



RECLAIMING WOMEN'S MORAL AGENCY IN ISLĀM: AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE GENDER JUSTICE IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of women's moral agency in Islām and its implications for achieving sustainable gender justice in Nigerian universities. While Islamic teachings affirm women's spiritual equality, moral responsibility, and social participation, realities in Nigerian higher education reflect persistent gender inequalities shaped by patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and institutional limitations. Drawing on Islamic ethical theory, classical scholarship (al-Ghazālī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn 'Āshūr), and contemporary reformist thought (Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas), this paper develops a normative framework for reclaiming women's moral agency. Using qualitative and analytical research design, supported by empirical studies on gender disparities in Nigerian academia, the study identifies key barriers such as underrepresentation, gender bias, and socio-cultural constraints. It argues that Islamic ethical principles, such as justice ('adl), dignity (karāmah), accountability (taklīf), and trusteeship (amānah), offer a culturally resonant and sustainable framework for gender justice. The paper proposes institutional, epistemological, and policy reforms for Nigerian universities. It concludes that reclaiming women's moral agency is essential for fostering inclusive academic environments, promoting sustainable development, and aligning Islamic values with contemporary gender justice discourse.

Keywords: Gender justice, Islamic ethics, moral agency, Nigerian universities, sustainability



Introduction

Gender justice has become a central concern in contemporary academic discourse, particularly within higher education institutions that are expected to serve as spaces of equity, inclusion, and intellectual advancement. However, empirical evidence indicates that universities, especially in developing contexts such as Nigeria, continue to reproduce structural inequalities that reflect broader societal patterns (Unterhalter & Howell, 2019; Hailu et.al., 2023). These inequalities are especially pronounced along gender lines, where women face systemic barriers in access, participation, and leadership within academic institutions (Aina, 2005).

In Nigeria, gender disparities in higher education manifest in multiple dimensions, including unequal representation in academic staffing, limited access to leadership positions, and persistent gender bias in institutional practices (Ayeni et.al. 2024; Bello & Bello, 2023). While policy frameworks promoting gender equality exist, their implementation remains inconsistent, often undermined by socio-cultural norms and institutional inertia (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Within Muslim societies, including parts of Nigeria, gender discourse is deeply intertwined with religious interpretations, making Islam a critical framework for understanding and addressing gender inequalities. Contrary to widespread misconceptions, Islamic teachings provide a comprehensive ethical system that affirms the dignity, moral responsibility, and social participation of women (Rahman, 1982; Jamal Al-deen, 2019). However, the lived realities of many Muslim women reveal a significant divergence between scriptural ideals and socio-cultural practices, often shaped by patriarchal interpretations rather than authentic Islamic principles (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002).

The concept of moral agency provides a critical lens for analysing this disconnect. Moral agency refers to the capacity of individuals to make ethical decisions and be accountable for their actions. In Islamic thought, moral agency is universal and not gender-specific; both men and women are considered morally responsible agents (*mukallafūn*) accountable before God (Al-Ghazālī, 1993; Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.). This principle is clearly articulated in Qur’ān 3 āyah (verse) 195, thus: “Never will I allow the work of any worker among you to be lost, whether male or female.” This verse establishes a foundational ethic of moral equality, emphasising that accountability and reward are based on individual actions rather than gender.

Similarly, the Qur’ān underscores the collaborative role of men and women in societal development, thus: “The believing men and believing women are allies of one another.” (Qur’ān 9:71). These scriptural foundations challenge patriarchal constructions that marginalise women and instead affirm their active participation in both private and public spheres. As Amina Wadud argues, the Qur’ān’s ethical vision is fundamentally egalitarian, though often obscured by androcentric interpretations (Wadud, 1999). Likewise, Asma Barlas contends that patriarchal readings of Islamic texts reflect historical contexts rather than divine intent (Barlas, 2002).

In the Nigerian context, reclaiming women’s moral agency requires a critical engagement with both Islamic teachings and socio-cultural realities. Cultural practices such as early marriage, gendered division of labour, and male-dominated leadership structures often restrict women’s educational and professional opportunities (Aina, 2005). These practices persist despite clear Islamic injunctions promoting justice, dignity, and knowledge for all believers.

Furthermore, the pursuit of sustainable gender justice necessitates frameworks that are both globally relevant and locally grounded. While global gender theories provide valuable insights, their application in Muslim societies should be contextualised within indigenous ethical systems (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Islamic ethics, with its emphasis on justice (*‘adl*), dignity (*karāmah*), and social responsibility (*amānah*), offers a culturally resonant framework for addressing gender inequalities in Nigerian universities (Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.; Rahman, 1982).

Despite the growing body of literature on gender inequality and Islamic perspectives, several gaps remain. First, there is limited integration of Islamic ethical frameworks with empirical studies on Nigerian universities, resulting in a disconnect between theory and practice. Second, existing studies often focus on either gender inequality or Islamic teachings, without providing a comprehensive framework that combines both perspectives (Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Finally, there is a lack of context-specific research that addresses the unique challenges faced by Muslim women in

Nigerian universities. This study seeks to fill these gaps by developing an integrated framework that combines Islamic ethics with empirical analysis to promote sustainable gender justice.

Literature Review

Gender Inequality in Higher Education, global and African Perspectives: Gender inequality in higher education remains a persistent global challenge, particularly in developing regions where structural, cultural, and institutional barriers intersect to limit women's participation and advancement. Studies have shown that despite increased access to education, women continue to face disparities in academic representation, leadership, and career progression (Unterhalter & Howell, 2019; Hailu et al., 2023). These disparities are often reinforced by institutional cultures that privilege male dominance and reproduce gender hierarchies within academic systems (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). In the African context, gender inequality in universities is further compounded by socio-economic constraints, limited policy implementation, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms. Research indicates that women are significantly underrepresented in senior academic positions across African universities, reflecting systemic barriers to advancement (Hailu et al.; Jamal Al-deen, 2019). These challenges highlight the need for context-specific frameworks that address both structural and cultural dimensions of inequality.

Gender Inequality in Nigerian Universities

In Nigeria, gender disparities in higher education are well-documented, with studies highlighting persistent inequalities in access, participation, and leadership. Although female enrolment has increased over time, women remain underrepresented in academic staffing and leadership roles (Aina, 2005; Bello & Bello, 2023). This underrepresentation is particularly evident at senior levels, where women occupy a small proportion of professorial and administrative positions. Institutional barriers such as gender bias in recruitment and promotion, lack of mentorship opportunities, and limited access to research funding significantly hinder women's academic advancement (Aina, 2005; Ayeni et al., 2024). Additionally, societal expectations regarding women's roles in family and caregiving further constrain their professional development, creating a dual burden that limits their participation in academic activities (Bello & Bello, 2023).

Empirical studies also reveal regional disparities, with Northern Nigeria experiencing lower female participation in higher education due to cultural practices such as early marriage and limited access to secondary education (Aina, 2005). These findings underscore the complex interplay between institutional and socio-cultural factors in shaping gender inequality.

Socio-Cultural Determinants of Gender Inequality

The persistence of gender inequality in Nigerian universities cannot be fully understood without examining the socio-cultural context in which these institutions operate. Patriarchal norms that prioritise male authority and assign domestic roles to women continue to influence educational and professional opportunities (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Cultural expectations often discourage women from pursuing higher education or leadership roles, particularly in conservative communities where gender roles are strictly defined. These norms are sometimes reinforced through misinterpretations of religious teachings, leading to the erroneous belief that Islām restricts women's participation in public life (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). However, scholars argue that such practices are cultural rather than religious and contradict the ethical principles of Islām.

Religion, Interpretation, and Gender Discourse in Islām

The relationship between Islām and gender has been widely debated in academic literature, with scholars emphasising the distinction between scriptural teachings and their interpretations. Amina Wadud argues that the Qur'ān promotes gender equality, but patriarchal interpretations have obscured its egalitarian message (Wadud, 1999). Similarly, Asma Barlas contends that the Qur'ān does not endorse patriarchy; rather, it has been interpreted in ways that reflect male-dominated historical contexts (Barlas, 2002). Contemporary scholarship has increasingly focused on reinterpreting Islamic texts to highlight their ethical commitment to justice and equality. Fazlur Rahman emphasises the need for contextual interpretation, arguing that Islamic teachings should be understood in light of contemporary realities (Rahman, 1982). This approach allows for a more dynamic engagement with Islamic ethics, enabling scholars to address modern challenges such as gender inequality.

Islamic Ethical Frameworks and Gender Justice

Islamic ethics provides a comprehensive framework for addressing gender inequality, grounded in principles such as justice (‘adl), dignity (karāmah), and moral responsibility (taklīf). Classical scholars such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī emphasise the universality of moral accountability, arguing that all individuals are responsible for their actions regardless of gender (Al-Ghazālī, 1993). Similarly, Ibn Ashur expands the concept of Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah (objectives of Islamic law) to include broader human values such as justice, welfare, and dignity, which are essential for achieving gender equity (Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.). These principles align with contemporary gender frameworks that emphasise human rights and social justice, demonstrating the compatibility of Islamic ethics with modern approaches to gender equality (Unterhalter & Howell, 2019).

Women’s Empowerment and Sustainable Development

The link between women’s empowerment and sustainable development is well established in global development discourse. Researches indicate that gender equality in education contributes to economic growth, improved health outcomes, and social stability (Unterhalter & Howell, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Educated women are more likely to participate in the workforce, contribute to decision-making processes, and invest in their communities. In the Nigerian context, promoting women’s education is essential for achieving national development goals. However, achieving this requires addressing both structural barriers and cultural constraints that limit women’s access to education and professional opportunities (Aina, 2005; Ayeni et al., 2024).

Islamic Ethical Foundations of Women’s Moral Agency

Understanding women’s moral agency in Islām requires situating it within a comprehensive ethical and theological framework rooted in tawḥīd (divine unity), khilāfah (vicegerency), and taklīf (moral responsibility). These interconnected principles establish the ontological equality and ethical accountability of all mankind, thereby providing a normative foundation for gender justice (Rahman, 1982; Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.). Contemporary scholarship further emphasises that these concepts, when properly interpreted, challenge patriarchal structures and affirm women’s active participation in both private and public spheres (Jamal Al-deen, 2019).

Tawḥīd (Divine Unity) and Ontological Equality

The principle of tawḥīd, which affirms the absolute oneness of Allāh, serves as the foundation of Islamic ethics and has profound implications for human equality. By emphasising a single divine source of creation, tawḥīd negates all forms of unjust hierarchy, including gender-based discrimination (Rahman, 1982; Wadud, 1999). Qur’ān 49 āyah 13 explicitly states: “O mankind, we created you from a male and a female... Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.” (Qur’ān 49:13). This verse establishes taqwā (moral consciousness) as the sole key to superiority, thereby rejecting gender as a basis for hierarchy or dominance. As Amina Wadud argues, this ontological equality is central to the Qur’ān’s ethical vision, although it has often been overshadowed by patriarchal interpretations (Wadud, 1999). Similarly, Asma Barlas emphasises that the Qur’ān’s discourse is fundamentally anti-patriarchal when read within its ethical and theological context (Barlas, 2002).

Khilāfah (Vicegerency) and Shared Human Responsibility

The concept of khilāfah positions mankind as Allah’s representatives on earth, entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining justice and order. Importantly, this role is not gender-specific but applies equally to all humans (Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.; Rahman, 1982). Allāh says: “Indeed, I will make upon the earth a vicegerent.” (Qur’ān 2:30). Classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī interpret this verse as establishing a universal ethical mandate that encompasses both men and women (Al-Ghazālī, 1993). This implies that women are equally responsible for contributing to societal development, including intellectual and institutional spheres such as higher education.

Some authors further argue that excluding women from leadership and decision-making contradicts the very essence of khilāfah, which requires inclusive participation in governance and social transformation (Jamal Al-deen, 2019).

Taklīf (Moral Responsibility) and Individual Accountability

The concept of taklīf refers to the moral responsibility placed upon individuals to act in accordance with divine guidance. In Islamic theology, all adult Muslims regardless of gender are considered mukallafūn (morally accountable agents) (Al-Ghazālī, 1993; Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.). to this, Allāh says: “Whoever does righteousness, whether

male or female... We will surely grant them a good life.” (Qur’ān 16:97). This verse underscores the independence of moral agency, affirming that women are not secondary moral beings but fully accountable individuals. As Fazlur Rahman notes, the Qur’ān consistently emphasises individual accountability, thereby rejecting collective or gender-based moral hierarchies (Rahman, 1982).

Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah and Gender Justice

The theory of Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah (objectives of Islamic law) provides a critical framework for translating Islamic ethical principles into practical applications. Ibn Ashur expands classical maqāṣid theory to include broader human values such as justice, dignity, and freedom (Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.).

The preservation of life (nafs), intellect (‘aql), dignity and social welfare is essential for achieving gender justice. Denying women access to education or leadership opportunities undermines these objectives and contradicts the ethical goals of Sharī‘ah (Unterhalter & Howell, 2019; Jamal Al-deen, 2019).

Epistemological Reform and Contextual Interpretation

A critical component of this framework is the need for epistemological reform, particularly in the interpretation of Islamic texts. Scholars have emphasised that many gender inequalities attributed to Islām are the result of historically conditioned interpretations rather than divine intent (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). Fazlur Rahman advocates a “double movement” approach, which involves understanding the historical context of revelation and applying its ethical principles to contemporary issues (Rahman, 1982). This approach allows for a dynamic engagement with Islamic teachings, enabling scholars to address modern challenges such as gender inequality in higher education. Similarly, contemporary gender scholars argue that reinterpretation is essential for aligning Islamic teachings with global standards of human rights and social justice (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Jamal Al-deen, 2019).

Integrating Islamic Ethics with Contemporary Gender Theory

The integration of Islamic ethics with contemporary gender theory provides a holistic framework for addressing gender inequality. While global gender frameworks emphasise rights, equality, and empowerment, Islamic ethics adds a moral and spiritual dimension grounded in accountability to God (Unterhalter & Howell, 2019). This integration is particularly important in contexts such as Nigeria, where religion plays a central role in shaping social norms and values. By aligning gender justice initiatives with Islamic ethical principles, it is possible to develop culturally relevant and sustainable solutions (Aina, 2005; Ayeni et al., 2024).

Conceptual Model: Reclaiming Women’s Moral Agency

Based on the foregoing analysis, women’s moral agency in Islām can be conceptualised as comprising:

- i. Ontological equality (Tawḥīd)
- ii. Shared responsibility (Khilāfah)
- iii. Individual accountability (Taklīf)
- iv. Ethical objectives (Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah)
- v. Contextual interpretation (Ijtihād/Reform)

This model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing gender inequality in Nigerian universities.

Empirical Analysis: Gender Inequality in Nigerian Universities

Overview of Gender Disparities in Nigerian Higher Education:

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that gender inequality remains a defining feature of Nigerian higher education, despite policy efforts aimed at promoting inclusivity and equity. While female enrolment has improved over the past two decades, disparities persist in access, retention, academic progression, and leadership representation (Aina, 2005; Ayeni et al., 2024). These inequalities reflect broader structural and socio-cultural dynamics that continue to shape educational outcomes for women. Globally, higher education institutions are increasingly recognised as critical sites for advancing gender equality; however, they often reproduce the very inequalities they seek to address (Unterhalter & Howell, 2019; Hailu et al., 2023). In Nigeria, this paradox is particularly evident, as universities simultaneously serve as spaces of empowerment and exclusion.

Gender Representation in Academic Staffing

One of the most significant indicators of gender inequality in Nigerian universities is the underrepresentation of women in academic staffing, particularly at senior levels. Studies show that while women are increasingly entering academia, their representation declines sharply at higher academic ranks, reflecting the persistence of a “glass ceiling” effect (Aina, 2005; Bello & Bello, 2023). This disparity is attributed to multiple factors, including:

- i. Gender bias in recruitment and promotion processes
- ii. Limited access to mentorship and professional networks
- iii. Unequal distribution of research opportunities and funding (Hailu et al. 2023; Ayeni et al., 2024).

These structural barriers are further reinforced by institutional cultures that privilege male dominance and marginalise women’s contributions to knowledge production (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Gender Disparities in University Leadership

Leadership positions within Nigerian universities remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, limiting women’s influence on institutional decision-making and governance. Empirical studies indicate that women occupy a disproportionately small percentage of roles such as Vice-Chancellors, Deans, and Heads of Department (Aina, 2005; Bello & Bello, 2023). This under-representation has significant implications, as leadership structures shape institutional priorities, policies, and cultures. The limited women in these roles often results in the marginalisation of gender-sensitive policies and the perpetuation of inequitable practices (Hailu et al. 2023; Ayeni et al., 2024).

From an Islamic ethical perspective, this exclusion contradicts the principle of *shūrā* (consultation), which emphasises inclusive decision-making as Allāh says: “And their affairs are conducted by mutual consultation” (Qur’ān 42:38). Excluding women from leadership, therefore, undermines both ethical and institutional ideals.

Institutional Barriers and Gender Bias

Institutional practices within Nigerian universities often reinforce gender inequality through both explicit and implicit mechanisms. Recruitment processes, for example, may favour male candidates due to implicit biases and entrenched institutional norms (Ayeni et al., 2024). Additionally, work-life balance challenges disproportionately affect women, as societal expectations often assign primary caregiving responsibilities to them. This limits their ability to engage fully in research, publishing, and academic networking (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, remains a critical issue in Nigerian universities. Studies indicate that female students and staff are particularly vulnerable to harassment from peers and superiors, creating an environment of fear and inequality (Aina, 2005; Ayeni et al., 2024). The persistence of such practices reflects institutional weaknesses in policy enforcement and accountability. Victims often face stigma and lack of support, discouraging reporting and perpetuating a culture of silence (Bello & Bello, 2023). From an Islamic ethical standpoint, such actions violate the principles of justice and dignity. To this, Allāh states: “Do not deprive people of their due rights” (Qur’ān 7:85).

Socio-Cultural Constraints on Women’s Academic Participation

Beyond institutional factors, socio-cultural norms play a significant role in shaping women’s experiences in Nigerian universities. Patriarchal structures that prioritise male authority and restrict women’s roles to the domestic sphere continue to influence educational outcomes (Jamal Al-deen, 2019; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). These norms are often reinforced through religious misinterpretations, despite clear Islamic teachings that affirm women’s rights to education and participation in public life (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). This highlights the need for a critical re-engagement with both cultural practices and religious interpretations.

Synthesis: Empirical Evidence and Ethical Implications

The empirical findings presented in this section reveal a consistent pattern of gender inequality across Nigerian universities, driven by a combination of structural, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. These realities stand in stark contrast to the ethical principles of Islām, which affirm women’s moral agency, dignity, and participation in societal development (Rahman, 1982; Ibn ‘Āshūr, n.d.). Addressing these disparities, therefore, requires a holistic

approach that integrates institutional reform, cultural transformation and ethical reorientation. This synthesis sets the stage for the next section, which develops a comprehensive ethical framework for sustainable gender justice.

Toward an Islamic Ethical Framework for Sustainable Gender Justice

Building on the theoretical and empirical analysis, this study proposes a comprehensive Islamic ethical framework for reclaiming women's moral agency and promoting gender justice in Nigerian universities. This framework integrates classical Islamic principles with contemporary gender theory to provide a holistic and context-sensitive approach.

Principle of Justice ('Adl): Justice ('adl) is a foundational principle in Islām, requiring fairness, equity, and the elimination of oppression in all aspects of life. To this, Allāh says: "Indeed, Allah commands justice and excellence..." (Qur'ān 16:90). In the context of Nigerian universities, this principle demands the removal of structural barriers that hinder women's participation and advancement (Unterhalter & Howell, 2021; Aina & Odebode, 2021).

Principle of Human Dignity (Karāmah): The concept of karāmah (human dignity) affirms the intrinsic worth of all individuals as indicated in Qur'ān 17 āyah 70, thus: "We have certainly honored the children of Adam." Ensuring dignity requires addressing issues such as harassment, discrimination, and exclusion, which undermine women's experiences in academic environments (Bello & Bello, 2023).

Principle of Moral Agency: Recognising women as independent moral agents is central to Islamic ethics. As Al-Ghazālī emphasises, moral responsibility is universal and not contingent upon gender (Al-Ghazālī, 1993). This principle requires institutions to create environments that enable women to exercise their agency fully (Rahman, 1982).

Principle of Trusteeship (Amānah): Universities, as institutions of knowledge and governance, bear a moral responsibility/trust (amānah) to promote justice and equity. This includes implementing policies that protect rights, ensure fairness, and foster inclusive participation.

Principle of Mutual Cooperation (Ta'āwun): Gender justice requires collaboration between men and women in transforming institutional cultures and practices (Cornwall & Rivas, 2020), as Allāh commands, thus: "And cooperate in righteousness and piety" (Qur'ān 5:2).

Epistemological Reform: A key component of this framework is the need for reinterpretation of Islamic texts to align with their ethical objectives. Fazlur Rahman emphasises contextual interpretation as essential for addressing contemporary challenges (Rahman, 1982). This aligns with calls for gender-sensitive scholarship that bridges tradition and modernity (Jamal Al-deen, 2019).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal and analytical research design suitable for normative social inquiry.

Research Design: The paper combines textual analysis of the Qur'ān and Hadīth, conceptual analysis of Islamic ethical principles, narrative review of empirical literature on Nigerian universities, as well as a critical interpretive method linking ethics to policy realities

Data Sources: Primary Sources include Qur'ān, Hadīth and classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn 'Āshūr. While Secondary Sources are Peer-reviewed journal articles, Gender policy reports, Nigerian higher education studies and Development agency publications

Analytical Procedure: The study uses thematic content analysis under four themes. These are (i) representation and leadership inequality, (ii) institutional bias and harassment, (iii) Islamic moral agency and justice and (iv) reform pathways for sustainable gender justice

Justification: Because the paper seeks to build a normative framework rather than measure numerical causation, a qualitative analytical methodology is most appropriate.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the literature and empirical evidence generated five major findings concerning women's moral agency and gender justice in Nigerian universities. These findings reveal both persistent challenges and emerging

opportunities for institutional transformation. More importantly, they demonstrate the relevance of Islamic ethical principles in addressing contemporary gender inequalities within higher education.

Persistent but Changing Patterns of Underrepresentation: The first major finding is that although significant progress has been made in expanding women's access to higher education, gender disparities remain evident in senior academic and leadership positions. Available studies indicate that female enrolment in Nigerian universities has increased considerably over the last two decades, resulting in greater female participation across diverse academic disciplines (Ayeni et al., 2024). In many institutions, women now constitute a substantial proportion of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and their presence in traditionally male-dominated disciplines continues to grow.

However, this increase in enrolment has not translated proportionately into leadership representation. Women remain less visible at the levels of professor, dean, head of department, deputy vice-chancellor, and vice-chancellor. This finding supports the argument that educational access alone does not automatically guarantee leadership equity. The phenomenon reflects what scholars describe as the "leaky pipeline," where women's representation declines progressively at higher stages of academic careers.

Nevertheless, a balanced interpretation of the evidence is necessary. The underrepresentation of women in leadership should not be attributed solely to discrimination. Historical patterns of academic recruitment, disciplinary distribution, years of service requirements, career interruptions associated with family responsibilities, and institutional cultures all contribute to leadership outcomes. Recent developments in universities, such as Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, and the University of Ibadan, where women have occupied important positions, including Deputy Vice-Chancellor and University Librarian, demonstrate that progress is occurring. Consequently, the issue is better understood as a complex interaction of structural, institutional, and socio-cultural factors rather than a simple narrative of exclusion.

From an Islamic perspective, however, leadership opportunities should be based primarily on competence, trustworthiness, and capability rather than gender. The Qur'ān presents examples of women exercising leadership and sound judgement, most notably the Queen of Sheba (Bilqīs), whose wisdom and consultative leadership are positively portrayed (Qur'ān 27:23–44). Similarly, during the reign of Caliph 'Umar (634 CE – 644 CE), (the second caliph of Islam), women also played a significant leadership role. The Caliph acknowledged the insight and vast intelligence of Shifā daughter of Abdullah that he often consulted her for advice concerning his administration. Subsequently, Caliph 'Umar appointed Shifā as one of his administrators in running the affairs of the state relating to trade and commerce (Oladosu-Uthman & Atobatele, 2023). This suggests that women's participation in leadership is consistent with Islamic ethical principles.

Structural and Institutional Barriers Continue to Influence Career Progression: The second finding reveals that institutional structures continue to shape women's academic experiences in significant ways. Research consistently identifies mentorship deficits, limited access to professional networks, unequal research opportunities, and work-life balance pressures as factors affecting women's career progression (Hailu et al., 2023; Ayeni et al., 2024). Academic advancement often depends not only on formal qualifications but also on informal systems of support, networking, collaboration, and sponsorship. Women frequently report having less access to these opportunities than their male counterparts. In addition, societal expectations regarding caregiving and family responsibilities may affect women's capacity to participate fully in activities that contribute to academic advancement, such as conference attendance, international collaborations, and research productivity. From an Islamic ethical perspective, such inequalities challenge the principle of justice ('adl), which requires fairness in opportunities and treatment. Allāh commands: "Indeed, Allāh commands justice, excellence, and giving to relatives, and forbids immorality, wrongdoing, and oppression" (Qur'ān 16:90). Universities, therefore, have an ethical responsibility to ensure that recruitment, promotion, and professional development systems operate fairly and transparently.

Gender-Based Harassment Remains a Significant Challenge to Women's Moral Agency: The third finding concerns the persistence of gender-based violence and sexual harassment within higher education institutions. Studies indicate that female students and academics continue to experience various forms of harassment that undermine their sense of security, dignity, and belonging (Bello & Bello, 2023). The effects of harassment extend beyond individual experiences. Fear of victimisation, social stigma, and concerns about retaliation may discourage reporting and contribute to a culture of silence. Consequently, harassment not only affects individual victims but also weakens institutional trust and academic productivity.

From the perspective of Islamic ethics, harassment represents a direct violation of human dignity (karāmah) and justice. To this, Allāh states: "Do not deprive people of their due rights" (Qur'ān 7:85). Similarly, Prophet Muhammad (ṢAW) declared: "There should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm" (Ibn Mājah, no. 2341). These texts establish a moral framework that rejects all forms of exploitation, abuse, and injustice. Consequently, institutions that fail to address harassment effectively are not merely neglecting administrative responsibilities but are also failing to uphold fundamental ethical values.

Religious Misinterpretation and Cultural Practices Continue to Shape Gender Relations: A fourth major finding is the continuing influence of cultural practices and religious misinterpretations on perceptions of women's roles within society and higher education. In some contexts, restrictions on women's participation in leadership, public engagement, or advanced education are justified using religious language. However, closer examination reveals that many such restrictions derive more from cultural traditions than from authoritative Islamic teachings. The Qur'ān repeatedly affirms the moral and spiritual equality of men and women. Allāh says: "Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women... Allāh has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward" (Qur'ān 33:35). Allāh also states: "The believing men and believing women are allies of one another..." (Qur'ān 9:71). In the same vein, the Prophetic tradition strongly supports women's pursuit of knowledge. The Prophet (ṢAW) said: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Ibn Mājah, no. 224).

Historically, Muslim women contributed significantly to scholarship, education, commerce, and public life. Figures such as 'Ā'ishah bint Abī Bakr, Umm al-Dardā', and Fāṭimah al-Fihri demonstrate that women involving in intellectual engagement and leadership are not foreign to the Islamic tradition. This finding suggests that efforts to promote gender justice in Nigerian universities should include educational initiatives aimed at distinguishing authentic Islamic teachings from cultural practices that may limit women's opportunities.

Islamic Ethics Provides a Viable Framework for Sustainable Gender Justice: The fifth and most significant finding is that Islamic ethics provides a culturally legitimate and intellectually robust framework for promoting sustainable gender justice in Nigerian universities. Unlike approaches that frame gender equality exclusively within secular rights discourse, Islamic ethics offers concepts that resonate deeply within Muslim communities and institutions. The principles of tawḥīd, khilāfah, taklīf, karāmah, amānah, shūrā, and maqāṣid al-sharī'ah collectively provide a comprehensive ethical foundation for reform. These principles affirm women's moral agency, recognise their intellectual capabilities, and emphasise justice, consultation, accountability, and human dignity.

Importantly, the findings suggest that Islamic ethics and contemporary gender justice are not inherently contradictory. Rather, when interpreted through their higher ethical objectives, Islamic teachings can serve as powerful resources for advancing inclusion, participation, and equity. Such an approach is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where religion remains an influential factor in shaping social values and institutional practices. Accordingly, sustainable gender justice is most likely to emerge when institutional reforms are supported by ethical transformation. Policies alone may be insufficient if they are not accompanied by changes in attitudes, values, and interpretations. Islamic ethical principles therefore offer not only normative guidance but also practical resources for fostering inclusive and equitable academic environments.



Implications of the Findings

Taken together, these findings reveal that gender inequality in Nigerian universities is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by structural, institutional, cultural, and ethical factors. While measurable progress has been achieved in women's enrolment and participation, significant challenges remain in leadership representation, institutional support, and protection from discrimination and harassment. The findings also demonstrate that Islamic ethical teachings provide important resources for addressing these challenges. Rather than viewing gender justice as an external or imported concept, the study shows that many of its core principles are deeply rooted within the Islamic tradition itself. Reclaiming women's moral agency therefore requires not only policy interventions but also intellectual engagement with Islamic ethics, institutional accountability, and cultural transformation. Such an integrated approach offers the most promising pathway toward sustainable gender justice in Nigerian universities.

Conclusion

By re-examining foundational Islamic sources, this paper has shown that Islām recognises women as fully autonomous and morally accountable human beings endowed with dignity, intellect, and social responsibility. The Qur'ānic worldview consistently affirms that moral worth is determined not by gender but by righteousness, ethical conduct, and accountability before Allāh. Women, like men, are recipients of divine guidance, participants in social reform, seekers of knowledge, and contributors to public welfare. The Prophetic model further reinforces this by highlighting the active roles played by women in scholarship, commerce, consultation, education, and communal life. Consequently, any framework that reduces women to passive dependents or excludes them from intellectual and institutional spaces stands in tension with the normative ethical spirit of Islām.

A major scholarly contribution of this study lies in the development of an integrated ethical framework that connects Islamic moral philosophy with contemporary gender justice discourse and policy reform. Rather than presenting Islām and modern gender concerns as opposing categories, the paper has demonstrated their potential compatibility when Islamic principles are properly understood through their ethical objectives. Through the concepts of tawḥīd (human equality under one Creator), taklīf (individual moral responsibility), khilāfah (shared vicegerency and stewardship), 'adl (justice), and karāmah (human dignity). The study provides a coherent theoretical model for rethinking women's participation in higher education. These principles offer a culturally legitimate and morally compelling basis for reform within Nigerian Muslim communities and institutions.

The study also contributes empirically by linking these ethical ideals to the lived realities of Nigerian universities. It has highlighted how underrepresentation in senior academic ranks, leadership exclusion, gender bias in recruitment, weak anti-harassment systems, unequal mentorship access, and socio-cultural constraints continue to shape women's experiences. These problems are not merely administrative inefficiencies; they are ethical failures that undermine justice, waste human potential, and weaken national development. Universities, as centres of knowledge production and social transformation, cannot fulfil their mission while half of their intellectual capital remains structurally disadvantaged.

Practically, this paper offers pathways for reform that move beyond symbolic commitments to measurable transformation. It calls for stronger institutional accountability, gender-sensitive governance structures, transparent promotion systems, targeted mentorship for women academics, safer reporting mechanisms for harassment, and curriculum reforms that include women's contributions to Islamic civilisation and scholarship. It also emphasises the importance of religious leaders, policymakers, and university administrators working collaboratively to promote interpretations of Islām that align with justice, education, and human flourishing.

More broadly, sustainable gender justice in Nigerian universities requires recognising that policy change alone is insufficient. Laws and regulations are necessary, but without ethical renewal they often remain weakly implemented. Genuine transformation demands institutional courage to challenge entrenched privilege, social willingness to confront patriarchal assumptions, and intellectual commitment to re-engaging Islamic sources in ways that speak to present realities. It requires moving from token inclusion to substantive participation, from rhetorical equality to structural fairness, and from inherited bias to principled justice.



Finally, reclaiming women's moral agency is not only a matter of fairness to women; it is a matter of educational excellence, social progress, and national development. A university system that empowers women to lead, research, teach, and innovate is stronger, more productive, and more just. When grounded in authentic Islamic ethics, the pursuit of gender justice becomes not an imported agenda, but a faithful expression of divine principles of justice, dignity, and trust. The future of Nigerian higher education will therefore depend significantly on its willingness to embrace women not as peripheral participants, but as equal moral agents and indispensable partners in knowledge, leadership, and societal transformation.

Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that achieving sustainable gender justice in Nigerian universities requires interventions at institutional, educational, policy, religious, and societal levels. Since the barriers identified are multidimensional, effective responses should move beyond isolated initiatives toward comprehensive and coordinated reforms grounded in both Islamic ethical principles and contemporary best practices in higher education governance such as:

Institutional Reforms for Inclusive University Governance

Universities should strengthen institutional mechanisms that promote equity, accountability, and inclusion. One important step is the establishment of independent Gender Equity and Inclusion Offices with clearly defined mandates to monitor gender-related issues, coordinate support services, and evaluate compliance with institutional gender policies. The study also recommends the adoption of a minimum representation benchmark for women on major university committees, governing councils, and strategic decision-making bodies. While representation alone does not guarantee gender justice, it enhances the diversity of perspectives in institutional governance and increases the likelihood that gender-sensitive concerns will be addressed.

In addition, universities should establish structured mentorship programmes that connect junior female academics with experienced scholars and administrators. Mentorship can provide guidance on career progression, research productivity, leadership development, grant acquisition, and work-life balance. Such initiatives are particularly important in addressing the informal barriers that often limit women's advancement in academia. These measures reflect the principles of *shūrā* (consultation), *‘adl* (justice), and *amānah* (trusteeship), which require institutions to ensure fairness and inclusive participation in decision-making processes.

Strengthening Mechanisms for Preventing Harassment and Gender-Based Violence

The findings reveal that harassment remains a significant challenge within Nigerian universities. Consequently, institutions should adopt comprehensive anti-harassment frameworks that prioritise prevention, protection, accountability, and victim support. Universities should establish confidential and technology-driven reporting systems that enable students and staff to report cases of harassment without fear of retaliation. Such systems should be supported by independent investigative panels, clear disciplinary procedures, and regular public reporting on institutional responses.

In addition, universities should organise mandatory awareness programmes for students, academic staff, and administrators on professional ethics, gender sensitivity, workplace conduct, and the consequences of harassment. These recommendations align with the Islamic principle articulated in the Prophetic tradition: “There should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm” (Ibn Mājah, no. 2341). This principle establishes the ethical obligation to prevent harm and protect the dignity and wellbeing of all members of the academic community.

Educational and Community-Based Reforms

Educational transformation must extend beyond university campuses to include families, religious institutions, and local communities. Since socio-cultural attitudes significantly influence educational opportunities and career trajectories, community engagement is essential for sustainable change. Religious leaders, Islamic scholars, and community organisations should actively promote messages that support girls' education, women's intellectual development, and women's participation in public life. Sermons, public lectures, and educational programmes should emphasise Qur'anic teachings that affirm the moral equality and intellectual capabilities of women.

Special attention should be given to correcting misconceptions that portray women's educational advancement as inconsistent with Islamic teachings. Historical examples of distinguished Muslim women scholars, such as 'Ā'ishah bint Abī Bakr, Umm al-Dardā', and Fāṭimah al-Fihri, should be highlighted to demonstrate the long-standing tradition of female scholarship in Islamic civilisation.

Policy Interventions and Government Support

Government agencies have a critical role in creating enabling environments for gender equity in higher education. The National Universities Commission (NUC) should incorporate gender equity indicators into institutional accreditation and quality assurance processes. Universities should be required to demonstrate progress in areas such as leadership representation, staff development, and anti-harassment measures. Similarly, the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) should establish targeted research grants, leadership development programmes, and academic fellowships specifically designed to support female academics. These initiatives would help address disparities in research productivity and access to professional development opportunities.

Curriculum and Knowledge Production Reforms

The study further recommends reforms in curriculum design and knowledge production. Nigerian universities should integrate discussions of Islamic ethics, gender justice, human dignity, and social responsibility into relevant courses across the humanities, social sciences, and religious studies. Curricula should also include the contributions of notable Muslim women scholars, educators, jurists, and intellectuals whose achievements have historically been overlooked. Such inclusion would challenge stereotypes, provide positive role models, and enrich students' understanding of Islamic intellectual history.

Promoting Ethical Reorientation and Cultural Transformation

Perhaps the most important recommendation emerging from this study is the need for ethical reorientation. Sustainable gender justice cannot be achieved solely through policies and regulations. Structural reforms must be accompanied by changes in attitudes, values, and institutional cultures. Ultimately, reclaiming women's moral agency requires transforming both institutions and mindsets. When women are empowered to participate fully in teaching, research, leadership, and decision-making, universities become more inclusive, innovative, and capable of contributing to national development. Therefore, gender justice should be viewed not merely as a women's issue but as a fundamental requirement for academic excellence, social progress, and sustainable development.

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