers, theologians, and educators are now present on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, reaching audiences well beyond the confines of a traditional mosque. These women address topics like feminism, mental health, and modesty within Islamic frameworks by fusing social commentary with religious knowledge. They can circumvent institutional constraints thanks to digital literacy, which promotes decentralized authority structures founded on relatability, trust, and moral coherence. But there are risks associated with this empowerment: female scholars frequently experience social backlash, accusations of heresy, or online harassment. Thus, the digital sphere represents a paradox: it reproduces new forms of control through visibility and surveillance while also democratizing authority [36].

Table 2. Impact of Globalization, Education, and Digital Transformation on Gendered Religious Authority

Aspect	Transformation Observed	Illustrative Example	Impact on Gender and Authority
Globalization	Cross-cultural exchange and feminist reinterpretation of Islam	Collaboration between Southeast Asian and Western Muslim scholars	Diversifies theological perspectives and challenges local patriarchy
Higher Education	Increased access to Islamic and gender studies for women	Female graduates from Islamic universities in Morocco, Indonesia, and the UK	Expands women's interpretive authority and theological competence
Digital Da'wah	Rise of online female religious influencers	Muslim female preachers on YouTube and Instagram	Creates decentralized authority based on authenticity and audience trust
Social Media Activism	Transnational advocacy for gender justice	Hashtag campaigns like #WomenInMosques and #Musawah	Amplifies feminist Islamic discourse and mobilizes global solidarity
Surveillance and Backlash	Online harassment and institutional scrutiny	Conservative pushback against female digital scholars	Reinforces gendered control, highlighting ongoing resistance and negotiation

Religious Authority as a Site of Control and Transformation

Religious authority, therefore, functions as a dynamic site where power and resistance coexist, shaping both personal faith and collective identity. On one hand, institutionalized structures such as councils of scholars, state-sponsored religious bodies, and mosque hierarchies continue to enforce traditional gender roles that reinforce patriarchal norms. On the other hand, the lived practices of believers increasingly demonstrate fluidity and contestation. Women preachers, youth leaders, and independent scholars often reinterpret religious texts in ways that resonate with contemporary realities, challenging exclusionary systems of authority. This dual process of conformity and resistance underscores that transformation in Islamic religious life rarely occurs through rupture, but through gradual reinterpretation, negotiation, and social practice [37].

Furthermore, the power of religious authority to create fresh ethical and intellectual frameworks in response to global issues is what gives it the capacity to transform. The interpretive community has grown as a result of education, international communication, and digital connectivity, giving previously underrepresented voices a chance to influence religious discourse. The changing landscape of authority is best illustrated by initiatives supporting female jurists, community-based theological training, and gender-inclusive mosque leadership. These advancements show that the fight for gender justice in Islam involves rethinking the fundamental premises of legitimacy and spirituality rather than just focusing on role equality. Therefore, in Muslim communities, religious authority represents both continuity and change, rooted in tradition but adaptable to believers' changing needs in the contemporary world [38].

In this way, within the Muslim world and its diasporas, religious authority turns into a mirror reflecting larger societal changes. The definitions of authority, piety, and leadership change in tandem with the speed of globalization and the way that younger generations reinterpret faith in light of contemporary ethics and social justice. A democratization of religious discourse that goes beyond established hierarchies is demonstrated by the increasing involvement of women, young academics, and lay intellectuals in theological discussions. This change represents a continuous rebalancing between divine guidance and human interpretation, not the deterioration of Islam's spiritual underpinnings [39].

Theoretical Interpretation: Power–Knowledge and Resistance

Additionally, Foucault's framework highlights how knowledge and social practice are inextricably linked. Authority over religious interpretation is entwined with daily activities in Muslim communities, ranging from community leadership to ritual observance. The studies under review demonstrate that women and young people are actively changing the standards and expectations of religious life by participating in teaching, digital scholarship, and public discourse. They are not only questioning established hierarchies. These participation actions demonstrate how social norms are constantly negotiated rather than statically imposed at the site of knowledge production [40].

Furthermore, rather than being overt, resistance in religious settings frequently takes the form of calculated and covert actions. Youth activists, reformist intellectuals, and female academics use social media, education, and local networks to establish alternative epistemic spaces. These programs seek to increase the authority's responsiveness and inclusivity rather than completely dismantle it. This illustrates Foucault's observation that resistance and power are co-constitutive, with resistance arising where power flows and giving rise to fresh modes of engagement and reinterpretation. These studies propose that even modest interventions, such as an online forum or women-led tafsir study group, can gradually change the dynamics of religious influence by presenting authority as relational [41].

Lastly, the interaction of resistance, knowledge, and power emphasizes how crucial context is to comprehending religious authority. The exercise and contestation of power are mediated by sociopolitical variables, educational opportunities, and technological infrastructures. The data suggest that changes in gendered authority frequently depend on more general structural factors like institutional transparency, literacy rates, and governmental laws. Therefore, using a Foucauldian perspective enables us to view gendered authority in Muslim communities as a dynamic and negotiated phenomenon that develops via both creative engagement and constraint, as opposed to linear or homogeneous advancement [42].

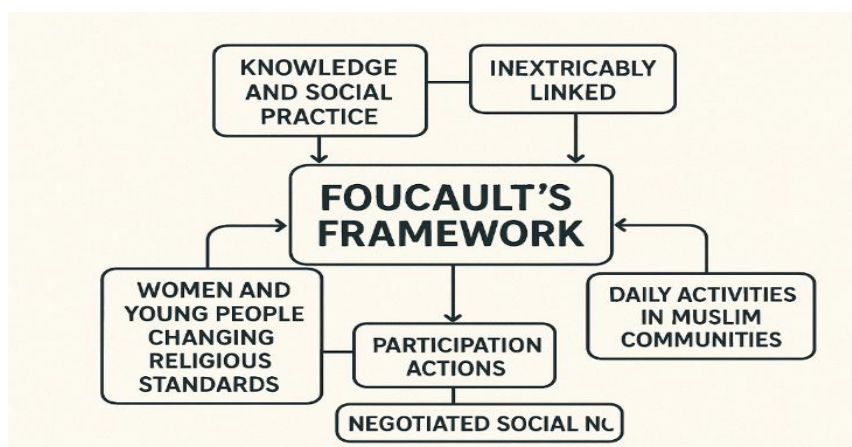


Figure 1. Foucault's Framework

Summary of Findings

In conclusion, this review shows how gendered religious authority is changing gradually but significantly in Muslim communities. Formal religious hierarchies are still dominated by traditional patriarchal structures, which prevent women from holding acknowledged positions of authority like scholars, jurists, or imams. But through a variety of channels, these established power structures are increasingly being challenged and reformed. In ways that defy expectations, women, young people, and reform-minded intellectuals are claiming interpretive agency, interacting with sacred texts, and creating religious knowledge. Both formal and informal education become vital tools for empowering marginalized voices to engage in community leadership and theological discourse [43].

These revolutionary possibilities are further enhanced by the emergence of digital platforms, which offer forums for the discussion, democratization, and dissemination of religious knowledge outside the bounds of established authority. The definition of acceptable religious authority is also being redefined by social activism, community involvement, and reformist theological movements. Crucially, this evolution is neither uniform nor linear; rather, it differs depending on the socio-political, cultural, and regional contexts, underscoring the relational and negotiated character of authority in Islam [44].

Islamic traditions are dynamic and constantly reinterpreted through lived experience, as evidenced by the intersection of faith, gender, and social change. Therefore, religious authority serves as both a site of renewal and a social control mechanism, opening up new avenues for justice, empowerment, and inclusion. The present and future of Muslim communities are shaped by the intersection of social activism, theological meaning, and gender norms in this dynamic field, indicating that transformative change is both possible and ongoing.

Table3. Gendered Religious Authority in Muslim Communities: Key Findings

Theme	Findings	Examples/Evidence	Implications
Persistence of Traditional Hierarchies	Male-dominated structures continue to control formal religious authority	Limited access for women to roles like imams, jurists, and recognized scholars	Gender norms remain a barrier; structural change is gradual
Emergence of Female Leadership	Women increasingly participate in interpretation and leadership	Female scholars, educators, and activists producing religious knowledge	Expands interpretive authority; challenges patriarchal norms

Role of Education	Education equips marginalized groups to engage in theological discourse	Formal institutions, community programs, and online courses	Enables knowledge production and informed religious participation
Digital and Social Platforms	Technology allows wider dissemination and debate of religious knowledge	Online forums, social media, webinars	Democratizes authority; creates spaces for reformist voices
Social and Theological Reform	Reformist movements reinterpret Islamic teachings	Community activism, youth engagement, gender-sensitive theology	Encourages inclusion, empowerment, and evolving religious practices
Dynamic Nature of Authority	Religious authority is relational and negotiated	Variations across regional, cultural, and socio-political contexts	Authority is not fixed; ongoing potential for transformation
Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Social Change	Authority serves as both control and renewal	Case studies of women's participation reshaping norms	Suggests transformative potential within Muslim communities

Comprehensive Analysis

The document presents a systematic and multidimensional examination of how gender shapes religious authority within Muslim communities, highlighting the evolving interplay between tradition, education, feminism, and multicultural contexts. The findings emphasize that, although formal religious structures remain largely patriarchal, significant shifts are underway driven by women's increased access to education, the rise of Islamic feminism, and the expansion of digital platforms. These forces collectively challenge longstanding male-centered models of religious leadership and open new avenues for women's participation in the production, interpretation, and dissemination of Islamic knowledge. A major contribution of the reviewed studies is the illumination of informal authority exercised by women within community settings, online spaces, and educational initiatives. While institutional gatekeeping often restricts women from official roles such as imams or jurists, women strategically cultivate influence through teaching, counseling, mosque-based study circles, and digital da'wah.

These practices illustrate that religious authority is not confined to institutional hierarchies but emerges dynamically through lived experience, relational trust, and interpretive engagement. Such shifts demonstrate the fluid and negotiated nature of religious leadership in the contemporary Muslim world. Islamic feminist hermeneutics plays a central role in this transformation, offering reinterpretations of Qur'anic texts that emphasize justice, equality, and human dignity. By reclaiming *ijtihad* and integrating historical, linguistic, and contextual analysis, feminist scholars challenge patriarchal readings and broaden the possibilities for women's scholarly and spiritual authority. These reinterpretations not only expand theological horizons but also reshape religious epistemology by recognizing women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge.

The review further highlights the impact of globalization and multicultural environments, where Muslim minorities must navigate competing expectations surrounding gender roles, inclusion, and identity. Digital spaces amplify these negotiations by enabling transnational collaboration, visibility, and activism, while simultaneously exposing women scholars to backlash and surveillance. Overall, the data demonstrate that religious authority in Muslim

communities is undergoing gradual yet substantive transformation. Despite persistent structural barriers, women, youth, and reformist thinkers continue to redefine authority through education, digital engagement, grassroots leadership, and feminist hermeneutics—signaling new trajectories for inclusivity and pluralism in Islamic thought and practice.

CONCLUSION

The review's conclusions highlight the slow but significant change in gendered religious authority in Muslim communities. Traditional male hierarchies are no longer absolute, but they still hold sway. The traditional limits of religious authority are being challenged by the growing participation of women, young people, and reformist intellectuals in leadership and interpretation roles. This change illustrates how authority in Islam is relational and constantly negotiated within social, cultural, and political contexts rather than being fixed. One of the main forces behind this change is education. Online learning platforms, community programs, and formal institutions give marginalized groups, especially women, the skills and information they need to take part in community leadership and theological discourse. Education gives people the ability to create religious knowledge, challenge long-standing conventions, and have an impact on community decision-making. Additionally, social media and digital platforms are crucial in reshaping authority. Digital publications, online forums, and social media make it possible for religious knowledge to be shared more widely and open up previously unattainable avenues for discussion and debate. By amplifying voices that question established hierarchies, advance reformist interpretations, and encourage intercommunal interaction, these platforms democratize religious authority in previously unheard-of ways. Further highlighting the dual function of religious authority as a site of renewal and a control mechanism is the intersection of faith, gender, and social change. Although patriarchal structures and gender norms still limit participation, women's and reformist actors' active engagement opens up new avenues for social justice, empowerment, and inclusion. The way that Islamic traditions are constantly being reinterpreted through lived experience is reflected in this dynamic interplay. In conclusion, the review affirms that transformative change in Muslim communities is both possible and underway. By recognizing the contributions of marginalized voices, leveraging educational opportunities, and embracing digital spaces for engagement, religious authority can become more inclusive, equitable, and responsive. These developments offer a hopeful vision of Muslim societies in which tradition and reform coexist, allowing gender, theology, and social progress to intersect in meaningful and transformative ways.

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Author Contribution

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Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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